

**The Teacher's Role in Improving Urban Indigenous Student Graduation Rates**

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**Introduction**

“Educators and curriculum writers, and those who fund and accredit them, need to recognize and accept responsibility for the potentially colonizing and acculturative effects of ‘main- stream’ education” (Ball, 2004, p457). Public school educators must take responsibility for low Indigenous student graduation rates. Indigenous students continue to face systemic barriers in school and struggle to graduate. Instead of questioning what is wrong with Indigenous students and their capacity to succeed, educators need to reframe the question and ask what is wrong with the schools, the curriculum and their role in the learning process. As an educator in a Canadian city, I will focus this study on the role teachers play in Indigenous student success in an urban, non-indigenous environment. By examining the impact teachers have on student success, my goal is to identify and comment on issues challenging Indigenous communities and students, while providing tangible tools and approaches teachers can use in the classroom. In order for a teacher to become an Indigenous student ally, it is essential they examine their own cultural bias, recognize the continued colonization of education, acknowledge the absence of traditional teaching practices and language use, and integrate Indigenous teaching and learning approaches into their practice.

For the purpose of this paper I have chosen to use the descriptor *Indigenous* to encompass all Aboriginal, Inuit, and Metis students. In order to ensure authenticity of research, I will use language attributable to specific researchers in quotations and references such as Aboriginal, Native and First Nations people.

**Background**

Fewer Canadian Indigenous students graduate from high school than non-Indigenous students. On the 1996 Census, urban Aboriginal students were less likely than non-

Aboriginal urban students to graduate high school (Hanselmann, 2001). This trend continued into 2006 when urban Aboriginal students were more likely to drop out of high school than non-aboriginal students (Enviroics Institute, 2012). [Statistics Canada 2006 census](#) highlights the disparity of levels in education attained between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. Statistics Canada highlighted this disparity of education attainment in the Labour Force Survey data, for 2007/2010 where the dropout rate for Indigenous students living off-reserve was 22.6% vs. 8.5% for non-Indigenous people (Gilmore, 2010). The statistics indicate there continues to be issues with how Indigenous students receive formal education.

Education ministries and school districts across Canada report lower than average graduation rates and achievement levels for Indigenous students. Why does this occur? The province of British Columbia stated in 2000 only 42% of Aboriginal students graduated from high school compared to almost 80% of non-Aboriginals (Morin, 2004). Similarly, nearly one-third of the Indigenous population in Ontario does not hold any type of diploma (Ontario Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs, 2012). These statistics need to change. In order to accomplish this, I believe it is essential for all levels of the education system to assess the experience of Indigenous students, including teachers.

### **Teacher's Role**

“As non-indigenous people, we must find our own ways to make sure that we do not walk right by the ‘new fork’ and continue blindly down the same old road we have traveled with Indigenous peoples” (Regan, 2005, p. 9). I have struggled to understand how I can support and honour Indigenous students as a non-Indigenous person. Prior to ETEC 521, I was one of the majority of teachers that Battiste (1998) highlights, who had not taken a

course from an Indigenous person or about Indigenous Education. I had always believed it was essential to respect others and had hoped to be an ally for minority students in my classroom. What I had not considered is how indigenous students might view me and what I stood for simply because my ancestors had been part of the colonization of Canada. I now recognize my inherent bias and am beginning to understand the Eurocentric focus of Canadian curriculum and the institution of school. In order to support Indigenous students in my classroom and take an active role in increasing the graduation rates of Indigenous students, I will need to rethink my construct of education. By choosing the path less travelled, it will be critical I endeavor to understand the effects of colonization and [residential schools](#), while being proactive in dismantling the colonial structure present in our current schools. Contrary to my initial perception, Indigenous students may prefer Indigenous teachers (Silver, Mallett, Greene, & Simard, 2002), however they do not believe only indigenous people can teach them. Rather, Wotherspoon and Schissel (1998) found teachers must exhibit cultural sensitivity and support students in the classroom. In order to become an effective teacher and ally for Indigenous students, I must understand decolonization, colonial impacts, place-based and experiential learning, the role of elders in education, and how to integrate technology effectively.

### **Decolonization**

*I was an indigenous child once a long time ago. I would like you to come with me on a journey and imagine the experience of the indigenous child. You arrive at school with a rich cultural background and find yourself facing an expectation that you should have accessed pre-school education, but, of course, you had no access to such things-even access to basic education is a luxury. On your first day, you find that the teachers do not speak your language; in fact, they don't even want you to speak your language. The teachers don't know anything about your culture. They say, "Look at me when I speak to you" - even though in your culture it may be disrespectful to look at adults directly. Day by day, you are torn between two worlds. You look through the many textbooks and find no reflections of yourself or your family or culture.*

*Even in the history books your people are invisible-as if they never existed or were "shadow people" or worse. If your people are mentioned at all, they are mentioned as "obstacles to settlement" or simply as "problems" for your country to overcome.*

*But children are tough and somehow you survive in this environment. You notice as you reach secondary school, however, that many of your indigenous brothers and sisters have dropped out. Did they fail school or did the school fail them? By senior high school, when you are the only one left, the teachers say, "You are not like the others." In your heart, you know that you are. (Magga, 2005, p.319)*

The effects of colonization are rampant within Canadian schools. Before students even sit in a desk they are faced with a Eurocentric approach to learning. Gone is the millennial old place-based, experiential, real-time learning, and in its place are structured westernized lessons in a formal setting. The majority of Canadian urban schooling still "postulates the superiority of Europeans and their descendants over non-Europeans, founded on a false polarity between 'civilized' and 'savage,' and 'center' and 'marginalized' peoples (Battiste, 1998, p. 31)." This Eurocentrism and continued colonial education is devastating to Indigenous students and is represented in the low numbers of high school graduates.

Educational colonialism has taken various forms in Canada. According to Paulo Friere, colonizers inacted a cultural invasion by "penetrating the cultural context of [Indigenous People], in disrespect of the latter's potentialities; they impose[d] their own view of the world...and inhibited the creativity of the invaded by curbing their expression" (Friedel, 1999, p. 140). The most devastating example of educational colonialism in Canada and imposition of the Eurocentric worldview resulted from residential schools. Residential schools continue to have a negative impact on Indigenous people. Multiple generations faced racism, were forced to assimilate into western culture, and rid themselves of their Indigenous identity including their languages and learning traditions. Today, the negative impact of residential schools is evidenced in low parental involvement (Friedel, 1999), absent parenting skills, low self-concept, lack of social cohesion, and the loss of language and

culture (Ball, 2004). Formal schooling, residential schools and current public schools, have devalued Indigenous knowledge and learning systems, demoralizing generations while stigmatizing Indigenous students. Schools and teachers must take responsibility for this colonial history by honouring Indigenous culture, communities and experiences, while providing skills and strategies for academic success (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 1998).

### **Indigenous Learning**

[Traditional Indigenous knowledge](#) is garnered via meaningful, place-based, experiential learning. Barnhardt and Kawagley (2005) retell an elder's story of learning to hunt caribou with his father. His father did not tell the boys what to do; instead he demonstrated the skills necessary by walking into a herd of caribou, completing his ritual, and killing the necessary caribou. "The knowledge, skills, and standards of attainment required to be a successful hunter were self-evident, and what a young hunter needed to know and be able to do were both implicit and explicit in the father's lesson"(Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005, p.9). The elder did not have to complete a written test, rather he demonstrated his learning by becoming a successful hunter. This example highlights Indigenous place-based learning. Barnhardt and Kawagley (2005) go on to define place-based education as "linking education to the physical and cultural environment in which students and schools are situated"(p. 20). This approach to learning can benefit both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students as meaningful learning occurs by creating a connection between one's experiences and the knowledge to be constructed. When developing a science model of place-based learning, Indigenous educators identified four aspects necessary for learning: language, experiential learning, culture and elders (Sutherland & Swayze, 2012). In history education, Marker (2011) highlighted key differing

values of learning history from an Indigenous perspective rather than a western colonial vision including a focus on the circular nature of time, oral tradition, relationships of landscape and non-humans, and local community. Unfortunately, place-based education, and other Indigenous learning approaches are not actively recognized and practiced in Canadian public schools.

Indigenous students have “demonstrated a distinct lack of enthusiasm for the experience of schooling in its conventional form...attributable to an alien institutional culture rather than any lack of innate intelligence, ingenuity, or problem-solving skills on the part of the students” (Battiste as cited in Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005, p. 10). The absence of Indigenous perspectives and the devaluing of Indigenous experience in the public school curriculum result in an educational disconnect where students begin to distrust their own abilities and question all they have previously learned (Castellano, 2008). This disempowering approach to Indigenous education is a contributing factor to a gradual decline of individual achievement through the school years for Indigenous students.

Powers (2005) highlights research demonstrating the fact American Native students achieve on par with non-native students until Grade 4. Native American school achievement then decreases and by Grade 10 students are on average four years behind their non-native peers. This hints at various factors, including the observation that “ elementary curricula and instructional methods may be more aligned to Native cultural values (e.g., cooperation, thematic or holistic learning, oral recital) than those in the later grades” (Powers, 2005, p. 338). Students are also faced with an unfamiliar assessment, discipline structure, and curriculum (Powers, 2005). Teachers need to take a proactive role aligning their teaching methods with Indigenous learning and teaching practices. Many of the teaching practices

(collaboration, experiential, and inquiry) are purported in constructivism, however are still not widely present in high schools.

There are multiple steps teachers can take in order for Indigenous education to “mirror [student] lives” (Battiste as cited in Neegan, 2005, p. 13). Teachers need to be aware of Indigenous knowledge systems and recognize the role of [elders](#), the community, collaboration and Indigenous language in school (Neegan, 2005). Teachers must incorporate Aboriginal cultural issues into the curriculum, not just as additional classes or add-ons to the curriculum, but as content and perspective (Neegan, 2005; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 1998). Provinces and Territories have taken different approaches to ensuring Indigenous content and perspective is included in the curriculum. The Office of the Treaty Commissioner in Saskatchewan created a resource, “The Treaty Resource Kit,” for all schools in Saskatchewan. The intention was for the teaching of treaties to disrupt the privileging of certain content over others and to begin a new narrative of Indigenous experiences (Tupper & Cappello, 2008). The use of the Treaty Resource Kit highlights Taiaiake Alfred’s belief that “there needs to be struggle in order to lay out a path to co-existence, and that the process of being uncomfortable is essential for non-indigenous people to move from being enemy to adversary to ally” (Regan, 2005, p. 3). Exploring the Treaties and creating a new narrative, challenges students and teachers to recognize systemic racism and accept historical and contemporary racism, thereby deciding to make changes to current relations.

### **Integrating Indigenous Perspectives in the Classroom**

There are multiple ways in which teachers can support Indigenous students in the classroom. Teachers must evaluate their approach and integrate Indigenous teaching and learning practices into the classroom. In a decolonizing pedagogies project in Toronto,



teachers indicated they felt underprepared to teach Indigenous material and had difficulties achieving curriculum goals with limited resources and time (Dion, Johnston, & Rice, 2010). It is essential to use decolonizing pedagogies such as the inclusion of Indigenous content and language, place and community, elders, oral traditions and storytelling, sharing and talking stories, experiential learning and problem-based-learning (Kannu as cited in McGregor, 2012). Kannu indicates it is also important for teachers to create a positive learning environment where students feel comfortable to speak, respect each other, have a sense of belonging, silences (wait-times) are respected, and where students have the opportunity to explore their identity and values (McGregor, 2012). Toulouse (2008) highlights seven living principles of Indigenous learning: respect, love, bravery, wisdom, humility, honesty, and truth. By demonstrating respect through the incorporation of Indigenous culture, graphic organizers, hands-on approaches, collaboration, metacognition, and Indigenous resources into the curriculum, teachers can express their belief in the value of Indigenous culture and the potential of a decolonized education system (Toulouse, 2008). There are various urban and provincial resources providing strategies for teachers in supporting Indigenous student learning: [Toronto School Division](#), [Manitoba Education](#), [Alberta Education](#), [British Columbia Ministry of Education](#), [Ontario Government](#), and [First Nations Education Steering Committee](#). Central to all of these resources is the importance of the circular nature of Indigenous learning and culture, empowering students, connecting to place and community, utilizing decolonizing pedagogies, and integrating Indigenous content into the curriculum.

### **Technology in the Classroom**

When I initially began this study in September, I had planned on focusing my research on how technology can be used to support Indigenous learning. I soon realized that with the

necessary historical and cultural understanding, I would be able to choose the appropriate technology for my students. Technology utilization must be approached cautiously and with the advice of elders and community members. I would not want to be responsible for further colonization through the loss of Indigenous culture (Bowers, Vasquef, & Roaf, 2000) by placing value on external knowledge systems.

Technology in education has the potential to (re)connect Indigenous students with language, culture and place as long as its use is framed within Indigenous knowledge practices. Ginsburg (2008) asserts successful use of digital technologies by Indigenous youth should be used to connect youth with traditional culture, support youth in creating new forms of Indigenous culture and “to extend Indigenous cultural worlds – on their own terms” (p. 301). Tools enabling digital storytelling, podcasting, videos and experiential learning, apply 21<sup>st</sup> century skills while utilizing traditional learning practices and upholding Ginsburg’s observations for successful technology use. Technology use should also facilitate Indigenous teaching best practices as outlined by the Toronto District School Board’s [Aboriginal Curriculum Resource “Since Time Immemorial”](#) such as: using realistic and accurate content, empowering language, holistic approaches, acknowledging diversity, presenting authentic voices and perspectives, validating Indigenous peoples’ experiences, and by making cross-curricular connections (Toronto District School Board, 2011).

### **Conclusion**

I have learned the first step to increasing Indigenous student success is recognizing my role in the colonization of Indigenous people and continued racism that occurs at all levels of the education system. As an educator, it is my responsibility to advocate for change within schools and to implement change within my classroom. Indigenous learning and

teaching approaches can benefit all students. They are based on respect and active learning, which should be the premise for any teaching and learning experience. By using decolonizing pedagogies, connecting students with elders and community, and by honouring Indigenous student experiences, I will be positively supporting urban Indigenous students with their academic experiences. I realize I am just one of many, however I am taking a step to “transform our colonial relationship with Indigenous peoples” (Regan, 2005, p. 7) and improve the educational experience of Indigenous students.

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