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More Than a Social Justice Project: The Continued Road Towards Truth and Reconciliation

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An Interdisciplinary Journal

*Honoring the Voices, Perspectives and Knowledges
of First Peoples through Research, Critical Analyses,
Stories, Standpoints and Media Reviews*

More Than a Social Justice Project: The Continued Road Towards Truth and Reconciliation

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Author Note

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Abstract

This community story describes one committee's experiences in reconciliation after the planning and hosting of an education conference entitled It Matters to Us: Transforming the Legacy of Residential School at Western University's Faculty of Education. The objective in hosting this conference was to provide educational opportunities that foster dialogue, reconciliation, and relationship building between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. This conference sought to increase knowledge, enhance self-awareness and strengthen the skills of those who work both directly and indirectly with Indigenous peoples. Outlined throughout the story are both the lessons learned and challenges experienced when a group of individuals from diverse individual, familial, and communal backgrounds come together to engage in a process of reconciliation.

Keywords: community, reconciliation, education, residential school system, Indigenous peoples

The road we travel is equal in importance to the destination we seek. There are no shortcuts. When it comes to truth and reconciliation, we are all forced to go the distance.

– Justice Murray Sinclair, Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, to the Canadian Senate Standing Committee on Aboriginal Peoples, September 28, 2010

Working in the area of Indigenous education, I have come to understand the challenges involved in trying to engage both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in critical conversation and reflection about the residential school system. I recognize the effort and preparation that is required to engage others in conversation around such a heavy and sensitive topic. I know, too, how isolating, even debilitating, it can feel to do this work, feeling as though you are having to compete with myriad other issues and voices that deserve equal attention. Experiences like these led me to wonder whether others involved in this work shared similar experiences. I was curious to know whether others felt the tension of being involved in a field of work that can be equally difficult and fulfilling. At a time in Canadian history when both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples are being encouraged to participate in reconciliation efforts related to the residential school system in Canada, myself, along with a committee of driven and compassionate individuals, saw an opportunity to engage with others in study and reflection about what it means to create a new understanding of our shared past, present, and future.

On March 10-11, 2015, the London Area Truth and Reconciliation Committee, in collaboration with local educational and community partners throughout the Southwestern Ontario region hosted an education conference entitled *It Matters to Us: Transforming the Legacy of Residential Schools* held at Western University's Faculty of Education in London, Ontario. This conference sought to increase knowledge, enhance self-awareness, and strengthen the skills of those who work both directly and indirectly with Indigenous peoples. The desire to organize an education conference addressing the legacy of residential schools evolved from a review of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada's 2012 interim report and many discussions with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples representing local leadership, educational stakeholders, and faith leaders around what truth and reconciliation could look like in our local context. Local supporters acknowledged that now was the time for meaningful, impactful action and activity.

Rethinking the Relationship

The purpose of this conference was to strengthen relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples throughout our local communities so that together, we could raise awareness about the legacy of residential schools and its continued impact on how we live and understand one another. A history of a systemic attempt to eradicate Indigenous peoples, their cultures, languages, perspectives, and knowledge has been embedded in our national history and its effects are ongoing. This can't be ignored or denied. For our committee, moving forward meant understanding this oppression, how it came about, how it continues to be held in place, and what it means to raise consciousness and promote opportunities for healing. We wanted to build people's capacity to respond to the learning and cultural needs of Indigenous youth and community members. We wanted to foster direct community-to-community engagement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in our local educational communities. Drawing on the TRC's mandate to acknowledge the injustices and harms experienced by Indigenous peoples and the need for continual healing, this conference focused on providing attendees with opportunities to network with other professionals and community partners who have an interest in supporting projects that foster dialogue, reconciliation, and relationship building between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Our work invited educational stakeholders to join forces with residential school survivors, social agency representatives, and community members to demonstrate their commitment toward addressing local priorities that promote healing and wellness in the educational system.

The organization of this conference, spanning close to two years, brought together nearly 500 people from all over the province of Ontario. While many of the attendees worked in public education, other participants worked in non-education related fields such as health, correctional services, and child and family services. The two day event was kicked off with inspiring performances by Sisters of All Nations and Inuk singer-songwriter Susan Aglukark. We were honoured to have Dan and Mary Lou Smoke, well-respected and involved community members in both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities of London, open and close our conference. The Smokes shared with attendees their knowledge of First Nations faith, history, and culture through prayer, storytelling, and song. The conference keynote address was given by Indigenous advocate Wab Kinew, who shared through story his personal experiences of reconciliation. Attendees had the opportunity to listen to and learn from residential school survivors, who bravely shared their stories of truth, survival, and healing. Attendees were also able to attend experiential workshops that focused on increasing one's cultural competency and creating safe spaces for dialogue and reflection.



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While an emotional couple of days for many, the conference equally (re)ignited a fire in many of us on the importance of listening to and learning from one another. Responses from attendees were overwhelmingly positive; participants described the conference as “powerful”, “emotional”, and “contributing to the continued road to reconciliation.” For many of the participants, this conference was the first time they were able to critically engage in discussion and reflection around the impact of the residential school system. Standing in front of them were survivors, inviting attendees to walk in their shoes for a brief moment, sharing through story and photographs their individual experiences of what it was like to be forcibly removed from their homes and communities, a topic that can be difficult for some people to grasp.

Attendees were excited to go back to their professional networks and share with colleagues their new learning. The planning of this conference involved many people, who brought to the table

experiences, knowledge, and expertise that collectively led us to this exciting moment in time.

As a committee, we were grateful to finally see our hard work come to fruition. Nevertheless, we know this conference was only the first step in our local journey of reconciliation based learning and engagement.

Bumps in the Road

Soon after the conference was over, an incident was reported to us that a residential school survivor was denied a take-home educational resource kit by a non-Indigenous person because “he was not a teacher”. There was great concern that the refusal of this package led the survivor to being traumatized, which was ironic given the theme of the conference. As a committee we discussed this incident in great depth because both this incident and its lasting impact demonstrates both the places and spaces where reconciliation still needs to happen. While receiving such devastating news was certainly not a moment our committee was proud of, the incident allowed us to become more aware of the dynamics of structural racism. What became evident to us was the lack of cultural competency training and preparation our non-Indigenous staff and volunteers received prior to the conference. Ideally that moment of being asked for a resource was a time to recognize the person asking, a residential school survivor, and to recognize it was a time to offer respect and assistance, and be strong enough to step outside a prescribed role and say something like... “Yes, please give me a minute to check and I want you to know I respect your request.”



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The Continued Road towards Truth and Reconciliation

We recognize from our participation in this work that a single education conference does not eradicate the inequities and incidences of structural racism and misunderstanding that continue to run rampant throughout our schools, organizations and workplaces. A single education conference does not destroy the painful presumptions that weigh heavily on how we come to relate with one another. A single education conference does not erase the human rights violations against Indigenous peoples that have spanned over a century and continue to impact Indigenous youth through the ongoing effects of colonization. However, it is a good place to begin. This conference served as an invitation for all individuals, regardless of race, age, gender, cultural background or socio-economic status, to come together in solidarity and seize the opportunity to learn what it means to be a good human being. This conference was more than a social justice project; it was an opportunity to allow humanity to win out over inhumanity; to show what reconciliation can look like when we push the conversation, not only with our words, but with our actions. Since the conference, a number of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples have partnered together to head start their own initiatives. One of the residential school survivors who presented at the conference, Ms. Grace Smallboy, continues to visit local schools in the area, sharing with students her story of strength and survival. Knowing this conference may have prompted individuals

within the local London area to reconsider their beliefs and perspectives about what it means to work towards truth and reconciliation alongside one another is encouraging. Does that mean the journey unfolding in London, Ontario is close to over? Not at all. There are no short-cuts to doing this work. To peel back the layers of our country's history will take time. Notions of superiority, assimilation, and subordination continue to wreak havoc throughout our local communities. Nonetheless, it is time for everyone to understand reconciliation in this country, so we can do right by Indigenous peoples and develop a new relationship based on mutual respect and reciprocity. Take a moment to share the incident above with your family, friends, colleagues, and neighbours. Listen. Talk. Listen. Reflect. Listen. Share. Ignorance and complacency is no longer an option.

The challenge in doing this kind of work is charting the journey. Why does truth and reconciliation matter? What does moving forward look like in Canada? How does society change the story they have been telling/living? The answers to these questions are different for everyone involved and it is no one's place to tell someone how to reconcile or forgive. For some, moving forward is validation, knowing your story or experience is being heard and recognized. For others, it is equitable treatment and access to support services that foster deeper, substantive opportunities for healing and wellness. For me, moving forward means engaging in conversations that are difficult but necessary to have; it is about cooperation versus competition; it is about taking up a position of responsibility versus hiding in the shadows of doubt and discomfort. It is up to each person to decide why reconciliation matters. However difficult the journey may be, trust that the answers to these questions will come to light in their own time, in their own way. Patience and trust become important in one's journey for truth and reconciliation.



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