

# Reconciliation in the Classroom

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## Abstract

*Canada is beginning to work toward reconciliation with Indigenous people. Serious mistakes have been made in the educational system which have led Canada to the current situation in which relationships with Indigenous people are in need of repair. This paper outlines the ways in which classroom teachers are integral to the reconciliation process through relationships, physical spaces, and lesson content. Through personal relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, culturally inclusive physical spaces, and curricular content that includes Indigenous perspectives, classroom teachers will contribute to reconciliation with Indigenous people in Canada.*

## Reconciliation in the Classroom

Canada is venturing down a path toward reconciliation in which educators play an integral role “to restore mutual respect between individuals from different cultural backgrounds” (Dion, 2016, p. 472). Considering the education system was a primary weapon in the European settlers’ attempt to destroy Indigenous<sup>1</sup> culture, it is the most suitable instrument to begin to rectify the egregious errors of the past. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC, 2015) recognizes the role of the education system in this process and lists Calls to Action numbers 6 through 12 under the umbrella of education (pp. 320-321). Classroom teachers will contribute to moving our country toward reconciliation by establishing and maintaining meaningful, respectful relationships with Indigenous students and their families, encouraging mutually respectful relationships between all students, creating classroom environments that meet the needs of Indigenous students, and delivering culturally relevant curriculum that includes Indigenous perspectives and an understanding of Canadian history from both the settlers’ and Indigenous people’s points of view. In their classrooms, teachers will set the stage for healing the damaged relationships with Canada’s Indigenous people and make reconciliation possible.

### Relationships

The relationships with Indigenous people, formed and facilitated by classroom teachers, are essential prerequisites to reconciliation. Relationships between educators and Indigenous students, educators, and Indigenous community members (including a student’s family<sup>2</sup> and Elders), as well as relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous<sup>3</sup> youth, are imperative when working toward reconciliation. Relationships with students, families, and communities are a priority to create positive school experiences for Indigenous students (Preston, Claypool, Rowluck, & Green, 2017). Through such relationships, Indigenous and non-Indigenous people will come to a place of mutual acceptance, respect, and understanding, which will facilitate the healing necessary for reconciliation to begin.

Nurturing, respectful relationships between teachers and Indigenous students contribute immensely to the reconciliation process in two ways. First, the relationships themselves are valuable in their own right, fostering a feeling of belonging and a positive attitude toward school

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<sup>1</sup> “The term ‘Indigenous’ is meant to respect the diversity of Indigenous nations, whether or not they are recognized by the Canadian state” (4Rs Youth Movement, 2017, p. 5).

<sup>2</sup> The word “family” is meant to include all caregivers in a student’s life.

<sup>3</sup> The term “non-Indigenous” is used “to respect the diverse peoples and communities living in Canada that are not Indigenous to these lands” (4Rs Youth Movement, 2017, p. 5).

in general. Second, the relationships lead to increased engagement in education, which results in higher academic achievement levels for Indigenous students. Positive relationships will be a factor in reconciliation by ensuring that school is a positive, successful experience for Indigenous students, unlike the negative experiences that many Indigenous people endured in schools of the past.

Caring personal relationships between teachers and Indigenous students are valuable first steps on the path to reconciliation in Canada because they instill a sense of belonging and emotional well-being in the students. Teachers' interactions with students have great influence on the students' sense of belonging in school (Maclver, 2012), and Indigenous students must know that they are important contributors to the school community (Gunn, Pomahac, Striker, & Tailfeathers, 2010). In addition to relationships contributing to Indigenous students' sense of belonging, when teachers truly get to know their students and build relationships with them, the students feel accepted for who they are and understand that they are cared for and appreciated. Authentic relationships between teachers and Indigenous students will create a "healthy, supportive school climate that affirms the identity and heritage of Native youth" (Lee & Quijada Cerecer, 2010, pp. 204-205). Indigenous students need to feel nurtured, respected, and understood by classroom teachers, and have positive relationships with educators that provide a sense of belonging to the school and society as a whole, in order to begin laying the groundwork for reconciliation.

Relationships based on mutual respect, trust, and genuine caring between teachers and Indigenous students significantly influence student attitudes, engagement, and therefore academic success. Teachers who demonstrate caring and communicate clearly the belief that all students are capable of learning promote Indigenous student success (Toulouse, 2011). In casual, friendly conversations, teachers learn about their students' interests and lives outside school. The personal connection with a teacher creates a positive school experience for the student. In addition, the teacher can make school more engaging for the student by incorporating aspects of the student's life outside school into lessons. With increased engagement in, and positivity toward, school comes increased Indigenous student success. Positive attitudes toward school and engagement in lessons translate into greater academic success, leading to an increased number of Indigenous graduates with the skills needed to become leaders and positive role models in society. These leaders and positive role models will guide Canadians down the path to reconciliation.

Personal relationships between school personnel and Indigenous community members are important as well as those between teachers and students. The relationships between educators and community members will not only convey to Indigenous students that their community and family are valued by the school and mainstream society, but will demonstrate to community members that they are accepted and valued as well. Relationships with the students' families are important because "parent and family involvement in the teaching and learning experiences of children is without a doubt the most critical component affecting student motivation, success, and achievement" (Manitoba Education and Training, 2017, para. 8). In order for Indigenous family members to support classroom and school activities, personal relationships must be present between them and their child(ren)'s classroom teacher. The classroom teacher must be perceived as a human being who understands his or her students and their families, rather than as an employee of a system that attempted to destroy Indigenous culture in the past. Relationships such as these stem from personal interactions that occur naturally when a classroom teacher makes a conscious effort to build connections with students' families. Connections can be made by attending community events, arranging social visits to students' homes or meeting for coffee, personal invitations to attend school functions, positive phone calls or notes home, social media contact, and casual conversations in the community. When a family member has a personal connection with the classroom teacher, he or she will be more likely to support the teacher in helping the child with homework, volunteering at the school, and communicating respectfully if conflicts arise. Relationships between Indigenous families and

teachers will lead to increased involvement in, and support of, the educational system. Involvement in the educational system will begin to heal wounds inflicted by this system in the past, and will empower Indigenous people to take increased ownership of the education of their youth, setting the stage for reconciliation.

Relationships with Indigenous community members are essential for teachers to lead future generations toward reconciliation. Relationships with Elders in the community are especially significant because Elders are highly respected people in the Indigenous community who have extensive knowledge about Indigenous culture and worldviews (Toulouse, 2011). Once relationships have been established, community members share valuable Indigenous knowledge, speak up to correct misconceptions about Indigenous culture, and actively participate in guiding the educational system. Local Indigenous people have the knowledge to ensure that Indigenous perspectives are accurately represented in schools and will contribute to shaping the educational system if these relationships exist.

Relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, based on mutual respect and understanding, are important as well as those between educators and Indigenous people. A positive school social environment that is “free from racism, bullying and other forms of oppression” (National Panel, 2017, p. 43) is essential for student success. In addition to zero tolerance policies regarding racism and bullying, classroom teachers must ensure that the classroom and school environment are conducive to developing respectful relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. This can be done by creating opportunities for social interaction such as strategic seating plans, inviting mixed groupings of students for “lunch with the teacher,” and assigning groups for projects that require Indigenous and non-Indigenous students to spend time with each other and work together. Opportunities to share personal stories through show and tell, sharing circles, and class discussions also help students to see one another as individuals. Respectful interactions can be modelled through conflict resolution strategies that require those involved to share their perceptions of the conflict and to collaborate in order to come to a solution or plan for the future. Through facilitating respectful, open relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, teachers shape the interactions of future generations. While working toward reconciliation for generations to come, it is important for our future leaders to have built and maintained respectful relationships with each other.

Reconciliation is possible only if Indigenous people are respected equals in society, and relationships established in Canada’s classrooms set the stage for this equality to be recognized. Education must not be perceived as something imposed upon the students in a classroom, but something everyone is working toward as a team, with each participant sharing individual strengths and knowledge, and learning from other members. This collaborative approach to education is possible only when mutually respectful relationships have been established to ensure that all parties feel valued as individuals and know that their contributions are appreciated.

### **Classroom Environment**

To be instrumental in the process of reconciliation, classroom teachers must create inclusive learning spaces designed for Indigenous student success. In creating such a space, educators must pay close attention to the physical appearance of schools and classrooms, instructional techniques employed, knowledge valued, and classroom management style. It is important for teachers to understand the perspectives and needs of Indigenous students (Maclver, 2012). The current educational system is modelled on a European approach to learning, and “Western models of education continue to be imposed on Aboriginal peoples throughout Canada” (Van Ingen & Halas, 2006, p. 380). For reconciliation to begin, teachers must examine schools and classrooms from an Indigenous perspective and make the changes necessary to ensure that learning spaces are inclusive.

Students must see themselves and their culture reflected in the school in order to feel as if they truly belong in the space. This feeling of belonging and pride in one's culture takes precedence over academics in the classroom (Gunn et al., 2011). Classroom teachers must ensure that posters and displays include culturally significant images and content. Pictures and information about the Seven Teachings, biographies and photos of local band council members, and displays of Indigenous artwork are some examples of how a culturally relevant environment for Indigenous students can be created. When Indigenous students see themselves and their culture represented in a celebratory and respectful way, they will begin to feel a sense of belonging and pride.

When educating with the goal of reconciliation in mind, teachers must employ instructional methods that suit the learning styles of Indigenous students. Indigenous ways of learning are different from the Western ways on which the current system in Canada was modelled, in that they are based on "a four-dimensional approach balanced to meet the emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual needs of the learner" (Neeganagwedgin, 2013, p. 18). Teachers must consciously plan lessons and activities that address the needs of the whole child (Manitoba Education and Youth, 2003), and recognize that although this is typically considered an Indigenous philosophy of education, this approach is beneficial to all students, not only to those who are Indigenous.

Indigenous culture, knowledge, worldviews, and contributions to society must be acknowledged and celebrated in the classroom. To the detriment of Canadian society, the educational system has consistently conveyed the message that Indigenous people, along with their knowledge, ways of life, and contributions to society, matter less than those of the settlers and their descendants do. This omission of Indigenous perspectives in mainstream public education is evidenced by the fact that many Canadians are ignorant of the contributions of Indigenous people to society (TRC, 2015), and through the numerous misconceptions many people have about Indigenous people and their way of life. Indigenous students often have to disregard their traditional knowledge to succeed in the current Euro-centric school system (Neeganagwedgin, 2011), causing Indigenous students to feel that they must choose between being themselves and being successful in school. Indigenous students must see themselves and their culture represented in a respectful way in lessons and class activities, and non-Indigenous students must learn to value and appreciate Indigenous knowledge and culture, in order to begin moving toward reconciliation.

Daily classroom experiences must be culturally inclusive. The communication style used in the classroom, daily routines, behaviour expectations, and the ways in which discipline issues are handled must reflect Indigenous beliefs rather than remaining solely Euro-centric. According to traditional Indigenous beliefs, "children are complete human beings given as gifts from the Great Spirit on loan to adults" (Kanu, 2014, p. 81) and must always be treated with dignity and respect. Teachers can demonstrate respect for students by engaging in conversations with students about the content being taught, rather than lecturing on the topic, in order to show students that their ideas matter and will be heard. In addition to their need for respect, Indigenous students have also identified the desire to be treated with firmness and warmth from their teachers (Kanu, 2014). When students are treated firmly, they receive the message that the teacher is paying attention to them and making an effort to correct behaviour as needed in order for them to succeed. Students also realize when they are held to high standards of behaviour, the teacher believes in their abilities. The Seven Teachings provide excellent guidelines for acceptable classroom behaviour as well as an opportunity to infuse Indigenous culture in daily school life (McFee, 2015). Following these guidelines aligns school beliefs with Indigenous beliefs, creating a culturally inclusive environment. Discipline issues must be dealt with by using Indigenous methods of conflict resolution, which focus on restoring harmony rather than on punishing individuals (Jacobs, 2013). Classrooms that are inclusive of Indigenous culture will begin building the road to reconciliation by creating learning spaces that meet the needs of all students.

Inclusive learning spaces are essential to the reconciliation process. Classrooms are mini-societies in which the future adult citizens of Canada learn to interact with each other. Canada's classrooms must be places that reinforce the value of Indigenous people and all aspects of their culture, including their knowledge, learning styles, and beliefs. When students are educated in such an environment, Indigenous and non-Indigenous students will develop mutual understanding and respect. This understanding and respect will make reconciliation possible in Canada's future.

### **Curricular Content**

The final component of education that leads to reconciliation is curricular content. It is inequitable that "Indigenous people and their cultures have been undermined and supplanted in the curriculum with lies or by distortions through both omission and commission" (Neeganagwedgin, 2013, p. 24) throughout Canada's history. To achieve reconciliation, students must learn an accurate and non-biased version of Canada's history and understand how it has transpired that Indigenous people are marginalized in their own homeland. In summarizing the TRC's Calls to Action regarding education, Vowel (2016) wrote:

Remember, the TRC did not call for only the residential-school legacy to be taught to all people in Canada. Learning about the treaties and the historic and contemporary contributions of Indigenous peoples is also vital if Canadians are ever going to achieve a base level of knowledge necessary to enter into any form of "new relationship" with us. (p. 178)

The lessons taught in classrooms, and the curriculum in general, must adhere to the TRC's Calls to Action and educate truthfully in order to make reconciliation possible.

The curriculum must include Treaty Education and an accurate account of Canadian history, including the facts surrounding residential schools and their continued legacy. Future generations must understand the experiences of Indigenous people with colonization, in order to ensure that the errors of the past are not repeated and to participate empathetically in the healing process. Treaty Education is a key component to understanding Canada's history, and, as such, is a critical aspect of beginning the journey to reconciliation. All students deserve "to know about treaties, the Indian Act, the development of the reserve system, the history of residential schools, and importantly the ongoing implications of this history for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada today" (Dion, 2016, p. 472). A clear understanding of Canada's history is important because "when all students – as well as educators – learn about our shared history in a balanced and respectful way, big steps on the path to reconciliation are taken" (Canadians for a New Partnership, 2017, p. 10). The foundation for the understanding and respect necessary for reconciliation is factual historical knowledge learned in Canada's classrooms.

In order to heal from events in Canada's history that damaged the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, there needs to be an understanding of how Canadian society came to be in a position of needing reconciliation so desperately. The school curriculum must no longer teach from a solely European viewpoint, but must include Indigenous perspectives as well. Teachers must realize that the European way of education is not the only way, and learn to accept a different truth than what has been traditionally presented by Canada's educational system. Through adjusting the curriculum to include an accurate portrayal of Canadian history and including Indigenous perspectives, the understanding necessary to reconciliation will develop.

### **Conclusion**

Reconciliation in Canada is dependent upon the relationships, curriculum, and environments in the nation's classrooms. Educators shoulder much responsibility in the reconciliation process because "education has brought us to the current state of poor relations

between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country, but education holds the key to making things better” (Sinclair, 2014, p. 7). Trusting, respectful relationships are a key component to setting the stage for reconciliation and must be established with individual students and Indigenous community members in order to move toward reconciliation. The content taught in classrooms must validate Indigenous identities and perspectives, and impress upon all Canadians that Indigenous people are valued and appreciated members of our society. The physical environments of schools and classrooms must reflect Indigenous culture, in order to communicate to all Canadians the value of Indigenous people and to ensure that Indigenous people feel valued in these spaces. Relationships, curricular content, and learning environment are interconnected aspects of classrooms that will pave the way for reconciliation in Canada.

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### ***About the Author***

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