

**Transformative Education for Indigenous Students: Culturally Responsive Leadership and
Teaching Practices in Educational Institutions**

by Edmund G. Major

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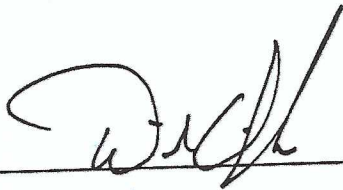
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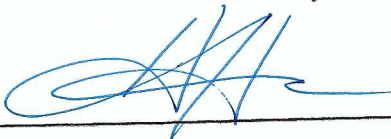
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**Transformative Education for Indigenous Students: Culturally Responsive Leadership and
Teaching Practices in Educational Institutions**

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Dedication and Acknowledgements

I would first like to acknowledge the land of which I am a part and can complete this project:

Red Deer Catholic Regional Schools would like to thank God for all of creation. I acknowledge that I am on Treaty Six Territory to the North of the Red Deer River and Treaty Seven Territory to the South of the Red Deer River.

I acknowledge the many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit whose footsteps have marked these lands for centuries and whose respectful stewardship has enabled us all to enjoy the riches of the Creator's blessings.

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Abstract

This capstone paper gives an insight into First Nations educational systems and how educational leadership influences the understanding of First Nations education today. It will suggest how First Nations instructional leaders can be influential leaders in today's society and how to treat everyone with care. Leaders need to know how to make changes slowly in First Nations schools. The research comprises various peer-reviewed scholarly journals and books from well-known authors, such as Schein. Some topics in this research paper will include the history of First Nations education and educational leadership, transitioning into an effective leader in First Nations Schools, and how to be a caring leader within the school or community. The outcomes will benefit the first-time leader when entering any school. Additionally, this paper will be a guide for use by all instructional leaders.

Keywords: Indigenous education, Indigenous school leadership, First Nation education, culturally responsive teaching, culturally responsive school leadership, principal leadership, culturally relevant education

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In today's modern educational environment, teachers are there to make the leaders of tomorrow emerge from our classrooms. The Alberta teacher quality standard (TQS) indicates teachers need to apply "a current and comprehensive repertoire of effective planning, instruction, and assessment practices to meet the learning needs of every student [as well as] consider student variables such as maturity and relationships amongst students" (Alberta Education, 2018, p. 5). These traits that teachers are to foster and make known to students in Alberta could be the exact definition a person might see in Webster's dictionary under leadership. The TQS also states in Competency 5 that teachers will "support student achievement by engaging in collaborative; whole school approaches capacity building in First Nations, Métis, and Inuit education" (Alberta Education, 2018, p. 6). This indicates that an Alberta teacher builds leadership capacities for non-Indigenous and Indigenous students.

As part of the Truth and Reconciliation's 94 calls for action (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015.) there are calls for education in Sections 6 to 12 and 62 to 65. In these action calls, there are specific strategies for First Nations people to receive improvements in how education is funded and how the curriculum is developed to increase the knowledge base of a First Nations student both on and off reserves and settlements. Some of the strategies will also develop ways to improve education attainment levels and success rates. These procedures can only increase leadership opportunities for Indigenous students from high school and postsecondary institutions.

If perceptions can be changed and improved using the education systems across Canada and the world, then the opportunities for Indigenous students to be seen as leaders in all levels of schooling can improve. Milne (2017) stated,

When implemented respectfully and authentically, findings suggest that incorporating Indigenous content into public schools has the potential to benefit Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Indigenous and non-Indigenous students may not have opportunities to learn about Indigenous Peoples, perspectives, worldviews, cultures, and heritage outside of school. Among non-Indigenous students, Indigenous-focused curricular initiatives contribute to increased awareness and understanding of Indigenous Peoples in the past and present, potentially leading to improved relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada. (p. 12)

This capstone project will focus on some perceptions and the opportunities that could be implemented to increase the leadership capabilities of our Indigenous students in our schools. This needs to be improved mainly in our Indigenous populous and mainstream schools with few Indigenous students.

Background Information

The ability of the nation and nationality to continue to view itself as legitimate is produced through its willingness to learn from past mistakes and overcome its troubling colonial history (Blackburn, 2007). “In Alberta, the need to create a more conducive learning environment for FNMI [First Nation, Métis, and Inuit] students is urgent. Given available expertise and economic prosperity, Aboriginal students in this province are not reaching acceptable educational attainment levels” (Gunn et al., 2011, p. 342). Unfortunately, “culturally diverse and marginalized students are often not included in schools. As a result, many of them find it difficult to become engaged within an educational system that does not reflect their experiences or reality” (Davy, 2016, p. 4). The Alberta TQS states that “quality teaching occurs when the teacher’s ongoing analysis of the context, and the teacher’s decisions about which pedagogical knowledge and abilities to apply, result in

optimum learning for all students” (Alberta Education, 2018, p. 3). “Communicating a philosophy of education that is student-centred and based on sound principles of effective teaching and leadership” (Alberta Education, 2023, p. 3). Although the word leadership only directly appears once in the statement, it is easy to assume that through thoughtful teaching practices, teachers can make the educational decisions that guide their leadership strategies to create those “optimal student learning experiences”. With that said, the issue remains that there continues to be a disconnect regarding practices to enhance student leadership traits. From the inception of formalized education, “when Europeans settled North America, Aboriginal education began a long road of paternalistic and racist practices” (Gallagher-Hayashi, 2004, p. 20), which left many Indigenous students marginalized. Recently, a concerted effort has been made to enhance learning environments for Indigenous students. However, system leaders must now find ways to improve all leadership opportunities for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. “Students need stories both to make sense of their world and to enable them to contribute to it; they need to both understand and have places from which to stand” (Tupper & Cappello, 2008, p. 577).

In most schools, leadership classes or groups like student councils and some Gay-Straight Alliance groups might promote leadership practices, but how many students know or see these as leadership opportunities? Teachers consistently try to create leaders through academic means, just awarding and celebrating the highest marks in all classes. Is this the only way schools can promote becoming leaders according to society’s standards of getting into postsecondary education? In most school systems, they have gone away with student councils and have gone the way of student groups called Student Voice. This gives all students a chance to have their voices heard at any time during the school year, which might provide those students who may not have been able to stand up for particular council positions the chance to be heard and has seen more engagement with the student

population through confident student leaders. Through this, we can see that “mainstream education continues to embrace Western European principles and its concepts of racial superiority over the colonized. Within this dichotomous relationship, Aboriginal peoples are encouraged to conform to their subjugated status within mainstream society” (Julien, 2016, p. 133).

Native American students often poorly resourced secondary schools that cannot offer the math and sciences necessary to prepare them for postsecondary education. Rural and heavily populated urban schools are rarely funded on par with suburban and are populated with minoritized students, including Native students and the issues about what many school settings are experiencing in the US and Canada including the poor learning environments for Indigenous students.” (Waterman et al., 2018, p. 8)

Statement of Issue/Problem

The current 39% high school completion rate among First Nations young adults between 20 and 24 across Canada is equivalent to the percentage of First Nations living in Alberta who report mid- to high-range income (Statistics Canada, 2023)

1. According to Statistics Canada Centre of Living Standards (Statistics Canada, 2023), if First Nations kids achieved the same level of education as non-Aboriginal kids, more than \$170 billion could be added to the economy.
2. The First Nations youth population is growing at three times the national average. This growth will be especially felt in the Prairie Provinces, where the First Nations are concentrated. The First Nations will make up 12.7% of the Canadian labour force growth between 2006 and 2026 (Statistics Canada, 2023).
3. The Assembly of First Nations (2023) reported that the First Nations high school dropout rate (42%) is six times higher than among non-First-Nations students (7%).

4. Edmonton, the city with the second largest concentration of Aboriginal people in Canada, found that although only 14.2% of its First Nations population was unemployed, 47.3% reported incomes in the low range in 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2023).

These statistics show that FNMI students and young adults are more likely to be low-income earners or in jail than to graduate high school. These are alarming; today, school systems are ill-equipped to change these numbers.

As the First Nations continue to grow in proportion to the rest of Canada's population, getting First Nations students through high school becomes even more economically significant. Schools in Alberta are ill-equipped to handle the number of Indigenous students, the backgrounds and emotional and physical baggage of these students, and the cultural teachings that these particular students may require.

According to Payne and Slocumb (2011), an inadequate education creates a permanent underclass. It makes it difficult for these disadvantaged students to obtain gainful employment, and they may end up in low-paying jobs, collecting welfare, or even in the criminal justice system.

For school environments, this statement can be said for any number of students, but it has been seen to affect our Indigenous populations more than any other in today's schools. The National Indigenous Economic Strategy for Canada (2022) estimated that if access to education and training for Indigenous Peoples became equitable to non-Indigenous Peoples, the result would be an additional \$8.5 billion in income earned annually by the Indigenous population. Further, the report states that closing the productivity gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians would lead to an increase of \$27.7 billion in Canada's gross domestic product each year. According to Johnson and Fuller (2014), culturally responsive leadership often overlaps with "leadership for social justice" approaches, a term prevalent in educational literature that focuses on improving the

educational experiences and outcomes for all students, particularly those traditionally marginalized in schools.

The association acknowledges the importance of nurturing Indigenous teachers and school leaders within the teaching profession. Listening, supporting, and learning from Indigenous teachers will contribute to the advancement of truth and reconciliation within classrooms, schools, and communities across the province (Alberta Teachers Association, 2022).

Purpose of the Study

“Culturally responsive leadership in education also refers to skills demonstrated by school leaders that enable them to influence others to respond appropriately to the educational needs of ethnically and culturally diverse groups of students” (Ladson Billings, 1995, as cited in Gay, 2002, p. 107).

The quote above is exactly what the purpose of this study will entail. Educational systems and districts are responsible worldwide for providing culturally sensitive and responsive opportunities for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. There are more leadership opportunities for students in non-Indigenous schools nationwide, with leadership classes and student councils present in our Indigenous schools. Still, they could be more well-attended or well-inspired by the teaching staff. As an education leader, you play a pivotal role in your district’s success—from guiding students along their learning paths to providing safe, inclusive school environments to making important budget decisions. Moreover, although the last few years have been incredibly challenging, you must keep showing up and doing your job well. This may also be similar to any culturally traditional classes that may also be introduced. Schools and school staff must be patient with initiatives involving leadership plans for Indigenous students. History shows that leadership initiatives such as these are enthusiastically introduced and celebrated but slowly fade as the initial

eagerness to have these classes and prospects is attended with great revelry. (Alberta Teachers Association, 2022) However, as the work builds and the enthusiasm dies, these get put to the side and eventually end without the intended purpose. Schools need to change this narrative regarding starting leadership opportunities for Indigenous students before the issue of leadership and Indigenous students can be addressed.

Research Questions

1. What do good leadership strategies look like for Indigenous students in Alberta schools?
2. What characteristics of student leadership opportunities/programs/experiences promote the development of leadership skills in students?
3. How can school leaders prepare and support the leadership opportunities of the Indigenous students?

Significance of the Study

According to the recent census in Alberta and Statistics Canada, the Aboriginal population in Alberta is 284,465, about 12.2% of the total population (Statistics Canada, 2023) Within that number, there are approximately 54,500 children. These numbers show that there are a significant number of Aboriginal students within the education system who need to be supported in ways that are meaningful and pertinent to them. “Canada’s Aboriginal youth have traditionally lagged behind non-Aboriginal students in terms of educational achievement” (Julien, 2016, p. 129). Regrettably, this trend will continue until meaningful change is implemented, as “Eurocentric education provides little opportunity for Aboriginal learners to develop a positive interpretation of Aboriginal identity and culture” (Julien, 2016, p. 133). By gathering research explicitly focused on addressing Aboriginal students in the education system in Canada and how to help them succeed effectively, it can guide administrators in implementing changes within their schools to bridge the achievement

gap and ensure meaningful learning opportunities are taking place. The need for qualified leaders from our school systems is paramount in today's rapidly evolving and competitive world. Schools must produce well-equipped graduates who think critically and solve problems wisely to be credible and marketable. Much research surrounds why Aboriginal students have been met with limited success in the education system regarding basic educational needs. However, research is still evolving into opportunities for Indigenous leadership in schools.

Historically, research into the mental health of Indigenous populations in Canada, as elsewhere, has been undertaken by settlers using colonial and non-Indigenous concepts and epistemologies (Waldram, 2004, 2009). Much scholarship indicates that a disregard for Indigenous perspectives persists in contemporary mental health research in Canada (Nelson & Wilson, 2017) creating the potential to misrepresent rates and types of mental health problems among Indigenous communities. Further, Canadian scholars warn of the embeddedness of colonialism in the healthcare system, a problem that creates barriers for Indigenous peoples seeking to access healthcare services, especially for mental health problems (Nelson & Wilson, 2017).

These mental health indicators are another reason why there is a need for more effective teaching and opportunities for Indigenous students in schools today to climb out of the so-called hole in the education system to be contributing members of society.

Leaders need to influence others to become leaders themselves effectively. Effective teachers may be the influential factor in a student's life to inspire this motivation. Developing and maintaining a solid building culture is essential to supporting and sustaining teacher leadership (Levin & Schrum, 2017), and this can be especially true for Indigenous students. Modelling leadership within a school can set the tone to build leadership capacity in all students. According to the research of Waters and Marzano (2006), a positive relationship between school district

leadership and student achievement was found, and district-level leadership responsibilities were identified to be correlated to student achievement. The positive benefits of nurturing leadership skills in those whom one can influence are exponential. Leaders are at the forefront of positive change, and if school systems can put forth the effort to provide leadership chances for their Indigenous students, they should strive for this.

Outline of the Remainder of the Paper

The primary objective of this capstone study is to explore culturally responsive leadership practices aimed at enhancing the educational success of Aboriginal students. The goal of creating meaningful opportunities for these students to connect with and actively engage in the curriculum is to foster an inclusive learning environment. Chapter 2 includes an in-depth review of relevant literature, encompassing the definition of culturally responsive leadership and identifying specific leadership practices and teaching strategies that have demonstrated effectiveness in working with Aboriginal students. Chapter 3 presents actionable recommendations for principals to leverage culturally responsive practices, bolstering their leadership abilities and nurturing teacher capacities to better meet Aboriginal students' needs.

Chapter 2: Extended Literature Review

Introduction

Indigenous students need to see Indigenous leaders. They need to see the people in the school system who are doing well. They need to see the people who come from their community, who have gone through the same issues in their community, have the same background, lead in their schools, and are successful in their lives (Alberta Teachers Association, 2022). However, most school divisions have no Indigenous leaders. The number of Indigenous teachers in most divisions could be more prominent. Regrettably, many classrooms and schools lack Indigenous content and opportunities to showcase leadership skills, resulting in limited exposure for Indigenous students to explore their histories and cultures and connect with their peers. “Today, North America’s aboriginal children (those of native and Inuit descent) walk through our schools like strangers” (Gallagher-Hayashi, 2004, p. 20). This situation can lead to feelings of isolation, being unheard, and a sense of invisibility (Alberta Education, 2005).

The history shared between Aboriginal peoples and European settlers is marred by cultural disruption (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 2), characterized by oppressive educational practices that continue to impact the schooling experiences of First Nation students. A considerable journey towards reconciliation lies ahead, demanding concerted efforts from all stakeholders. Culture is viewed as a fundamental resource for Indigenous communities. While the notion of cultural continuity and identity is debated by some, several scholars see it as valuable in the effort to revive and preserve the connection between past, present, and future (Chan, 2021).

To create a truly enriching and inclusive learning environment for all students, it is crucial to transition the educational experiences of Indigenous students toward a holistic approach that acknowledges and nurtures their mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual capacities. Indigenous

leaders often face the dilemma of double consciousness as they struggle to interpret, negotiate, and survive in two distinct cultural worlds (Fitzgerald, 2006). Contemporary leadership demands that Indigenous leaders make bridges between many worlds; this dilemma involved in this bridge building is often called “living between two worlds” (Kenny & Fraser, 2014 p. 4). Achieving this transformative shift necessitates the implementation of culturally responsive leadership and teaching practices within educational institutions. By embracing these practices, Indigenous students will benefit, and the entire learning community will thrive in an environment that values diversity, fosters cultural understanding, and promotes a sense of belonging for all.

Definition of Terms

Aboriginal: Refers to the original peoples of North America and their descendants (Alberta Education, 2005)

Colonization: Refers to the act of settling among, imposing worldviews, and establishing control over the Indigenous people of a particular area (University of Saskatchewan, 2023).

Culturally responsive leadership: Refers to the broadened understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy as it moves beyond the classroom to the larger school context and decision-making within the school (Hollowell, 2019).

Culturally responsive pedagogy: Refers to conceptual understanding and thinking that “embraces Indigenous ways of knowing . . . [and is] fostered by approaches to teaching and learning that include purposeful thinking about people, places and processes” (Empowering the Spirit, n.d., para. 1).

Culturally responsive teaching: Refers to using “cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (Gay, 2002, p. 206).

Decolonization: Refers to the “process by which Indigenous peoples refute historical and current colonialist stories about themselves, and reclaim their languages, cultures, knowledge systems, political and social worldviews” (University of Saskatchewan, 2023).

Educational leader: Refers to the leader of the school. This term is often used interchangeably with “principal” throughout this capstone study.

Emotional Tax: “Emotional tax is the combination of being on guard to protect against bias because of race, ethnicity, and gender and experiencing the associated effects on well-being and ability to thrive at work” (Travis & Thorpe-Moscon, 2019, p. 12). Psychological safety is when employees feel they can make mistakes and take risks without being penalized (Thorpe-Moscon & Ohm, 2021, p. 5).

First Nation: Refers to the various first peoples of Canada and is often the preferred term over “Indian” (Alberta Education, 2005).

Indigenous: Refers to the inhabitants originating in a particular country and their descendants; in the context of this capstone study, it is used to refer to the original first peoples of Canada (Alberta Education, 2005).

Microaggression: The Centre for Race and Culture (n.d.) defines microaggressions as “hostile verbal, behavioral, or environmental insults or slurs that target People of Color and Indigenous Communities. They are normalized and are thus often not recognized as aggressive or inappropriate” (para. 2).

Principal: Refers to the school’s leader as assigned by the school board. This individual is responsible and accountable for demonstrating the leadership quality competencies as described in the leadership quality standard (LQS) by Alberta Education (Alberta Education, 2023). This word is often used interchangeably with “educational leader” throughout this capstone study.

Professional development: Refers to the ongoing learning on behalf of educators to improve how they teach, which can be done in both formal and informal ways (Bullock & Sator, 2015).

Reconciliation: Reconciliation means the process and goal of creating societal change through a fundamental shift in thinking and attitudes, increasing intercultural understanding to build a better society through learning about First Nations, Métis, and Inuit perspectives and experiences, including residential schools and treaties” (Alberta Education, 2023, p. 2).

Background Information

To gain a greater understanding of the significance and need for culturally responsive leadership practices in K–12 schools, it is essential to briefly consider the systematic attempt by the government of Canada to eradicate indigenous culture through the use of residential schools. As Gallagher-Hayashi (2004) claimed in their research, “When Europeans settled North America, aboriginal education began a long road of paternalistic and racist practices” (p. 20). “Colonial powers vanquished entire Indigenous populations through oppressive means, from genocide and epistemicide to moving subaltern subjects into unfamiliar spaces” (Khalifa et al., 2019, pp. 578).

Unfortunately, “the introduction of residential schools in 19th century Canada established the dominance of European languages, customs, and traditions over the Aboriginal tradition while deconstructing important Aboriginal kinship and community ties” (Julien, 2016, p. 133). Elise Charland, a residential school survivor, recounted her experiences dealing with her loneliness and that of her younger brother from her time at Onion Lake School. She stated, “There was no one there to help us, to love us, to take us in their arms and take the hurt and tears away. That loneliness was unbearable. No one cared whether we lived or died.” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, p. 24). “Residential schools were government-sponsored religious schools that were established to assimilate Indigenous children into Euro-Canadian culture” (Miller, 2023, para. 1) and

were the mainstay of Indian education during 1867 and 1969. However, “the last federally administered residential school closed in 1996” (Legacy of Hope Foundation, 2023). These schools were primarily based on the assumption that Whites were inherently superior to the “Indians” whom they considered savage and uncivilized (Bombay et al., 2014). This belief was asserted by Clifford Sifton, the Minister of Indian Affairs, when he stated, “The Indian cannot go out from school, making his way and compete with the white man... He has not the physical, mental, or moral get-up to enable him to compete” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015 p. 25).

According to Menzies and Wilson (2020), under the guise of educating and preparing Indigenous children for their participation in Canadian society, the federal government and other administrators of the residential school system committed what has since been described as an act of cultural genocide. As generations of students left these institutions, they returned to their home communities without the knowledge, skills, or tools to cope in either world.

“Moreover, the attempted assimilation of Indigenous students left them disoriented and insecure, with the feeling that they belonged to neither Indigenous nor settler society” (Miller, 2023, para. 18). According to John Tootoosis’, a former residential school student who attended the Delmas School in Saskatchewan from 1912 to 1916,

when an Indian comes out of these places it is like being put between two walls in a room and left hanging in the middle. On one side are all the things he learned from his people and their way of life that was being wiped out, and on the other side are the white man’s ways which he could never fully understand since he never had the right amount of education and could not be part of it. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015 p. 79)

Unfortunately, “many of the values and morals of this culture conflicted with traditional Aboriginal values and customs” (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 3). McCue’s (2018) research furthered

this by stating that Indigenous peoples educated their youth through traditional means — demonstration, group socialization, participation in cultural and spiritual rituals, skill development, and oral teachings before contact with Europeans. The introduction of European classroom-style education as part of a larger goal of assimilation disrupted traditional methods. It resulted in almost a cultural eradication and the lack of leaders of Indigenous descent coming out of our schools.

Reformers of Indigenous education policies are attempting to reintegrate traditional teachings and provide more cultural and language-based support to enhance and improve the outcomes of Indigenous children in the education system. “Despite the closure of residential schools, Aboriginal peoples have suffered psychologically and culturally” (Gunn et al., 2011, p. 327). Sadly, “the consequences of this Eurocentric approach to education and cultural sanitation have outlasted the residential schools themselves” (Gunn et al., 2011, p. 327). Based on the research above, it is evident that there is a significant gap in how Indigenous students were traditionally taught and how their learning has been impacted after the imposition of the Westernized curriculum.

Unfortunately, we still have a long way to go in making reparations for the Residential School era.

Education in general and the everyday meanings of the curriculum in schools can be seen as essential elements of the existing social privilege, interest, and knowledge of one element of the population at the expense of the less powerful groups. (Maina, 1997, p. 301)

Julien’s (2016) research suggested, “since Aboriginal peoples are not of the dominant norm, but are minorities within a colonial state, they are encouraged to embrace the colonizers’ conceptual notions” (p. 133). Consequently, “mainstream education continues to embrace the principles of Western Europe and its concepts of racial superiority over the colonized. Within this dichotomous relationship, Aboriginal people are encouraged to conform to their own subjugated statuses within

mainstream society” (Julien, 2016, p. 133) due to “conventional modes of education continuing to be based on foreign values, which function to disconnect the students from their communities and their identity” (Julien, 2016, p. 133). Julien (2016) further argued, “for countless Aboriginal students in Western Canada, there exists little chance to develop a non-Eurocentric understanding of their own history and culture, contributing to feelings of alienation and inadequacy” (p. 134). As such, “it is important, therefore, that educators employ a pedagogy that facilitates the alternative learning styles of Aboriginal youth” (Julien, 2016, p. 134) in order to change the perceptions surrounding Eurocentric hegemony in education. As Hanson et al. (2020) pointed out,

Education is equally dependent upon strong relationships, networks between individuals, and groups that foster learning. Oppressive colonial structures – including the Indian Act and Indian Residential Schools – have damaged relationships between Indigenous and settler groups and cause/caused stressed relationships within Indigenous communities. However, the most serious consequences of colonial practices include the harm done to Indigenous ways of learning and knowing, threatening formal and informal education for future generations of Indigenous learners. (p. 136)

Based on the research, it is evident that Residential School intergenerational trauma still exists today “and can be seen in the continuing legacy of dysfunctional families and anti-social behavior that it has left behind in many Aboriginal communities” (Miller, 1996, as cited in Julien, 2016, p. 1330). Consequently, the impact cannot be ignored, particularly as educators endeavour to connect and engage with Indigenous students meaningfully. Part of this connection lies in attempts to engage with Indigenous students in meaningful and relevant ways to their experiences and context. As part of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Calls to Action (2015), there is a need to develop culturally appropriate curricula “to redress the legacy of residential

schools and advance the process of Canadian reconciliation” (p. 2). In addition, “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” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015) to close the learning gaps and disparities for Indigenous students. Currently, “Eurocentric education provides little opportunity for Aboriginal learners to develop a positive interpretation of Aboriginal identity and culture” (Julien, 2016, p. 133). Henceforth, by endeavoring to infuse our schools with the very things that the government of Canada and Catholic churches sought to eradicate, may we begin seeing a systematic change in the way Indigenous students are educated (Hinks, 2011). Through these measures, they may feel connected to the curriculum, be proud of their cultural backgrounds, and learn more about themselves (Hinks, 2011).

All of this has led today’s society to where it concerns Indigenous education and any leadership opportunities that may exist in our school communities.

Culturally Responsive Leadership

Leadership is the second most influential school-level factor in student achievement, after teacher quality (Clifford et al., 2012). What is unique about instructional leadership is that, first and foremost, it is tightly connected to the work of improving learning for students. Leadership is complex work and can have a range of purposes. For example, some leadership tasks may be primarily managerial and not directed toward improving learning and teaching. The motivation for instructional leadership is the improvement of instruction (Le Fevre, 2021).

The fundamental purpose of educational leadership is to nurture the growth and well-being of children in their care and ensure that every decision made in the school system is in the best interests of the child. Additionally, “principals’ belief in students, emphasis on ensuring student

belonging, promotion of relationships and promotion of culturally relevant school experiences are seminal for Aboriginal students to have a positive school experience” (Preston et al., 2016, p. 6). In Alberta, this is achieved as principals follow the LQS (Alberta Education, 2023) which suggests that “quality leadership occurs when the leader’s ongoing analysis of the context, and decisions about what leadership knowledge and abilities to apply, result in quality teaching and optimum learning for all school students” (p. 3).

When working with Indigenous students specifically, based on their educational history and “widespread mistrust of the education system largely stemming from the Residential School legacy” (Crooks et al., 2015, p. 217), a principal must acknowledge and recognize the need to find specific strategies that are pertinent to Indigenous youth. These strategies can then be utilized to help Indigenous students achieve their most significant potential and meet their learning aspirations (Alberta Education, 2023). To make the necessary shifts to become culturally responsive as an educational leader, Davy’s (2016) research outlined some strategies that can be used to accomplish this: “(a) foster cultural responsiveness, (b) promote culturally responsive pedagogy, and (c) create a welcoming school environment focused on building relationships” (p. 32). When schools become places where programs, activities, and services are connected to their home cultures and cultural backgrounds, students are more apt to engage in these experiences as they are pertinent to their contextual understandings and frame of reference.

Unfortunately, many “Aboriginal peoples in Canada continue to attend schools (both on and off reserve) that continue to remain mired in a system deeply entrenched in Eurocentric pedagogy and colonizing philosophies” (Julien, 2016, p. 129), causing a disconnect as “their home culture is at odds with the culture and expectations of schools” (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008, p. 946). Similarly, Khalifa et al.’s (2019) research suggested that leadership and administrative practices continue to

carry characteristics of colonization through means of single, authoritative top-down leadership, prioritization of school-based perspectives and policies over community, understanding of knowledge and its conveyance as opposed to experiences, inferiority and dislodging of educative processes from elders and oral community traditions and the use of schools and curriculum as a way to monitor and control Indigenous populations. Culturally responsive educational leaders must be mindful of these lasting colonial measures and “identify and resist schooling practices that continue to dislodge indigeneity and oppress Indigenous and minoritized students” (Khalifa et al., 2019, p. 586). As educational leaders actively look to make a difference in how Indigenous students connect with the curriculum and their overall school experiences, exploring these cultural responsiveness strategies is vital to effectively meeting our Indigenous students’ needs.

Welcoming School Environment and Building Positive Relationships

Within the LQS (Alberta Education, 2023), leaders are responsible for “creating a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment” (p. 3) and do so by building “positive working relationships with members of the school community and local community” (Alberta Education, 2023, p. 3). As leaders in the school, principals must strive to help educators in their building understand the need for additional skills and different perspectives to meet the needs of those they serve effectively (Davy, 2016, p. 3). This means that “effective leaders must be capable of promoting and sustaining an environment stable enough to attract, maintain, and support the further development of good teachers” (Khalifa et al., 2016, p. 1273). They must work with their teachers to advance their knowledge and understanding of the Indigenous cultures and histories framed in a local context (Davies & Halsey, 2019). In doing so, learning experiences aligned with local Indigenous beliefs and cultural heritage can be supported, and Indigenous students’ cultural and spiritual well-being can be recognized (Davies & Halsey, 2019). As a culturally responsive school

leader endeavors to accomplish this, the responsibility of creating a culturally responsive school learning environment can be shared and extended to the promotion of inclusive school climates for marginalized or minoritized students within a school context (Khalifa et al., 2016, p. 1274). This includes creating a welcoming, caring, respectful, accepting, and safe learning environment (Alberta Education, 2023; Crooks et al., 2015; Davy, 2016; Khalifa et al., 2016) and respecting First Nations cultures.

“Responsive leaders are those who are aware of their communities’ colonial history and current opportunities and challenges but continue to advance student teaching and learning by honoring students’ ancestral teachings and values” (Khalifa et al., 2019, p. 594). School community leaders must be mindful that they can either further marginalize the communities they serve or help liberate them by employing authentic and meaningful partnerships (Khalifa et al., 2019). Stockdale et al. (2013) discovered that “understanding the community is critical for successful leadership. The importance of understanding the community and people the school serves cannot be underestimated. Such understanding is necessary to create and build the relationships pertinent to any successful school” (p. 101). Similarly, Davy (2016) suggested that “culturally responsive leaders seek to know their school communities and put strategies in place to level the playing field for the marginalized communities they serve” (p. 21). Davy (2016) furthered this by indicating that “schools must become culturally responsive systems, growing, evolving, and adapting to meet the needs of the students and families they serve” (p. 3). “FNMI [First Nation, Métis, and Inuit] students must know that they are valued in the school and that they have much to contribute to the school environment” (Gunn et al., 2011, p. 335).

Gunn et al. (2011) found in their research that “Aboriginal students and their families reported a sense of belonging and care. This feeling cultivated a commitment to educational

attainment and a greater understanding of its value” (p. 329). Establishing this sense of belonging and care when working with Indigenous students means recognizing the connection between home life, community, and school. Oskineegish (2015) emphasized this point by suggesting that “active communication and engagement in the community is an essential method of learning relevant and appropriate pedagogical practices” (p. 13). “The ways that leaders communicate are directly linked to their cultural backgrounds and community relationships and reflect what they value and that which they prioritize” (Khalifa et al., 2019, p. 597). Additionally, “meaningful teacher-student relationships that build on the emotional, physical, and intellectual facets, among many others, of the learner facilitate the development of a safe, respectful context” (Ragoonaden & Mueller, 2017, p. 35).

Khalifa et al. (2019) indicated in their research that the responsibility of ensuring that relationships are being upheld and maintained as a cultural norm and reflecting the school values and priorities rests mainly on the principal. Khalifa et al. (2019) further suggested that “school leaders who serve Indigenous youth must empower students and families by embracing collective, mutual, and community-based communication” (p. 598) and “create spaces that are welcoming to community and Indigenous knowledge” (p. 594). As principals work towards building these communication links and collaborative relationships, students will feel more connected to their school and their academic futures (Gunn et al., 2011). Getting to know the community and forging relationships with the students, parents, and community members can help the school become part of the community (Dugan et al., 2012, p. 57). As this happens, the community and school can become intertwined and more accurately reflect and represent the cultural beliefs of the Indigenous community where the school is situated. Stockdale et al. (2013) suggested in their research that “the principal’s job is to ensure the trust is built between the community and the school. Trust fuels the

school's direction. Without trust, the school will never reach the level of success it aspires to" (Stockdale et al., 2013, p. 97). As evidenced earlier, a trusting relationship is essential in making educational gains due to the complicated educational history that Indigenous people have endured. "When strong relationships are built upon trust, school leaders can push the status quo or 'shake things up' and still maintain the community's support" (Stockdale et al., 2013, p. 97). Minkos et al.'s. (2017) research suggested,

When school administrators demonstrate a genuine interest in learning about students, families, and staff in their school communities, not only do they communicate an appreciation of diversity, but they actively convey the belief that an acknowledgment and celebration of differences holds the promise of teaching us about our commonalities. (p. 1265)

As educational leaders endeavor to create "inclusive environments in which diversity is respected and members of the school community are welcomed, cared for, respected and safe," effective relationships grounded on trust can begin to be established, as well as the "conditions under which the learning aspirations and the potential of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students realized" (Alberta Education, 2023, p. 3).

Professional Development

"Of all leadership expressions, the principal is most knowledgeable about resources, and he/she is best positioned to promote and support school-level reforms" (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990, as cited in Khalifa et al., 2016, p. 1274). When working towards implementing culturally responsive practices in the school, educational leaders need to "lead professional developments to ensure their teachers and staff, and the curriculum, are continuously responsive to minoritized students" (Khalifa et al., 2016, p. 1274). Khalifa et al. (2016) argued that "principals must play a leading role in

maintaining culturally responsive resources and curriculum, mentoring and modeling culturally responsive teaching, or offering professional developments around CRSL [Culturally Responsive School Leadership]” (Khalifa et al., 2016, p. 1281). Creating a positive school climate based on solid relationships provides a bedrock for learning. Students need to feel safe and belong to thrive in school (Flook, 2019). Therefore, an educational leader must be willing to work alongside teachers, supporting them in developing and continually refining their craft through culturally responsive measures to improve student outcomes. This includes “discussing issues in Aboriginal education with their academic staff and working towards improving the delivery of Aboriginal education” (Hinks, 2011, p. 120). It is essential to have these ongoing discussions to ensure measures are taken to improve and continually reflect on the student’s learning experiences. As members of the school learn more about the intricacies of Aboriginal worldviews, they are more equipped to “understand and respect each other, which, in turn, enhances trust, generates synergy, and promotes productivity in these relationships” (Preston et al., 2016, p. 9).

Additionally, educational leaders must help “teachers understand that culturally responsive caring is action-oriented in that it demonstrates high expectations and uses imaginative strategies to ensure academic success for ethnically diverse students” (Gay, 2002, p. 110). Gunn et al.’s (2011) research suggested that by making a concerted effort to educate staff and non-Aboriginal students about First Nation, Métis, and Inuit cultures, history, and language, they would receive instruction more tailored to their needs and experience an enhanced sense of belonging (p. 335). “The culture and climate of each school vary, and therefore the needs of each school vary to one degree or another” (Hinks, 2011, p. 120). “Teachers need to be encouraged to question the curriculum and pedagogy [to begin] approaching effective instruction through a cultural lens” (Irvine, 2010, p. 60).

Additionally, to be successful in culturally responsive teaching, educators must acquire detailed and factual information about the specific ethnic group they serve to make their schooling more interesting, stimulating, representative of, and responsive to their students (Gay, 2002, p. 107). Unfortunately, what teachers think they know about a specific cultural group is often based on superficial or distorted information conveyed through popular culture, mass media, or other critics (Gay, 2002, p. 107). Therefore, by encouraging teachers to participate in culturally relevant professional development opportunities, “these inadequacies can be corrected by acquiring more knowledge about the contributions of different ethnic groups to a wide variety of disciplines and a deeper understanding of multicultural education theory, research, and scholarship” (Gay, 2002, p. 107). As teachers are encouraged to participate in ongoing professional development surrounding culturally responsive practices, they must be encouraged to successfully “convert it into culturally responsive curriculum designs and instructional strategies” (Gay, 2002, p. 108). Gay (2002) suggested that as teachers become more comfortable with this conversion process, they will be better equipped to “determine the multicultural strengths and weaknesses of curriculum designs and instructional materials and make the changes necessary to improve their overall quality” (p. 108). Teachers can develop their repertoire of multicultural instructional examples:

They understand the role and prominence of examples in the instructional process, know the cultures and experiences of different ethnic groups, harvest teaching examples from these critical sources, and learn how to apply multicultural examples in teaching other knowledge and skills. (Gay, 2002, p. 113)

In doing so, teachers will be better prepared to meet the needs of their students and help them feel connected to the curriculum.

Foster Effective Relationships

Finally, as educational leaders strive to model effective culturally responsive leadership practices and create a shared vision, they must do so by establishing and fostering effective relationships. Strong relationships must exist “between educators, students, parents, and community members in order to build upon an Aboriginal students’ sense of belonging to their school” (Preston et al., 2016, p. 12). Educational leaders are responsible for establishing relationships within the school and with community members. According to the LQS (Alberta Education, 2023), “A leader builds positive working relationships with members of the school community and local community” (p. 3). This includes “establishing relationships with First Nations, Métis and Inuit parents/guardians, Elders/knowledge keepers, local leaders and community members and acting consistently in the best interests of students” (p. 3).

According to research, “Family engagement is at the top of the list of factors that determine student outcomes. Partnerships between schools and families can improve students’ grades, attendance, persistence, and motivation” (Kaufman, 2023, p. 1), Minkos et al. (2017) also referred to Grassi and Barker’s (2010) research, which suggested that “families can provide important information regarding the child’s educational history, exposure to language, strengths, and challenges in the child’s acquisition of language, culturally appropriate behaviors and differences between home and school expectations” (Grassi & Barker, 2010, as cited in Minkos et al., 2017, p. 1262). “Principals whose leadership style is grounded in relationships, reciprocity, responsibility and relevancy (traits valued via Aboriginal leadership) are individuals who work toward improving the educational experience for all students, regardless of ethnicity” (Preston et al., 2016, p. 13). This can be achieved as school administrators “identify, encourage, and maintain behaviors that are

associated with modeling and nurturing of interpersonal relationships that encourage student success” (Weber, 2007).

Furthermore, as the Kauerz et al. (2021) outlined in their principal’s guide, as educational leaders nurture positive relationships within the school and community, stronger partnerships and collaboration between schools and communities can lead to improved family engagement, which is critical to bridging home and school cultures. Additionally, these partnerships increase the sense of trust between students, families, and schools, improving student connectedness to school and feelings of inclusiveness (Kauerz et al., 2021)

The benefits of fostering effective relationships cannot be overstated. As educational leaders dedicate their efforts to incorporate culturally responsive leadership practices and build relationships with all stakeholders; they will succeed tremendously.

Summary

The findings gathered from the comprehensive analysis conducted in this literature review underscore a compelling imperative for developing educational strategies that effectively leverage the cultural strengths intrinsic to First Nation children. Regrettably, the current state of education, which leans toward Eurocentric perspectives, must be revised to foster a positive interpretation of Aboriginal identity and culture among Aboriginal learners (Julien, 2016, p. 133). This prevalent Eurocentric framework perpetuates the imposition of foreign values, resulting in a disconnection between students, their communities, and their personal identities. Consequently, these circumstances contribute to sentiments of alienation and inadequacy (Julien, 2016).

Educators and educational leaders are called upon to integrate culturally responsive practices and strategies within K–12 schools. This transformation enables the provision of learning experiences congruent with reconciliation efforts, marking the initiation of a paradigm shift in

Indigenous education aimed at fostering genuine student engagement. To facilitate this evolution in pedagogical approach and comprehension, educational leaders must collaborate closely with educators, guiding them towards cultivating critical self-awareness and advocating for culturally responsive teaching methodologies. The foundation for this transformation lies in establishing a nurturing, inclusive, and secure learning environment. Most Canadians grew up in an education system that did not teach about Indigenous Peoples. The history of colonization, including the residential school system, contemporary Indigenous issues, and Indigenous cultures, traditions, and worldviews, is unfamiliar to many Canadians, including educators. This can make the prospect of teaching Indigenous content in a way that supports reconciliation daunting (Thorne, 2019). This journey, while rewarding, is not devoid of challenges, necessitating an unwavering commitment to continuous learning and the embrace of practices that honor, embrace, and celebrate diversity as catalysts for growth among all learners (Minkos et al., 2017). Given the historical context of mistrust stemming from the Residential School system, forging positive, trust-based relationships between schools and Indigenous communities becomes a fundamental pillar in the rebuilding process. These relationships encompass First Nations, Métis, Inuit parents/guardians, Elders/knowledge keepers, local leaders, and community members (Alberta Education, 2023, p. 3).

When educational institutions acknowledge and address barriers hindering the success of Indigenous students, adopting culturally responsive practices in tandem with a shared vision, the stage is set for transformative learning experiences. Such initiatives pave the way for meaningful academic and cultural connections, underscored by collaborative efforts between educational leaders and Indigenous communities, families, and students in the journey toward reconciliation. Chapter 1 succinctly outlined the rationale behind the necessity for culturally responsive practices within K–12 schools. The groundwork for this argument is rooted in the enduring legacy of residential schools,

whose ongoing adverse effects are pervasive in Indigenous education. Gunn et al. (2011) and Davy (2016) provide empirical support, emphasizing that Indigenous students' failure to attain acceptable educational benchmarks is attributable to their difficulty engaging with an educational system that is misaligned with their realities and experiences. In Chapter 2, a comprehensive exploration of culturally responsive practices took centre stage, encompassing pedagogy and leadership. This section delved into the intergenerational impact of residential schools on Indigenous education, spotlighting the urgency of recalibrating educational practices to engage with and connect Indigenous students. The chapter further underscored pivotal culturally responsive leadership practices applicable on a personal level to refine leadership approaches. It guided educators in implementing culturally responsive teaching methods and highlights actionable steps educational leaders can take to foster a shared vision within schools by exemplifying culturally responsive leadership practices.

Chapter 3: Summary, Recommendations, and Conclusions

Summary of Findings

This capstone study examined culturally responsive strategies educational leaders can apply within K–12 school settings to facilitate meaningful connections and engagement between Indigenous students and the curriculum. According to Davy (2016, p. 98), when principals exhibit cultural responsiveness towards students and families, they can shape the school environment to enrich students' experiences, performance, and academic accomplishments. Educational leaders are pivotal in fostering supportive learning atmospheres and enhancing student outcomes within the school context, particularly in their interactions with Indigenous students (Hohepa, 2013; Preston et al., 2016). Educational leaders are vital in leading school-wide transformations by embedding Aboriginal culture, knowledge systems, and history (Gunn et al., 2011) through integrating culturally responsive practices. This approach can establish conditions conducive to optimal and sustained learning experiences for Indigenous students (Alberta Education, 2023). As highlighted by Preston et al. (2016), leaders whose approach aligns with values such as relationships, reciprocity, responsibility, and relevancy (values emphasized in Aboriginal leadership) strive to enhance the educational journey for all students, irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds (p. 13). As educational leaders endeavor to infuse culturally responsive practices and cultivate relationships with stakeholders, they can better equip Indigenous students to achieve higher levels of success within educational contexts.

Implications of the Research

The predominant goal of this capstone study is to elucidate the significance of culturally responsive practices when engaging with Indigenous students. Additionally, this study aimed to pinpoint specific culturally responsive techniques that educators and administrators can employ

within K–12 school environments. This holds profound importance for educational leaders, as they significantly influence the school’s mission, vision, and culture.

Look, they [non-Native leaders] definitely see the world a little bit differently. I mean, especially policy. I said, you guys, you do not want to build policies that are good for the institution; we need to have policies that are good for the students, the staff, the people. (Povey et al., 2023, p. 249)

A leader’s continuous analysis of the context and decisions about applying leadership knowledge and skills lead to quality teaching and optimal learning for all students (Alberta Education, 2023, p. 3).

Collaboration and learning alongside teachers are vital for educational leaders as they integrate culturally responsive practices. Educators require support as they transition their paradigms and teaching methods. Teachers can gain confidence in developing a repertoire of multicultural instructional strategies by comprehending the role and significance of examples in instruction, understanding the cultures and experiences of various Indigenous groups, extracting teaching exemplars from these essential sources, and learning to apply multicultural examples to teach diverse knowledge and skills (Gay, 2002, p. 11). By employing these multifaceted instructional strategies, educators are better poised to address students’ needs and foster a sense of connection to the curriculum and the school environment. To ensure an optimal learning experience for Indigenous students, the principal must establish an environment tailored to their learning requirements. This necessitates recognizing that their educational history has been adversely affected, resulting in distinct learning needs compared to many mainstream students. Educational leaders should guide teachers in embedding academic knowledge and skills within students’ experiences and frames of reference. This approach makes the curriculum more personally meaningful, engaging, and

comprehensible (Gay, 2002, p. 106). Implementing these measures can aid Indigenous students in shifting their educational paradigms and making a meaningful stride toward closing the achievement gap. As educational practices become more attuned to the needs of Indigenous students through a holistic approach to learning and fostering cultural pride by cultivating an inclusive classroom environment, students are empowered to establish profound connections with their learning journey.

Recommendations

As educational leaders strive to establish enriching learning environments that foster student success and growth (Preston et al., 2016), their emphasis on nurturing children's well-being, cultivating effective relationships, and employing culturally responsive strategies ensures that each decision within the school system is rooted in the child's best interests. The ensuing recommendations aim to guide educational leaders in implementing culturally responsive leadership practices across K–12 schools, facilitating Indigenous students' connection with the curriculum and enhancing their achievements within educational settings. To attain these objectives, educational leaders must actively enhance their knowledge, skills, and insights on both an intrapersonal and interpersonal level. Recognizing the substantial influence wielded by educational leaders in forging inclusive learning environments, fostering student success, and facilitating relationships and culturally responsive school experiences for Indigenous students, this framework encompasses seven identified recommendations. The seven recommendations revolve around intrapersonal actions, empowering culturally responsive educational leaders to internalize these principles.

Intrapersonal Recommendations

The subsequent recommendations centre on the attributes and behaviors that an educational leader should adopt personally, enabling them to grasp culturally responsive practices and pedagogy before guiding others on this transformative path.

Recommendation 1: Promote Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Embedding culturally responsive pedagogy is pivotal for educational leaders when navigating decisions, staffing, community engagement, fostering inclusivity, and evaluating instructional strategies. This guiding principle must reside at the forefront of educational leaders' considerations to ensure that all determinations are viewed through this essential lens. Irvine's (2010) investigation underscores that culturally responsive pedagogy is grounded in recognizing that learning may vary among cultures, and educators can amplify student achievement by attaining insight into their cultural backgrounds and translating this awareness into instructional methods (Irvine, 2010, p. 57). The directive set forth by Ontario Education (2013) underscores a distinctive facet of culturally responsive pedagogy, emphasizing a deliberate focus on the personal realm of aligning with culturally responsive pedagogy. This personal dimension encapsulates the mindset and practices of educators dedicated to culturally responsive teaching aimed at nurturing the holistic growth of every student. Culturally responsive educators are attuned to their self-awareness and possess an intimate comprehension of their students and their optimal learning approaches (Ontario Education, 2013, p. 2). Effective advocacy for culturally responsive pedagogy mandates a perpetual cycle of reflection for educational leaders, ensuring their methodologies harmonize with optimal student learning while profoundly rooted in meaningful, culturally responsive modalities that facilitate profound connections. These interactions, in turn, become fertile ground for the emergence of students' voices, facilitating the construction of knowledge and significance from their distinct vantage points in ways that will indelibly resonate (Irvine, 2010).

Nonetheless, realizing these outcomes hinges upon educational leaders' profound grasp of how culturally responsive pedagogy is a cornerstone for augmenting student learning.

Recommendation 2: Establish a Welcoming School Environment Through Community***Involvement***

According to the LQS (Alberta Education, 2023), educational leaders are responsible for establishing an inclusive, compassionate, respectful, and secure learning environment (p. 3). This responsibility unfolds as educational leaders gain a profound understanding of the context in which their school operates and the intricate interplay between the school and its surrounding community. A crucial facet of this awareness involves acknowledging the colonial history that shapes the community and addressing current prospects and challenges, all while collaboratively engaging with stakeholders to uphold students' ancestral wisdom and principles (Khalifa et al., 2019).

As Davy (2016) proposed, the transformation into culturally responsive systems underscores the imperative for schools to evolve, adapt, and flourish in response to the needs of the students and families under their care (p. 3). This engenders the demand for proactive engagement from educational leaders, extending their presence within the school's confines and the broader community. By nurturing an environment where Indigenous students and their families experience a genuine sense of belonging and support, the foundation is laid for fostering a commitment to educational achievement and a profound recognition of its significance (Gunn et al., 2011).

In tandem with these efforts, establishing a palpable sense of belonging and care necessitates profoundly recognizing the symbiotic relationship uniting home, school, and community.

Recommendation 3: Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

The LQS (Alberta Education, 2023) outlines that educational leaders are responsible for effectively communicating, facilitating, and resolving challenges (p. 3). However, this mandate transcends mere problem-solving and envelops the entire expanse of an educational leader's role. For those serving Indigenous youth, the imperative lies in empowering students and families through

a commitment to collective, mutual, and community-rooted communication (Khalifa et al., 2019, p. 598). This symbiotic approach synergizes with establishing inclusive and hospitable learning environments, wherein continuous communication is pivotal, ensuring that all stakeholders have a platform to voice their perspectives and be acknowledged. Research by Gunn et al. (2011) accentuates that as principals foster open communication channels and collaborative relationships, students forge stronger connections with their schools and cultivate a deeper engagement with their academic journeys. In consonance, Minkos et al. (2017) assert that when school administrators genuinely invest in comprehending the dynamics of students, families, and staff within their educational communities, they not only express an appreciation for diversity but also embody the belief that the recognition and celebration of differences hold the potential to illuminate our shared bonds (p. 1265). As affirmed by Oskineegish (2015, p. 13), active communication and community engagement stand as indispensable avenues for assimilating relevant and apt pedagogical practices. Hence, as educational leaders remain steadfast in pursuing ongoing, transparent communication, they pave the way for a profound interweaving of the school and community. This harmonious fusion mirrors Indigenous communities' cultural values and convictions more authentically.

Recommendation 4: Model and Support Culturally Responsive Practices

Recognizing an educational leader's profound influence within a school, their active participation and exemplary conduct are non-negotiable imperatives. Pursuing transformative initiatives, such as integrating culturally responsive practices, demands the principal's unwavering endorsement; lacking this, the execution of such practices risks fragmentation or fleeting existence within the school environment (Khalifa et al., 2016, p. 1274). Principals assume the vital role of embodying the qualities they aspire to see reflected in their faculty, ensuring that teachers embrace and sustain their commitment to cultural responsiveness (Khalifa et al., 2016, p. 1281). The prism

through which a principal perceives education and holds philosophical convictions pertinent to the triumph of Aboriginal students demands thoughtful consideration, given their potential to profoundly influence student achievement (Preston et al., 2016).

Consequently, an educational leader must continually epitomize the desired behaviors and outcomes. By doing so, these traits become seamlessly woven into the fabric of the school's culture, fostering a transformative environment that resonates with the entire community's aspirations.

Recommendation 5: Encourage and Build Positive Relationships

Educational leaders are responsible for cultivating effective relationships and motivating their teaching staff to follow suit. As highlighted by Davy (2016, p. 35), culturally responsive leaders champion an environment where teachers foster constructive and trusting relationships with their students, one that reveres their home cultures while emphasizing academic accomplishment. In this context, teachers are tasked with acquainting themselves with and comprehending the intricacies of the community in which their school is rooted, taking proactive steps to engage with community members (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). Such engagement facilitates the construction of bonds founded on trust, enabling teachers to gain a deeper awareness of cultural nuances that may shape student learning experiences (Hinks, 2011; Oskineegish, 2015). The dividends of this endeavor manifest as shared experiences between students and teachers, which become the bedrock for fostering constructive classroom interactions (Oskineegish, 2015, p. 19).

Relationships form a pivotal nucleus in the First Nations ethos, cascading through connections between administrators and teachers, teachers, and school personnel, and among teachers, parents, and children (Stockdale et al., 2013, p. 101). Moreover, as aptly captured by Hinks (2011, p. 35), taking the time to genuinely know each student individually, delving into their familial backdrop, interests, and cultural heritage positions teachers to contextualize their perspectives and

comprehensions. This deliberate endeavor nurtures an environment wherein cross-cultural understanding flourishes, illuminating pathways to effective teaching and learning.

Recommendation 6: Professional Development

Educational leaders bear the expectation to immerse themselves in “lifelong professional learning and continuous critical introspection, identifying avenues for enhancing leadership, pedagogy, and learning” (Alberta Education, 2023, p. 3). In tandem, they are enjoined to “collaborate with peers such as teachers, principals, and fellow leaders to cultivate individual and collective professional prowess” (Alberta Education, 2023, p. 3). As expounded by Khalifa et al. (2016), principals should spearhead the stewardship of culturally responsive resources and curriculum, providing mentorship and exemplifying culturally responsive teaching. Furthermore, they should orchestrate professional development initiatives centred around culturally responsive school leadership (p. 1281). Educational leaders are entrusted with the responsibility of fostering an understanding among teachers about the perpetual need to evolve their practices to sustain effectiveness particularly about serving Indigenous students with unwavering responsiveness (Khalifa et al., 2016). The council proposed by Gunn et al. (2011) accentuates the necessity of an intentional drive to educate both staff and non-Indigenous students about the cultures, history, and languages of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit communities. This venture aligns with the belief that First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students would thrive in an environment tailored to their distinctive requisites, experiencing a heightened sense of belonging (Gunn et al., 2011, p. 335). As educators ascend in confidence to integrate culturally responsive methodologies seamlessly, they naturally progress towards a point of comfort where they question the curriculum and their pedagogical approaches through a cultural prism (Irvine, 2010). This transformative shift equips them to deftly

address the learning needs of their students, facilitating more profound engagement with the curriculum and engendering a palpable sense of belonging.

Recommendation 7: Support the Development of Culturally Responsive Curricula

Once teachers have undergone an augmentation of their proficiencies in culturally responsive practices, a paramount need for accountability emerges to translate these strategies into tangible applications. Battiste and Henderson (2009) advocate for meticulously scrutinizing teaching methods and curricula, underscoring the imperative to decolonize educational practices. This calls for an elevation and validation of the collective narratives and experiences of Aboriginal individuals within the curriculum, unearthing the injustices of colonial history and unraveling the past by dissecting the societal, political, economic, and historical factors that silenced Aboriginal voices. Through these deliberate actions, a secure haven is fashioned wherein teachers and learners can flourish and evolve collaboratively. Educational leaders must traverse this journey alongside their teachers, rendering steadfast support. This ensures that the integration of this curriculum is not a mere appendage but rather an integral and foundational educational process, enmeshed in a holistic viewpoint that acknowledges one's interconnectedness within the universe and the historical ties to Indigenous communities (Battiste & Henderson, 2009, p. 15).

In pursuing a culturally responsive educational milieu, it is paramount for educational leaders to comprehend the scope of their role and the profound influence they can wield in crafting such an environment. By directing their focus towards both intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics—ranging from critical introspection and awareness to championing culturally responsive pedagogy, engendering a welcoming school ambiance, fostering community engagement, nurturing effective communication, constructing a shared vision, exemplifying and endorsing culturally responsive practices, cultivating and promoting positive relationships, offering professional development,

endorsing self-awareness, and nurturing the creation of culturally responsive curricula—schools can forge a pathway towards the academic triumph of Indigenous students within the education system. The time is ripe for actionable change aimed at “rectifying the legacy of residential schools and advancing the process of Canadian reconciliation” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015 p. 1). This mission crystallizes through a resolute commitment to implementing culturally responsive practices to empower Indigenous students and foster success among ALL students.

Suggested Research for the Future

The primary focus of this capstone study centred on educational leaders within K–12 schools, particularly those with a substantial Indigenous student population. Nonetheless, further research in this area is imperative. While the gathered research encompassed a range of minoritized groups within the education system rather than solely Indigenous students, it is worth noting that distinct strategies might be more effective for different minorities and subcultures. Recognizing and pinpointing precise strategies for the specific groups under consideration is paramount.

Another avenue for exploration involves comparing and contrasting principals’ experiences on reservations with those in neighboring communities where Indigenous students are present. This comparative analysis could unveil effective strategies within these diverse demographics. Moreover, a recommended area for prospective investigation lies in examining schools within Alberta.

Presently, a scarcity of research exists even within the Canadian context. Consequently, the study heavily drew upon insights from the United States and Australia. Renewed focus on a more localized scale, tailored to the unique necessities of communities and demographic groups in that area, may yield more actionable and transformative outcomes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, delving into instructional leadership has provided me with a profound comprehension of what constitutes instructional solid leadership (Mendels, 2012, p. 58). As Washington (2004) aptly conveyed, “Our culture and teachings will pave the way for us to regain our strength and independence as a nation” (p. 597). For transformative change to occur in leadership, FNMI must foster cooperation and mutual respect amongst one another. Washington (2004) further emphasized the need for collaboration, stating, “We may not always agree, but it is time for us to unite and work together once again” (p. 602).

“To achieve our goals, it is imperative to develop leaders who possess profound change knowledge and the ability to cultivate leadership in others” (Fullan et al., 2005, p. 58). FNMI should emphasize exemplifying effective leadership to nurture and develop future leaders within their organization. Fullan et al. (2005) also emphasized that knowing alone is insufficient; actual progress is achieved through the cycle of knowing, doing, reflecting, and re-doing (p. 58). Embracing mistakes and persisting without giving up is vital to effective leadership within the school setting. FNMI should quickly seek guidance from other FNMI members during their principal meetings. Moreover, FNMI must reflect on the continuous improvement of their schools and explore ways to support their staff and students further.

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