

Conditions for Success: Indigenous Youth Reflections on Their Experiences with Canadian Education Systems

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Abstract: This paper brings forward the reflections of 30 Indigenous youth from across Canada and their first voice perspectives with Canadian education systems. A central component of the project was to obtain youths' understandings of education in Canada and to seek their recommendations on ways to improve education for Indigenous youth. Accessing Indigenous youths' experiences is important as their capacities to have successful and equitable educational experiences are strongly hindered by colonial settler policy and systemic institutional racism. Indigenous scholars have appealed for changes to education systems with a focus on challenging colonial relations of power and the multiple oppressions Indigenous youth experience when educated under Eurocentric practices. Our methodological framework is located within a relational paradigm as a mechanism to ignite dialogue and prioritize Indigenous voices in education. Our building of relations began with a sharing circle held at our Mount Saint Vincent University's Wigwaum. Our Indigenous colleague and co-author, Jonathon MeDrano, explains how sharing circles provide equitable opportunities for people to share their ideas and respective worldviews. We then facilitated reflective journaling workshops with the youth. The young people's reflections in this paper identify the compelling need to address systemic racism, stereotypes, and to challenge normative and colonizing structures that generate discrimination. Moreover, the young people soundly indicated that education systems in Canada require much larger integrations of Indigenous ways of knowing and being in all aspects of delivery (i.e. language, culture, Indigenous teachings), including more Indigenous counsellors to support their mental well-being.

Keywords: Indigenous, youth, education, systemic racism, call to action

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Introduction

This paper is derived from a larger project titled, *“The Collected Stories of the Warriors of the Red Road at Sea”* where we engaged with 45 Indigenous youth from across Canada to gain knowledge about their connections to self, others and their communities (i.e. education, nature, culture, Indigenous traditions, community) (Reddington & Theunissen, 2021). The purpose of this larger project was to honour the voices, experiences, and lives of Indigenous youth from across Canada and to listen to their teachings and respective worldviews. This paper highlights one aspect of this larger project. Specifically, it illuminates the experiences of 30 young Indigenous people of Canada (ages 15-24 years) and their experiences with Canadian education systems across all 10 provinces and 3 territories. A central component of the project was to obtain youths’ understandings of education in Canada and to seek their recommendations on ways to improve education for Indigenous youth.

We acknowledge from the outset of this paper that the Indigenous youth are our teachers and teach us that knowledge is relational and emerges from the interconnectedness we have to all creation. We are equally indebted to our Indigenous colleague and co-author of this paper, Jonathon MeDrano, who offered us mentorship and ensured that this project was derived from an Indigenous perspective. As Louis (2007) reminds us “research on Indigenous issues should be carried out in a manner which is respectful and ethically sound from an Indigenous perspective” (p.130). Here, relational accountability began with mobilizing knowledge that was derived “from an Indigenous point of view” and that our research outcomes support future dialogue in academia and in communities across Canada in relation to prioritizing Indigenous voices in education (Louis, 2007, p. 131). We similarly recognize how essential it was to follow Canada’s Aboriginal ethics guidelines to increase our accountability as well as to obtain ethical approval from the Mi’kmaw Ethics Watch at Cape Breton University in advance of conducting this research, as well as our own Mount Saint Vincent University’s Research Ethics Board. As researchers, it was equally imperative that we took a decolonizing stance when presenting the

young people’s educational experiences. This represents the call to action for Indigenous and non-Indigenous to work together and destabilize white colonial practices (Truth and Reconciliation Report (TRC) 2015). Specifically, Call to Action #7 “calls upon the federal government to develop with Indigenous groups a joint strategy to eliminate educational and employment gaps between Indigenous people living in Canada and non-Indigenous Canadians” (p. 1-2).

Indigenous scholars have appealed for changes to education systems with a focus on challenging colonial relations of power and the multiple oppressions Indigenous youth experience when educated under Eurocentric practices (Bailey, 2016; Battiste, 2005; MacKinley, 2012; Madden, 2015; O’Dowd, 2010; Tomkins, 2002). The TRC (2015) calls on Canadian provincial and federal governments, communities, schools, and citizens to actively address systemic racism and structural inequalities that impact Indigenous youths’ lives and future trajectories. Calls to Action #64:

calls upon Council of Ministers of Education, Canada to maintain an annual commitment to Aboriginal education issues, including building student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy and mutual respect (TRC, 2015, 64, p. 7).

This call to action requires attention as research shows that Indigenous educational needs are not being met in Canadian schools (Hart & Kempf, 2018; Kim, 2015; Mullen, 2020). Further, their capacities to have successful and equitable educational experiences are strongly hindered by colonial settler policy and systemic institutional racism (Neeganagwedgin, 2013; Shotton, 2017). For instance, Hart and Kempf (2018) report that Indigenous students in Ontario schools are viewed as poverty stricken, the “welfare Indian” stereotype (Satzewich 2011). Bailey (2016) when interviewing post-secondary students at McMaster University indicates how racism is perpetuated due to low interaction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and consequently contributes to ignorance in relation to Indigenous culture, values and beliefs. Ball (2012) augments this position by noting that a large segment of Indigenous children contend with culturally dissonant learning environments in Canada. Specifically, Indigenous children encounter serious academic

challenges, to a certain extent due to a prominent disparity between their early knowledge attainment experiences within their familial and communal contexts, and non-Indigenous educators' culturally divergent perceptions, expectations, and task mandates pressed upon them (Ball, 2012).

This paper contributes to this literature and the requirement to address systemic racism towards Indigenous youth in our Canadian educational systems. This call to action to address systemic racism includes educating non-Indigenous youth on treaty education (Joseph, 2018) and Indigenous histories as a mechanism to improve relations and disrupt damaging stereotypes that situate Indigenous youth on the margins in public Canadian schools. Moreover, there is a significant requirement to decolonize education and dismantle racism by advancing educators' critical consciousness (Freire, 1970). Further, there is a need to integrate Indigenous ways of knowing and being across all aspects of education (Battiste, 2005; Brandt, 2007; Reddington & Theunissen, 2021).

The Project

We understand decolonization to be an ongoing process of recognizing the ways that colonization has shaped the conditions of Indigenous lives, and the importance of working together with Indigenous people to identify these conditions, and "re-center the interests of Indigenous peoples" (McGregor & Marker, 2018, pg. 318). Central to this process of taking a decolonizing stance was building a reciprocal relationship with the Indigenous youth and to follow their direction. As Steinhauer (2001) reminds us, reciprocity and respect "means you listen intently to others' ideas and that you do not insist that your idea prevails. By listening intently, you show honour, consider the well-being of others, and treat others with kindness and courtesy" (p. 86). We are thankful to the Indigenous youth who also taught us about the concept of relationality and how to respectfully honor the Indigenous knowledge and teachings of fostering interconnectedness, listening to others and generating new ways of seeing and knowing (Moreton-Robinson, 2000; Wilson, 2001, 2008).

A research framework that works towards decolonization and re-centers the interests of Indigenous people is built "on the fundamental belief

that knowledge is relational" (Wilson, 2008, p.177). Wilson (2008) identifies that following a research paradigm built on relationality involves research with a "community context" and "demonstrates respect, reciprocity and responsibility" (p.99). Our building of relations began with a sharing circle held at our Mount Saint Vincent University's Wigwaum and led by Indigenous knowledge keepers. Tachine et al. (2016) explain that a sharing circle as a type of methodology offers "a unique, culturally relevant and culturally sensitive approach to Indigenous-based educational research" (p. 291). Kovach (2009) similarly identifies that sharing circles provide opportunities for each voice to be respected and where everyone has an equal opportunity to share their opinions and ideas. Our initial sharing circles supports the call to action to build "intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect" (TRC, 2015, p. 7). We then held a reflective journaling workshop on our campus with the Indigenous youth where the participants could build connections with each other and share their stories. This time together was transformative in nature as we had an opportunity to give recognition to one another's culture and to value life as a living process (Weber-Pillwax, 2004). In the journaling workshop, our role as researchers was to assist the youth in locating multiple ways in which to connect with the process of sharing knowledge. To do this, we utilized the medicine wheel as it illustrates Indigenous ways of knowing and exemplifies how all things are interconnected, related, spiritual and powerful (Battiste, 2011).

Figure 1. The Four Directions of the Medicine Wheel



| Yellow = Spring | Red = Summer | Black = Fall | White = Winter |
|---|---|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • beginnings • mental • preparing • awareness • visionary • creativity • determine energy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • knowledge • physical • understanding • flexibility • preparation • process | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • knowing • emotional • connections • physical • methodical • contemplative • perseverance • hold energy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • balance of intellect and wisdom • spiritual • courage • freedom • warrior • intellect • maintain a positive pattern |

Source: Medicine Wheel: Four teachings (Ryerson, 2017)

The medicine wheel (Figure 1) represents the ongoing and cyclical nature of change and transformation that is essential to all living things. Our aim in using the medicine wheel and four teachings when facilitating the journaling workshop was to provide a mechanism for the youth to share and write about their educational experiences. During the journaling workshop, the youth connected with the cyclical nature of the medicine wheel and the teachings of their Elders when expressing their ideas, beliefs, and values. As Absolon & Willett (2005) remind us, Indigenous systems of knowledge are interpreted through personal storytelling and self-location. "To locate is to make a claim about who you are and where you come from, your investment and your intent. To put yourself forward means to say who you are, give yourself voice, and claim your position" (Absolon & Willett, 2004, p. 112). As Kovach (2009) similarly explains, a relational ontology, the logic of being (i.e. interrelations between environment, culture, others and self), where Indigenous people have an opportunity to articulate their histories, relations, motivations, and limitations. What follows in this paper is a summary of the youths' experiences with Canadian education systems as documented from sharing circles and journal writing, including their educational recommendations. During the journaling workshops, participants shared stories of racism, discrimination, and the disconnect they embodied when reflecting on white, non-Indigenous and colonizing educational practices.

The Results

The impact of colonization was echoed across the Indigenous youth stories. When journaling about their educational experiences, many of the youth shared accounts of instances when they were bullied, isolated, misunderstood, negatively stereotyped, and felt disconnected from the teachings in their schools as they were based on White colonial histories and perspectives. Two significant findings when reviewing the participants' responses is the prevalence of systemic racism in schools and the need to Indigenize the curriculum. The participants when discussing racism in Canadian schools expressed moments where they felt "intimidated", "useless" and "worthless". They also addressed how dominant stereotypes frequently silence, alienate and

position them on the periphery in Canadian schools. In particular, the young people spoke about how stereotypes that frame them as the "poor", "bad", "drunk" and "uneducated" led to feelings of isolation. Their statements call for change and the necessity to preserve their culture and heritage. As one participant explains, "[t]hey need to teach about Indigenous resistance to counteract victimization and foster pride". The participants also indicate the importance of having Elders, Indigenous teachers and Native counsellors/advisors in all Canadian public schools. "The biggest resource that I think works very well and is extremely effective is the student advisors that are specifically for Indigenous people" stated one participant. The young people similarly highlight the importance of teaching all Canadians about Indigenous ways of knowing, especially their non-Indigenous peers. As one youth participant stated,

[t]he challenges Indigenous youth face stem from a lack of mandatory education about Indigenous culture and history. There is certainly bullying that goes on towards Indigenous students, and some or all could be avoided if more students understood the rich, but also very sad history of Indigenous Canadians.

The young people's responses on the current climate of education in Canada are powerful. We invite you now to read their first voice perspectives on education, to reflect on their statements, and begin to challenge normative and colonizing structures that generate discrimination. As Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, we humbly recognize that the young people's statements hold the potential to change how we approach education, and in so doing so change our relations to the world. Table 1 provides a synthesis of the key themes and participants' responses.

Table 1: Summary of Indigenous Young People’s Perspectives on Education in Canada

| Theme | Sub-Themes | Participants’ Responses |
|---|---|---|
| Limited learning about their Indigenous culture, language, and beliefs in Canadian education system (e.g. absence of Elders in schools, disconnected from language, Eurocentric curriculum) | White colonial teaching of Indigenous history | <p><i>“Based on ‘white’ ways of learning”.</i> Participant 5</p> <p><i>“We were taught about Indigenous peoples in relation to European settlers”.</i> Participant 17</p> <p><i>“The curriculum is dated and mainly focuses on white/European history. What we learn at school about our own cultures (if we’re lucky) is very limited”.</i> Participant 5</p> <p><i>“School has never been a native thing my community still views it as a fundamentally white institution. Even in the days of my dad the main focus of school seemed to be assimilation of my nation”.</i> Participant 28</p> |
| | Elders are not present in our schools | <p><i>“Every Indigenous student deserves the support of an Elder or teacher because school is hard for a lot of people, especially when you’re carrying more than you need to”.</i> Participant 2</p> <p><i>“I’ve pushed and pushed to have an Elder in residence at my school, for those seeking spiritual guidance and connection”.</i> Participant 19</p> |
| | Education system failed to teach us about our culture | <p><i>“Teaching our language will put to rest the notion of education as a white institution”.</i> Participant 28</p> <p><i>“I was never taught about Indigenous resistance or strength or survival. I was never taught to appreciate the beauty of Indigenous culture so when my band was created in 2011 and my great aunt told me “I’m Indigenous”, I wasn’t proud to be. As I learned and connected my pride”.</i> Participant 17</p> <p><i>“I have noticed challenges that many Indigenous students face, and I feel that those challenges stem from a lack of mandatory education about Indigenous culture and history”.</i> Participant 3</p> <p><i>“Some of the challenges that I think Aboriginal youth have is that they don’t get the opportunity to learn their language or about their backgrounds in school unless their reserve have a school that offers that as a subject.”</i> Participant 25</p> <p><i>“They need to teach about Indigenous resistance to counteract victimization and foster pride”.</i> Participant 18</p> |
| Systemic Racism | Racism and negative stereotypes | <p><i>“To be completely honest I really do not know what we could do about it because there will always be some kind of racism”.</i> Participant 4</p> <p><i>“If all kids learned about Indigenous cultures in a positive way it would reduce racism and make our day to day lives a lot easier”.</i> Participant 28</p> <p><i>“Racism within the system that makes Indigenous people feel like they are useless and worthless”.</i> Participant 8</p> <p><i>“I barely see Aboriginal people only more pale faces. It’s intimidating. The bullying and stereotyping of us”.</i> Participant 13</p> |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | <p><i>"So many stereotypes on our culture, such as drinking and doing drugs... and because people start to live that lifestyle, they believe we all grow up and live that way". Participant 11</i></p> <p><i>"I heard many racist and anti-Indigenous sentiments from (mainly) white people, classmates and educators who thought they were free to express those thoughts in a 'safe' environment". Participant 30</i></p> <p><i>"The majority of Canada don't know our history only stereotypes". Participant 12</i></p> <p><i>"Stereotyping us that we can't do the work". Participant 9</i></p> <p><i>"There is certainly bullying that goes on towards Indigenous students, and some or all of that could be avoided if more students understood the rich, but also very sad history of Indigenous Canadians". Participant 3</i></p> |
| | Bullying | <p><i>"The bullying and stereotyping of us. I remember being told I would end up pregnant and uneducated or called a squaw and many other degrading things in school". Participant 10</i></p> <p><i>"It's like we were the last on the social circle and labelled as the "bad kids" or "poor kids" and you know now the majority of us don't have kids and the ones that do have kids work so damn hard to not let their kids grow up with the life they had". Participant 8</i></p> <p><i>"Some of the struggles that Aboriginals face in their education are bullying. Bullying is everywhere. No matter what race you are. It hurts to say that. I wish (one day!) that bullying can stop". Participant 1</i></p> |
| Mental Health Issues | Suicide | <p><i>"In the North, the majority of us have lost so many people to suicide or Alcohol and drugs. School is a safe haven for many. Schools should be open in the evenings for kids to work on homework etc. cause maybe their homes are not the best". Participant 10</i></p> |
| | Lack of mental health support | <p><i>"We cannot learn if we are mentally ill and if we had resources, our lives could improve in all aspects". Participant 5</i></p> <p><i>"A lot of youth, especially youth in junior high and high school suffer from mental health". Participant 6</i></p> <p><i>"Another challenging thing is the guidance counselors my school and island doesn't seem to have a good program for mental health, and everyone knows that a lot of native people struggle with mental health". Participant 16</i></p> <p><i>"I struggle with being able to find my voice. I also struggle with my mental health which causes a huge barrier to my education". Participant 19</i></p> |
| Non-Indigenous not understanding their identities, culture (e.g. lack of awareness) | Non-Indigenous youth are not taught about our culture | <p><i>"My [non-Indigenous] friends don't understand why I get followed by security in stores or why a band card can be helpful. It is an active reminder of being marginalized in a system of numbers. They don't understand my struggles as a student, and the school system doesn't either". Participant 2</i></p> <p><i>"The biggest issue is youth being uneducated about how Indigenous youth are living now which can lead to bullying". Participant 13</i></p> |
| | Isolation | <p><i>"It's been awkward often being the only Indigenous person in the class/school, especially before post-secondary. I would often be expected to speak for Indigenous people on my own, when I could only represent myself". Participant 27</i></p> |

| | | |
|--|--------------------------------------|--|
| | | <i>"I was visually the only Native student in the class or school".</i> Participant 27 |
| <hr/> | | |
| Few Indigenous role models (i.e. teachers, guidance counsellors) | White teachers | <i>"It is also important to note that our educators are mostly white and know only what the textbook suggests".</i> Participant 5 |
| | | <i>"My personal experience with education regarding Indigenous people has been outside of the reserve systems, in "white" schools with white teachers".</i> Participant 27 |
| | Requirement for more Native Advisors | <i>"In school growing up having an aboriginal counsellor instead of one of different nationality is harder to open up to because they don't share similar backgrounds or understandings. I think there should be Aboriginal counsellors for each school throughout Canada".</i> Participant 10 |
| | | <i>"I find it really nice to have a Native advisor to talk to about my issues that may arise".</i> Participant 13 |

The participants' journaling of their experiences with the Canadian education system indicates their immense pride in relation to their Indigenous heritage. However, they also identify that their Indigenous beliefs, values and culture are not prioritized as part of the Canadian curriculum. The young people routinely state the necessity to Indigenize education and to teach non-Indigenous youth about their beliefs and values to prevent negative stereotypes, bullying and racism. As one youth stated, *"I think there should be more counsellors, life skill classes, ANTI-bullying, hands-on learning, and Native studies enforced"*. Moreover, the young people express a desire to see increased mental health support in their schools and communities. *"We cannot learn if we are mentally ill and if we had resources, our lives could improve in all aspects"*, expressed one participant.

The lessons learned from the youth in this project signify the importance of building culturally relevant and responsive programming, policies, and practices in education. There is also a necessity to address systemic racism to ensure Indigenous youth have equitable access to education and future career opportunities. The next section of this paper highlights the recommendations the youth put forward for educational change. The youth argue that educational change is critically important for the reconciliation process and sustained systematic change.

Indigenous Youth Recommendations

In their journal writing, the youth put forward recommendations to improve the Canadian education system. It should be noted that, during the workshops, they expressed a deep desire for meaningful change to education. As one participant enthusiastically stated,

[w]e could get the chiefs together from across Canada, make a plan but we have to start with the youth, and build our way up, make sure they don't live the lifestyle of their family and friends.

Table 2 provides a summary of the key recommendations brought forward by the youth in relation to educational change. The youths' recommendations speak to the work of decolonization and the call to action for Indigenous and non-Indigenous to work together and address systems of power imbalances and oppression. Importantly, we must work to build structures and processes that empower youth and amplify their voices. This project contributes to the literature that addresses the importance of Indigenous and non-Indigenous partners coming together to address systemic racism in our schools as called for by the TRC (2015) and the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (2007).

Table 2: Summary of Young People’s Key Recommendations for Educational Change

Youths’ Recommendations for Educational Change

- ✓ Include traditional Indigenous teachings and learnings across curriculums.
- ✓ Bring Elders and parents into the school to teach us about our traditions.
- ✓ Enhance learning about their own cultures in school and have more practical experiential land and spiritual learning opportunities about their culture (i.e. living off the land, language, connection to water and land, hands-on learning, job shadowing).
- ✓ Increase the number of Indigenous teachers and Native advisors in schools.
- ✓ Improve access to mental health services in schools and in their communities.
- ✓ Address systemic racism by educating non-Indigenous people about their culture, values, beliefs, and traditions.
- ✓ Improve funding and supports to help Indigenous youth attend college and universities.

Conclusion

These findings demonstrate that Indigenous youth living in Canada are looking for meaningful changes to the educational system that reflect their cultural ways of knowing. Their call to action to decolonize education and enhance their access to more Indigenous teachers, guidance counsellors, Native advisors, and educational assistants in our Canadian schools requires immediate action. Moving forward, provincial and territorial education systems across Canada must provide purposeful opportunities for Indigenous youth to come to the table and actively participate in Indigenizing our Canadian curriculum, programs and policies. We are appreciative of the youth participants for sharing their experiences and offering recommendations for change. While this is a small sample size of 30 participants, it addresses the requirement to listen to Indigenous youth and address educational barriers to learning for the most marginalized and vulnerable student populations.

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