

Reconciliation and the Canadian Education System: A Study Through a Colonial Lens

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Abstract:

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada Report and its Calls to Action have identified formal education in Canada as a path towards hope and reconciliation. Yet, as a system born of imperialism and colonialism, how can formal education in Canada accomplish this task? By using Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) as a framework, this paper has as its foundation that racism and colonialism are endemic in Canadian society and warrant critical and interdisciplinary study. Examining both the federal government and Alberta government's formal education responses to the Calls to Action, this paper has found that important work needs to happen in order to respond to the TRC Calls to Action. First, funding gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous education needs to see a shift from control to responsibility. Second, curricular development and implementation need to focus on transformative learning rather than material content. Finally, teacher training needs to give space and support for inner and personal work to understand the racism and colonialism in teachers' own lives.

The Reconciliation and Canadian Formal Education: A Critical Study

Despite the painful experiences Aboriginal people carry with them from formal education systems, they still see education as the hope for the future and they are determined to see education fulfill its promise (RCAP, 1996, 3:434).

Introduction

Since I completed my undergraduate degree in education, and the twenty years of teaching that followed, I have been aware of and concerned with the state of Indigenous communities in my country, Canada, and the vast inequalities that exist in the systems and structures of formal education. As a settler, I am cognizant of the differences between Indigenous education and non-Indigenous education systems as well as the treatment and attitude towards Indigenous knowledge and culture in a settler classroom. In recent years, the truth about Indian Residential Schools, their victims, and the schools' role in the genocide and extermination of Indigenous language, culture and communities have come to light and the need to critically examine Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships is here.

In the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) of 1996 and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Reports and Calls to Action that followed in 2015, the path towards hope and reconciliation have been seen to include formal education. Yet, the lack of deeper understanding of the systems that the Canadian government used, and continue to exist, may be hindering our ability to make real and lasting change. One cannot deny the reality of Canada's colonial and imperial past, nor can it be denied that change has been slow to these

systems. Therefore, an examination of the systems of formal education itself must accompany the work needed moving forward if reconciliation is to happen. My question for this paper then is how, as a system born from imperialism and colonialism, does Canada's formal education systems attempt to do the work of reconciliation as outlined in the TRC Calls to Action?

Theoretical Framework and Interdisciplinarity

To examine how Canadian formal education attempts to address the TRC Calls to Action, I will use Critical Race Theory (CRT) and more specifically Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) as a framework. CRT evolved in the mid-1970s as a form of disruptive, or oppositional scholarship (Brayboy, 2005, p. 428). Even though it originally focused on race and racism in legal studies, CRT quickly moved to examine other structures and systems where race and racism were evident. In education, CRT “posits that racism is endemic in society and in education, and that racism has become so deeply engrained in society’s and schooling’s consciousness that it is often invisible” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 428). TribalCrit goes one step further. It takes CRT’s position that racism is endemic in education and ties this racism to colonization. As a colonized country, Eurocentric “thought, knowledge, and power structures dominate present-day society” and have been used to assimilate and erase the colonized from the dominate society (Brayboy, 2005, p. 430).

CRT and TribalCrit are activist in nature, and therefore a relevant framework when we are looking to make societal change through formal education. If the authors of RCAP see education as being the vehicle for reconciliation, then the work needs to be disruptive. CRT and TribalCrit

theory imply the need to eliminate of the influence of racism and colonialism not only in the lives of the students, but also in the faculty and institutions themselves.

CRT and TribalCrit also require interdisciplinarity. Both CRT and TribalCrit value “experiential knowledge” and lived experience, which is imperative to interdisciplinarity (Brayboy, 2005, p. 428). As Dreyfuss (2011) points out, lived experience means that “our understandings are constructed intersubjectively, socially constituted through deep awareness, even curiosity, about, how others around us perceive similar experiences” (p. 77). Interdisciplinarity concerns itself with relationships and how examining the disconnects in disciplines offers new ways of understanding. Interdisciplinarity is also “interested in the differences between disciplinary perspectives, and curious to learn about those differences” (Dreyfuss, 2011, p. 77). For this paper, I am curious how using the CRT and TribalCrit frameworks alongside an interdisciplinary examination that involves colonial studies, global studies, education studies and history may open new and interesting relationships that shed light on how formal education might help achieve the goals of reconciliation in Canada as outlined in the TRC Calls to Action.

Colonialism

Before I begin to look critically at how formal education has attempted to answer the Calls to Action however, it is necessary to include a brief look at colonialism and its link to CRT and TribalCrit. As mentioned above, CRT has as its foundation that racism is endemic in society and TribalCrit has as its foundation that “colonization is endemic to society” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 429). For the simplicity of this paper, I am using the term colonialism to include post-

colonialism and neo-colonialism as well. Colonialism is “what colonial-settler nations do to justify exploiting people and territories to benefit those in power” (Mullen, 2020, p. 672). These acts of justification include mechanisms and systems that often seem invisible yet have immense importance to the discussion of power inequities and injustices when looking at Canadian colonialism. In addition to the question of power, colonialism also includes maintaining the status quo, or at least making it seem hard to change the status quo, as well as the act of “othering.” Otherness is the colonial trait of division that continues to have communities think in terms of “us” and “them”. Therefore, since colonialism is endemic to Canadian society, and colonialism includes power, as well as maintaining the status quo and the act of differentiating between “us” and “them”, I will use colonialism as the foundation of my examination.

Calls to Action

In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) published its Calls to Action. The purpose of the Calls to Action is twofold; to address the horrific legacy of residential schools, and to “advance the process of Canadian reconciliation” (Section 1). It is the latter that is of interest to this paper. Of the ninety-four suggestions for action, the last fifty-two concern reconciliation. Of particular importance for education are sections 62 through to 65. However, on closer examination, almost every section of the reconciliation sections speaks to some aspect of formal education. To simplify for the benefit of this paper, I have lumped the actions into three categories: funding, curriculum, and teacher training. For each category, I will discuss how I see formal education systems, federally and locally in Alberta, addressing the actions. Using an

interdisciplinary approach, rooted in CRT and TribalCrit, I hope to add depth in evaluating how the spirit of reconciliation might be addressed through Canadian formal education systems.

Funding

The TRC Calls to Action asks for “comparative funding for [and reporting of] the education of First Nations children on and off reserves” (Section 55, ii). Other actions include funding for curriculum, teacher training and teaching methods. I will explore these actions in the following sections, but for now I want to take a closer look at why funding to fill a gap between on and off reserve education of Indigenous students is important for reconciliation.

Historically, education in Canada has been the responsibility of the provinces and territories. Yet the federal government, through the Indian Act (1867) and the various Treaties made between the Government of Canada and Indigenous communities, has the responsibility to educate Indigenous students. As a colonial tool, education of Indigenous students was used and justified through the Davin Report (1879) which had as its recommendations “the segregation and isolation of Indigenous children from any and every influence of their cultural traditions” (Indigenous Canada). This dual system of education continues to this day despite attempts to place more of the responsibility of Indigenous education on local Indigenous bands and councils. The key here, I believe, is looking at the term responsibility.

As early as the 1970s, the question of control and responsibility has plagued the funding systems and structures of Indigenous communities throughout Canada. The federal government's White Paper of 1969 proposed "integrating First Nations children into existing provincial/territorial education systems" which sparked the National Indian Brotherhood (NIB) to call for "Indian Control of Indian Education" (Drummond & Rosenbluth, 2013, p. 4). For the Canadian government, moving away from the responsibility of educating Indigenous students meant handing over control of Indigenous education to the provincial and territorial governments. For Indigenous groups like the NIB, shifting control to provincial schools was not the answer. What was at stake here was keeping the responsibility of Indigenous education at the federal level in order to protect the Treaty and Constitutional relationship Indigenous communities have with the federal government. Even Jean Chretien, then federal Minister of Indian Affairs acknowledged in 1972 that "paying the bills is not enough... we have the responsibility to examine the suitability of services, to anticipate problems and to evaluate the success of the program" (Phillips, 2011, p. 233). This exchange illustrates the question of control and responsibility and brings to light the colonial issue of power and power imbalance between the federal government and the NIB.

Since the 1970s there has been a "devolution of administrative control of education from the federal government to First Nations communities" (Drummond & Rosenbluth, 2013, p. 4). The shift of control has been paralleled by Indigenous calls for self-determination and sovereignty in all aspects of Indigenous life. Yet the responsibility of funding for Indigenous education has been confusing. Drummond's (2013) *The Debate on First Nations Education Funding: Mind the Gap* outlines the difficulty in comparing funding between provincial and federal systems. Primarily federal funding has come to Indigenous communities through grants and "proposal-

based targeted program funding” (p. 5). These grants and program funding are short-term and require continual application processes. There have been more stable basic calculations for funding, yet the formulas vary, allowing “some bands... more flexible agreements with regard to their block contributions than others, depending on band capacity and priorities” (p. 5). There are also gaps and variations in accounting for funding which makes comparisons difficult. Yet, overall, it is understood that “funding has a significant impact on the delivery of educational services and is integral to improving educational outcomes for First Nations students” (Drummond & Rosenbluth, 2013, p. 20). There clearly is a lack of responsibility by the federal government in accounting for its own variances in funding Indigenous education.

Muddled in the discussion of control and responsibility of funding is Indigenous rights to establish and control the education of their children. In 2007 the United Nations General Assembly voted to adopt the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the Canadian government adopted UNDRIP as an Act in 2021. In the document, Article 14 states that “Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions.... [and] Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination” (p. 13). For Indigenous peoples, having the control of educational processes and schools does not free the “State” from their responsibility to provide the same levels and forms of education to them as they do to all their citizens.

If we shift our focus of funding Indigenous education from one of control to one of responsibility, I believe a couple of interesting issues come to light. First, to be responsible for

something implies there is a need to be accountable. Not only has the federal government not been able to address the funding gap between Indigenous education and provincial education, it has also failed to build governance structures that are focused on Indigenous education success. For example, there is no federal Minister of Education of Canada. Instead, federal funding for Indigenous education comes from Indigenous Services Canada (ISC). In addition to education, ISC is responsible for Indigenous health, water, housing, community infrastructure, social programs as well as other needs of Indigenous communities (Government of Canada). Education is one piece of a multifaceted portfolio that already warrants further assistance with the addition of the Elementary and Secondary Education Program: National Program Guidelines 2019 to 2020 to further set out guidelines and requirements for federal funding of Indigenous education. Although it's still early to see if these guidelines do anything to improve the gap that Indigenous communities face with regards to funding, it is important to note that they are just more guidelines. There is still no federal governance system in place specifically to deal with the federal government's responsibility for Indigenous education in Canada.

Which leads to a second issue. Because there is no federal governance system to address the federal government's responsibility for Indigenous education, "the major priority [of federal departments] is to negotiate and provide education funding" (Mendelson, 2008, p. 4). This funding comes with the focus on "provincial comparability" which has as "a prescriptive rule that provincial curricula and provincially certified teachers be employed by band operated schools, rather than as a description of education outcomes such as literacy and numeracy skills and cultural competency" (Mendelson, 2008, p. 6). It appears then that the responsibility the federal government has is to the provincial government's control of curricular and teacher

training certification rather than the outcomes of Indigenous student learning. One could argue that the White Paper of 1969 and its desire to shift control of Indigenous education from the federal government to the provincial governments has, in a way, happened.

Curriculum

The TRC Calls to Action include many requests for curriculum development. These requests include incorporating age-appropriate material on residential schools, treaties, and Indigenous historical and contemporary contributions to Canada (Section 62). They also include utilizing Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods in the classroom (Section 62 iii). In addition, the Calls to Action ask for curriculum development that builds “student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect” (Section iii). There is also a request that there be a forum, ideally the Council of Ministers of Education, where annual discussions on sharing and informing best practices can exist for teachers, since there is no federal governance body to do so (Section 63).

Federally, as outlined in the section above on funding, there is no organized governance body dedicated to formal education to address curriculum. Action item 63 requesting that the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) be the forum for national sharing and discussing of best practices does hold some promise. Since 2004 the Council has made Indigenous education one of its priorities. Nationally, it has hosted summits, educator’s forums, and symposiums all with the purpose of sharing best practices and establishing ongoing dialogue between Indigenous education organizations, TRC advocates, educators, and curriculum developers (Indigenous

Education CMEC). Yet it's important to also note that the CMEC, like Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) discussed above, is not solely dedicated to Indigenous education. CMEC primarily looks after Canada's education obligations and commitments internationally, educational and occupational qualifications inter-provincially, and official-languages programs (About Us CMEC). Therefore, the onus of curricular work lies with the separate provincial and territorial governments. For this examination, I will be using the province of Alberta and drawing on Alberta Education and the Alberta Teachers' Association response for curricular needs.

The Government of Alberta does have a section on their website dedicated to Education for Reconciliation. Even though currently Alberta Education is revamping their K-12 curriculum, there are many resources and programs available to teachers to help develop, administer and evaluate curricular programs and processes with reconciliation in mind. Resources like *Walking Together: First Nations, Metis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum* aim to help teachers deepen their understanding and appreciation of Indigenous ways of knowing and perspectives, while other resources like *Indigenous Awareness* and *Rupertsland Centre for Teaching and Learning* focus on sharing practical lesson plans, authentic Indigenous content and professional development opportunities (Education for Reconciliation Government of Alberta). Given these many resources and opportunities, how do Alberta schools address the legacy of colonialism in its own institutions?

Critically, since colonialism is endemic in our society and specifically in our schools, we need to approach curricular content not from deciding what we should teach, but rather how and why we teach it. This doesn't mean that material content is not important. Learning about residential

schools, Treaties, and Indigenous histories and contemporary accomplishments is very important. But you can go about content delivery in vastly different ways. Is the content passively attained facts and dates, or is the content an agent for deeper self-learning and societal change? In this light, I think the most important TRC action that is disruptive to the colonial project has to do with “building student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect” (Section 63 iii).

Let me use the concept of multiculturalism education as an example. On the surface, teaching and learning about different cultures that make up the Canadian society may seem like enough to foster intercultural understanding and respect. Yet, multiculturalism actually “permits a form of participation on the part of those designated as ‘cultural others’ that is limited to the decorative and includes ‘leisure, entertainment, food, and song and dance’” (St. Denis, 2011, p. 308). If you shift the learning focus from “food, fun, [and] festivals” learning to a focus on “social justice” you have an opportunity to transform the learning experience (Writer, 2008, p. 1). As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, both Critical Race Theory and Tribal Critical Race Theory have activist dimensions that are more likely to “facilitate transformation” (Writer, 2008, p. 3). It is this transformation from passive material acquisition to active societal and personal change that the TRC Calls to Action require of the formal education systems in Canada in hoping to achieve reconciliation. In fact, this shift from material knowledge to social justice also “critically engage[s] global citizens... [and] effectively multiply and diversify viewpoints of colonial and Indigenous education” (Mullen, 2020, p. 681).

This transformation is needed for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. In her work on Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy, Battiste (2002) states that “the central purpose of integrating Indigenous knowledge into Canadian schools is to balance the educational system to make it a transforming and capacity-building place for First Nations students” (p. 29). She goes on to say that one of the most important educational reforms that need to take place is to “acknowledge that Canadian schools teach a silent curriculum of Eurocentric knowledge by the way teachers behave and the manner in which they transmit information” (p. 30). Addressing and then actively confronting the silent curriculum is needed to make the goals of reconciliation possible. As Verna Kirkness (1999). attested over 20 years ago, the “prospective of Aboriginal education in Canada... begins with process rather than content” (p. 28).

This shift from content to process might seem easiest in the social science subjects like multiculturalism, yet it can and should also be encouraged in other subjects as well. Especially biology and its potential focus on sustainability science. As Johnson et al. (2011) have noted, sustainability science explores human-nature interactions and these interactions “always entwine questions of social and environmental justice and deeper metaphysical questions of connecting and meaning, inevitably giving rise to questions of human rights, Indigenous rights and environmental rights” (p. 2). Science as a neutral, universal and globally objective field of knowledge continues the colonial agenda to undermine other ways of knowing and at the same time uphold Western epistemologies as the more valid. Yet incorporating Indigenous knowledge as an equal way of studying the environment helps both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students “develop an appreciation of the contributions that Aboriginal peoples have made to science and technology, demonstrate humankind’s interconnectedness to the environment, integrate learning

from different scientific disciplines, and improve the success of all learners in the classroom” (Onuczko & Barker, 2012, p. 4). In short, incorporating Indigenous knowledge is transformative and disruptive to the status quo and offers “[e]pistemic friction [that] is contained in those uncomfortable moments in which our taken-for-granted assumptions about the world begin to crack. These moments can be transformative and catalyze critical consciousness to imagine and hopefully actualize an alternative epistemology” (Seawright, 2014, p. 558). Again, the process used to deliver curriculum can be transformative for students to build intercultural understanding, empathy and respect.

Teacher Training

Under the Calls to Action “Education for Reconciliation”, teacher training includes learning how to integrate Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into classrooms (TRC, 2015, p. 62 ii), developing and implementing K – 12 curricula on Indigenous people history and the legacy of residential schools (Section 63 i), and sharing information and best practices (Section 63 ii).

Under the Calls to Action “Professional Development and Training for Public Servants”, teachers need “skills-based training in intercultural competency, conflict resolution, human rights, and anti-racism” (Section 57).

For teachers in Alberta, the Alberta Teacher’s Association (ATA) has been instrumental in providing training for reconciliation. In 2016, the ATA along with the Government of Alberta and the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR) signed a Joint Commitment to Action (JCTA) to “ensure that all K-12 teachers receive additional training related to First

Nations, Metis, and Inuit histories and cultures” (Indigenous Education and Walking Together). The ATA has also created an Indigenous Education Specialist Council (IESC) to “facilitate professional development related to First Nations, Metis and Inuit education” (IESC). They also provide Indigenous resources for all teachers and their classrooms.

From a CRT and TribalCrit stand, the Calls to Action item that seems the most important section is item 57, “skills-based training in intercultural competency, conflict resolution, human rights, and anti-racism”. The other items seem to be addressed through the ATA and IESC and I feel that their success hinges on teachers’ training as described in section 57. As Csontos (2019) points out in her work on educator training, “policy implementation depends on teachers’ ability to adapt policy directives to their previously acquired knowledge base” (p. 159). This “knowledge base” often perpetuates the power imbalance between the colonizers and the colonized because no work has been done to change it. Non-Indigenous teachers, especially, “having been educated within colonialism, [will] henceforth perpetuat[e] the colonial project” unwillingly and potentially “misinterpret the TRC’s policy direction” (Csontos, 2019, p. 160). For teachers to engage students and build capacity for “intercultural understanding, empathy and mutual respect” (p. 62 iii), educators need to do the work as well.

A case in point is Lorenz’s (2017) report *Reversing Racism in the Time of Reconciliation? Settler Colonialism, Race, and Alberta Teachers*. In it, Lorenz explores how ATA members understand and articulate racism through responses to a survey about what racism is, and who can experience it (p. 80). What she found was that there was a significant “lack of understanding of the sociopolitical history of race as a term... [and] settler colonialism is intricately tied to an

individual's ability to understand race as a concept" (p. 88). Participants in the survey did not understand how race is socially constructed, how the idea of race contributes to systemic oppression, nor how settler colonial norms are maintained in curricula and education institutions themselves. This is where most teachers in Alberta are starting, and training needs to reflect "how deeply imbedded settler colonialism is within, not only systems of education, but the mythology of the nation as a whole" (p. 91).

In order to do transformative work with students, educators need the time and skill development to do the work within themselves. As Marie Battiste (2002) notes, the "educational structures will change only if we [educators] are willing to first do the inner work and engage directly with Indigenous knowledge and consciousness" (p. 29). I would add to Battiste's thoughts that educators also need to engage deeply with the colonial realities of the education system itself and critically evaluate their personal role in transforming it. As noted in the TRC report itself, "thinking must change. The way we talk to, and about, each other must change. All Canadians must make a firm and lasting commitment to reconciliation to ensure that Canada is a country where our children and grandchildren can thrive" (TRC, 2015, p. 317). Since formal education is key to reconciliation, teacher training needs to address and incorporate this kind of work.

Conclusion

Looking at the TRC Calls to Action through a colonial lens steeped in Critical Race Theory and Tribal Critical Race Theory has been a fruitful exercise. Using the understanding that colonialism and racism are endemic in Canadian society, enabled a critical evaluation of formal

education attempts to address the TRC Calls to Action. Granted, there is much additional research and work that remains, but the brief process done here for this paper has brought a few things to light. First, in examining the funding gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous education, the concept of “responsibility” versus “control” was revealed. Funding is not just about money, it’s more importantly about being accountable and responsible for Indigenous education. Second, in an examination of the Calls to Actions on curricular development and implementation, the notion of transformative action reigned over material content sharing. Approaching curriculum as material content, rather than transformative process, does not allow for the type of societal change needed for reconciliation. Lastly, with regards to teacher training, the inner work for reconciliation needed by educators must be a starting point. Lack of awareness of racism and colonialism has left teachers unable to develop, implement or integrate best practices for reconciliation in their classrooms.

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