



## Reconciliation Through Education A Model of Ethical Spaces and Relationality

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### Résumé de l'article

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## Reconciliation Through Education: A Model of Ethical Spaces and Relationality

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### Abstract

As more alarming truths are being revealed around the horrors of the residential schooling system in Canada, educators are being called to decolonize and Indigenize their teaching practices. As post-secondary teacher educators working in Indigenous education who have gained valuable insights around this difficult teaching, the authors offer readers a conceptual model of reconciliatory education. The model invites educators to move beyond colonial schooling practices to embrace decolonizing and Indigenizing approaches and the powerful potential of relational teaching and learning. Envisioned as an ethical space residing between Indigenizing and decolonizing practices and animated by truth-telling and critical thinking, the extended infinity model, presented in this article, shows the dynamic nature of teaching and learning that occurs when relating together through commitments to decolonizing and Indigenizing. While purposefully engaging in an ethos of ethical relationality, the model carries transformative potential for teaching and learning.

### Ethical Spaces and Relationality

As postsecondary educators and scholars specializing in Indigenous education, we hear the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's (TRC) 94 Calls to Action (2015a) resonating across the field and beyond. While acknowledging that the term *reconciliation* is politically contested, we persevere in our efforts because we believe these efforts are essential to educational reform and societal change. Recent happenings in Canada, including stark evidence of the thousands of unmarked graves of Indigenous children who died without their families while under the care and authority of residential school officials, have brought to light the need for deeper understandings

of the historical truths that maintain ongoing injustices against First Peoples.<sup>1</sup> Here in Canada, most settlers are just now becoming aware of the full complexities of settler colonization and understanding the need for honest, frank discussions; however, far fewer see their own levels of being implicated (Rothberg, 2019) or privileges deriving from settler-colonial acts and hierarchies. Together, these realities underscore the vital role of education and the need to advance societal change. As hopeful activist-educators, we offer “reconciliatory education” as a conceptual model that is predicated on relationship building and inspired by our own lived experiences as educators working in the realm of reconciliation through education in the Canadian context.

Many Canadians are wanting to do the right thing, and we see this willingness evidenced by the many educators, scholars, and concerned citizens setting out their own personal and professional commitments to truth and reconciliation (Association of Canadian Deans of Education, 2010; Chrona, 2022; Chung, 2016, 2019; Cote-Meek & Moeke-Pickering, 2020; Donald, 2009; Jewell & Mosby, 2019; Kanu, 2011; Madden, 2019; Poitras Pratt & Bodnaresko [Eds.], 2023; Toulouse, 2018). In this article, we offer our proposed model of reconciliatory education, or reconciliation through education, to explain the *hows* and *whys* of this complex work. Our model invites educators to move beyond colonial renderings of teaching and learning—those predicated on individualist, competitive, and assimilative terms—and instead embrace the powerful potential of teaching and learning that can result when educators are driven by an ethos of truth-telling (Poitras Pratt & Gladue, 2022) and ethical relationality (Donald, 2012). In this article, we share what we have learned through our own processes of facing each other as Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars across truth divides and invite you to step into the space with us.

*Take the first step & try to make it beyond.* (Wagamese, 2016, p. 109)

## Sharing Our Truths

We are educators working in a Canadian post-secondary context with pre-service and practicing teachers, and we are deeply committed to learning truths and enacting reconciliatory practices in our personal and professional lives. Our passion for social justice and truth-telling brings us together, as does our steadfast belief that “at its heart, reconciliation is about building relationships of trust and cohesion” (TRC, 2015b, p. 5).



Figure 1: Photo of Yvonne, 4 years of age (Quesnel, British Columbia).

As a Métis woman, I (Yvonne) have devoted my life to bringing Indigenous truths to others through education. I realize this gift came from teachings received as a young child while playing underfoot at Indigenous (then called Native) political gatherings with my parents. I have early memories of listening to and absorbing the ways of the Indigenous world—I learned the art of debate, political strategy, and the power of advocacy playing on the floor at these gatherings and seated around the family dinner table. My passion for doing what is right was engrained early on and is brought into my present-day teaching and learning practices.

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<sup>1</sup> We use First Peoples to step outside political categories; with it, we include First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples as well as all other Indigenous peoples who do not fall under the three recognized categories within the 1982 Canadian Constitution.



Figure 2: Photo of Sulyn with maternal grandparents, 4 years of age (Calgary, Alberta)

Being raised by a white mother and Chinese father in Western Canada in the 1980s, I (Sulyn) grew up watching the different ways that people would respond to my interracial married parents. Whether it was my mother ordering dim sum dishes using Cantonese or my father taking us hiking in the Rocky Mountains, the beliefs of what others thought of my mixed-race family, mistaken or otherwise, seemed to project onto my own identity and sense of belonging. While it has taken some time to learn the words and constructs of difference, the journey of puzzling out these daily incongruities has led me to better understand the dynamics of power and how to meet injustices in educational spaces.

While our backgrounds differ in terms of ancestry and culture, we find sisterhood and solidarity in our shared experiences of encountering power, resisting oppression, navigating cultural distinctions, understanding formal and family politics, benefiting from informal learning, and, especially, engaging in the vulnerable act of sharing stories about our in-between positionings. In honouring the complexities of our intersectional situatedness (Crenshaw, 1989), we bring to this work a lived appreciation for diversity along with a panoramic view of shared humanity. By regularly engaging with each other's truths in authentic and caring ways, we often stop to consider what this means relationally. We have come to understand that we are enacting what is a process of, we propose, *reconciliation through education*.

The deeply relational experience of engaging with each other in truth-telling as we write and teach together is rooted in our shared vision of decolonizing and Indigenizing our own teaching and learning practices. It also recognizes the potential of new pedagogy emerging from such encounters (Louie et al., 2017; Louie & Poitras Pratt, in press). As such, the result of our ongoing interactions in this ethical, relational space (Ermine, 2007) is a dynamic process of creating and refining reconciliatory practices, or what we term reconciliatory education, through the deeply vulnerable act of truth-telling, where we learn to teach Indigenous truths alongside our own truths. Indeed, this is the pressing and vital work that the TRC (2015c) has set out for educators. Our model of reconciliatory education seeks to describe the ways in which critical social justice educators are coming into a shared space of ethical relationality (Donald, 2012) and working together to learn how to be better together by sharing truths.

## The Historical Context in Canada

Canada's history is usually told starting from the point of first contact between Europeans and Indigenous peoples, ignoring the longstanding occupancy of those who have lived in these lands since time immemorial. With this myopic focus on the last few hundred years, the millennia-long residency of the First Peoples and their longstanding knowledge traditions are erased and dismissed (Dickason, 2002; Francis, 1997; Miller, 2018; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP], 1996). With the arrival of British and French colonizers seeking wealth came genocidal actions and oppressive policies under the guise of the Doctrine of Discovery, which sanctioned the strategic and intentional takeover of lands along with the attempted assimilation of the original occupants (Miller, 2018; Teillet, 2021). Other colonizing factors, including the

introduction of foreign diseases, mapping and place-naming, firearms, liquor, patronizing attitudes, and instigating warfare with previously allied nations, all served to further settler-colonial aims (Carter, 2019; Furniss, 2000). The ongoing denial of Indigenous existence and sovereignty cleared the way for European settlement and so-called progress (Liu, 2009; Miller, 2018). In the face of ongoing settler-colonial advances and assimilative oppressions, Indigenous peoples have resiliently, and often secretly, maintained and upheld their traditional knowledge systems and ways of knowing, being, doing, and relating. Canada is currently in a moment of reckoning as settler Canadians come to recognize these difficult truths among many others. This is largely due to the sacrifices and efforts of thousands of Indigenous peoples across Canada who formally shared their testimonies of lived residential school experiences with the TRC, the subsequent publishing of their experiences in a 2015 final report, and the accompanying 94 Calls to Action.

## **The Canadian Problem**

Canada is often lauded internationally for its peaceable and tolerant ways, yet Indigenous peoples have long known, and most recently the TRC is reminding settlers, that there is a far less celebratory side to the Canadian story (Battell Lowman & Barker, 2015; TRC, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d). The ways in which Canada brings its nation-building project to fruition over the centuries is laden with injustices (Coyle & Borrows, 2017; Francis, 1997;), and the schooling system has been a particularly effective and cruel colonial strategy in this regard (Miller, 2018). Not only were residential schools used to decimate Indigenous families and communities by forcibly removing generations of children from their families, but the one-sided version of Canadian history advanced through a colonially biased curriculum, absent of Indigenous peoples' sovereignty and agency, has been so thorough a colonial project that only now are some Canadians beginning to realize the oppressive realities of our settler-colonial nation-state (Poitras Pratt, 2021). In resting on myths of multiculturalism, peace, order, and good governance, Canada has largely managed to avert any negative global attention, that is until very recently. This diversionary tactic includes the pushing aside and ignoring of multiple attempts by Indigenous peoples to bring this unjust situation to light (see for instance National Indian Brotherhood, 1972; RCAP, 1996). We are hopeful that the TRC's 94 Calls to Action represent a turning point as they clearly oblige actionable responses from healthcare, child welfare, legal systems, industry, media, museums, and other public institutions. No longer are these recommendations; instead, these are Calls to Action. An educative lens reveals that there is a pressing need for education, conceived broadly, across all these Calls. The Honourable Senator and Justice Murray Sinclair (Anishinaabe), in his central role for the TRC, identified education as key to moving forward:

Education is what got us into this mess—the use of education at least in terms of residential schools—but education is the key to reconciliation.... That's why we say that this is not an aboriginal [sic] problem. It's a Canadian problem. (as quoted in Watters, 2015, para. 17–18)

Reconciliation efforts in Canada are emerging from the harsh reality of unjust colonial relations, focusing on the experiences and impact of the Indian residential schooling system but extending far beyond this one area. Given Canada's present-day settler-colonial struggles and history with longstanding racist systems and attitudes, it is not surprising that Indigenous peoples are pushing back on how reconciliation is being envisioned and advanced by Canada's federal

government (Alfred, 2010; Corntassel & Holder, 2008; Coulthard, 2014; Garneau, 2012; Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Tuck & Yang, 2012). As critical questions of land and land ownership loom as key issues in these discussions, several Indigenous scholars and others concerned with rightful restitution believe a national project of reconciliation is impossible given the scope of past and present injustices. In this tension, we appreciate the generous realism provided by Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar, writer, and artist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017), who navigates this contentious topic as an invitation to consider: “Far from asking settler Canadians to pack up and leave, it is critical that we think about how we can better share land” (para. 17). Given the ongoing legacy of broken promises from federal powers (Schimmel, 2022), we honour the work of Indigenous scholars and knowledge-keepers who articulate the need for self-determination and for inherent rights to be respectfully acknowledged while remaining keenly aware of past injustices.

In our professional roles and personal lives, we note the degree to which many settler Canadians remain intentionally unaware of the impacts of a settler-colonial past and present; perhaps more disconcertingly, even when made aware, they struggle with (or resist) moving their awareness toward reconciliatory actions. We, along with allied scholars such as Paulette Regan (2010) and Danielle Metcalfe-Chenail (2016), are concerned that while many people express empathy and even shock, they ultimately end up doing nothing to lessen the overt and covert oppressions against Indigenous peoples. Correspondingly, former Minister of Justice and Attorney-General of Canada, Jody Wilson-Raybould (2021) (Musgamagw Tsawataineuk and Laich-Kwil-Tach) shares her views on the impact of non-Indigenous citizens remaining silent, and inactive, on Indigenous injustices,

There has always been a direct connection between silence and injustice. Silence in the face of injustice is a self-interested form of cowardice. Silence sustains and ultimately feeds harm, while speaking out can drive progressive change. Indigenous peoples know this all too well. It is a simple fact that as we have made our voices heard, and more and more Canadians raise their voices as allies, change in the direction of justice emerges. This is equally true in our daily interactions where racism and discrimination rear their ugly heads, as well as in broad societal change. (p. 139)

Despite Wilson-Raybould’s hopeful, tempered tone, it seems non-Indigenous Canadians are slow to change, perhaps because the ceding of power and privilege feels untenable, as does recognizing the self-determination of Indigenous communities (Land, 2007). The ongoing report titled, *Calls to Action Accountability: A Status Update on Reconciliation*, provides telling evidence of inaction, concluding, “We find that reconciliation in this country is still only just beginning” (Jewell & Mosby, 2019, para. 1, emphasis added). This is a troubling truth.

We are witnessing educators step in to address this Canadian problem through their advocacy, scholarship, and demonstrations of public support for truth and reconciliation efforts (Battiste, 2013; Association of Canadian Deans of Education, 2010; Freeman et al., 2018; Kirkness, 2013; Madden, 2019; Shirley, 2017; Toulouse, 2018; Trimbee & Kinew, 2015; Universities Canada, 2015). We find ourselves aligning with the forward-looking perspective of teacher-educator and Korean Canadian scholar Sae Hoon Stan Chung (2016), who insists that we are at an “important juncture in Canadian history” (p. 400) where we can either work to make amends or continue perpetuating injustices through our inaction. Chung (2019) implores us to have the “courage to be altered” (p. 13)—to shift how we teach and learn.

In our early reconciliatory scholarship, we began doing just that. We focused on the role of critical service-learning as a transformative pedagogy (Poitras Pratt & Danyluk, 2019) and

worked with education undergraduate students who volunteered time at Indigenous schools on reserve. In these federally funded schools, which are separate from urban schooling systems, we witnessed the undergraduate pre-service teaching students make deep and meaningful connections through the praxis of decolonizing and Indigenizing scholarship, critical thinking, respectful dialogue, and mutual learning. Then in 2016, we expanded our curricular offerings and scholarship by developing a graduate certificate program focused on responding to the TRC's 94 Calls to Action (2015c). This one-year Master's program was carefully designed for students to create a critical service-learning project working alongside a community partner, responding to one of the TRC's 94 Calls to Action. Insights from this graduate program are featured through a collection of stories from Indigenous and non-Indigenous alumni in *Truth and Reconciliation through Education: Stories of Decolonizing Practices* (Poitras Pratt & Bodnaresko [Eds.], 2023). As an emerging, evolving, and expanding area of scholarship, truth and reconciliation studies as an inquiry and practice in education is becoming more clearly defined. We argue that it necessarily involves critical, decolonizing, and Indigenizing ways, and our teaching and learning experiences in truth and reconciliatory spaces have inspired us to propose a working model of how we interpret these components interacting with and complementing one another through a relational approach.

## **A Model of Reconciliatory Education**

One objective of the TRC is to advance reconciliation from an abstract concept into meaningful actions and practices. We are responding to this Call by working together as Indigenous and non-Indigenous adult learning specialists in reconciliation education to generate and contribute new ways of thinking to the scholarship of teaching and learning. We are inspired and guided by the TRC's words:

Reconciliation must support Aboriginal peoples as they heal from the destructive legacies of colonization that have wreaked such havoc in their lives. But it must do even more. Reconciliation must inspire Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples to transform Canadian society so that our children and grandchildren can live together in dignity, peace, and prosperity on these lands we now share. (TRC, 2015b, p. 114)

As postsecondary educators, we are reflective about the ways in which we are responding to the Calls to Action, and we have come to realize a few patterns about our engagement, teaching, and learning. For one, we recognize that we are interpreting this passage above as a call to adopt decolonizing and Indigenizing approaches in our teaching and learning spaces. For another, we are mobilized by encounters of truth-telling and the interpersonal dynamics of being together in ethical relationality (Donald, 2012). Recognizing these patterns, and based on our personal and professional experiences of living and teaching in truth and reconciliation, we propose "reconciliatory education" as a model to depict the transformative teaching and learning that results when educators come together in the shared ethical space of relationality to innovatively decolonize and Indigenize pedagogy and practices.

### ***Adopting a critical approach***

As more people become aware of Indigenous realities, they are beginning to question why they were not taught the full truths of Canadian history (Poitras Pratt & Danyluk, 2017). Adopting a critical approach means identifying and questioning where one's underlying beliefs, assumptions,



and privileges lie, so that we can open ourselves to new perspectives (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017; UNDRIP, 2021). This, as Taylor and Jarecke (2009) remind us, is “deep learning [as] an experience of personal or social empowerment” (p. 277). We are buoyed as many more educators are starting to see how biased curricula advantage one group, one story, and one perspective over all others (Association of Alberta Deans of Education, 2021; Seixas, 2017). As our eyes become opened, a critical stance allows us to make visible hegemonic norms and challenge previously unquestioned assumptions. This critical practice, in turn, leads to a pattern of truth seeking, and the forces of truth animate the processes of reconciliatory education. In Figure 3, truths are represented as the energetic lines within and outside of the model.

In reflecting on the ways in which we teach and learn about reconciliation through education, we note the presence of key interrelated aspects: decolonizing, Indigenizing, and truth-telling. We believe decolonizing is where many of us must concentrate our efforts after a critical stance has been adopted, given the force and the power of our colonial schooling systems—and we submit that decolonizing and Indigenizing efforts are interrelated aspects of teaching and learning for reconciliation through education. The space in between, reconciliatory education, is created when educators are engaged in ethical relations and focused on generating reconciliatory practices of decolonizing and Indigenizing. The Model of Reconciliatory Education (Figure 3) below shows how we have brought these crucial elements into relation.

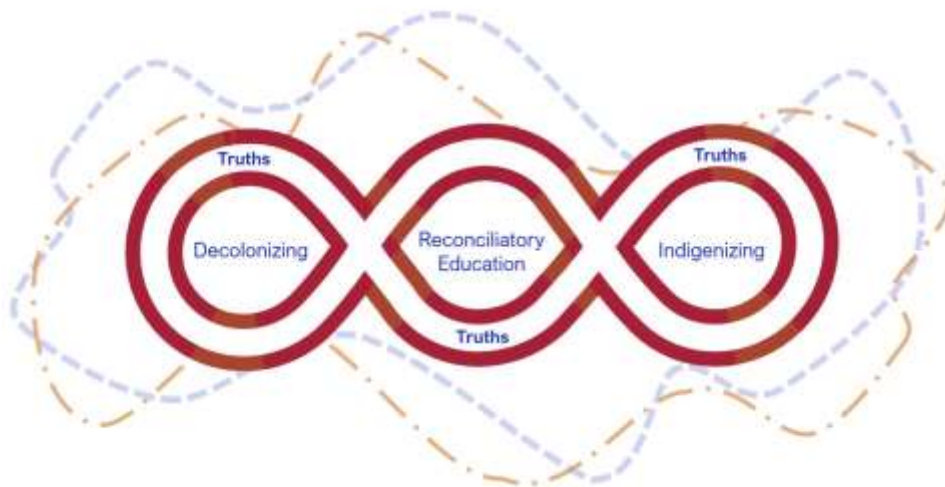


Figure 3: Model of Reconciliatory Education (Bodnaresko & Poitras Pratt, 2023)

There are a few key aspects about the ways in which we are understanding reconciliation through education, which we discuss in no particular order. It is notable that the model exists in an atmosphere and context of criticality and creativity. As mentioned at the outset of this article, reconciliation is a complex matter—this is partly because reconciliation relates to one’s identity, and we are all so very different, and partly because every one of our interactions are as unique as we are. To illustrate, let us consider our individual experiences with the reconciliatory education model as one way of facilitating understandings.

### ***Sulyn’s journey along the reconciliatory education model***

Four years ago, I entered the PhD adult learning stream of educational research at the University of Calgary. At the time, my research project ideas were vague and broadly related to immigration



and settlement. While I was not entirely sure of my focus, I knew that I had made the difficult but right decision to leave my secure public school teaching position to further my education. I had not been here a month when my learning journey began to crystalize. I had met Yvonne years earlier when studying for my Bachelor of Education, and I felt immediately grounded at the start of my doctoral studies as we reunited; I felt the magnetic forces connecting my passion, curiosity, and unknowingness with Yvonne's embodied wisdom. The ensuing years have been a tremendous journey for me as we walk up, down, and around together and apart, through the minefields and meadows that are truth and reconciliation in Canada.

The reconciliatory education model comes into being as I contemplate, remember, and engage as a settler working in relation with Yvonne, other Indigenous friends and relatives, and allied scholars. This model takes a critical approach in that it seeks to reveal and analyze power and privilege in Canada's unique historical, cultural, and ideological contexts (Rose, 1999; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). I feel grateful that the political science training I experienced before joining education enables me to focus on the ways in which power and privilege relate with knowledge and its social construction. Over the years, I increasingly attended on-campus and virtual learning events and opportunities hosted by Yvonne and fellow Indigenous colleagues. In this earlier stage of learning, I did not ask many direct questions and instead addressed my unknowing by listening, reading, watching, and contemplating the thinkers and Elders who presented and were referenced (Poitras Pratt & Danyluk, 2019).

Taking a critical approach then led me to the concept of "decolonizing." This was new thinking to me, and it has taken years for me to gain a grasp, not yet firm, of what decolonizing does and how it can look as we pursue social justice on and for this land. From where I stand today, decolonizing is critical thinking, but with the crucial added action of recognizing and ceding power. Decolonizing is understanding that there are ways to be in the world that are not foremost competitive or individualistic and that it is possible for both of these perspectives, and others, to coincide. I understand decolonizing as being comfortable with ambiguity and eschewing the drive for solutions and efficiency. It is daring to hope and believe that we do not have to feel as if we are individually and collectively as a society running towards the edge of a cliff.

In seeking other ways of knowing, being, doing, and relating (i.e., decolonizing), I find myself being drawn into the spaces of stewards who have called this land home since time immemorial. Referring to the reconciliatory education model, the context of my critical stance leads me to seek truths, which brings me to a decolonizing approach that leads me to learn more truths, and the contemplating and reconciling of these truths most often leads me to the powerful knowings and principles of the First Peoples of this land—this is Indigenizing.

It would be possible for me to stay forever in the infinite learning loop of following truths from decolonizing literature into Indigenizing teachings, and back and forth. For me, the difference that expands this model from a double-looped infinity into an extended infinity with three loops is the honouring of relationships. One of the very real-world challenges in taking up this work is that settler educators miss one or more of the elements (i.e., criticality, truth-telling, decolonizing, Indigenizing), and they become frustrated and discouraged when they receive feedback that their well-intentioned efforts are not culminating in the socially just outcomes that they intended. In reflecting on this quandary—of good intentions not matching outcomes—it becomes clear that relationships are the key to teaching and learning in a good way.

By engaging in partnership with like-minded, like-hearted, and like-spirited people who are also committed to decolonizing teaching and learning practices and who sincerely value Indigenous knowledge systems and principles, we create ethical space between the two loops of decolonizing and Indigenizing. This might be seen in the act of connecting with a family member

about an Indigenous authored novel, attending an Indigenous film with a trusted friend, connecting with an Indigenous colleague to hear about their scholarship, or asking an Indigenous education specialist for feedback on a lesson plan or course design. Reaching out to others means we step beyond an individualized learning loop about truth and reconciliation to create an in-between space where teaching and learning can occur as the exchange of truths with others.

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*In this telling moment of ethical and reciprocal exchange, we ask ourselves:  
What does your story mean to me, and  
what does my story mean to you?  
How do I see myself implicated in what you have just shared?*

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### ***Yvonne's journey along the reconciliatory education model***

As a Métis scholar, one who comes with lived experiences and entered the academy later in life, I marvel at the ways in which education presents itself as both oppressor and freedom fighter. What I now believe, based on my own educational experiences, is that education is slowly, albeit awkwardly at times, starting to transform. I was raised with the cultural traditions of the Métis, and I have vivid memories of my father telling me that “progress isn’t always good” and that the Whiteman would soil his own “nest” in the pursuit of profit. It has taken me decades to see the Indigenous wisdom within these sayings—yet as global peoples experience how our planet is reeling from exploitive and extractive ways of wealth-seeking groups, I am reminded of the wisdom inherent in my father’s belief systems being passed onto me. These beliefs were also the seeds of critical thinking that arrived from the deep wells of someone attempting to survive Western forces with traditional ways and only a third-grade education.

What I can also see now, in hindsight, is that the nurturing of critical thought was also the basis for my own decolonizing ways. So while my graduate training privileged the Western canon, I was eventually empowered to bring the voices of Indigenous scholars and knowledge-keepers into my scholarship—sometimes with the help of faculty but more often by listening to those around me who whispered words of encouragement or scribbled helpful resources in the margins of my notebook. It was through the latter scenario that I was introduced to the powerful work of Maori scholar and educator Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), whose first edition of *Decolonizing Methodologies* became a life buoy in the sea of Eurocentric theories I was being asked to navigate. Another soul-saving resource arrived by way of Brazilian theorist Paulo Freire (1970), whose *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* sang out to me with its reclamation of power and belief in the wisdom of shaping education to bring meaning to grassroots people. I found solidarity in these works as they rang true to my own life experiences and offered the critical hope that I so desperately needed—and what I could eventually offer in return to my own community.

As a Métis person, I am deeply aware of our in-betweenness, and for a number of us, we are steeped in Indigenous ways, so my starting point in the reconciliation through education model fluctuates: according to what is needed in the moment by learners or others and, more often than not, what the current political climate calls for. Elsewhere, I have acknowledged the “complexities, ambiguities, and contradictions” (Poitras Pratt, 2021) of Métis situatedness and how culturally fluid parameters welcome in creative diversity (Robinson & Martin, 2016) that is then transformed through lived experiences. I apply the same worldview when thinking about how we as educators might transform educational experiences to be respectful and inclusive of all learners and all truths. My experience with the reconciliatory education model is one wherein Indigenous ways,

principles, and truths are already a part of who I am by way of my upbringing and the passing on of Indigenous knowledge traditions. The space that resides between Indigenizing and decolonizing is one that is both familiar and inherently full of possibilities—it is a space of hopeful and creative imagining with all my relations.

## **Bringing Decolonizing and Indigenizing into Education and Your Own Practices**

The term *decolonization* can invoke strong reactions, with many asking, “What does this term mean for me as an educator?” Some postcolonial theorists have defined it as the “process of revealing and dismantling colonialist power in all its forms” (Ashcroft et al., 2000, p. 63). From an educator stance, Mi’kmaw scholar Marie Battiste (2013) argues that decolonizing begins with “confronting the hidden standards of racism, colonialism, and cultural and linguistic imperialism in the modern curriculum and seeing the theoretical incoherence with a modern theory of society” (p. 29). Across editions of *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Maori scholar and educator Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999, 2012, 2021) sees decolonizing as a way to critique damaging Western research approaches. Her 25 projects<sup>2</sup> have since inspired Indigenous postsecondary educators to transform a number of them into guiding principles that support the work of Indigenizing education (Louie et al., 2017).

To transform theoretical articulations of decolonization into practical, everyday possibilities, we need to take up decolonization in ways that reflect our own unique positionality: to consider what decolonization means at a personal level and in relation with others (Graveline, 1998). The practice of coming up with a lived understanding of decolonization is a deeply personal act that involves naming and challenging your own unquestioned assumptions of what is “right” and “true.” Further, it necessitates consideration of the degree to which these assumptions are tied to settler-colonial logics that make possible the many and ongoing injustices Indigenous peoples have suffered and continue to endure on this land. From an Indigenous perspective, it means shedding un-truths and affirming what we know to be true (Poitras Pratt & Gladue, 2022).

We ourselves have taken up the challenge of articulating the meaning of decolonization from our own positionalities. From Yvonne’s perspective as a Métis scholar, decolonizing is a need to address historical and contemporary structural and systemic injustices through education; this work begins by using educative resistance, fueled by the creativity of social imagination (Greene, 1995) to spark awareness into action. In her efforts to reclaim and revitalize Indigenous knowledge traditions, the driving ethos of this work is premised on a deliberate reinterpretation of decolonization, one that is generative and positioned within the “realm of the creative” (Poitras Pratt, 2020, p. 6). In this way, the pursuit of self-determination is advanced through Indigenizing acts of storytelling, celebrating survival, revitalizing, connecting, reframing, restoring, returning, and sharing (Smith, 2012). As such, rather than focusing on decolonization as acts of destruction, disruption, or even deconstruction, Yvonne purposely nurtures and tends creative resistance efforts into being. These Indigenizing efforts breathe life, purpose, and joy back into teaching and learning.

For Sulyn, a settler scholar, decolonization can be perceived as a threat to the status quo life that is uncomplicated and easy. Decolonizing is about privileging Indigenous peoples’ rights

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<sup>2</sup> These 25 projects include claiming, testimonies, storytelling, celebrating survival, remembering, Indigenizing, intervening, revitalizing, connecting, reading (critical re-reading), writing, representing, gendering, envisioning, reframing, restoring, returning, democratizing, networking, protecting, naming, negotiating, discovering, and sharing.

and self-determination and includes the practice of constantly self-reflecting upon her connections, contributions, perpetuations, and disruptions of settler-colonial structures and ways. Chung's (2019) words resonate: "the most challenging recognition for me is to realize that there is inequity in me, that I have both forces within me" (p. 21). Sulyn understands this quote as navigating the complicated tension of simultaneously being in solidarity with and support of Indigenous peoples' rights and self-determination while also acknowledging her occupancy as a settler colonizer on these lands.

Together, we maintain that decolonizing is a matter of truth-telling—exposing settler colonial injustices to Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike—knowing that schooling has been a major source of the mistruths, as documented in the thousands of pages compiled by the RCAP into a 5-volume collection (1996), and by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Residential Schools into a 6 volume final report (2015a), as well as numerous others. In making the case for decolonization as a necessary process, we assert the need for critical self-examination as a way of opening space and a prelude to healthier relations. In this space of ethical relationality, the longstanding traditions of First Peoples provide much wisdom (Poitras Pratt & Gladue, 2022), and we see great value in honouring Indigenous ways of knowing, being, relating, doing, and starting with where you are at (i.e., physically, spiritually, mentally, and emotionally).

The work of Indigenizing is best started locally by focusing on the land underneath your feet and under the guidance and leadership of Indigenous peoples. We see much promise and potential in Indigenous ancestral traditions to help guide the ethical reform of current educational practices. The wisdoms of land-based pedagogy and storytelling traditions are powerful and compelling forces (Archibald, 2008; Simpson, 2014, and as educators, we are drawn to these essential Indigenizing pedagogies. We consider our roles and relationships to be heterarchical and dynamic (Poitras Pratt et al., 2021). In centering Indigenous principles, we purposefully disrupt the Westernized postsecondary hierarchy where an all-knowing teacher unilaterally imparts their wisdom to a student. We are further inspired by a powerful Cree term, *è-mâmwî-atoskâtamahk*, translated as *we work on something together* (McLeod & Wolvengrey, 2016). We argue that there is nothing more urgent to work on together than a set of reconciliatory practices that are based in Indigenous principles and values. By working through decolonizing and Indigenizing processes—supported by ethical relationality—we become able to move towards *acting*, not out of fear, guilt, or shame, but in recognition of our individual responsibilities towards ensuring our collective survival and wellbeing (Poitras Pratt, 2020).

### ***Truths and truth-telling as educational norms***

Looking around, we see that the burden of efforts and (un)learning must shift to non-Indigenous Canadians (Evans et al., 2020; Gladue, 2022; Regan, 2010). Settler and newer Canadians must listen to and learn from what Indigenous peoples are saying, and have been saying, since settlers first came to this land. In the past fifty years alone, numerous Indigenous-led initiatives have arisen to educate Canadians of the injustices and dark realities that stem from a colonial past and continue into contemporary times. Notable events include the National Indian Brotherhood's (now Assembly of First Nations) self-determining issuance *Indian Control of Indian Education* (1972), the massive RCAP report (1996) sparked by the Oka event of 1990, the restorative work of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (2023), and the Indian Residential Schools Agreement (2006) that precipitated the Truth and Reconciliation Commission era. Also notable are grassroots-led movements such as Idle No More, which started in 2012 to raise public awareness of the injustices Indigenous peoples face in Canada (Walia, 2014). Additionally, the National Inquiry into Missing

and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls was launched in 2016 and delivered its Calls for Justice report in 2019 in response to Indigenous peoples' outrage at the systemic lack of supports or justice for Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people experiencing violence and erasure. Non-Indigenous Canadians are increasingly being challenged to wake up and recognize the presence of racism and oppression within Canada as significant historical and present-day structures and realities (Gilmore, 2015; Regan, 2010; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017; Simon, 2000; St. Denis, 2007).

The work of truth and reconciliation requires humility. In an educational setting, humility implicates teachers as learners and learners as teachers. It is the professional practice of reflecting on ourselves as educators, the discipline, and educational practices, under the watchful gaze of our students, families, and communities, that makes us accountable. As we continually work towards implementing the Calls to Action, we are reflecting on and coming to more clearly understand the process of how we can ethically and responsibly engage in truth and reconciliation practices through education by making spaces for Indigenous peoples, principles, and ways. We keep moving forward together—as learners and as teachers.

### ***Creating reconciliatory practices in ethical spaces of relationality***

You will know that you are within the reconciliatory education model when you connect with another while seeing the depth of colonial injustices, the longevity of Indigenous responses, and the need for contemporary Indigenous moves to reclaim sovereignty. We remind you that there is no single way forward on these loops of learning, unlearning, and imaginings. Yes, you can learn lessons from the experiences of others who are taking up the work of decolonizing, but you must start from where you are presently situated. Your experiences and relations are unique, and your decolonial journey will be, too. As Canadian social-justice educators Aman Sium, Chandni Desai, and Eric Ritskes (2012) note, “We are deeply aware of the need to begin with our own positionalities, with an inward look at our own histories, subjugations, privileges, contradictions, tensions, insecurities, rage, hope, optimism, and aspirations—each of these entangled with the others” (p. ii). And insofar as this process extends beyond the self, it extends into the world: this is the enactment of reconciliation through education in ethical spaces of relationality. This ethical space makes room for an “ecological understanding of human relationality.... [It] does not deny difference, but rather seeks to more deeply understand how our different histories and experiences position us in relation to each other” (Donald, 2012, p. 45). It is here that we can together make a difference.

### **Call for Educators to Come Together in Ethical Relations**

It is becoming clearer to us that decolonizing means opening a space where Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples can come together and address the damaging forces of settler colonialism. It is also becoming evident that decolonizing in an educational space means we have a responsibility to use our power and privilege, as those who have the attention of many people each and every day, to tell truths, deeply consider the implication of our situatedness with these truths, and learn from them to create better relations of trust and cohesion.

Part of our reconciliatory praxis as educators involves working to decolonize the institution and systems of education in Canada. Educators are learning some hard lessons along the way, but we know we must maintain hope in all we do. Schooling, in its unquestioned and colonial form, has colonized all of us; notions of objectivity and value-neutral “truth” override wholistic

understandings; bifurcated thinking that privileges binaries, categories, and linearity sever natural interconnections; imagination and creativity are undervalued and even stifled in favour of replications of the status quo; and an ethos of individual competition is unquestioned and even celebrated over that of working together. This ongoing assertion of individual rights and freedoms threatens our collective and the planet's wellbeing. We do not claim to know the whole of what decolonizing education might be, nor do we claim to know the best ways forward. However, we are moving forward, and doing so with a spirit of learning and an attitude of wanting to do better in this space of possibilities.

We invite all caring educators to begin decolonizing and join us in this movement, all the while understanding that this work is done to better our relations. If more equitable power relations are to be imagined and one day realized, we must each do our part to teach and learn from others. Reconciliation through education represents a lifelong endeavour that has implications for the health and wellbeing of our shared national future and, as such, is our shared responsibility.

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