We're all racist: a narrative inquiry into a journey of decolonization

by

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Supervisory Committee

We’re all racist: A narrative inquiry into a journey of decolonization

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Abstract

The fact that Aboriginal students in British Columbia graduate at a much lower rate than non-Aboriginal students led me to query the biases that I, as a white female teacher might hold. This led to the research question: In what way will exploring my journey of understanding racism and decolonization lead to developing a better understanding of myself and the process of changing beliefs for the purpose of providing better educational experiences for Aboriginal students? Using a combination of narrative an autoethnographic approaches, I examine my journey through a series of fictional vignettes. I learn that reflecting on one's biases and making changes contributes to better classroom experiences for Indigenous students; I also realize that I must always challenge my biases and awareness of systemic racism.

Supervisory Committee
Dr. Paige Fisher
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CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

Beliefs and Orientation

I attended the same school at which I began teaching. Between graduating from high school and beginning a career in education I raised a family, acquired a whole lot of life experience and witnessed significant changes in Aboriginal[1] graduation rates. There were no Indigenous students in my graduating class and by the time I returned to my home community to teach, the Aboriginal cohort represented approximately a third of the class. While these changes were significant, the graduation rate for Aboriginal students was still far too low. In addition to the low rates of graduation, I was also dismayed to encounter the book room. The books available were virtually the same ones I studied as a student three decades earlier. This led to second issue – that of engaging students. There was little in the room to engage students in the 21st century, let alone students who were not from the dominant culture.

Soon after beginning my teaching career, I had the opportunity to attend a First Nation Education Steering Committee conference. At this conference, figuring out how to engage First Nations students became my passion. Hearing speakers talk of using Indigenous literature in a variety of ways, in particular *Secret of the dance* (Spalding, 2006), started me thinking about how I would incorporate these texts into my classes. It took a while to actually begin using them though, as I was very much aware that I am a white woman, which gives me a certain unearned privilege in our society (McIntosh,

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[1]Language use changes over time. I am taking direction from the Progress audit: The education of Aboriginal (2019) students in the BC public school system. I will use Indigenous except to refer to studies and documents, in which case I will use the term, Aboriginal. The term, First Nations when the intended meaning is a nation rather than people (p. 10).

2002). I could be fairly certain that I could ask to use a washroom in my small town and be granted access to meet that most basic human need. I have witnessed situations where that cannot be said for a person of colour. With this awareness, it took many conversations with my principal and other First Nations' authors, educators and elders to begin using First Nations' texts in my classes. The reactions, which form some of the stories in Chapter Four, of my students and their parents affirmed the need to continue using these texts and advocating for changes in the way we address education for First Nations' students in the public school system.

I came to believe that all students have a right and need, to see themselves represented in their day-to-day experiences in school. This led me to both build my own understanding and observe the way in which others treat these students. I believe relationships are critical in school settings. Relationships with adults in the school help to create a sense of belonging. I believe first, and foremost, in the value of creating relationships with my learners. My own experience has shown that when I develop positive relationships with my learners, I am more motivated, and better able to find ways to help them learn more deeply. We must see each other as people first and learners second, or it is difficult to engage in deep learning and thinking. Whether Indigenous students learn differently because of their worldview, their circumstances or some other reason (and I realize that there is bias within this statement) I believe we need to create an atmosphere that helps all students learn in a deep and meaningful way.

Introduction and Background

As stated in the preceding section, I began teaching English at a small secondary school in a school district located in the British Columbia interior. During my time there, the Aboriginal school population became approximately 50% of the student body. Upon beginning my Master's program, after six years of classroom teaching, I planned to explore the relationship between curriculum and Aboriginal success in school; in fact, that was my focus during the first year. However, halfway through the program, I accepted a position as vice principal of a secondary school in a new district. This required a new direction in my studies, as my teaching time was limited.

As I began scanning in the new environment, I noticed that there were several artefacts honouring the local First Nation; this led me to believe that it was a much more inclusive environment than the school in which I previously taught. In many ways this was true: Indigenous students were included in regular programs and many extra-curricular activities. Aboriginal students also graduated at a rate approximately twenty per cent higher than my previous school yet still at a significantly lower rate than non-Aboriginal students. In 2013/14 the six-year completion rate for Aboriginal students was 61.6% compared to 84.2% for all students (Ministry of Education, 2014). However, as scanning continued it became apparent that this was not the case for all Indigenous students. During the two years preceding my arrival, the district worked on restructuring programs that affected Aboriginal students. For example, the off-site alternate program, which was overly subscribed by Indigenous students, moved to the community college campus. In the original alternate program, students from grade eight to twelve attended. The new configuration saw only the grade eleven and twelve students move to the college campus. Based on conversations with senior administration, the intention was that

younger students would return to the classroom in the main school and teachers would find ways to support the students. It appears that this did not meet these students' needs and twenty of them left the public system. Conversations with an administrator at one of the elementary schools indicated her perception that Indigenous students who were succeeding at the elementary level do not continue to have success once they reach grade eight.

Through this transition, I began to observe my own assumptions and pay attention to areas where they were challenged or affirmed with the intention of exploring the idea that there seemed to be a discrepancy between the outward markers of successful integration of Indigenous students and the reality I was noticing. I posed an initial research question: To what extent is there a discrepancy in the stated narrative of the place of Aboriginal students the lived reality of Aboriginal students within this school. However, as I began to explore this question two issues arose.

First, as I had conversations with other adults in the school, there seemed to be an unwillingness to explore areas of change to better meet Indigenous students' needs by several teachers. In fact, many conversations ended with reference to home life or reserve life as being the cause of any problems that might be limiting Indigenous students' success. Secondly, I realized that to explore the attitudes of others within the school would be virtually impossible given that I was in a position of power over almost everyone in the school. The teachers in the school were not uncaring people and demonstrated concern for all students yet did not seem to be conversant of topics such as systemic racism and the trauma of residential schools. This led me to wonder how I had arrived at this place of realizing that public schools were not always welcoming to

Aboriginal students and why they did not seem to succeed in school at the same rate as non-Aboriginal schools.

Research Question

In what way will exploring my journey of understanding racism and decolonization lead to developing a better understanding of myself and the process of changing beliefs for the purpose of providing better educational experiences for Aboriginal students?

Project Overview

To explore this question, with the intention of becoming better able to understand and lead others, I reviewed the academic literature on aspects I felt were critical to better reach Aboriginal students: the impact of racism on Aboriginal students, implementation of anti-racist pedagogy, and exploration of decolonizing education. I decided to use an auto-ethnographic approach to explore my memories and thinking as to how I had arrived at the conclusion that these aspects were important. My exploration led to the series of stories which make up Chapter Four in this document. I also chose stories, or storytelling, as it was the stories of others that helped me understand and realize the importance of learning about the experience of Indigenous people. Following each story, I reflected on my experience in the context of literature, whether academic writing or the writing of Indigenous people. During the process of writing and reflecting on the stories, I felt a framework was needed to help connect my work to that of others in the field. I chose to use Paulette Regan's "circle protocol", used in teaching others about decolonizing as a framework to understand my own journey.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Aboriginal students graduate at lower rates than non-Aboriginal students. While this fact is well known and proven across Canada, the reasons for the difference are varied and complex. In the following review of the existing literature, I will first provide a contextual background of Aboriginal educational in British Columbia which demonstrates the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. I will then address the need for all students to have trusting relationships and a belief that they are capable of doing what is asked of them in school. Finally, I will address some of the issues which create the culture in which Aboriginal students find school difficult: the persistence of racism, whether overt or covert (McMahon, 2007; Riley & Ungerleider, 2012; Schick & St. Denis, 2003;), a lack of culturally appropriate learning experiences (Battiste, 1998; Baydala et.al, 2009), and a need to decolonize learning experiences and curriculum (Battiste, 1998; Haig-Brown, 2009; McIntosh, 2002; Munroe et.al, 2013; Regan, 2010;).

The State of Aboriginal Education in British Columbia

The number of students who identify as having Aboriginal ancestry in British Columbia has remained relatively consistent over the past ten years, ranging from 11.0 percent to 11.9 percent. The highest percentages occurred in the middle of the time span of the report (Ministry of Education, 2014). However, Aboriginal students are over-represented in alternate programs compared to non-Aboriginal students. Five percent of Aboriginal students are in alternate programs compared to less than 1% of non-

Aboriginal students (p. 7). They are also over-represented in the special needs categories of behavior disabilities, at a ratio of 3:1, and learning disabilities at a ratio of nearly 2:1 (p. 8).

At the time the *Aboriginal Report 2009/10 – 2013/14* (Ministry of Education, 2014) was produced, students in grades 11-12 were required to take five courses, which had a provincial exam component. Aboriginal students achieve passing grades (C- or better) at a slightly lower rate than non-Aboriginal students; the gap ranges from a single percent in English 12 to 12% in English 10: First Peoples. However, the number of Aboriginal students receiving grades of C+ and higher are significantly lower than non-Aboriginal students. For example, the gap between Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal students receiving a grade of C+ or higher in Science 10 is 27%. This gap is consistent even for courses based on Aboriginal content. The gaps for English 10: First Peoples, BC First Nations Studies 12 and English 12: First Peoples are, 21%, 17% and 22% respectively (p. 16). One possible reason may be that Aboriginal students do not have the same skills as non-Aboriginal students; the Foundation Skills Assessment scores support this conclusion based on grade 7 results (p. 13-15).

It is imperative that Aboriginal students obtain, at a minimum, high school graduation in order to participate in today's society (Richard, Vining, Weimer, 2010). High school graduation doubles the employment rate. According to the Canadian Council on Learning, the Aboriginal employment rate "rises from 34 percent…to 64 percent among those with high school certification and reaches 80 percent among Aboriginals with university degrees" (p. 51). Aboriginal students also progress through the secondary school years at a slower rate than non-Aboriginal students (Ministry of

Education, 2014). Eighty-six percent of non-Aboriginal students graduate from secondary school within six years of entering grade 8, while only 62% of Aboriginal students graduate within the same time span. They also progress from grade to grade more slowly than do non-Aboriginal students. One hundred percent of all non-Aboriginal students progress from one grade to the next grade each year until grade 11 when 1% fail to move on from grade 10. Aboriginal students begin this drop in progression from year to year at grade 9 when 1% do not move from grade 8 to grade 9 (p. 28-29). This has significant implications on Aboriginal students as fewer have the required background to attend post-secondary institutions. The Ministry's data also indicates that there is a significant drop off in the rate of post-secondary attendance the further one gets from secondary graduation (p. 34-35). If the gap between the rate at which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people are able to participate in the workforce and society is be to be closed, research seems to indicate that we must pay attention to the rate at which Aboriginal students progress through school.

Relationships and Competence

All students want to feel included, valued and competent; Indigenous students are no different. In his meta-analysis, John Hattie (2009) identifies relationships and self-efficacy as some of the most effective aspects to increase learning in students.

The study, *Aboriginal students' perspectives on the factors influencing high school completion* (MacIver, 2012) identified similar themes. This study interviewed a small number of Aboriginal students in Saskatchewan who had previously dropped out of school, but had returned to school at the time of the study. The interview questions were

intended to discover students' views on the following areas: "(a) barriers to continuing in school, (b) influential sources, (c) ideal educator traits, and (d) cultural heritage as an influencer" (p. 158). Like Hattie's (2009) analysis, these students felt that having a positive relationship with their teacher was a major factor in engagement with school. The students placed a good deal of the responsibility for teaching, using effective strategies and knowing their strengths and abilities, on the teacher. In addition to the theme of teacher relationships, the study also identified the importance of "culturally affirming learning environment[s] which profile(s) Aboriginal cultural values, curricular, and activities" (p. 158). This theme connects to the concept of decolonizing education discussed later in this review. Encouragingly, especially given the low rates of Aboriginal teachers, the ethnicity of the teacher was not considered significant in this study.

While finding that IQ tests are not good predictors of success, one study, conducted in a Northern Alberta charter school found a positive correlation between students' perceptions of themselves and achievement (Baydala et al, 2009). In this study, researchers administered a series of tests to which included the Behaviour Assessment Scale for Children (BASC), the Self-Perception Profile for Children (SPPC) and the Weschler Individual Achievement Test II (WIAT 11). The tests measure behaviour development, self-perception and academic achievement, respectively. There was a positive correlation between students' self-perception and their academic achievement. An additional subtest, Close Friendships, of the SPPC was given to students in Grade 7 and 8. The researchers also found that for students in grades 7 to 8 close friendships are connected to increased academic achievement. However, according to Baydala et al, "[c]lose friendships may be difficult to establish in an…environment that excludes

indigenous language and culture." (p. 29), thus an environment which includes indigenous language and culture may help students form close friendships. It is critical that the students' communities be involved in developing culturally appropriate solutions and interventions as what is considered culturally appropriate varies between nations and communities.

While the majority of research points to a positive correlation between achievement and inclusion of culture and relationships, Richards, Vining and Weimer's (2010) research found the opposite to be true. Analyzing the Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA) data from British Columbia, they found that "increasing the number of Aboriginal students in a school lowers Aboriginal performance" (p. 48). Students write the FSA in grades 4 and 7 to assess their achievement in numeracy, reading and writing. The Richards et al study revealed that "By grade 4,…gaps exist between…Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal student performance; by grade 7, the gaps in all three skills are larger" (p. 54). In an attempt to determine some reasons, or correlations, the researchers analyzed data from 366 schools which met their criteria of (1) having more than 30 Aboriginal student scores and (2) having socio-economic data from Statistics Canada for those areas. After taking into account socio-economic status and parental education, Aboriginal students' achievement lowered as the numbers of Aboriginal students in the school rose. Based on their analysis , which is consistent with other researchers (Bishop, 2017; Riley & Ungerleider, 2008, 2012), the authors suggest, "large Aboriginal student counts foster a culture of low academic expectations – among teachers, students' peers, or both" (p. 59). It is worth noting that this study was limited to public schools and the authors also note that the Aboriginal population is becoming increasingly urbanized (p.

47). In both circumstances, students may have less access to family and cultural relationships and supports; in fact, as Richards, Vining and Weimer noted, districts that were exceptions to the findings of the study, focused on working with the Aboriginal community. Within this study, four districts exceeded forecasted achievement results. Those districts had in common a focus on long-term Aboriginal success, a focus of working with the Aboriginal community, and a focus on using student performance data (p. 62). It is likely that by collaborating with the Aboriginal community and putting a focus on student success, the authors have unwittingly provided a possible and partial solution to the problem of the educational gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.

Racism

As noted by Battiste (2013) in *Decolonizing Education*, Canada tells a narrative of tolerance and multi-culturalism while perpetrating a sense of racial and western superiority (p. 125). Studies support this belief within schools and the educational community, although it is not always recognized (McMahon, 2007; Neeganagwedgin, 2013; Schick & St. Denis, 2003). According to McMahon (2007), because teachers and administrators do not, easily or readily, acknowledge racism it is difficult to facilitate change (McMahon, 2007). It is the opinion of various researchers (McMahon, 2007; Schick & St. Denis (2003), that instead of acknowledging racism, people prefer to focus on multi-culturalism, gender, class, or economics as an explanation for the challenges that minority students, especially Indigenous students, face in the public education system.

McMahon (2007) explored white administrators' concepts of social justice, whiteness and anti-racism through interviews, and found that "whiteness is a difficult subject even for white administrators who agree to be interviewed about whiteness [and] racism" (p. 689). The qualitative study consisted of ten administrators from school districts in Toronto. They were chosen based on their willingness to discuss issues about race and anti-racism. The schools in which they led had high populations of black and South Asian students. While the schools did not have high Aboriginal populations, there were some students of Aboriginal descent and their voices are included in the findings. This study is important in that it draws attention to the matter of systemic racism.

Several participants do not acknowledge themselves as, nor consider the term, 'whiteness' as a descriptor of race; those who did acknowledge themselves as white, were in contrast to the non-white populations with they worked. The problem created by this attitude is that it becomes difficult to enact anti-racist policies within schools:

> Even though [some] respondents make reference to whiteness as associated with historical colonialism and treatment of First Nations populations or media depictions, they do not assume ownership for how it advantages them nor do they identify it as embedded in the policies and practices of schooling beyond acknowledging that the majority of teachers and administrators in their school district are white and some of the curriculum is Eurocentric. (McMahon, 2007, p. 693).

Due to the discomfort within leaders and teachers this leads to any changes being primarily at the surface level or diverted to another cause. Most commonly, questions of race were shifted to a focus on class, gender and sexual orientation because this is more

palatable to mainstream society (McMahon, 2007). In addition, social justice issues tend to be those which are far away, including projects that involve helping others in locations in other countries and cultures, thereby reinforcing the concept that social injustice is something that occurs elsewhere. Thus, schools can say they are addressing issues of social injustice without implicating the dominant culture in any wrongdoing. The other issue raised in McMahon's study is that administrators are, by the nature of their position, charged with carrying out duties and expectations of their respective school boards. Challenging school boards does not lend itself to job security. Only one respondent was willing to challenge the status quo mainly because she was in her final year before retirement. In her conclusion, McMahon laid much of the responsibility for change in the area of anti-racism and social justice with "school districts, faculties of graduate studies and administrator preparation program providers" (p. 694).

Riley and Ungerleider (2008) attempted to quantify the perception that discrimination is a systemic issue among Canadians in a study designed to determine the attitudes and perceptions of pre-service teachers towards Aboriginal students prior to knowing the students. The study involved 50 preservice teachers who participated voluntarily and had previously taken a social issues course. Participants were asked

> (a) to review the 24 randomized fictitious permanent student records, (b) to consider the criteria for three program options (remedial, standard, or advanced, and (c) to use a scale… to indicate their recommendations regarding the program best suited to each student (p. 382)

for the purpose of determining placement in grade 8. The record cards were divided into three categories: one third indicated students who received funding for Aboriginal

programming; one third indicated students who received funding for ESL services; one third were blank in regard to additional services or funding. Performance data from grades 4 to 7 was identical within each set of records. The researchers anticipated that all students would be placed into the appropriate categories if the preservice teachers considered only the students' prior achievement. The results showed that "Aboriginal students…earned lower recommendations than…non-Aboriginal [students]…despite the fact that the fictional students in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal categories had identical records of prior achievement" (p. 383). This study provides some quantitative evidence of racism and discrimination often mentioned in qualitative literature (p. 385) which could be of use in "combat(ing) discrimination in schools" (p. 386).

In 2012, Riley and Ungerleider repeated the study to examine the way teacher bias and stereotype affects the decisions they make in regard to Aboriginal students. In the 2012 study, experienced teachers, rather than pre-service teachers, were asked to recommend placement for 24 fictitious grade 8 students. The teachers were provided with student records that included grades and funding categories. One third of the students were identified as English Second Language learners, one third were identified as Aboriginal and one third were left without a funding category. The teachers were directed to place students into three streams for grade 8: "supplementary learning assistance; regular grade 8 program or rapid advance program" (p. 309).

They found the teachers used race as a factor in their decision as to which grade 8 grouping to place Aboriginal students. In fact, only one teacher placed all the students based on their grades; however, she acknowledged she "ma[de] a conscious choice to focus on student achievement rather than student designation labels" (p. 311). In other

words, this study implies that it is difficult to leave behind one's biases and assumptions. In some cases, the teachers indicated they needed to know more about the family background of Aboriginal students. They would consider placing them in the advanced class if the student had a supportive family. There was no mention of family support being necessary for advanced placement for students not labeled Aboriginal. Other biases and stereotypes ranged from labeling them as lazy and unmotivated to victims overcoming difficult circumstances rather than relying on academic evidence to place students.

The impact of making decisions in which racial biases enter into the decision-making process can have far reaching impacts for Aboriginal students. In the scenario presented by Riley and Ungerleider, students may not be supported or challenged at the appropriate level. This study is particularly important as it again provides quantitative evidence for statements made by other researchers that "teachers prejudge Aboriginal students even before meeting them" (Riley & Ungerleider, 2008, p. 383).

Anti-racist pedagogy

Riley and Ungerleider (2008) assert, "Racism and discrimination may be the gatekeepers that keep students from fulfilling their potential, either because they no longer trust the system to provide an environment conducive to learning or because they were never even allowed through the gate" (p. 386) . So why is it so difficult to bring anti-racist pedagogy into school systems? Based on their experiences in teacher education in Western Canada, Schick and St. Denis (2003) propose three ideological assumptions that "work against equitable social relations and the possibilities for social change" (para. 10). The first assumption is that culture is what matters, not race. Since many of their

students view culture as constructed, it is less threatening to them (para. 35). The second assumption is the concept of meritocracy: “all that is required to get ahead is hard work, talent and effort” (para. 42). The third and final assumption the authors propose is that of “goodness and innocence- -by individual acts and good intentions, one can secure innocence as well as superiority” (para. 49). Together, these assumptions conspire to avoid the uncomfortable topic of race and racism while still attempting to deal with the issues surrounding racism. Assumptions such as these also allow white people to avoid responsibility for wrongdoing that may arise from racism and to ignore the privilege that being white affords (McIntosh, 2002; Neeganagwedgin, 2013; Schick & St. Denis, 2003). Everything is reduced to an individual level: no one is responsible for collective actions which then makes reparation difficult, if not impossible.

Systemic racism in schools must be addressed even if there may not be individual acts of racism directed towards Indigenous students. Other jurisdictions have had similar experiences and successes as they have challenged their own systems of embedded racism. Russell Bishop has worked to improve the education of Maori students in New Zealand for many years. In the early years of his teaching career, common explanations for low achievement results among Maori students could be categorized as racism based on low expectations. Many teachers believed the students were “culturally deprived; there were few books in their homes, they were not read to, . . . there was limited parental support for their learning, . . . they did not strive in their learning and were more interested in their own cultural activities” (Bishop, 2017, para. 3). In reality, according to Bishop, it was the negative beliefs which teachers held about their students that prevented the students from higher levels of achievement and which created toxic relationships

between students and teachers. This cycle has persisted for generations. Through Bishop's research and work among Maori students it was determined that by supporting teachers to develop "extended family-like relationships in their classrooms" (para. 11) they were able to use effective pedagogies to improve student success. As noted earlier in this review, relationships with students are also critical to student success. As Bishop reminds us:

> our actions as teachers, parents, or whoever we are at the time, are driven by the mental images or understanding that we have of other people. . . . if we think that certain other people have deficiencies our actions will tend to follow from this thinking and the relationships we develop will be negative and our subsequent interactions with them will tend to be negative and unproductive. (2017, para. 8)

As Bishop also noted, teachers and others involved in the education of Indigenous students require support and professional development. The next section of this review will discuss ways to begin to decolonize education in order to build better relationships with and understanding of Aboriginal students.

Decolonizing Education

Multiculturalism is often touted as a solution to bring about understanding among, and reduce tension between, various ethnic and racial communities. In Canada, multiculturalism was enshrined in law in 1988 as the Multicultural Act in part as a way to respond to the need to address racial discrimination (St. Denis, 2011). However, this policy in many ways has served to make Indigenous people one group among many ethnic groups in Canada, thus not acknowledging their place as the original inhabitants of Canada. In addition, St. Denis (2011) argues that as Aboriginal teachers have attempted

to introduce Aboriginal content into their classes, they are met with resistance. In these cases, the objectors use multiculturalism as a reason not to use Aboriginal content on the premise that "[they] are not the only people here" (p. 313). The intent is that as Canada is a multicultural country, all cultures must be treated in the same manner (St. Denis, 2011). The effect is that Aboriginal peoples and their perspective are erased into a melting pot of various other cultures. This allows "schools to trivialize Aboriginal content and perspectives and at the same time believe that they are becoming more inclusive and respectful (St. Denis, 2011, p. 313). St. Denis' perspective suggests that in order to better learn about anti-racism and decolonization, it is important to consider Aboriginal people as the unique group of people they are and not include them in the larger multicultural label.

There are several definitions for the term, decolonization. One definition is also the goal of Aboriginal education: decolonization, is "ensur[ing] that Aboriginal children maintain their cultural identity while achieving their formal education" (Munroe, Bordon, Orr, Toney & Meader, 2013, p. 319). From a non-indigenous perspective, it is "recognizing and respecting Indigenous criteria, protocols, and practices, without appropriating them" (Reagan p. 15). Yet neither of these definitions fully reflect the need to undo the impact of colonization, which must occur if Canada is to move forward with decolonizing education. If "racism is the…assigning of values to real or imaginary differences, to the accuser's benefit and his victim's expense, in order to justify the former's own privileges" (Memmi, as cited in Battiste, 1998, p. 21) then schools will need to challenge Canada's narrative of tolerance and multi-culturalism if they are to undo the sense of racial and western superiority that is currently evident in Canadian

curriculum and schools (Battiste, 2013 p. 125). While it is difficult to tease apart decolonization in education with other aspects that also need to undergo decolonization such as the land, society and governance, these areas are beyond the scope of this review.

"Decolonization is not a rejection of colonialism… but a way to reimagine and rearticulate power, change, and knowledge" (Sium, Desai & Ritskes, 2012, p. 2). It is important to recognize that decolonization is not about returning to a previous way of life, nor is there a single path to decolonize education. One aspect of colonization that is prevalent in schools is Eurocentric knowledge and curriculum. In addition to historical events viewed from a colonizer perspective, knowledge in other disciplines is presented as universal truths, rather than as a product of western thought and culture. In order for education to become more decolonized, it must bring forward Aboriginal ecologies, cultures and spiritualties as a whole to prevent Aboriginal knowledge from becoming merely an add-on to support western culture (Battiste, 1998). As noted by Munroe, et al. (2013) in their research, Aboriginal parents and communities want their children "to be educated in such a way that [they] are able to consider…different arguments and make wise [life] decision[s]" (p. 318) so it is crucial that attempts are made to decolonize curriculum.

In another positive move towards decolonization, British Columbia schools are in the process of implementing Indigenous content and Indigenous perspectives into all areas of curricula. However, it is important that Indigenous knowledge is not separated from its context: the land and language, and that the Indigenous knowledge is not subjugated to Western knowledge (Battiste, 1998; Munroe, et al. 2013, Sium, Desai &

Ritskes, 2012). This concept is illustrated in the following example, shared by Munroe, et al (2013):

> The conversation [with Mi'kmaw Elder, Dianne Toney]…inspired the author to develop a junior high mathematics lesson…that began with [the] story of Dianne's quill boxes and led students through an investigation to explore why this "three and a thumb" relationship exists between the circumference and the diameter of circles and eventually to an exploration of pi. This activity allows students to drawl parallels between the Elder's knowledge and the concept of pi as taught in school without privileging one over the other. This lesson serves as an example of how mathematics can emerge from an Indigenous context rather than being imposed upon on Indigenous artifact (p. 330).

As important as the fact that this lesson comes from an Aboriginal perspective and worldview, is the fact that it also derives from conversation and collaboration from the Aboriginal community. Munroe, et al. (2013) note that there is alignment between 21st century curriculum and Indigenous ways of knowing and being; it is this alignment, along with their research that suggests a path forward to decolonize schools and curricula. 21st century curriculum embodies a wide range of skills and attributes, depending on which list is being viewed; however, one aspect that appears repeatedly, and in which there is general agreement, is that a "stripped down emphasis on discrete skills, and a narrow curriculum of reading and mathematics, does not serve students well…in preparing them for their current and future lives" (p.324).

Another perspective on decolonization is that “[d]ecolonization cannot take place without contestation. It must necessarily push back against the colonial relations of power that threaten Indigenous ways of being” (Sium, Desai & Ritskes, 2012 p. 3). While educators should be willing to push the boundaries within the education system for the benefit of Indigenous students and to redress wrongs, it is important to realize that the ‘system’ serves a wide spectrum of society. The challenge is to find the boundaries in which one can operate within the education system while remaining true to one’s moral compass. This is an example of the that Parker J. Palmer (2003) addresses when he advises educators: “(t)he challenge…is always clear, though finding a way through never is: Do we follow the soul’s calling, or do we bend to the forces…around us and within us” (p. 377)? This is a question that can only be answered on an individual basis.

Conclusion

In this brief review of literature on Aboriginal student achievement, racism and anti-racist pedagogy, and decolonizing education perhaps the most compelling argument is that our Indigenous students cannot wait for the “system” to discover the best way to serve their needs. There is sufficient, well-researched evidence to support making immediate change to the way in which education is delivered to Indigenous students. Change must happen at all levels: provincial, district and school; however, it is in classrooms that change will be felt most by individual students. British Columbia has provided a way forward with the introduction of mandated integration of Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives at the classroom, or curriculum level. To ignore this mandate is at the peril of all students, Indigenous and non-Indigenous. In order to fulfil the

mandate of providing the best education possible for Indigenous students, it is necessary to consider the role of the teacher. The teacher is the one who comes face to face with students on a daily basis and the teacher "cannot give what they do not have" (Palmer, 2003, p. 381). In order to create change, I, the teacher, am "willing to look in (the) mirror and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self- knowledge— and knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject" (Palmer, 2010, p. 3).

Chapter Three: Procedures and Methods

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to use narrative writing and autoethnography in order to reflect on my journey towards a decolonizing perspective as both a person, and more importantly, as an educator.

Methodology

Narrative inquiry is grounded in the concept that human beings tell stories to make sense of themselves and their world. The stories people tell shape their understanding of the world (Clandinin, 2006). Clandinin states, "(n)arrative inquiry is an old practice that may feel new" for the reason that "methodologies are [emerging] in social science research"; yet she notes that narrative inquiry also has "intellectual roots in the humanities" (p. 44). Clandinin (2006) suggests that narrative inquiry exists in three dimensions: personal and social interaction, time, and space. As the researcher navigates the three dimensions, they also become "part of the landscape and are complicit in the world they study" (p. 47). The same stories people to tell to understand the world also define relationships between people and within institutions. For this reason, it is important that school leaders ask questions such as, "Who are the heroes? Who are the villains? What are the successes? What are the challenges?" (Halbert & Kaser, 2009, p. 64). More importantly, are the answers to the question, "What [and why] are the stories repeated?" (p. 65).

Connected to the concept of narrative writing, or storytelling, is that of autobiography. From the perspective of a researcher, it is important that the storytelling

one engages in engages both the heart, or emotions, and the mind. Like Chambers (2004) discovered, the stories one tells must matter. This need for stories told as research to matter leads to the concept of autoethnography. According to Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) "(a)utoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to…systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)" (para. 1). Autoethnography has not always been considered an acceptable form of research and has it roots in a response to "the 'crisis of confidence; inspired by postmodernism in the 1980s" (para. 2). Researchers within the social sciences were coming to terms with the concept that universal narratives did not exist and could not be understood without considering the impact of culture and context. Traditional, quantitative research tends to ignore other ways of knowing and privileges "white, masculine, heterosexual, middle/upper-classed Christian, able-bodied perspective[s]" (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, para. 4), which makes understanding other cultures and perspectives difficult. Over time, social sciences researchers have come to accept autoethnography as a way to "empathize with people who are different from us" (para. 2).

However, the form of research is not without its challenges, as researcher, Sarah Wall (2008) discovered. In her discussion of autoethnography, she refers to the need to have facts and objectivity as reflecting both a form of privilege and a reference to a previous era when "personal impressions were not seen as important" (p. 45). However, her experience writing autoethnography "reveal to [her] once again the value of experience and reflection" (p. 50). She felt that the relative ease with which her project was approved by both her institution's ethics board and encouraged by her advisors is an

indication of the increasing acceptance of qualitative research in general and autoethnography in particular.

I chose narrative inquiry as a methodology in part because of Indigenous authors such as Thomas King. As I read King's (2003) *The truth about stories: A native narrative,* the words with which he ended each chapter challenged me: "Take [this] story, for instance. It's yours. Do with it what you will….But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You've heard it now" (p. 29). Narrative inquiry and autoethnography are research methodologies which allowed me to explore me to explore the way in which I became aware of racism on a personal, rather than societal level.

Methods

My research included a wide variety of reading from academic literature and trade books on the topics of colonization and decolonization, residential schools in Canada, equity in education, and Indigenous literature and stories. From this reading came several notebooks of notes and reflections. I also combed through journals, earlier writing and memories in an attempt to discover both why this passion for decolonizing schools was so compelling and how it might help me lead and encourage others to follow a similar path. In addition, I began to focus my journaling over a six-month period on aspects from my own life in an attempt to see if I could retrace my own path towards decolonizing my ideas. From the journals came several memories, which I recast as stories. With the exception of *Dirty Little Secrets*, the contents of Chapter Four are fictional representations that convey the truth of my experience at the time as well as through a reflective lens. However, details and characters are narrative constructions. *Dirty Little*

Secrets, still a narrative construction, is written as true to my memories of the event as possible. I made this choice because that story reflects the event in my life that provided me the impetus and moral imperative to continue seeking answers to my questions about the education of Indigenous students and how best to serve them.

After writing the stories, I provide discussion and further explanation of how each story fits into my journey. Finally, I reviewed the stories through the lens of academic research and literature. By including the research and literature of others, I hope to avoid one of the common criticisms of using personal narrative and autobiography, which is a lack of analysis.

CHAPTER 4: Autoethnographic stories and discussion

Early Years

Heat, dust and blackflies. Every day in this new place the dust seemed incessant and in those days, nightly showers were not yet a regular event. We crawled into bed, grimy, as the dirt from the day, mixed with sweat and the dried blood from blackflies, which was also a new phenomenon. As surely as every day was hot and dusty, it rained a couple nights a week: not just sprinkles, but a torrential downpour sometimes accompanied by lightning and thunder. The morning after the rainfall, the trees and dense undergrowth were bright green again. The day filled with hope, only to once again become hot and dusty while we waited for rain to clean the air again.

The decade was the 1960s. My family, consisting of my parents and three siblings had moved to the interior to fulfill a childhood dream of my father's: to live in the wild of British Columbia. They came to the small village to manage a fishing and hunting lodge. I was eight years old and everything seemed new. The lake, blackflies, heat, the accommodations and the people were new, or different. Especially the people. I was fascinated by the boat builder – an Indian[2] *named Pete, who was married to a white woman. Just the mere fact that people could build boats, let alone a man doing so singlehandedly was an amazement. When I didn't have chores to do, I often headed to the boathouse to watch him work. His wife cooked for the lodge.*

Eventually, we came to know their family. It was a large family and a couple of their girls were close to my age. We visited their home on the reserve several times,

[2] At times I will refer to Indigenous people as "Indians" in the stories in Chapter Four. Today the term is derogatory; however, in my youth it was the only word used (in my world) to refer to indigenous people. I have retained its use for narrative purpose.

playing games in the bush with all the kids. I loved their house; it was big and had all sorts of halls and hideaways. When I saw it again in later years, I realized the hideaways and many halls were the results of several additions made to accommodate their growing family. They were the first kids I knew with two names – given names and nicknames. James was Iggy, Charlotte was Jazzy and so on. It was confusing when people used both names interchangeably. I knew the girls' names, but never did figure out which nickname belonged to which brother.

As the summer drew to an end, my parents' job ended and we moved into town. We met another family with whom my mom, dad, siblings and I developed friendships that lasted for several years. I recall seeing the two girls in school that fall and have a vague memory of one of them in passing through my grade five or six class, but they rapidly fell from both my social circle and memory.

Discussion of Early Year

I have shared this story in a variety of ways over the years, most often when discussing Indigenous graduation rates or the fact that racism is learned, not innate. As mentioned in the preceding story, meeting other people in the new town, as well as going to school and losing the long days of summer time, were some of the reasons my friendship with the girls came to an end. Yet there was more going on, I now realize. Over the next couple of years, I quickly internalized some unwritten rules: do not take the shortcut through the trail on the way home; do not use the road by the creek; and never go to the reserve. Of course, being children in those days, we often ignored some of the rules – especially if it meant taking a short cut – but I never did so without at least a little bit of

trepidation. Whether the rules were part of common sense - the trail went past an abandoned building used for drinking - or urban mythology - the girls who lived on a creek would beat you up - they also all involved Indigenous people. The message communicated to my young mind was that if Indigenous people were present, one should be fearful and take precautions in order to remain safe.

Retelling this story for the purpose of analyzing my journey towards unlearning racism, I see quite clearly that I was drawn to the exotic nature of Indigenous people. In reality, perhaps my initial meeting of First Nations people and getting to know this family, came from a place of seeing them as “other” and a place of racism along with an element of childhood innocence and naiveté. At the age of ten, this was not a conscious understanding, but an example of how early we pick up social cues and the beliefs of the society in which we live. Revisiting this story as an adult, allows me to see how easily and insidiously we gather and instill belief systems in an unexamined manner.

We’re All Racist

Georgia topped off my coffee. Another day of toddlers and infants, feeding and diaper changes, and daily coffee outings to friends’ kitchens reduced the tedium that comes when raising young children in a small town with limited access to resources and activities. Today, I sat in Georgia’s kitchen listening to her explain a workshop she attended on racism and poverty. “Everyone is racist,” she explained.

I could feel the anger well up in my body. I shot back with my answer “But I’m not racist; I treat everyone with the same respect.” And I did, or so I thought. I didn’t call the native people “Indians” and believed black people had the same rights as white

people. Our church tried to witness to the natives. Lots of other people were racist but not me.

As I left Georgia's house, with the three kids in tow, I was confused. If everyone was racist, how could she be married to a native[3] man?

Discussion: We're All Racist

This event was my introduction to the concept of systemic racism and white privilege, although I did not know that at the time. American media, as well as my American family, heavily influenced my concept of racism. Racism was Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King: overt and deliberate. It was my grandfather telling me "black people can live wherever they want, just not next door." In other words, it was deliberate and intentional. Translated to the community in which I lived, I thought it meant that as long as I did not call anyone a "dirty Indian" nor denied them a seat at the church, I was not being racist. My upbringing and culture defined racism as "individual acts of meanness" (McIntosh, 2002, p. 101).

Many years later, I was introduced to the concept of white privilege through an activity during my professional development year of teacher training. The activity, based on Dr. Peggy McIntosh's (2002) *White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack*, required participants to consider the role that race plays in day to day living that white people generally take for granted. While a facilitator reads through a series of statements, participants take a step forward for each statement that applies to them. Example statements such as:

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[3] During the time period of this narrative, native was used as a term for Indigenous people.

> I can be pretty sure of renting…housing in an area…in which I would want to live.
>
> I can go shopping alone most of the time…assured that I will not be followed[.]
>
> I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
>
> I can choose…band[aids] in "flesh" color and have them…match my skin.
>
> I can choose public accommodations without fearing that people of my race cannot get in. (McIntosh, 2002, pp. 98-99)

At the end of the series of statements, there is generally a wide gap between white people and people of colour. As an aside, I have repeated this activity with students in senior high school English classes and it raises awareness as to the role skin color plays in daily lives. Because these are high school students, not adults, I generally adapt the exercise by assigning roles to students in order to lower the risk level.

Once I became of aware of white privilege, "an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day" (McIntosh, 2002, p. 97), I began to see it everywhere. In cafes where an Indigenous person comes in, asks to use the bathroom, and is told "customers only", yet when I do the same thing I have no problem; in gas stations where the "out of order" washroom is opened for me and not for the Indigenous person; observing a store clerk following my Indigenous students around a store and not their white counterparts.

As I reflect back on the coffee date in the story, I realize that I did not see myself as "raced". Being white was normal, not a racial identity (McIntosh, 2002). What does this mean to me today? It means that I attempt to challenge and ask questions about

systems that make being white the norm. It means I bring up the concept when I can. It does not mean that I refuse to use the bathroom just denied to an Indigenous person, yet perhaps it should. It is difficult to give up the power and privilege that white privilege affords me.

An Interlude

There is a considerable time lapse between this preceding story and the story that follows. I have spent time reflecting on my life during this period and I cannot recall anything of significance regarding racism and Indigenous people. During this time, I developed a business producing quilts and teaching quilt making, raised my children and eventually went to school to become a teacher. My social group also changed from the one that included Charlotte, to one that was more to the right on the political spectrum and of a slightly different economic class. Noticing the shift in who I spent time with and the differences from the previous group does raise the matter of how much we are influenced by those we surround ourselves with. My narrative continues after I obtained a job teaching English in the local high school.

Conferences, Conferences, Conferences

"Hey, Cindy, want to go a conference?" asked the new principal. In the past, all my travelling was with my children, transporting them around the province from arena to arena for hockey and speed skating. But this was the FNESC (First Nation Education Steering Committee) conference held in Vancouver at a swanky hotel convention centre. I booked my flight and hotel, packed my bags and headed off to the conference with a

colleague. Little did either of us realize that this was the beginning of many opportunities for learning and travelling for me.

I sat in a very large auditorium listening to author Nicola Campbell (2005) read Shi-shi-etko, a children's book, which tells the story of a young girl about to leave for residential school.

My girl, we will not see each other
until the wild roses bloom in the spring
and the salmon have turned to our river.
I want you to remember the ways of our people.
I want you to remember our songs and our dances,
our laughter and our joy,
and I want you to remember our land. (p. 5)

Mesmerized by the poetic writing, emotions were also bubbling up as faces of my own children passed through my mind. Young children, babies really, sent off to school for the year? Of course, some of my Indigenous peers went away to attend school, usually around grade seven or eight, but that was because they wanted to, right?

Discussion of Conferences, Conferences, Conferences

Campbell's picture book, *Shi-shi-etko*, was the beginning of many stories by Indigenous authors that would influence my teaching over the next few years and really brought the matter of residential schools to light. As in Chapter One, there were not any Indigenous students in my graduating class; many dropped out, but the few that continued on went to a school about a two-hour drive away. Many of their parents attended a

residential school about the same distance away from home in the opposite direction. I knew of these schools and heard them mentioned growing up, but certainly not with the connotations which we have come to associate with the term 'residential school'. The school attended by previous generations to mine, was presented as a place where Indigenous children went to learn basic skills such as sewing and cooking because their parents did not teach them. The school attended by my peers had the term *college* in it so always seemed rather exotic and I recall often wondering how and why they were able to attend college at such a young age.

During this time, I began to admit that I knew very little about residential schools or the 'sixties scoop' (a time during the 1960s during which Aboriginal children were adopted into non-Aboriginal families), theft of Indigenous lands and the formations of reserves, or very much about the history of Indigenous peoples of Canada. As I learned more about colonization, there was a lot of emotional impact. Initially, the feelings centred on a sense of helplessness and futility as I put myself in the position of the Indigenous parent losing their children. As I learned more about additional generations of Indigenous people forced to send their children away to school, knowing their children would like face emotional, sexual and physical abuse, I felt overwhelmed. It was beyond my imagination and I knew I could not have coped. While I was processing this, I came to realize not only the impact the practice had on Indigenous people, but also of their tremendous resilience.

I also began to realize the nuances of racism and the privilege I held as a white person. Although I mistakenly thought my Indigenous peers were headed off to a college, rather than residential school, the fact that I thought this odd shows that I held the idea

that and Indigenous person having the ability to go to college was extraordinary. A further example of my biased thinking came during a staff room discussion about one of my peers who was a member of the medical profession. A staff member made the comment that he had been admitted to the prestigious American school through a 'special' program for Indigenous people. Initially, that made sense as I recall being surprised when they attended university several years earlier. I slowly began to become aware that my attitudes were racist and steeped in the biases of my North American culture.

Dirty Little Secrets

My little red Corolla sped out of Calgary. The trip thus far had been familiar: the interior plateau of British Columbia, rising toward the towering, jagged, snow covered peaks of the Rocky Mountains, finally giving way to the rolling hills of Alberta. But from this point on – all would be new. On this momentous occasion, celebrating half a century of living, I headed out to discover this spectacular country called Canada. Canada had been my home for over forty years; my parents emigrated from the United States when I was eight. My years of schooling took place in British Columbia, and although I retained my US citizenship, I felt more Canadian than American. I gloated over the fact that Canada was a much better country than the US. After all, we had health care; we celebrated equality and diversity – no racism like that south of the 49th parallel; we had the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and gun control. Douglas Coupland had it right when he said: "I mean, in the genetic and geographical lottery that is life on earth, being Canadian and middle class in the late twentieth century is probably the biggest grand prize of all. I mean what can be better? Nothing" (as cited in Richler, 2006, p. 34).

Canada was perfect, like the day I drove out of Calgary: clear blue skies and brilliant sunshine. I would reach the east coast of Canada before my feelings about this wondrous country were rattled.

* * *

The dark, dank, earthy aroma stung my nostrils. A sense of reverence enveloped me as I strolled through the dark, shaded forest trying to imagine people surviving on the bounties of the land. I had arrived in Boyd's Cove, Newfoundland, a site of the Beothuk Indians. The Beothuk Indians inhabited coastal areas of Newfoundland prior to European contact. A small group, they moved inland to avoid contact with white people. As I wandered through the interpretive site conflicting emotions welled up inside: respect and admiration for their ability to live in the harsh environment that is coastal Newfoundland, quickly followed by sadness at their disappearance. I stared at replicas of pit houses, marveled at their repurposing of items left behind by Europeans. These people were extinct: a result of disease brought by settlers, misunderstanding, appropriation of their land and outright murder. I knew that before I arrived, so why was I so overcome with emotion now?

* * *

Flipping through Saturday morning's Halifax Times I saw the notice:

A picnic in Seaview Park
Learn about Black history in Halifax
Everyone welcome!

This sounded interesting. I didn't know much about the presence of Black people in Canada, let alone in Nova Scotia. The day was bright and I was feeling rather lonely. A day with people would be wonderful. As I parked, I was greeted with the sight of motor

homes, tents, laundry lines and barbecues all crammed together like the makeshift community it was. Children roamed the grounds, visiting from one "house" to the next with everyone watching out for all of them. My stomach started to rumble and my mouth began to salivate as the smells of charred meat mixed with sweetness and spice wafted through the air. I began to scan the park for a food booth; however, nothing was apparent. There was a table with some pamphlets and a few t-shirts on sale. The gentleman monitoring the table explained the event to me: Africville was a settlement of black Loyalists that had lived on this site since the 1800s. In the 1960s, the city broke up the community and moved them off in dump trucks to various places around the city. The final insult was bulldozing down the community church. I was horrified at this story. These things only happened somewhere else – like the United States. We welcomed diversity, didn't we?

As he related this story, a young black man, with long flowing dreadlocks, approached, "How can you sound so matter of fact about kicking us off our land?" he shouted.

"It was a long time ago. We need to help people get on with their lives," came the measured reply. "It does no good yelling over something that's over with."

"No way! We should burn down one of their churches – see how they like it". I decided to move on. I felt like an outsider at someone else's family reunion.

For the second time on this trip, there was the nagging suspicion that something wasn't right with my Canada.

* * *

Completing the trilogy of events that rocked my concept of Canada is something that happened while I watched a re-enactment of the expulsion of the Acadian people from Nova Scotia on the Parks Canada screen in Grande Pre. First, hope – they could stay as long as they agreed to conditions, then betrayal. Forced to leave the land in which they invested so much time. These people invested years developing dykes to turn back the sea and form arable land on which they could live and thrive. Why had I not realized that the "Expulsion of the Acadians" I learned about in school not registered in my brain and that the Acadians lost everything? Was it the blissful ignorance of youth or did I merely forget? Perhaps the fact that now that I was not only a mother, but also a new grandmother activated emotions about the event in a new and different way. As I pondered these thoughts, the smell of the rotting timbers from the remains of their dykes, mixed with decaying vegetation, served to underscore the wrongdoing of the event.

* * *

The nagging feelings I had been sensing broke loose deep within as I watched the video in Grande Pre. Canada did, in fact, have her own dark, dirty secrets. She wasn't all sweetness and light, after all. Rather than being reduced though, she became human – like the rest of us – capable of immense good, but also capable of great evil. At the end of the trip I also came of age – I could embrace the country that my parents chose for me with all the great things such as health care and left wing politics yet, at the same time, stand on guard against the atrocities of which we are all capable. I could honestly say, "I won the lottery!"

Discussion of Dirty Little Secrets

The events related in this story are a culmination of fifty years of living into an epiphany about the country I live in. It also points to the importance of accepting both the positive and negative aspects of any situation. This event also took place as I, and many other Canadians, was just beginning to learn about residential schools. Growing up, I was aware of the fact that many Indigenous students went away to school. At that time, I do not think I thought much about it other than it seemed somewhat exotic to go away to school. As a young adult, my knowledge, still incorrect and partial, shifted to believing that they went away to school to learn skills needed to function in society or because their parents were unable to care for them. In the few years preceding this story, I began to learn about the real nature of residential schools and the government mandate that forced Indigenous children from their families into schools far away.

The epiphany I had as a result of these events was necessary in order for me to begin to realize that I, as a member of the dominant class and race in Canada, am also complicit in both past and continued colonization of Indigenous peoples in Canada. Many of my friends and colleagues will, and have, disagreed with me on this statement. My perspective is that in a democracy, we must be willing to be held accountable collectively for wrongs committed by governments. Coming to this conclusion, coupled with experiencing these events in a short time allowed me to progress to a stage where I was ready to begin investigating the concept of decolonization.

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

"Excuse me, but is this where Richard Wagamese is speaking?" I asked the man seated in the back of the lecture hall.

"Why would you want to hear him?" I was taken aback by the response, as well as confused. The class I brought in scattered to various seats as soon as we entered the room. My stomach churned as I realized that other than a room number, nothing indicated the presentation we travelled two hours to see. What if this was the wrong place? How would I gather the students back up? With that response, my panic increased; I stammered and stuttered, "He's an author…my kids are reading this book…we came to hear him…" The voice in my head was also saying, "You are a First Nations man in a university. How could you not know Richard Wagamese?" As my mind and mouth were racing to come together, a wide grin spread across his face and I realized that I had asked the question to Wagamese himself. I thought "so much for showing my openness to diversity by not assuming the only First Nations male would be the author." After a few minutes of brief conversation, I settled down into my seat to enjoy the reading.

This was my second year of teaching and I had introduced Indigenous Literature into my English 12 class. My own knowledge about Indigenous people and the impact residential schools had on people and culture, along with attending a workshop put on by the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) provided me with the moral imperative to add more Indigenous content to the curriculum. My class was currently reading Keeper 'N' Me by Richard Wagamese (1994) and he was speaking at UNBC so we boarded the school bus early in the morning for a two-hour drive. Following the session, students wrote reflections on the trip. As I read through them, tears welled up as I read statements like, "Twelve years in school and finally I get to read about someone like me."

*I look up from my coffee and notice the family across the café looking my way and murmuring. It is a couple of weeks after our visit to see Richard Wagamese and the people are family members of one of my non- Indigenous students. As the voices rise, snippets of conversation reach my ears: "…it's grade 12…they're reading stuff about Indians…that is f***ing stupid…" I am the only other person there aside from the staff so I know that this conversation is meant for me. Anger and embarrassment well up in my body. I want to lash out at them…I don't.*

Discussion of The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

This story serves to demonstrate both the positive and challenging aspects in my journey towards decolonizing curriculum by introducing Indigenous literature into the classroom. It also provides a glimpse into my own thinking about racism. The fact that I found myself processing thoughts such as showing I was not racist by not presuming the only Indigenous person in the room was not Wagamese, in fact demonstrates that I certainly had not fully embraced the impact and depth of racism within my culture and my community.

While I had both the moral imperative and backing of appropriate authorities such as school administration and FNESC, I was not prepared for the almost venomous response from some segments of the population. Some students did not care for the novel itself; some had difficulty with the style of writing as Wagamese used alternating narrators, and the voice of Keeper, the elder, was very much a slow, wise voice in terms of content and style. Essentially many non- Indigenous students did not connect with the book because it did not fit their life experience. With a few years of hindsight, more

experience and the increase in available novel resources, I am not sure I would have done much different with this particular work of fiction. As I moved into using more works that dealt with residential schools in Canada, I prepared my students with more background knowledge; however, this novel was not set in, nor was about residential schools. It was a glimpse into reserve life and negotiating relationships after being reunited with family.

What I did learn from this experience was that anytime one is moving outside their, or their community's, experience and comfort zone, some degree of conflict and disagreement is inevitable. It also demonstrated that systemic racism is ingrained and a topic in which it is extremely difficult to engage. While many people, teachers, parents and students, questioned using a novel that focused on a particular non-white group and the impact it had on non- Indigenous students, no one questioned the practice of using American based novels such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960) or Shakespeare's works. These works are foreign in terms of worldview and content to many Indigenous students; as noted by my students, they do not see themselves or their people reflected in them. Yet this practice is considered okay because these books are viewed as universal works of fiction. This very statement demonstrates the racism inherent within the educational system.

The other learning which I took from this experience, is that it is important to forge ahead when there is a moral obligation to do so even though you may be heading into uncharted territory and feeling somewhat unprepared. If we wait until we know all the possible outcomes and pitfalls, change will never happen. This experience also enabled me to better support teachers as they try new resources and curricula.

In Paulette Regan's (2010) words, "we will always be engaged in the struggle to unlearn racism…and will inevitably make mistakes" (p. 23) but continue we must. I did continue to use Indigenous literature, but also learned to provide more background to my non- Indigenous students. Before reading a novel, I lead all the students through a series of stations that provided them with background knowledge about residential schools and the treatment of First Nations people in our community. In addition, they wrote unit pre and post reflections about their knowledge and thoughts on the topic. Some of the initial responses were quite typical of many residents in our community and referred to the way they felt First Nations took advantage of tax dollars, received unfair advantages with regard to post-secondary funding, and that many had drug and alcohol addictions by choice. One of the final responses contributed heavily to my changing mindset about bringing Indigenous literature into the English classroom. A student commented that while he felt there were still some Indigenous people who took advantage of the system, he now understood what was behind so much of the trauma and tragedy many people faced under the residential school system. If we are to create real change, we must not only provide content to allow Indigenous students to see themselves represented, but to also educate the rest of the student population.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In order to make sense of the preceding stories and connect to the work of others in the field, I will turn to the work of Paulette Regan (2010). Regan, a Euro-Canadian holds a PhD from the Indigenous Governance Program at the University of Victoria. Regan, along with Brenda Ireland, created and held workshops with the intention to provide “opportunities for people to experience decolonization…and move people outside their comfort zones” (p. 19). I find the framework they use in their workshop to move people from a place of not knowing or understanding the history of First Nations in Canada to a place where people have a “better understanding and greater respect for the role that history plays in everyday Indigenous-settler relations” (p. 20) is similar to that which I have experienced through the stories related in Chapter Four.

The framework used by Regan and Ireland provides structure for the daylong workshops include the following stages:

1. An invitation to participate
2. An explanation of the necessity of decolonization
3. A re-storying of history
4. A call to action

In addition to the various stages, or parts to the day, they also include the concept of circles. In a workshop setting, this is often most obvious in the physical set up of a space. As will be apparent in the discussion that follows, the notion of circularity and non-linear time occurs in my journey.

Stage one is an invitation to participate in the process of decolonization. In the story *We’re All Racist*, I received an invitation to consider the aspect and implications of

racism as it related to indigenous people. At the time, I was not ready to accept the invitation in part due to a lack of understanding of the concept as well as being unwilling to begin the journey of discovery. At this time in my life, I was much like the administrators in McMahon's (2007) study. I was unable to understand the concept of race as applied to myself; it was only others, in the case Indigenous people, who were racialized people. It is necessary to acknowledge the issue of race before one can move on to understand the privilege that white people hold. The invitation was repeated several years later when I became aware of McIntosh's (2002) work on privilege and again as I began attending conferences as a new teacher. This leads me to conclude that is important to continue to issue invitations to others to engage in the work of deconstructing colonization and to remember that we are often not in the same place at the same time. In fact, it may take years for people to understand the concept of race and privilege.

Stage two requires an explanation of the necessity for decolonization. Chapter Two clearly outlines one of the strongest reasons for making changes within the education system: the rate at which Aboriginal students graduate when compared to non-Aboriginal peers (Ministry of Education, 2014). As noted in the recent BC Auditor General's (2019) report, the Aboriginal graduation rate has increased to 70% from 64% in 2014, an indicator that policies implemented by British Columbia are having a positive impact. One of those policies is a changing curriculum in which Indigenous students are able to see themselves represented; an example of this is demonstrated in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* in Chapter Four. Several Indigenous students were able to find a story in which they were able to connect to themselves and their families. It was also an opportunity that allowed me, the teacher, to build relationships with students which

Bishop (2017) identifies as a crucial aspect that contributes to the indigenous student to succeed.

I have found the concept of, and the need to, re-story our history has become the most compelling aspect of the journey. Realizing that we have whitewashed our history and made it palatable to those us who are settlers in Canada is the theme of *Dirty Little Secrets*. I felt this most viscerally as I stood in the forests where the Beothuk people once lived in Newfoundland. This was also the point at which all the reading and theory became real for me. Regan relates that this third stage of the workshop is also the most emotionally draining part of the day as people learn the truth of our history, including stories of residential school. It can be difficult for white people to listen to new stories and perspectives, as it puts us in the position of having to confront our role as benefiting from our privilege. This area would benefit from further research.

Regan's (2010) last stages requires the participant to ask: what do I do with this information and learning? *The Good, The Bad and the Ugly* details the way I started to apply my knowledge in the classroom. It is easy to become overwhelmed by the enormity of the circumstances and for this reason Regan stresses the importance of starting with something that goes beyond the sense that the problem is too large and moving to a "this I can do" (p. 21) attitude. For me, it began with a novel. I learned from those first early forays into changing how and what I taught in my English class. As the story in Chapter Four illustrates, it is not always easy but it is fulfilling.

Lessons Learned

From the perspective of the classroom, the end, in terms of the stories in Chapter Four, was teaching a novel by an Indigenous author about the impact of colonization. It was also about the remarkable resilience of the First Nations people in Canada. However, like a circle I arrived back at the beginning. Invitations continue to come whether through individuals or through literature and are a reminder of the circular nature of change. We reach the end, only to realize the circularity of change: the end invites us to re-engage again from the beginning. I continued to teach Indigenous novels and learned to better prepare my non-indigenous students to engage with the hard work of coming to terms with the real history of Canada.

Further research

I hope that these stories contribute to the academic literature and to the stories of other researchers. In addition to continuing my personal journey, further studies by others in the field of education to add to the literature would be useful. By connecting to Regan's (2010) work, I realize that my experience is not unique; it would be helpful to see how other non-indigenous people learn about and cope with unlearning racism. It is my hope that these stories contribute to the academic literature and are of benefit to others in the journey to unlearn racism. There are two areas I feel would benefit from further research. First, unlearning racism and providing decolonizing spaces is emotionally difficult work and more research in ways to support teachers and others in the educational field as they engage with the work of decolonization while supporting both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students would be immensely useful. The second, and equally important aspect, is to research ways to move forward at a quicker pace. It

has taken me many years to arrive at the place of recognizing systemic racism. For the benefit of Indigenous students, are there ways to arrive at that place more quickly?

Conclusion

The answer to my research question posed in Chapter One is complex and simple at the same time. The simpler part to answer is that as I unlearn racism and bring about decolonizing practices, such as opening space for Indigenous content, the experience is better for students. The more complex and difficult answer is about understanding my own racism. I learned that it is impossible to completely eradicate one's biases. Analyzing the stories told in Chapter Four, combined with more recent current events, have caused me to realize the importance of who and what I surround myself with. In *Early Years*, I pointed out how readily I picked up the idea that I should be cautious and fearful around Indigenous people. During the interlude between my young adult life and becoming a teacher, I also noticed that the people I spent time with had an impact on my thinking. I have noticed that current national issues such as land use, Aboriginal title and pipelines sometime raise uncomfortable thoughts and questions in my mind. I realize that internal racism and discrimination will perhaps always be close at hand and requires continual awareness and questioning on my part. Regan (2010) reminds me that "(c)ircles are universal places of connection that invite paradigm shifts" (p. 19). I find myself back at the beginning yet again with an invitation to continue this journey to unlearn racism.

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