

First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Leads: Transforming Education by Sharing Our Praxis

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(Pseudonym)

Abstract

In the fall of 2016, the Ontario Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education [MOE], Indigenous Education, 2016) announced that each school board was required to have a dedicated position under the umbrella title "First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Lead" (henceforth referred to as the "Lead"). The MOE also provided the funding for this position. This new funding and mandate ensured that all school boards had the capability to create a new position and/or continue supporting their current Lead position(s).

However, the MOE provided few guidelines for what this work should entail, and they offered no mandatory training to the Leads. Therefore, in the absence of substantial directions from the MOE, it is critical that these Leads, academics, and other people that work in the field of Indigenous education communicate about the possibilities of this work. This paper is a small contribution to this subject area, in hopes that it will create a much-needed conversation about the future of Indigenous education in elementary and secondary schools. This paper will begin by theorizing about some of the difficulties and barriers that some Leads may experience. Then it will offer one strategy that one school board is using to implement Indigenous education in Ontario.

Keywords: First nations; Métis; Inuit; Indigenous; Indigenous education

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Introduction

In the fall of 2016, the Ontario Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education [MOE], Indigenous Education, 2016) announced that each school board was required to have a dedicated position under the umbrella title, "First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Lead" (henceforth referred to as the "Lead"). It should be noted that in spite of the name of this position, there are many Leads that are non-Indigenous people. The title indicates the subject area for which the position is responsible, rather than the identity of the person who has the title. The MOE also provided the funding for this position. Each board received a minimum level of funding (\$165,520.12) to hire a dedicated First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Lead. Boards were required to spend at least half of this funding on the dedicated position.

While some school boards already had one or more positions dedicated to providing curriculum support, teacher training, and/or student mentorship in the area of Indigenous education, this new funding and mandate ensured that all school boards had the capability to create a new position, or continue supporting their current Lead position(s). These roles appear under many titles, including superintendent, principal, consultant, community liaison, and more. While some school boards are still working on fulfilling this commitment, many boards have already created this position and much more.

However, the MOE provided few guidelines for what this work should entail, or specific directions on how the work should be implemented. The only clear direction from the MOE is that each Lead

needs to implement the Ontario First Nation, Métis, Inuit Education Policy Framework using the Board Action Plan template; to work with Indigenous Education Advisory Committees/Councils to develop and implement Board Action Plans; to support the implementation of voluntary and confidential self-identification policies; to collaborate and liaison with Indigenous communities, organizations, and families; and to support "efforts to build the knowledge and awareness of all students about Indigenous histories, cultures, perspectives, and contributions ..." (Personal communication, Education Officer— Indigenous Education Office, Ministry of Education, July 5, 2016). Above and beyond these guidelines, no mandatory training was offered to the Leads by the MOE, and individual school boards have the discretion to decide how the above work should be implemented.

Considering the brevity of these guidelines, it is critical that these Leads, academics, and other people who work in the field of Indigenous education communicate about the possibilities for this work. This paper is a small contribution to the subject area, in hopes that it will create a much-needed conversation about the future of Indigenous education in elementary and secondary schools. After all, these Leads have the potential to transform our current Eurocentric public education system. This paper will begin by theorizing about some of the difficulties and barriers that some Leads may experience. Then it will offer one strategy that one school board is using to implement Indigenous education in Ontario.

Identifying the Barriers

Many schools across Ontario have been increasingly learning and teaching about Canada's colonial history, as well as Indigenous perspectives, narratives, and contemporary struggles and successes with varying degrees of commitment. These varying levels of commitment often depend on a school's geographic location, student demographics, and the knowledge and commitment of the school board's leadership and teachers. Although these variations in Indigenous education between schools and school boards are rationalized and accepted as a normal or inevitable part of implementation, perhaps these differences should be more contested. After all, despite the diversity among school boards and individual schools, all public-school boards in Ontario function as top-down hierarchies. At the top of this hierarchy is the Ministry of Education, which is the government body responsible for overseeing all of Ontario's publicly funded English and French public and Catholic schools.

The Ministry of Education is the governing body that provides policies and guidelines for public education. A decade ago, the Ontario Ministry of Education published the Ontario First Nation, Métis, Inuit Education Policy Framework. This document stated that it had two goals to achieve by the year 2016. These goals were to "improve achievement among First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students and to close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in the areas of literacy and numeracy, retention of students in school, graduation rates, and advancement to postsecondary studies ..." (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 5). As previously outlined, recently every school board was also directed to create a dedicated Lead position for Indigenous education to

implement the Ontario First Nation, Métis, Inuit Education Policy Framework. Therefore, the bottom line is that each school board has been provided with the political, human, and financial resources to integrate Indigenous education into their systems and given the explicit direction that Indigenous education needs to be a priority in schools across Ontario.

Considering the above policies and positions that have been mandated by the Ministry of Education, we should be contesting rather than accepting the varying levels of commitment that school boards have made to Indigenous education. Or, at the very least, we should be asking what the barriers are to Indigenous education in Ontario's school boards. Moreover, what anticolonial praxis is currently taking place in elementary and secondary schools, if any? While a province-wide analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, some preliminary comments may suffice.

To begin with, some people suggest that the level of engagement with Indigenous education depends on the student demographics in each board. Specifically, some people believe that student engagement will depend on whether student populations are primarily Indigenous or non-Indigenous. Each school board has voluntary and confidential self-identification policies for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students, and the MOE grants funding based on this data (Ministry of Education, *Estimates Briefing Booking 2016–2017*, 2016). Yet, regardless of how many students self-identify, student demographics can never be cited as a barrier to Indigenous education for a few basic reasons. First, if school boards do have larger Indigenous populations—such as some school boards in Northern Ontario—that does not necessarily guarantee that the student populations are engaged in

discussions about Indigenous identities, issues, and contemporary activism. Due to the ongoing legacy of colonial projects such as residential schools, the so-called 60s Scoop (the wholesale adoption of Indigenous children beginning in the 1960s and continuing into the 1980s, often without the knowledge or consent of the Indigenous families or communities), changing definitions in the Indian Act (such as C-31), and contemporary disproportional incarceration rates and children-in-care rates, it is possible that Indigenous youth and their communities are still learning about their own histories, cultures, and community connections. Therefore, we cannot assume that Indigenous students are inherently interested, prepared, or desiring to lead the way in Indigenous education.

Moreover, refusing to self-identify is sometimes intentional and purposeful. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012), author of *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, would argue that research pertaining to Indigenous communities—such as collecting self-identification data—must be connected to a history of European imperialism and colonialism. She states that "'research,' is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world's vocabulary. When mentioned in many Indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful ... " (p. 1). She explains that, "The greater danger, however, was in the creeping policies that intruded into every aspect of our lives, legitimated by research ... " (Smith, 2012, p. 3). Therefore, the low numbers recorded for self-identification must be considered, explained, and analyzed within the context of research and policies affecting Indigenous communities historically, rather than being interpreted

through a singular lens specific to these contemporary self-identification policies.

Moreover, non-Indigenous people in Canada cannot continue to expect Indigenous youth and educators to bear all the responsibility for this work. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action are for all educators; they do not distinguish between what Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators need to accomplish. And finally, as Cannon (2011) explains, "so long as we remain focused on racism and colonialism as belonging only to Indigenous peoples, we do very little in the way of having non-Indigenous peoples think about matters of restitution, their own decolonization, and what it might mean to transform their complicity in ongoing dispossession" (para. 2). Therefore, quantitative data about self-identified students should not be conceived of as a rational barrier to implementing Indigenous education in school boards.

What, or perhaps who, presents other barriers to Indigenous education? Gaining the support of leadership teams—directors, superintendents, principals—is absolutely critical to advancing this work. School boards function as institutional hierarchies, so positional power is an inevitable factor that must be navigated by Leads. Yet, even after Leads have secured the support of their leadership teams, Indigenous education becomes one of many projects that the leadership teams balance. Leadership teams are constantly tasked with implementing all of the Ministry's goals. Indigenous education is one area of work, which means it will be prioritized, de-prioritized, and managed to meet the system's needs.

For example, even when Leads are asked to present, share, and teach about Indigenous education to adult learners, they

are often given limited time periods. Principals and superintendents may ask Leads to teach other educators for 45–90 minute workshops, which is one of the reasons that things change so slowly in the system. Many educators are at the beginning of their learning journey, so short workshops merely introduce them to a few basic ideas, which are not necessarily followed up on or extended upon. Unfortunately, the expediency of this type of work in institutions is not new. As Jeffery and Nelson (2009) note, "practitioners demand solutions and techniques for 'working with different Others' while remaining indifferent to a critique or analysis of how those differences are constituted ... we often note what feels like an urgency to skip the critical reflection ... and move automatically to a prescribed 'action' that will correct the problem" (p. 100). While time constraints and action-focused work is not unique to Indigenous education, it is one lingering problem that is difficult to circumvent as a Lead.

In addition to time constraints, each educator with whom Leads communicate can be resistant to a Lead's work because of his or her own subjectivity. One problem that Leads must contend with is White Fragility. Whether teaching a small or large group of adult learners, there is a chance that any person in the room may become defensive when learning about racism and/or colonialism. Robin DiAngelo explains why this reaction is normal for White people and she names this phenomenon "White Fragility." DiAngelo (2011) writes:

White people in North America live in a social environment that protects and insulates them from race-based stress. This insulated environment of racial protection builds white expectations for racial

comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress, leading to what I refer to as White Fragility. White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviours, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium. (p. 54)

DiAngelo (2011) identifies factors that inculcate White Fragility as segregation, universalism and individualism, entitlement to racial comfort, racial arrogance, racial belonging, psychic freedom, and positive representation. It may be argued that some racialized people also experience some of the above factors in their daily lives, and therefore, they may experience aspects of White Fragility, too.

When presenting about topics such as colonialism, genocide, and specific violent acts of assimilation, settler guilt is an ever-present barrier. Yet, White Fragility exacerbates this guilt by creating a reaction that can easily make the Lead vulnerable. For example, if a person in a position of power reacts negatively to a Lead's presentation—for even the most minor infraction, such as wording that is perceived as negative or uncomfortable—then this could result in disciplinary meetings, and even job dismissal. Learning to anticipate, address, and de-escalate moments of White Fragility is not easy, and the consequences of not doing so can be serious.

Finally, an analysis of barriers would not be completed without reflecting upon the people who interact with students the most: teachers. Whenever a "new" topic is introduced as a laudable goal to reach—such as the inclusion of Indigenous voices, histories, and perspectives in classrooms—some educators become evasive, reluctant, and even fearful of the work. For example, non-Indigenous educators will publicly state that they agree that Indigenous education is important, and others will proclaim to be committed to reconciliation. Yet, despite their avowed commitment to reconciliation, non-Indigenous educators typically follow up with hesitant questions such as, "But where do I begin?" In other words, educators claim that they would like to teach about Indigenous peoples, but they cannot because they feel unequipped to do so. No matter how many teaching resources are produced, or the availability of additional qualifications in First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Studies, or professional development offered by school boards, or the growing presence of Indigenous scholars, Native friendship centers, knowledge keepers and Elders, and more, educators in Ontario continue to claim that they do not know where to begin this work.

This widespread ignorance that elementary and secondary educators claim to have in regard to Indigenous education usually manifests as resistance towards integrating Indigenous perspectives into their classrooms, and/or teaching First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Studies courses. Many of these educators complain about how unprepared and uneducated they are in this subject area, and they express various levels of anxiety when they are asked to alter their Eurocentric teaching pedagogies. What is also problematic are the teachers who are attempting to teach about Indigenous education, but who lack an anti-

colonial lens. Instead, they teach about First Nation, Métis, and Inuit people through a limited culture-based framework. Therefore, whether teachers are teaching Indigenous-related content in their classrooms, or are outright refusing to do so, many Leads typically see the same results: Elementary and secondary educators are at the beginning of their learning journey.

While some people may dismiss these concerns as "normal" or commonsensical, these reactions of fear and/or discomfort deserve to be critically analyzed precisely because they are considered rational and acceptable responses in education. If we accept them as inevitable and acceptable reactions, then this also means that these responses have been accepted as rational and inevitable barriers to transforming education. Rather than accepting these responses as legitimate barriers, we should think critically about how they may be grounded in more than simply discomfort or ignorance.

These responses and resistance that teachers express are problematic for several reasons. To begin with, this reaction could be identified as another "settler move to innocence," as coined by Eve Tuck and K. Yang (2012). They also state that a settler move to innocence is "settler desire to be made innocent, to find some mercy or relief in the face of the relentless settler guilt and haunting ... the misery of guilt makes one hurry toward any reprieve" (p. 9). In this case, the reprieve or mercy that educators seek out or hurry towards is the ongoing excuse that they are "not ready" to teach about Indigenous peoples. By making these claims, these teachers can opt out of any commitment to transforming education, and by doing so, they renew their commitment to maintaining the current Eurocentric education system. Moreover, as Harsha

Walia (2012) points out, when settlers get stuck in a state of guilt, it "is a state of self-absorption that actually upholds privilege" (p. 28). Therefore, whether these reactions are a settler move to innocence or a reflection of these educator's own privilege, they signal that their own subjectivity as a settler should be the primary and sole factor in the decision of whether they should learn and teach about Indigenous communities.

Furthermore, when educators do attempt to include Indigenous perspectives into their classrooms, their strategies are typically one-dimensional. That is, educators tend to focus on incorporating Indigenous culture into their classrooms in very token-based ways. Lomawaima and McCarty's (2006) concept of the "safety zone" is a notion that many educators in Ontario abide by, even if the notion remains unnamed. They define the "safety zone" as a practice whereby educators "distinguish safe from dangerous Indigenous beliefs and practices ... [and] determine where and when Indigenous cultural practices might be considered benign enough to be allowed, even welcomed ... " into schools (p. 6). Many Leads would attest that they consistently see educators teaching about "safe" concepts such as medicine wheels, regalia, and artwork, yet teachers become uncomfortable and even resistant to teaching about the violent nature of colonialism, such as land dispossession, racism, or governmental policies that continue to shape the lives of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. These latter topics have been identified as "dangerous" by educators, and teachers have the discretion and ability to omit these topics from their lessons. In essence, what these teachers are doing is dictating what is "allowably Indigenous" by highlighting socially acceptable forms of Indigeneity, while excluding examples that

are deemed transgressive by settlers (Vowel, 2016, pp. 68–69).

The result is that elementary and secondary educators are praised for teaching about any element of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit cultures because it is well-known that some of their peers are not teaching any Indigenous-related curriculum whatsoever. This is how culture has become the benchmark of success in elementary and secondary schools, and how anticolonial educators become stigmatized as radical, aggressive, and unrelatable. Marie Battiste (2013), in *Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit*, explains that:

Culture [is] an educational concept that allow[s] Euro-Canadians to focus on empowering the deprived and the powerless, yet not having to confront any explanation or evaluation of the effects of racism or colonialism on these cultures or people.... Culturalism ... has developed strategies that mask Eurocentric foundations and purposes of education and its privileged consciousness and perspectives. (pp. 31–32)

If educators are avoiding lessons and discussions about colonial techniques and practices, then how can students ever learn to embrace an anticolonial lens, or challenge white supremacy?

For Leads in Indigenous education in school boards, these are some of the barriers and issues that we may confront. As a result, the following questions ensue: Once I have access to a group of educators who are committed to integrating Indigenous education into their schools, how can I, as

their Lead, guide/direct them toward the goal of transforming education, which requires that they teach about topics such as racism and land dispossession, and also interrogate their own complicity in maintaining settler colonialism? Moreover, how can I prepare and motivate these educators to teach about sovereignty, and the history of colonialism, treaties, residential schools, the Indian Act, forms of resistance and more, when they are accustomed to teaching about “safe” topics such as culture? Finally, how can I safely navigate White Fragility (and ultimately, white supremacy) when I am teaching settlers about colonialism?

Strategy/Plan for Addressing the Barriers

Rather than merely outlining the barriers to Indigenous education, it is equally important to initiate dialogue about how Leads circumvent these barriers in their daily work. As a Lead in Indigenous education for a school board in Ontario, it is my professional duty to answer the above questions that I propose, to honor the Truth and Reconciliation's Calls to Action #62 and #63. In short, these Calls to Action ask that all levels of government make age-appropriate curriculum and learning resources on residential schools, treaties, and Aboriginal people's historical and contemporary contributions to Canada, to address teacher-training needs, and to identify the best teaching practices to support the above work. The overall goal is to create more intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect for educators and students (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, pp. 238–239).

For me to prepare educators to teach Indigenous education, and to fulfill these Calls to Action, I need to begin by understanding what these educators already

know and what their learning gaps are, as my narrative and professional trajectory is often different from theirs. I must be aware of where they are at in their learning journey and what type of resources and support they are already utilizing to teach Indigenous education, so that I can meet them where they are in their learning, and then lead them on their learning journey. Moreover, because Indigenous education is not a mandated part of the elementary or secondary curriculum in Ontario, I must approach this work cautiously and strategically because educators are entering this work voluntarily, which means that I need to learn how to engage them academically, but also emotionally and personally. If I offend or intimidate teachers, or create too much shame or guilt, they will simply opt out of the learning that I have set in place. Or worse, as mentioned previously, some educators can utilize the hierarchies that we work within to target me as the problem (rather than colonialism, which is the problem).

The work plan that outlines the long-term goals and budget for my work as a Lead is called the Board Action Plan for First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education. Over the past few years in the school board that I work for, this plan focused primarily on delivering professional development workshops to teaching staff, inviting Indigenous educators and Elders into schools, and organizing Indigenous-based educational activities for students. While these initiatives were improved upon on a yearly basis, the outcomes or long-term effects of the above projects were difficult to assess because these opportunities were offered indiscriminately to the entire board, and participants were not consistently asked to follow up or comment on their learning.

This school year we decided to take a different approach to the work. The board sought out one school from each supervisory region to become model schools for Indigenous education. Each year, more schools will be invited to join. These model schools will learn and teach about First Nation, Métis, and Inuit histories, perspectives, and contemporary issues, in order to become exemplary schools that are supporting an in-depth development of Indigenous education, and ultimately to support all schools in the board. One principal and a small group of teachers from each school are part of a central learning committee that will meet regularly to discuss the challenges and successes they have had in integrating Indigenous education into their schools, and to collectively learn from each other, the Lead, and her or his principal. While it is mandatory that each of the schools have a principal and a group of teachers attend the professional development activities and learning circles, we have been flexible in allowing principals and teachers to bring additional people, so that additional people may benefit from this work. Each of the schools will also receive a package of professional development activities to assist in their learning, as well as programs to engage the student population in their schools. The package of professional development activities includes presentations by Indigenous educators and scholars, movie nights, book clubs, workshops and simulations, and weekend trips to learn from Elders. Student programs include academic and participatory workshops for students led by Indigenous educators.

Returning to my educational problem and questions that were outlined earlier in this paper, the specific accomplishments that I want to achieve is to establish the purpose and direction for Indigenous education for

these model schools. This direction will involve guiding educators to think critically about the work that they are doing, and ultimately, to add to their current goals of embedding culture into their classrooms. While teaching about culture is an important part of the work—and will inevitably remain a mainstay in classrooms—it should not be the end goal for Indigenous education. In addition to culture, I want them to consider how they are complicit in settler colonialism, and to alter their classrooms by teaching about Canada's racist and colonial history. I want to teach them how to educate others about Indigenous sovereignty, treaties, the Indian Act, residential schools, acts of resistance, and more. Only then can we think about the possibilities of reconciliation in education. I plan on accomplishing the above tasks during the meetings that they have committed to attending. Considering that this project is a new initiative, I have the unique opportunity to set the tone and goals for this long-term work.

To establish the purpose and direction for Indigenous education, each meeting had a structured agenda. I began by asking the principals and teachers to share what they thought the purpose of the work was, so that I could understand which of their ideas I needed to maintain, shift, and extend upon. I also needed to provide them with foundational concepts at each meeting to build a common vocabulary for us to use, and to stimulate their critical thinking. Finally, I needed to intentionally show them examples of culturalism—in readings and professional development opportunities—so that they could discover why a culturalistic framework is limiting. In short, I knew that I could not simply introduce these educators to my end goals without any context. Rather, I needed to create an environment in which they would learn the importance of these

goals on their own, with me guiding them, rather than directing them.

For our first meeting, I ensured that many of the above ideas were integrated into the learning, to normalize these strategies. For example, prior to our first meeting as a group, I sent an invitational email to everyone, asking that they come to the first meeting prepared to share their teaching philosophy, how it would inform the work we would do in Indigenous education, and overall, what they hoped to achieve by participating in this initiative.

Then during the meeting, I provided the following prompts to stimulate conversation and to inspire them to think about what we were attempting to accomplish with this new initiative: What is your teaching philosophy and how will it guide this work? What are we trying to achieve? What is the ultimate outcome? What experiences, lessons, and/or resources have informed your work in Indigenous education so far? In small groups, each person answered any of the above questions on a large post-it, shared his or her ideas in their small groups, and then each table shared some common ideas with the whole group. Everyone left their post-its for me to collect, so that I could later reflect on them and summarize their ideas. Their ideas were then written into a formal commitment, so that we could recall where our learning began, revise our goals over time, and stay focused on what our collective goals were. These goals were also shared with the school board's Educational Advisory Circle—which comprises Indigenous community members, Elders, teachers, and other staff members—to elicit their feedback and advice.

At the first meeting, I also introduced the group to new ideas and

concepts that would guide our work, to develop their learning from the outset. For example, we discussed Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action #62 and #63, and I introduced them to the following concepts: settler, colonialism, anticolonialism, and reconciliation. I asked each person to research one term using some common inquiry templates, and at the following meeting, we would begin by discussing what they learned. I would then supplement their discussion with quotes and teachings by Indigenous scholars.

I also assigned the reading "Decolonizing our Practice—Indigenizing our Teaching" by Shauneen Pete, Bettina Schneider, and Kathleen O'Reilly (2013) for homework. I chose this article for a few reasons. First, I recognized that many of the educators were not academics, so the conversational tone in this article would be accessible to the educators with whom I was working. Second, the three co-authors discuss how they began to integrate Indigenous perspectives into their pedagogy, which is inevitably where many of these teachers would be starting, too. Third, the article would teach the educators about vocabulary, such as "decolonize" and "racism." Finally, and perhaps most importantly for my long-term goals, this paper provided me with a tool to critically reflect upon. In short, this paper does not explore how the authors (two of whom are non-Indigenous) are complicit in settler colonialism, and the absence of critical teaching topics—such as treaties, residential schools, or the Indian Act—is obvious. Therefore, the educators I was working with would be able to relate to the content and understand the literature (which would keep them engaged), but unbeknownst to them, it provided me with a platform to critique settler complicity and culturalism, which

would be the topics of the following meetings.

In addition to the concepts and homework readings, the first professional development workshop that the teachers attended was an example of culturalism, too. The workshop was given by an Indigenous person who has several years of experience in education. While this individual's teachings about history, Indigenous knowledge, and this person's own narrative were very informative and useful to educators—and certainly have an important place in classrooms—this person's workshop omitted any lengthy discussion about violent colonial practices or anticolonial teachings.

As well, this person emphasized the presentation of traditional artifacts, which reinforced stereotypes about Indigenous people being stuck in the past, and may have shifted the attention away from antiracism and anticolonial frameworks. During one presentation, for example, this person presented the group with a drum, the four sacred medicines, a talking stick, corn husk dolls, and a rattle made from hide. Verna St. Denis (2004) identifies this type of practice as fundamentalist. She explains that when fundamentalist ideas of Indigeneity are presented:

[O]ther analyses of the ongoing marginalization, exclusion and oppression of Aboriginal people are not adequately explored. As a form of fundamentalism, cultural restoration and revitalization encourages Aboriginal people to assert their authenticity and to accept cultural nationalism and cultural pride as solutions to systemic inequality; ironically, this

helps to keep racial domination intact. (p. 36)

I introduced St. Denis's article, "Real Indians: Cultural Revitalization and Fundamentalism in Aboriginal Education" to stimulate conversation at the meetings. Therefore, both homework readings and workshops provided me and the group of educators with real examples to interrogate. In the first meeting, I invited the group to think critically about the work that we would be doing. As mentioned in the outset of this paper, many of these educators were new to this work, so I needed to begin by highlighting these discussion points in tangible and explicit ways, in order to guide them to think critically about this work.

During subsequent meetings, I began to push the educators out of their comfort zone. We began by debriefing our thoughts about the presentation by the Indigenous person, and the Pete et al. (2013) article, and I challenged them to think about what a culturalistic framework of teaching may be lacking. Then we discussed the homework terms from the first meeting—"settler," "colonialism," "anticolonialism," and "reconciliation"—and I compared their findings to how these terms are defined by Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars. I also introduced the group to Beenash Jafri's (2016) paper "Privilege vs. Complicity: People of Color and Settler Colonialism" to ensure that racialized educators were compelled to think about their responsibility in settler colonialism. For their last few homework tasks, the educators were asked to explore the terms "decolonization" (to which they were introduced in the Pete et al. (2013) reading), "solidarity," and "allies," so that they could continue to question their own positionality in this work. They were also asked to read Martin J. Cannon's (2011) article, "Changing the Subject in Teacher

Education," which asks educators to think about their own relationship with colonialism, and how understanding their complicity in colonization relates to decolonizing and transforming education.

The final few meetings for the school year focused exclusively on shifting our teaching practice away from culturalism to thinking about how to teach about treaties, residential schools, the Indian Act, Indigenous activism and resistance, and more. By this point, the educators had an array of workshops, books, documentaries, and other teaching resources to consider. Some of the additional learning that they participated in included book clubs, in which the group read and discussed *Indigenous Nationhood: Empowering Grassroots Citizens* by Pamela Palmater (2015) and *Indigenous Writes* by Métis writer Chelsea Vowel (2016). *Indigenous Writes* is a great text for foundational knowledge, as each of the short chapters provides a summary of basic information—on terminology, Métis identity, who status Indians are and other forms of membership, reserves, treaties, and specific issues such as Inuit relocation or the White Paper, and more. This text is complemented by *Indigenous Nationhood* (Palmater, 2015), which is a collection of Palmater's blogs from her insight and work as a Mi'kmaq woman, mother, activist, lawyer, and professor. Palmater's book is exceptional because it routinely demonstrates how historical forms of violence and power are either ongoing, or directly related to issues that exist today.

Finally, Professor Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair spoke to the group about his life experience and activism. His presentation was beneficial because he could integrate his personal narrative, activism, and experience with Indigenous education

into one presentation. Regardless of the specific nuances of the last few meetings, the format included scaffolding the participants' learning by introducing new concepts, critical readings, and encouraging discussions.

Next Steps and Future Discussions

While this paper has already outlined some of the barriers that Leads may confront in their work, one of the most consistent barriers that I encounter is coming to an understanding of how my own subjectivity is implicated in this work. As a racialized woman who was born and raised in Canada, I am a non-Indigenous person. Moreover, unlike some other racialized people in Canada, I cannot claim to be Indigenous to anywhere because my African ancestors were stolen from their lands and my family's history was erased in the process. As Dionne Brand (2001) states in *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*, "I cannot go back to where I came from. It no longer exists" (p. 90). So, as a non-Indigenous person, I am always asking myself, what is my position or investment in First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education, and how am I implicated in the colonial project?

While articles such as "Accomplices Not Allies: Abolishing the Ally Industrial Complex" provide extensive critiques about what it means to be an ally, I have had to accept that I cannot be involved in every struggle (Indigenous Action Media, 2014). Moreover, as Harsha Walia (2012) reminds us in her article "Decolonizing Together: Moving Beyond a Politics of Solidarity Toward a Practice of Decolonization," as a non-Indigenous person, I should not attempt to take a leadership role in the community. Rather, I should be "accountable and

responsive to the experiences, voices, needs and political perspectives of Indigenous people themselves" (p. 28). This is precisely what I am trying to do. My work is guided by the input from the Education Advisory Circle at the school board that I work for, and I am in regular communication with the director of education from a local First Nation community, to see how the school board that I work for can support education in that First Nation community. Therefore, even though I have come to understand that my role is to facilitate Indigenous education with the guidance of Indigenous community partners, I still feel that it is not enough.

As a Canadian, I still am left pondering what else I can do address the fact that I live and work on stolen lands. I do not know what else to do to restore Indigenous sovereignty. I am in complete agreement with Toby Rollo (2014) who explains that, "Canadians as a people [are] constituted by historical treaties and agreements that contemporary citizens did not consent to but nevertheless benefit from and are obligated to uphold. We recognize that the violation of such treaties is unjust" (p. 226). For the last decade, I have taught both teenagers and adults about our treaty relationships with Indigenous people, about Indigenous sovereignty, and the brutal realities of colonialism to dismantle the pervasive myth that Canada is a country filled with nice people and a peaceful past. While I consider this teaching to be my activism, is it enough? I have yet to answer this question.

Finally, anybody in a First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Lead position will attest to the fact that in our daily work, we confront people who are entirely supportive of our work, and others who deprioritize Indigenous education, or colleagues who do not understand its

importance at all. To maintain your ability to do this work, you need to find colleagues—both people in lateral and leadership positions to yours—who will continue to support your work and advocate for Indigenous education, and who can empathize with the issues that we confront due to the nature of our work. Negative feedback about our work that is grounded in educators' White Fragility, guilt, and their own discomfort with the subject area is inevitable in a country that was founded by a colonial state, but boasts multicultural rhetoric. Having supportive, equity-minded anticolonial colleagues and leaders to defend this work is invaluable. While this paper is only a small contribution to the larger project of transforming the Eurocentric institutions that we work within and for, hopefully it will highlight the role of Leads in Indigenous education, elicit conversations about how to do this work effectively, and stimulate discussions about how school boards can support us through this difficult, yet worthwhile work.

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