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LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING FORWARD:
THINGS I WISH I HAD KNOWN BEFORE
TEACHING IN AN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY

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LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING FORWARD: THINGS I WISH I HAD KNOWN BEFORE TEACHING IN AN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY

Bora Kim

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Abstract

This essay relates the learning journey that I have been on as a non-Indigenous post-secondary educator teaching college courses in an Indigenous community and engaging in learning and unlearning about Indigenous Peoples and their history and world views in Canada. What I wish I had known before teaching college courses on reserve includes (1) more about Indigenous Peoples and their history in Canada, and (2) the four Rs of my responsibility as a non-Indigenous post-secondary educator. My journey of learning and unlearning has just begun and will be ongoing as Indigenous history is long and complicated, and Indigenous knowledges embrace contextual knowledge and relationships emerging from a specific Indigenous epistemology.

Résumé

Cet essai présente des anecdotes sur mon parcours d'apprentissage comme personne enseignante non autochtone au postsecondaire ayant enseigné des cours collégiaux dans une communauté autochtone et ayant vécu un processus d'apprentissage et de désapprentissage au sujet de l'histoire, des peuples et des visions du monde autochtones au Canada. Ce que j'aurais aimé savoir avant d'enseigner des cours collégiaux sur une réserve, une liste non exhaustive : (1) l'histoire et les peuples autochtones au Canada et (2) les quatre R de mes responsabilités comme personne éducatrice non autochtone au postsecondaire. Mon parcours d'apprentissage et de désapprentissage vient de commencer et se poursuivra, car l'histoire autochtone est longue et compliquée, et les savoirs autochtones intègrent les relations et les savoirs contextuels émergents d'une épistémologie autochtone particulière.

Positionality

While understanding that the search begins with “self-in-relation” (Absolon, 2011; Kovach, 2009), it seems appropriate to begin this reflection by locating myself. I am of Korean ancestry and a post-secondary educator in the field of early childhood education

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(henceforth ECE). I was born and raised in South Korea and moved to Canada in 2012 with no knowledge of Indigenous Peoples and their history and world views in Canada. Teaching ECE college courses to a group of Indigenous learners on reserve for a year has helped me with critical and profound reflection on my practice of adult education and made me feel in dire need of being educated on Indigenous knowledges. In 2019, I sought out and decided to learn about Indigenous history, world views, and research methodologies. Since then, I have been engaged in learning, unlearning, and reflecting on my teaching and learning practice.

As a guest on the Dish with One Spoon territory, Tkaronto (Toronto), I express my gratitude to the original caretakers of this Land and honour the relationships and knowledge embedded within it. As a non-Indigenous ECE post-secondary educator striving to be part of reconciliation in education, I am committed to learning from Indigenous Elders, Knowledge Keepers, scholars, and communities that model and inform the necessity of Indigenous pedagogy, while reflecting on my cultural values and identity. I wish to acknowledge that Indigenous knowledge emerges from individual and collective experiences in relation to the land (Fellner, 2018; Wildcat et al., 2014); therefore, Indigenous communities in Canada are diverse and dynamic, with their own cultures and languages.

Introduction

As Hampton stated, "We are not Cinderellas; the slipper doesn't fit" (as cited in Kovach, 2009, p. 29). Before teaching ECE college courses to a group of Indigenous learners on reserve, I did not know how a post-secondary education could act as Cinderella's slipper, which expects everyone to fit into it. When I taught on reserve, I had very limited knowledge of Indigenous Peoples and their history and world views in Canada; therefore, I was not aware of the positional superiority of Eurocentric knowledge that exists in academia, as discussed by Smith (2012). Thus, I ponder a profound question for enhancing the practice of adult education for Indigenous learners and their communities: How could my practice of adult education have been different if I had known about the Indigenous Peoples and their history in Canada, and my responsibilities as a non-Indigenous post-secondary educator, before I taught pre-service early childhood educators in an Indigenous community? In this reflection, I discuss the critical things I wish I had known about before teaching on reserve: (1) more about Indigenous Peoples and their history in Canada, and (2) the four Rs of my responsibility as a non-Indigenous post-secondary educator. I acknowledge that the lived experiences of Indigenous Peoples vary among communities, and my reflections are based on my experiences.

Indigenous Peoples and Their History in Canada

I wish I had a deeper understanding of Indigenous Peoples and their history in Canada, and of the injuries and damages inflicted by abuse from the colonial past that still affect Indigenous Peoples' daily life. Witnessing the death of a family member, experiencing families being fragmented, losing a family member or a friend due to substance abuse or suicide, misusing substances, and suffering from depression were some of the factors that influenced my Indigenous learners' health, well-being, and involvement in post-secondary education. I wondered why the Indigenous learners, in particular, encountered so many challenges that seemed to affect the frequency of absences, dropping out, delays in submitting assessments, and not passing the course. Then I observed how these Indigenous

learners were labelled as incapable individuals because of their “lack-of-performance issues” (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991/2001, p. 78). I did not know what to do at that time; however, learning about Indigenous Peoples and their history has helped me learn about the relationships between colonial education and Indigenous Peoples and gain better understanding, tools, and language that I can use to support Indigenous learners.

An analogy of vases from Chrisjohn et al. (2017) highlighted the lives of Indigenous Peoples in Canada in an enlightening way:

A new homeowner wants to select pottery vases that are high-quality and most durable; therefore, he starts to smash each pottery vase on the asphalt and although they are all fine vases, he only accepts the vases that are not broken. A man who walks by and learns what the homeowner is doing silently agrees with him and walks away. (p. 99)

In this “Vaseology,” the vases are Indigenous people in Canada, the new homeowner represents the people and systems that perpetrated violence and genocide against Indigenous Peoples, and the passerby represents the people and systems that have been complicit in the violence and genocide (Chrisjohn et al., 2017, p. 99). Tuck and Yang (2012) explained the reason behind this act of violence by stating that “in order for the settlers to make a place their home, they must destroy and disappear the Indigenous peoples that live there” (p. 6). Indeed, the European settlers attempted to eradicate Indigenous ways of living, cultures, and languages in order to assimilate Indigenous Peoples into notions of Western civilization (Haig-Brown & Hoskins, 2019). Upon the formation of Canada as a nation, the federal government enacted numerous initiatives and policies, including the creation of residential schools. More than 150,000 Indigenous children across the country were removed from their families and communities to attend these schools, where they were forced to speak English or French instead of their own language (Haig-Brown & Hoskins, 2019); were physically, sexually, psychologically, and/or spiritually abused; and were taught to be “civilized” to fit into the Canadian society while learning that Indigenous ways of living were primitive (Wilk et al., 2017). Due to residential schools, “relationships between schooling and Indigenous peoples became fraught with distrust, pain, and withdrawal” (Haig-Brown & Hoskins, 2019, p. 5). I wish I had known about the residential school system and the colonial history sooner, as it would have urged me to challenge how post-secondary education was tailored to Indigenous learners and their communities.

Although residential schools operated between the 1870s and the mid-1990s, the intergenerational impacts of the schools are still evident (Bombay et al., 2014). Not only did the children sent to residential schools demonstrate poorer health compared to those without these experiences, but their children and families also had poorer health, even though they did not attend the schools (Bombay et al., 2014; Wilk et al., 2017). As the analogy of vases represented (Chrisjohn et al., 2017), the cracks and broken pieces from being thrown on the ground have been affecting the lives of the Indigenous communities. The shards of broken pottery vases were and are still everywhere. Accordingly, issues that Indigenous Peoples face should not be viewed as “disorders.” Rather, they need to be understood as “reactions or responses” to colonial violence (p. 99). This interpretation has illuminated that post-secondary education fails to meet the needs of Indigenous learners because it tends to look for solutions that are driven from the victim-blaming perspective, as discussed in Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991/2001). Hence, if I had learned about Indigenous Peoples

and their history beforehand, I would have had better understanding, tools, and language to speak up and advocate for the Indigenous learners, and be more than a bystander, as demonstrated in the following examples:

- It is not about Indigenous learners not taking post-secondary education seriously. It is about Indigenous learners' reactions to the denial or ignorance of colonial history and the blame that the continued colonialism places on them, re-traumatizing them within post-secondary education. As Tuck and Yang (2012) stated, blaming Indigenous Peoples for their inability to transcend their illness or life circumstances contributes to extending innocence to the settler.
- It is not about Indigenous learners being incapable of fitting into post-secondary education. It is post-secondary education that expects all students to "adapt to conventional institutional norms" (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991/2001, p. 77). It is systemic violence and cultural genocide that re-traumatize Indigenous learners and their communities. It is about the urgency to empower Indigenous learners by breaking down systemic and societal inequalities within post-secondary education (Pidgeon, 2016).
- It is not about poor choices that Indigenous learners make in their lives. It is about limited mechanisms and supports that are available to Indigenous learners and their communities in order for them to heal from the historically traumatic events. It is about the need to understand the ongoing implications of the historical trauma and promote appropriate supports for health and well-being of Indigenous communities and individuals while considering historical context (Wilk et al., 2017) within post-secondary education.
- It is not about Indigenous learners and their communities not speaking out against violence, genocide, and injustice. Due to "the result of colonization, indoctrination, and historical trauma," silence to violence has been common among Indigenous communities (Knott, 2018, p. 155). Therefore, it is about the need to create and sustain an environment where Indigenous learners and their communities feel safe, trusted, and valued to share their voices about the evidence of colonialism within the educational system. It is about the need to attentively listen to them.

As Razack (2015) asserted, the colonial violence is still uncoupled from the colonial present. It is of critical importance that all post-secondary institutions and educators engage in the process of learning and unlearning the history of Indigenous Peoples in Canada and the contemporary issues that Indigenous learners experience based on cultural and historical context.

The Four Rs of My Responsibility as a Non-Indigenous Post-Secondary Educator

I wish I had realized what my responsibilities were as a non-Indigenous post-secondary educator in the process of reconciliation so that I would have recognized how my practice of adult education was further colonizing Indigenous learners and their communities. For systematic changes, social reform, and reconstruction within post-secondary education, Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991/2001) suggested the Four Rs: Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, and Responsibility.

Respecting Indigenous Knowledges

I wish I were better educated about Indigenous knowledges in order to create an environment that respects and honours Indigenous knowledges and Indigenous learners for who they are. In Canada, as in many other colonial-settler nation-states, educational spaces have developed in ways that privilege one way of knowing over other ways of knowing and understanding (Kerr, 2014; Kovach, 2009; Pacini-Ketchabaw & Taylor, 2015), and, therefore, have devalued Indigenous learners' consciousness and separated them into two different worlds (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991/2001). Smith (2012) further noted that the power of Western and European knowledge influenced how knowledge was arranged and distributed within post-secondary education.

Through my teaching experience, I witnessed the struggles of Indigenous learners who left their culture and identity upon entering post-secondary education and adopted Western ways of knowing to be successful. For example, in my ECE classes, only Eurocentric theories were introduced and discussed as a way of educating and nurturing children. The learners were given a list of only Eurocentric pedagogies that they could research and learn. Although the topic of diversity within ECE was discussed, the curriculum did not include any resources, discussions, and connections to Indigenous Peoples and their history, world views, and communities. Smith (2012) pointed out that Indigenous Peoples' contribution to knowledge construction is rarely mentioned in post-secondary education, and this was evident in my practice. Now I understand that when the learners were required to learn about the course materials that did not reflect their lived experiences and cultures, they experienced disequilibrium by separating themselves from their identity, relationships, and culture.

One way to respect Indigenous learners' identity and cultural values is to acknowledge and respect that there are multiple approaches to knowledge acquisition other than a Western approach (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991/2001; Pidgeon, 2014). To bring Indigenous and other ways of knowing together, I have been learning about and incorporating the guiding principle of *Etuaptmumk*, which means Two-Eyed Seeing in Mi'kmaw, that Elder Albert Marshall brought forward. Elder Albert Marshall (2018) articulated *Etuaptmumk*:

I, you, and we need to learn to see from one eye with the best or the strengths in the Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing...and learn to see from the other eye with the best or the strengths in the mainstream (Western or Eurocentric) knowledges and ways of knowing...but most importantly, I, you, and we need to learn to see with both these eyes together, for the benefit of all. (p. 6)

For example, in my curriculum, land-based pedagogy from Indigenous world views (see Simpson, 2014) and outdoor nature play from other world views have been brought together to help Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners better support children's wholistic learning and development. Co-teaching a course with an Indigenous educator has also helped me bring Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of knowing together in a respectful and sustainable way to honour "the gift of multiple perspective" (Marshall, 2018, p. 6) and, therefore, enrich not just Indigenous learners but all learners.

In addition to respecting Indigenous learners for who they are, I have begun to recognize and respect that individual learners have a learning spirit that travels with them and offers them "guidance, inspiration, and quiet unrealized potential to be who [they]

are” (Battiste, 2010, p. 15). Accepting and validating each learner’s cultural knowledge and core values with the heart and the head can nourish their learning spirit, encourage them to discover their gifts, and engage in wholistic learning where they can engage spiritually, emotionally, mentally...and physically (Anuik & Gillies, 2012). To nurture learning spirits in my practice, I have been inviting learners to reflect on their cultural knowledge and experiences, learn about the cultural knowledge and experiences of others, and self-assess their unique learning journey and growth, as suggested by LaFever (2016). How can I grade meaningful reflection if what is meaningful to my learners may not be meaningful to me? Also, as Indigenous languages were suppressed in residential schools (Haig-Brown & Hoskins, 2019), I have been encouraging learners to incorporate their first language or languages other than English in their reflection and explain what it means in English for me and others to understand. For example, some of my learners included poems and songs that are written in their first language, as they represent their connections to where they come from. Through this process, I have been reminded how important it is for post-secondary educators to honour that each learner brings their own slipper—each one a different shape, colour, and size, that has been and will be on a unique pathway—instead of cultivating Cinderellas that will fit into one slipper.

Relevance to Indigenous Communities

I wish I had ensured that the curriculum and classroom practices were relevant and responsive to the lived experiences, cultures, and needs that are identified by Indigenous learners and their communities. In my practice, the course contents, learning outcomes, and assessments mainly focused on evaluating learners’ intellectual capabilities. For example, I had only what Preston and Claypool (2021) called Westernized assessments in my classes, such as written exams, essays, and PowerPoint presentations that focused on measuring intellectual knowledge. The process and relationships of learning were linear and remained at a surface level. However, as the Indigenous Wholistic Framework represents (Pidgeon, 2014, 2016), wholistic interconnectedness among individuals and within the educational institution, the wider community, and culture is grounded in Indigenous world views as it relates to the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical realms. This interconnectedness of relationships is guided by the four Rs that were introduced by Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991/2001). To support Indigenous learners’ wholistic growth and learning through a relevant curriculum, LaFever (2016) shared the four-domain framework that is based on the four quadrants of the Medicine Wheel. This framework has been guiding my practice, particularly with learning outcomes and assessments, to create a well-balanced learning environment and learner-centred learning experiences, and, therefore, to empower Indigenous learners. For example, incorporating spiritual learning outcomes into the course has helped me focus on having post-secondary learners draw on their experiences, feelings, passions, and interests as they come to understand how they connect and contribute to their community (LaFever, 2016). This is because spiritual learning outcomes allow learners to explore meaningful and relevant work with their communities and express their connections to their communities in their work (LaFever, 2016).

To offer more culturally diverse and relevant assessments, I have been reconsidering types of assignments and restrictions on the assessments. I learned that timed assessments (e.g., exams that have time restrictions) impede Indigenous learners’ learning experiences

as many Indigenous communities value reflection and processes more than quick answers that are used to measure intelligence (Preston & Claypool, 2021). Trumbull and Nelson-Barber (2019) noted that when learners engage in self-reflection, self-assessment, and peer-observation, their emotional and spiritual learning can be nourished through the assessments. LaFever (2016) further suggested that encouraging learners to be attentive to their inner reactions and feelings and to self-assess their own growth can foster their learning in the spiritual domain. For this reason, I have moved away from timed exams. Instead, I have been incorporating opportunities for my learners to self-assess their reflection, choose their own assessment topics and formats (e.g., storytelling, songs, artwork, a poster, an essay, a letter, a poem, etc.) that speak to their heart, and choose their own deadlines for some assessments that may not necessarily need my feedback for other assessments.

In my previous curriculum, the assessments required the learners to use a list of resources that were written by the settlers. The knowledge that the Indigenous students gained from their Elders, Knowledge Keepers, families, and community was not validated in the academic assessments because it was not a published academic work. My learning and unlearning process challenged me to rethink what counts as knowledge and taught me that knowledge is constructed, understood, and conveyed in multiple ways and not all knowledge is literate (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991/2001). I also learned that Indigenous knowledge is commonly passed on through oral traditions (Preston & Claypool, 2021). To create a culturally appropriate and relevant curriculum, I have been incorporating resources that are developed or recommended by Indigenous scholars and communities. I have also been validating and respecting the use of oral traditions of Indigenous knowledge in academic work by inviting my learners to cite stories that they have heard from their families and community members and reflect on how they relate to other topics.

Reciprocity in Teaching and Learning

I wish I had realized how important it was to build reciprocal relationships between and among post-secondary educators, all learners, and communities. Reciprocity means “deeply acknowledging the gifts of the other and acting on this recognition in ways which deeply honour the other” (Stewart-Harawira, 2005, p. 156). Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991/2001) explained that the practice of teaching and learning is a reciprocal process where faculty members “understand and build upon the cultural background of the student, and the students are able to gain access to the inner-workings of the culture (and the institution) to which they are being introduced” (p. 10). Although Ball and Pence (2006) shared a paradigm to support Indigenous children, it can be applied to all levels of education, and this paradigm reminded me that knowledge is constructed and conveyed through “reciprocal teaching and learning; respect for knowledge ‘all ways’; and unlearning of expert presumption of universal validity of knowledge and expertise” (p. 83). However, my previous curriculum mainly focused on passing knowledge on to the learners as a one-way process, and learners passively received it. I was perceived as an expert, and learners were considered non-experts. Therefore, to foster reciprocal relationships in my practice, I have been exploring and practising the following responsibilities:

- Acknowledging Indigenous territory and place in my daily practice, as suggested by Pidgeon (2014), positioning myself as a non-Indigenous educator, and sharing my

ongoing learning journey with my colleagues, learners, and community members. Inviting my learners to do the same.

- Building mutually empowering and respectful relationships with my learners by acknowledging that we all engage in learning as equal participants (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991/2001), respecting each learner's learning spirit, and building on their learning spirit. I have been inviting my learners, as equal participants, to share their experiences, knowledge, and language(s) that they know. To present myself as a co-learner and include everyone as equal participants, I have been moving away from a traditional classroom setting, where an educator stands behind a podium and learners sit in rows, by sitting or standing in a circle with everyone whenever possible. Also, I have been ensuring that I am not the only one who makes all the decisions by empowering learners to make more decisions for their assessments (self-assessment, topics, formats, and deadlines, as discussed above) and classroom protocols. Moving forward, I aim to invite learners to co-construct assignments and rubrics together.
- Facilitating opportunities for me, my colleagues, learners, and communities to learn together. By exchanging stories, knowledge, and experiences with each other, diverse perspectives and world views can be fostered through the development of reciprocal relationships as we discuss how to educate and nurture children in our community together.
- Making myself more accessible and vulnerable (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991/2001) by being okay with saying, "I do not know, but we can explore it together"; "I have never thought of it from that perspective. Thank you for sharing"; and "I am also here to learn with and from you."
- Avoiding promoting competition among learners, but, instead, supporting them in honouring, building, and sustaining interconnected relationships with each other and all forms of life by including projects that help them learn about each other's gifts and encourage collaboration and by facilitating classes on the land to connect with the land.
- I have realized how much power and control I can let go of in my practice to move away from hierarchy relationships to reciprocal relationships. My practice with building reciprocal relationships can support not only pre-service early childhood educators' learning experiences but also their future practice of building reciprocal relationships with children, their families, and community. Now that I have a better understanding of Indigenous Peoples and their history in Canada, I can also see how building, rebuilding, and sustaining reciprocal relationships among Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and all living beings is critical to moving us a step closer to reconciliation.

Responsibility

I wish I had realized that as a non-Indigenous post-secondary educator, I "must take responsibility and be part of [my] own decolonizing process and move towards reconciliation" (Pidgeon, 2016, p. 88). As I was not educated on the colonial history, I was not aware of the pain and oppression that Indigenous communities have been experiencing. Regardless, Chrisjohn et al. (2017) and Razack (2015) reminded me that indifference further dehumanizes Indigenous communities and can result in the same outcome:

violence against Indigenous Peoples and communities. Indifference can also persuade the public that Indigenous Peoples have caused their own demise (Razack, 2015). My teaching experience in an Indigenous community informed me that my motivation and responsibility lay at the heart of social justice and advocacy as they relate to understanding and building relationships with Indigenous Peoples and communities. As Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991/2001) explained, responsibility occurs through participation. Through the engagement of education, training, reflection, and research, I will continue to seek opportunities to learn from and with Indigenous communities, nurture and sustain relationships with them, and have my practice reflected in the four Rs. My reflective process of learning and unlearning will continue as Indigenous history is long and complicated, and Indigenous knowledges embrace contextual knowledge and relationships emerging from a specific Indigenous epistemology. My continuing journey of learning and unlearning will contribute to responding to the needs of Indigenous learners in my class and their communities in opposition to the vested interests of colonization.

In addition to post-secondary educators' learning and unlearning process, Pidgeon (2016) highlighted the important responsibility of ensuring that non-Indigenous learners are educated on Indigenous history and world views by stating:

Indigenization of the academy has truly transformed higher education when Indigenous students leave the institution more empowered in who they are as Indigenous peoples and when non-Indigenous peoples have a better understanding of the complexities, richness, and diversity of Indigenous peoples, histories, cultures, and lived experiences. (p. 87)

Creating physical representations of Indigenous cultural traditions, such as artwork, contributed to creating an inclusive post-secondary educational space that respects the cultural integrity of Indigenous communities. However, this was not enough for non-Indigenous learners to understand and value Indigenous knowledge, issues around colonization, and Indigenous peoples' rights (Pidgeon, 2014). In keeping with the Calls to Action that were put out by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada (2015), it is post-secondary institutions' responsibility to ensure that post-secondary educators and non-Indigenous learners are educated on Indigenous Peoples and their history, and contribute to systemic changes. Implementing the six actions of ReconciliACTION proposed by the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (n.d.) in 2015, which are "Learn, Understand, Explore, Recognize, Take Action, and Teach Others," can ensure that the work of post-secondary institutions and educators toward reconciliation go beyond mere plans and translate into meaningful actions.

Consequently, the four Rs are critical in post-secondary educators' practice because these principles not only instill respect for Indigenous cultural integrity (Martin, 2018) but also strengthen success for Indigenous learners (Pidgeon, 2016). Hence, it is of critical importance that post-secondary educations and educators be grounded in the four Rs in order to engage in reflections on colonialism, respectfully incorporate and strengthen Indigenous knowledges in their practice, and foster learning that is wholistic, balanced, interrelated, and culturally relevant to Indigenous learners.

Conclusion

The Honourable Murray Sinclair, chair of the TRC, emphasized the importance of education in the process of reconciliation in Canada by stating, "It was the educational system [residential schools] that has contributed to this problem in this country, and it is the educational system, we believe, that's going to help us to get away from this" (TRC, 2012, 1:26). Therefore, post-secondary institutions and educators need to be held accountable for educating themselves and educating non-Indigenous learners on Indigenous Peoples and their history, respecting and fortifying Indigenous knowledges, building reciprocal relationships with Indigenous learners and communities, and enacting transformative reconciliation. When post-secondary institutions and educators are committed to the four Rs (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991/2001), they can create a culturally safe learning environments for Indigenous learners. This, in turn, contributes to moving toward reconciliation and achieving the pursuit of Mino-Bimaadiziwin—"the good life" (McGregor, 2018) for Indigenous learners and their community.

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