




Commentary

If Education Is the Key to Reconciliation, How Will Professional Development Contribute to Unlocking the Process?

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ABSTRACT

This text considers the urgency of teacher learning, given the recent culmination of Canada's six-year Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and in light of the position taken by the TRC that, "Education holds the key to reconciliation." Beginning with a reflection on the author's formative encounters as a practitioner, the text goes on to question how teachers will be prepared for the significant role they have been called on to play. The latter section takes into account that professional learning is emotional and cerebral, and points to the need for emotional readiness among teachers participating in reconciliation practices with students.

 Last July I spent a week at the Harrington School of Communication and Media, at the University of Rhode Island, learning about digital media tools and technologies. I accompanied other teacher educators who were drawn to the session because their current research intersects importantly with digital literacy. Significantly, another colleague gave this particular learning opportunity a strong endorsement. She was not alone; the institute's bold claim on the website states, "75% of participants have rated the Summer Institute in Digital Literacy the BEST professional development program they have ever experienced in their entire career!" Further down on the page, readers are invited to "[j]oin us for a once-in-a-lifetime experience" (Media Education Lab, nd).

I will say at the outset that I am skeptical of professional development that is designed for me, by someone else, and am cautious when faced with hyperbolic marketing claims, such as the above. I am also troubled by the corporatization of opportunities for teacher learning, which include the kind of “context-free” sessions that provide generic materials (Hardy & Rönnerman, 2011), notably linked to some form of accountability and numeric measures of success (Derrick, 2013). Dadds (2014) suggests that such “delivery” approaches to professional development imagine an unproblematic transmission of new knowledge. In contrast, she claims that we need to acknowledge that,

the journey of professional growth into new and better practices is often unpredictable; often non-linear; often emotional as well as cerebral. It demands the capacity and strength to ask questions; to analyse and interpret feedback; to discipline the emotions generated by self-study; to change established practices in the light of new understanding; to remain interested and professionally curious. (p. 15)

This kind of professional growth is captured by Linda Kroll (2007) who, in a retrospective look at her life as an educator, recounts key encounters with people and texts and their relationship to what she calls her “own theoretical development” (p. 103). Kroll’s account reveals that her path was marked by challenges, questions, and ongoing self-directed inquiry—all of which enriched her life. She concludes,

The constant reviewing and reconstruction are what makes teaching and learning so interesting. It keeps alive the purpose of what we do and allows us to stay focused on our mission of making schools a better place for everyone who participates in them. (p. 103)

In considering my own formative encounters as a teacher-learner, there are two that are most significant: working with the Naskapi Nation of Kawawachimach for over three decades, and having an early career experience with action research, informed by the writings of Carr and Kemmis (1986), Cummins (1986), Freire (1970), and Grundy (1987). My initiation to classroom-based inquiry in a remote school serving a First Nation profoundly affected the way I think as a teacher—before, during, and after classroom interactions. While it is popular to use the term “reflection” to describe the thinking inherent to the kind of inquiry I had undertaken, doing so does not capture how reflection can become a philosophical way of being (Hardy & Rönnerman, 2011). Action research changed who I am as a teacher.

Since those early moments of researching my own practice, I have been drawn to collaborative and participatory action-focused inquiry. So you may be wondering why I would choose to attend a summer institute that makes the kind of pitch that seems incongruous with my own approach to professional learning. The answer to that question is “reconciliation.” Yes, I went to the summer institute motivated by confounding questions and heightened concerns: How can I contribute to reconciliation—as a citizen and as an educator—at this pivotal moment in our Nation’s becoming. And how can digital tools facilitate the process?

If you are wondering what I mean by pivotal moment or by reconciliation, you are not alone. In a short informal survey of 20 seasoned educators, I found that about half were not aware of the six-year process of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. To a great degree they were unsure if it had anything to do with their lives or their educational practice. Of those who were aware, few knew of the *Calls to Action* (TRC, 2015a) that were released with the gripping executive summary in June 2015. The TRC documents recount vivid and painful testimony, which captures the experiences of the generations of Indigenous people whose lives were directly and/or indirectly impacted by residential schooling. The ongoing and pervasive effects of this and other devastating colonial policies are a legacy that we all own as Canadians. This is why the TRC outcomes include *Calls to Action*. They are intended to engage all citizens in contributing to “restoring balance,” as the Chair of the Commission, Justice Murray Sinclair, stated in a short video on the main page of the TRC website. Beyond the collective efforts of Canadians, educators have a significant role to play. Justice Sinclair (2014) explains this in a text written for the Manitoba Teachers’ Society, “It is precisely because education was the primary tool of oppression of Aboriginal people, and miseducation of all Canadians, that we have concluded that education holds the key to reconciliation” (p. 7).

In different areas in the country, educators are responding to this. For example, in September 2015, the BC Teacher’s Federation launched an information-rich, interactive e-book, *Project of Heart: Illuminating the Hidden History of Indian Residential Schools in BC*. The dedication states:

Our goals are to honour the survivors and their families, and to help educate Canadians about the atrocious history and ongoing legacy of residential schools. Only when we understand our shared history can we move forward together in a spirit of reconciliation. (BCTF, 2015, p. i)

As education holds the key, one of the *Calls to Action* is to “Make age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools, Treaties, and Aboriginal peoples’ historical and contemporary contributions to Canada a mandatory education requirement for Kindergarten to Grade Twelve students” (TRC, 2015a, p. 7). In 2014, Sinclair noted that curriculum focusing on residential schools has been/is in the process of being implemented in the Northwest Territories, Nunavut, British Columbia, Manitoba, Alberta, and Saskatchewan. Ontario’s response is described in a June 2015 Toronto Star article; significantly, the headline reads, “Teachers need to be educated about residential schools before students, says TDSB official” (June 2, 2015). In the article, the author, writes, “York University Professor Susan Dion, an aboriginal expert on First Nations education, said education is key to reconciliation ‘because we need to know what we’re reconciling about—and at this point, Canadians aren’t really sure’” (Brown, 2015, np). As my informal survey suggests, this may also be the case for many teachers.

Somewhat differently, the role of teacher *educators* was established in 2010, with the publication of the Accord on Indigenous Education by the Association of Canadian Deans of Education. While the impact of residential schooling is not explicitly named among the 32 points in the Accord, related elements are present. For example, teacher educators are called on:

- To foster all education candidates’ political commitment to Indigenous education, such that they move beyond awareness and act within their particular sphere of influence.
- To encourage all students, teacher candidates, and graduate students to explore and question their own sense of power and privilege (or lack thereof) within Canadian society as compared with others in that society. (ACDE, 2010, p. 7)

Since the release of the Accord, changes in Teacher Education programs have been noted. These include the development of new courses, the increasing presence of Indigenous educators and Elders in Schools and Faculties of Education, and strengthened university-community collaborations. Within courses, it is possible to find increased attention to Indigenous ontology and epistemology, settler identity, colonization and decolonization practices (Wiens et al., 2015).

Further underscoring the role of higher education in the reconciliation process, Universities Canada, on behalf of their 97 member institutions, released 13 principles on Indigenous education developed by university leaders. The principles represent an answer to the TRC’s call to universities. Like the Accord, there is attention to supporting

Indigenous students, fostering collaboration and intercultural engagement, and “providing greater exposure and knowledge for non-Indigenous students on the realities, histories, cultures and beliefs of Indigenous people in Canada” (UC, 2015).

I could, at this point, begin to describe how I have been using my new knowledge of media and technology tools to realize some of the goals laid out for me in documents like the *Accord*, the *Principles on Indigenous Education*, and the *TRC Calls to Action*. I could comment on how the students’ semi-public practice of blogging is creating a space for them to work through some of the emotionally charged and challenging questions they are encountering in their own exploration of Canada’s dark past; I could detail how they are producing short films for augmented reality points around our campus—to foster community members’ awareness of Indigenous issues, knowledge, and presence. I could also explain the benefits of using Twitter daily to see what is significant for reconciliation—because I follow Justice Sinclair, Wab Kinew,¹ Charlene Bearhead,² Heather E. McGregor,³ and others who are interested in reconciliation.

However, for the purpose of this text, I want to make the point that there has not been much discussion of how professional development for reconciliation will be organized and carried out with teachers in the field. While there is public reference to school board and teacher federation efforts to begin the professional development, the question of what should comprise the learning process has not been widely discussed. In writing about teacher participation in reconciliation in different areas of the globe, Zembylas, Kendeou, and Michaelidou (2011) note that understanding teacher perspectives on reconciliation is essential. “Is it peaceful coexistence? Is it empathy? Is it forgiving and forgetting?” (p. 527). Multiple views exist and it is likely that across Canada divergent perspectives are held, which would have implications for moving forward. So where do we start?

Among the points in the *Calls to Action*, point ii of Call 62 focuses on “Provid[ing] the necessary funding to post-secondary institutions to educate teachers on how to integrate Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into classrooms.” While this is essential, it does not seem to get to the heart of trauma, its long-term impact, and the nature of reconciliation. On the other hand, *Call to Action 57* directly targets “Professional Development and Training for Public Servants,” among which teachers might be included. It calls for:

The provision of education to public servants on the history of Aboriginal peoples, including the history and legacy of residential schools, the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, Treaties and Aboriginal rights, Indigenous law,

and Aboriginal–Crown relations. This will require skills-based training in intercultural competency, conflict resolution, human rights, and anti-racism. (TRC, 2015a, p. 7)

The above recognizes the knowledge and particular capacities that might be required to understand the significance of the trauma that has given rise to a need for a reconciliation process. Call 57 is directed toward “federal, provincial, territorial, and municipal governments,” which begs the question: *Who will take the lead in professional development for teachers?*

Dadds (2014) makes the important point that professional growth—in general—is both emotional and cerebral. When it comes to participating in reconciliation processes, Zembylas et al. (2011) note the significance of the emotional readiness of the teachers, which has an impact on their willingness to be involved. They describe that readiness requires a belief that reconciliation is important, a plan to take action, and confidence and comfort in doing so. There may be ambivalent emotions, which as Zembylas et al. explain, “are not attributes of individuals, but represent provisional readings and judgements” (p. 535). This can be advantageous, as looking at ambivalent emotions can be part of pedagogical practices that lead to greater readiness. Finally, Zembylas et al. mention the importance of “structural support (e.g. teacher training, appropriate curricula) provided by government policy measures” (p. 535), and they indicate that if teacher-led reconciliation is imposed, then teacher support will be unlikely.

Preparing teachers for their role in reconciliation is not something that can be delivered, packaged, or offered as decontextualized, professional development. In the short introductory TRC video in which Justice Sinclair defines reconciliation, he notes that it may take several generations of concerted effort to “restore balance” (TRC, 2015b). In the discussion of how we will move ahead, we will have to keep this in mind. One appropriate approach would be to privilege practitioner learning (Derrick, 2013), in which “practice and learning are collaborative – knowledge, expertise, ideas, questions, projects and problems are shared and embodied within teams of colleagues, formal and informal, rather than in isolated individuals” (p. 277). It’s unrealistic to expect that all educators will take up practitioner-based inquiry around reconciliation, but it is entirely reasonable to suggest that we can sit down together and share our responses to the question, “What do we understand by reconciliation?”

Notes

1. Wab Kinew is a journalist, hip-hop artist, and author; he is the Associate Vice President for Indigenous Relations at the University of Winnipeg.
2. Charlene Bearhead is the Education Lead at the Center for Truth and Reconciliation at the University of Manitoba.
3. Heather E. McGregor is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Ottawa, recent PhD graduate of UBC's Center for Historical Consciousness.

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