COVID-19 and Indigenous Learners: Strategies for Post-Pandemic Re-Engagement

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Abstract

This paper is rooted in the context of my career as a teacher in rural, majority Indigenous schools in multiple communities in British Columbia. Throughout my career I have had the pleasure of working in communities with a rich connection to Indigenous heritage and ways of knowing and have seen the myriad ways the traditional model of schooling fails to meet the needs of our Indigenous learners. The addition of the COVID-19 pandemic added additional strains to Indigenous communities, many of which were exacerbated by the severing of connections to community schools during the initial closure in the spring of 2020 and continuing through to the present day. Although most restrictions have ended and COVID-19 has moved from being a public health emergency to a part of daily life, many Indigenous learners and their families remain disconnected from their schools for a variety of reasons. This reality presents both a challenge and an opportunity for the education system, which must now find a way to re-engage those families who have distanced themselves from schools. Fortunately, the answer lies in expanding the work many are already doing in providing warm, welcoming school environments and Indigenizing curriculum through providing authentic experiences rooted in the First Peoples principles of learning and Indigenous ways of knowing. Schools which take this opportunity to transform their programming in bold, new ways will see increased engagement and connectedness in all learners, Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

Keywords: Indigenous students, COVID-19, land-based learning, First Peoples Principles of Learning, rural education

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Chapter One: Introduction

The ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic has affected the lives of people across the world and greatly altered the operations of many of our institutions. Education has experienced upheaval in the form of emergency remote learning at the start of the pandemic, fluid movement between in-person and online classes, and rolling school closures due to COVID outbreaks or staffing challenges. As school is so interwoven into the social fabric of society, children have been greatly affected by the pandemic. While all youth are affected by these challenges, Indigenous children have been particularly impacted, especially by the shift to online learning and the resulting disconnection from education and community resources. While COVID-19 is no longer considered a public health emergency and has moved to a part of everyday life, many Indigenous youth have had important connections severed and remain disconnected from school. As an educator who has made a career of working in remote, rural communities with high Indigenous student populations, this topic has a particular resonance in both my personal and professional lives. I begin this chapter by outlining my professional experience in rural Indigenous communities and its influence on my educational philosophies, then I will share my learning journey that has led me to this topic, after which I will present my argument for effective approaches to re-engaging Indigenous learners.

My Journey as a Teacher and Learner

Culture shock, surprise, and fear – these are the words I would use to describe my early days as a teacher at a secondary school in a tiny village in the interior of British Columbia. At the time it was a small community of eight tiny streets, a grocery store, a general goods store, a post office, and a small handful of hotels, surrounded by several First Nations reserve communities.

As a graduate of the West Kootenay Teacher Education Program, I was familiar with rural and remote communities, but this was my first real taste of diving headfirst into the type of community that had been mostly theoretical to me until then. During WKTEP we were constantly reminded of and shown the advantages of rural communities but having grown up in a city with an abundance of resources, at first glance all I could see was deficit – the distance from services, the lack of infrastructure, the cost of goods, and so on. These are very real challenges that continue to affect those living in the area, but it did not take long for me to experience the advantages of such a small, tight-knit village whose residents truly care about one another and where the school is an integral part of the fabric of the community. Right from the start I could see that the principal of the school cared deeply about the community, the children, and their families, and his leadership set the tone for the whole staff. With so few students at the school, it was possible to know the families, their context, their challenges, and the complex dynamics that may exist in the home. The philosophical basis of the school was that we care for the whole child and build strong relationships first and worry about content and curriculum after. Using this approach, I was able to connect with students and their families deeply and contribute to a safe and caring school environment, which was desperately needed in a community where trauma was unfortunately common. This was especially important in a community that is and continues to be overwhelmingly Indigenous and the school population itself is 98% Indigenous.

The school and its administration were guided by the First Peoples Principles of Learning and had cultivated strong relationships with local Indigenous leaders, who had come to trust that the school had the best interests of its children at heart. Many of these local leaders and elders had attended the residential school located just outside town and had negative experiences with education, while many more had attended the public school itself in a time of far less cultural

safety, when being Indigenous was not necessarily seen as something to be proud of. The staff at my school strove to teach holistically, meaningfully integrate Indigenous education, care for all the children's needs, and honour the cultural traditions of our students. In this way the school ingratiated itself to the community and truly became a lifeline for those students whose homes may not have been safe places, physically or emotionally, and where their needs were not always being met. Although I only worked there for two years, these lessons have stayed with me and will continue to form the basis of my core values for the rest of my career and have continued to serve me well as I have moved into other jobs in similarly remote and rural communities.

Learning experiences during the M.Ed. program

My most profound learning experiences that have led to an interest in this topic happened both in the M.Ed. program and in my professional practice during it. As a teacher I noticed alarming trends in Indigenous student disengagement at the beginning of the pandemic. There was a stark difference between the levels of engagement of our non-Indigenous students, especially those who had access to technology, and our Indigenous students. This trend continued as I moved into administration and schools reopened in 2020, and we are still struggling to reengage Indigenous learners over three years after the start of the pandemic. This has adversely affected their learning and academic performance, their sense of belonging in the school, and their health and wellness.

As I have navigated the challenges of administration in the height of the pandemic and as we move into an era of managing it in everyday life, I have searched for ways to bring those vulnerable students back into the school and meet their needs in meaningful ways. This has been the greatest challenge of my career so far and represents a major hurdle for educators moving forward. Two early influences on my interest in this topic are the works of Paulo Freire and Nel

Noddings, which I studied in The Philosophy and History of Education during my Master of Education program. Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* formed the foundation of my belief in education as a force for justice. Access to education for Indigenous students during times of crisis is certainly a matter of justice and requires bold and courageous leadership. Noddings's (1988) writing on care in education are highly influential in my own practice and highlight the need for caring, welcoming schools for meaningful education to take place. The disconnection from school for many learners has removed that caring environment, and for many students who have disengaged for long periods it becomes more difficult to return the longer they are away. The value of Noddings's work has become even more apparent in my personal practice of late, as initiatives based on this ethos have taken shape.

Transformational Learning Experiences

Although I have always been aware of the importance of adequate nutrition to student learning and am familiar with Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs and the importance placed on physiological needs, it has come into stark relief in the current school year how many students were routinely coming to school hungry. This year has seen the introduction of a free lunch and snack program at my school, and as expected, many students take advantage of the food at lunch and breaks. What was unexpected, but perhaps should not have been, was the corresponding increase in attendance and student performance and decrease in problematic behaviours. Students who previously only attended sporadically or routinely skipped multiple classes a day began to take advantage of the food and come to school more regularly, and students with a history of challenging behaviours began to behave more calmly and were self-regulating better. This was particularly pronounced with Indigenous students, many of whom do not have adequate food at

home and often came to school without lunches. This has only further cemented my belief in the importance of this topic and the urgency with which many schools will need to change.

Presenting the Argument

I claim that the disconnection from school experienced by many Indigenous students will be mitigated by an increased focus on creating welcoming school environments, providing land-based learning, and integration of authentic learning experiences, all rooted in the First Peoples Principles of Learning. Culturally relevant content and teaching practices are associated with improved educational and social-emotional outcomes for Indigenous students. The link between culturally relevant education and positive outcomes is based upon evidence from studies by authors such as Oskineegish (2014), who notes that "when teachers become responsive to student culture and include appropriate aspects of culture they will see a difference in motivation, interest, and self-esteem" (p. 514). This prescription for recovery from the pandemic address what Brant-Birioukov refers to as a "settler historical consciousness" that exists in the education system and which regards Indigenous knowledge as "outdated, irrelevant, or inferior to Western knowledge systems" (p. 247). An early example of success in mitigating the effects of pandemic lockdowns through land-based learning can be found in the works of Hargreaves (2021).

In the coming chapter, I will review the works of several prominent authors on the topics of land-based education, the incorporation of authentic Indigenous content, and the importance of relationship-based learning for Indigenous learners, and how these can be used to address challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic. I will then discuss two real-life applications of these topics in my professional life, and describe how they have positively impacted the students in the communities I have worked in. I will then conclude by describing my learning on these

topics in the MEd program and exploring the theoretical and practical implications of my argument.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Access To Supports

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the gaps in access to support services for Indigenous students. If the Canadian educational system is to re-engage learners who have struggled since the pandemic began, these gaps will need to be closed. I have described how these gaps may be mitigated by the inclusion of authentic Indigenous content in classrooms, the creation of safe and caring schools, and the introduction of land-based learning. As Whitley, Beauchamp, & Brown (2021) explain, "existing inequities in educational outcomes experienced by vulnerable children prior to the pandemic have been greatly exacerbated as cracks in our support structures are revealed" (p. 1694). This suggests that, while COVID-19 has had direct detrimental impacts on Indigenous populations that can be measured by scientific data, the impacts on Indigenous student education are symptoms of existing problems. Connection to school is crucial for more than academic reasons, and Indigenous students are particularly vulnerable when those connections are severed. As Ineese-Nash (2020) observes, "schools and community programs can provide a lifeline for Indigenous youth who may be experiencing mental health challenges; they serve as a mechanism to enter into the mental health service system" (p. 276).

Effective Approaches

Culturally relevant education has been identified as critical to Indigenous student success and connection to school. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) discussed this in Call to Action #63, i-iv in their final report, urging governments to develop curricula that meet the cultural needs of Indigenous students. The severing of that culturally relevant programming during the COVID-19 pandemic has created challenges for Indigenous students

and the literature suggests that restoring those links is key to effective recovery from the pandemic. Richardson and Crawford (2020) describe how Indigenous communities used their cultural knowledge to create public health materials incorporating local language and culture to communicate important information about pandemic safety and suggest the same can be done by educational institutions. McIvor, Chew, & Stacey (2020) describe a similar strategy, discussing the successful outreach of Indigenous educational and public health authorities grounded in local cultural context. Other communities have adopted a traditional approach in response to the changing nature of the pandemic that has rendered some previously available services inaccessible.

Land-Based Learning

The importance of authentic Indigenous content, including land-based learning, is a crucial aspect of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's (2015) final report. This report, published at the conclusion of an investigation into the abuses of the Canadian Residential School System, includes 94 calls to action targeting various aspects of Canadian society that currently do not provide for equity for Indigenous peoples. A number of these recommendations concern education and identify education as a crucial vehicle for meaningful reconciliation. As Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Murray Sinclair notes, "education is what got us into this mess — the use of education at least in terms of residential schools — but education is the key to reconciliation" (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2015). In keeping with the spirit of these calls to action, it is crucial for all students, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to receive meaningful and authentic Indigenous content in their education. The 62nd call to action specifically addresses this, calling for the various levels of government to provide funding for teacher training programs to ensure prospective educators are able to weave

authentic Indigenous content into their classrooms (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). With proper training and the confidence to integrate land-based learning rooted in authentic Indigenous knowledge, teachers can reach the most vulnerable learners.

The First Peoples Principles of Learning, developed by the First Nations Education Steering Committee (2014) also express the importance of incorporating the land into learning, stating "Learning ultimately supports the well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits, and the ancestors." Using these as guiding principles, educators can connect with all learners, both in times of crisis and in the course of their regular work. As Hargreaves (2021) states, "nature is a spiritual entity, bound up with a sense of meaning and value in life. In this respect, what is essential for the learning and well-being of Indigenous students, is good for all students" (p. 1842). Hargreaves goes on to describe innovative work done by schools in isolated, rural communities in the Pacific Northwest of the USA to strengthen engagement among learners. Teachers in these schools discovered that a positive strategy involved increasing the engagement with the land at home and in nearby communities (p. 1842). Hargreaves goes on to describe the projects and their benefits.

> Projects developed through the network included taking and sharing time-lapse videos of the local environment to strengthen senses of local pride and build awareness of communities elsewhere, investigating disputes between businesses and environmentalists over local land use, researching into the use of drones in local agriculture, and studying salmon fishing and doing salmon dissections in biology as ways to link to traditions of the local Indigenous community and also to attempt to regenerate the local economy (p. 1842).

Ineese-Nash (2020) describes communities whose young people have embraced communalism and a more sustainable, land-based life to mitigate the economic struggles caused

by COVID-19. This provides a way forward for schools to re-engage students previously left behind by the pandemic, which some have already begun. Hargreaves (2021) stresses the importance of schools helping students adopt Indigenous worldviews and ways of life and describes the effectiveness of land-based programs being offered in some schools as COVID-friendly alternatives to online learning. Hargreaves goes on to explain the benefits of these programs, explaining that "learning outdoors also helps young people make a spiritual connection with their humanity as part of nature" (p. 1842). Hargreaves explains how this is rooted in Indigenous ways of knowing and that an understanding of the reciprocal relationship between humanity and nature helps students understand themselves better. Because of this, Hargreaves suggests that schools enhance their nature-based and outdoor programming and "shift some of the balance of resources and support from digitally based to nature-based innovation and improvement" (p. 1853).

Safe and Caring Schools

While it is well-known that children require safety and security in order to learn effectively, it is not always the case that schools provide these to all learners. This is especially true of Indigenous learners, whose academic results and graduation rate continue to lag behind that of non-Indigenous students. As the COVID-19 pandemic created fear and worry about physical health and safety, schools across the world attempted to respond with measures designed to ensure minimal spread of the virus. However, there has not been a corresponding increase in the urgency surrounding emotional safety. Many students from all backgrounds may have challenges returning to "normal" now that the pandemic has ostensibly become a part of everyday life, and this presents a challenge for teachers who may wish to get on with the business of school. However, this challenge may be seen as an opportunity to further strengthen

community bonds in schools and reshape how school is approached. Hargreaves (2021) suggests that “those elements of teaching and learning that provide teachers as well as students with positive senses of accomplishment, that honor teaching and learning as emotional practices and not just cognitive ones, and that grasp how important in-person relationships in schools are as a foundation for learning and well-being, must be strengthened” (p. 1848). This will have positive impacts on all members of school communities, and by extension, the community as a whole. As a former colleague of mine (Anonymous, personal conversation, 2015) was fond of saying, “teaching is a profession of the heart before it is a profession of the mind.” Hargreaves supports this notion, stressing “the importance of emotions, relationships and identity and not just cognitive learning in the work and contributions of teaching; and of the value of social relations and in-person communication and collaboration” (p. 1839). While there is obvious wisdom in these words and it is certainly easy to say them, it is quite another to meaningfully implement these strategies in schools. So how can it be done?

The answer, again, lies in the First Peoples Principles of Learning (First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2014). In addition to the first principle, which deals with learning’s connection to self, family, community, land, spirits, and ancestors, the fourth principle states that “learning involves generational roles and responsibilities.” While this certainly includes the adult-child dichotomy of traditional, western education, it can also refer to the extended community of elders, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other adults, who share a collective responsibility for educating youth. By involving the community at large in the education of young people, particularly Indigenous youth, an increased sense of comfort and trust can build within schools. This is in addition to the obvious benefit of tapping into the broad knowledge base of community members, many of whom may be great sources of traditional

knowledge. Brant-Birioukov (2021) stresses that, in healthy and thriving communities, “older siblings, extended family, clan members, and Elders participate in the education of the community’s youth. We are all learners; we are all teachers” (p. 249).

School has the ability to, and often must be, a lifeline for students, particularly in remote Indigenous communities. In the absence of access to social services, quality nutrition, appropriate clothing, and many other necessities, schools often step in to fill the gaps. Without regard for whether it is their responsibility to provide these, many schools will do so because it is what is needed. It is known, according to Brant-Birioukov (2021), that “Indigenous communities are disproportionately at risk of suffering the worst consequences of Covid-19...due to access to quality health care, safe drinking water, and lack of food security” (p. 254). These impacts negatively affect the connectedness of Indigenous children to their schools, as these matters of life and death take precedence over attendance at school. The closures of schools during the pandemic presented an additional challenge, as the non-educational services offered by schools are typically removed during online learning or were scaled back due to fear of spreading illness. As Brant-Birioukov points out, “presented with school closures, too many Indigenous youth are less concerned with ‘falling behind’ in their studies than they are with receiving the basic necessities that many schools provide, such as breakfast and lunch” (p. 255). By creating or reinstituting these additional programs, schools have an opportunity to support their most vulnerable learners and bring Indigenous students back into the school community.

Additional Challenges

A key issue preventing Indigenous student connection has been poor internet infrastructure, which is a serious disadvantage at a time when school closures have forced learning online. As the University of Saskatchewan (2021) points out, many Indigenous learners

"live…in regions where the infrastructure and equipment needed to support online learning are inadequate or underperforms, and their connectivity frequently fails" (p. 12). In communities where internet access is routine and reliable and students have internet-capable devices at home, learning has not stalled to the same degree. Human Rights Watch (2021) reports that "the lack of internet access and adequate equipment for online learning was a key obstacle for many Indigenous children" (p. 12). In remote communities underserved by internet service providers, even having a device and a connection does not guarantee continuous connection to services offered by schools. Whitley, Beauchamp, & Brown (2021) observe that residents in these communities often struggle to complete even routine computing tasks such as sending email due to poor connectivity, rendering resource-heavy videoconferencing technology unfeasible. These articles all suggest that lack of access to internet infrastructure is a pre-existing issue for Indigenous students and the switch to online learning necessitated by COVID-related school closures has exacerbated this. There are additional challenges in communities in which students have remained connected to their schools and their learning. Indigenous students in some communities have reported significant anxiety and fear about exposure to COVID when they have returned to school, with the University of Saskatchewan observing that "students have been less engaged, and seem to feel anxious, unsafe, stressed and/or fearful about the possibility that they will be exposed to the virus in the school environment" (p. 15).

These feelings and their impact on learning cannot be ignored, and their presence in students in my care have presented a significant challenge in my professional practice.

Chapter Three: Application

Throughout my entire teaching career, I have been steeped in Indigenous education. Since joining an education program in August of 2014, rural, place-based, Indigenous education has been at the forefront of both my learning and my practice. This has continued through my career, as I have remained in rural, remote schools in different communities in BC. These experiences have opened my eyes to the realities of Indigenous communities and the importance of culturally relevant education that values the land, history, and traditional knowledge of the people who have lived there for millennia.

Experiences in Rural Education

My initial foray into education was in a large, but rural and sparsely populated district in BC entirely located on unceded Indigenous territory. Following applications to a seemingly endless list of school districts and similarly endless rejections, I was offered a job in a small village. I later learned that I was the sole applicant to this position, which required teaching English First Peoples 8-12, First Nations Studies 12, Art 10-12, Social Studies 8-9, and AVID 8-9. While I was prepared for the reality of varied teaching assignments and multi-grade classrooms that are often typical of rural districts, this was an especially challenging assignment for a non-Indigenous educator new to the profession.

Context

This village has a long and important history to both Indigenous people and non-Indigenous settlers and has been inhabited for thousands of years. Its position at the confluence of two major rivers and subsequently a major highway gave it a place of importance throughout the history of British Columbia. Despite this, by the time I had arrived, it was a tiny village with few amenities and only a few hundred inhabitants in the town proper. The local reserves in the

area rounded out the population to a few thousand, but the school population remained very small. The elementary school educated only about 100 students, while the high school had around 50, with some choosing to attend a nearby First Nations school and some taking the 160 km round trip bus ride each day to attend a larger school in a nearby town. The reasoning for the former tended to be driven by the parents due to an increased focus on cultural and language education, while the latter was typically due to the greater opportunities for athletics. Like many somewhat isolated communities with large Indigenous populations and which had once been home to a notorious residential school, this community had more than its share of challenges.

The legacy of the Residential School system was palpable in the town, with many residents having attended. Many of these attendees were old enough to have been forced by the local Indian Agent and taken from their parents, while others were sent willingly by parents who wished for the chance for their children to learn valuable life skills. Many of these former attendees left with deep scars, some of which were shared with us outsiders. Many more had experiences we were explicitly instructed by long-time residents never to inquire about due to the magnitude of the trauma. Nearly every student had a parent, aunt, uncle, or grandparent who attended the residential school, and many had multiple such relatives. This generational trauma had wide-ranging ramifications, including children with adverse childhood experiences of abuse, parents with substance abuse challenges, and caregivers who found it difficult or even impossible to enter a school after what they had experienced. These challenges all combined to make the already difficult task of educating children in a culture that was new to me even more daunting.

The Classroom

Once I began working at the school, it became apparent that I had my work cut out for me. Many of the students struggled with self-regulation, disruptions were frequent, and reading

and writing levels were very low. On the first day I attempted to have students write about their summer, and was met with outright refusals, blank stares, and open hostility from many of the students. I quickly realized that a different approach was needed. Although I knew intellectually that students are unable to learn without their emotional and physical needs being met first, to a first-year teacher adjusting to a new community and way of life this seemed like a monumental task.

With guidance from the school's principal and encouragement from a close friend who had taken a job at the school at the same time, I began to intentionally cultivate relationships with the students. The advantages of small, rural schools began to reveal themselves to me, as I learned about the students' home lives, their families, their interests, and their challenges. As I became more comfortable with the students, and they with me, I quickly began to embrace the idea that my job as an educator was to support the well-being of the whole child and build strong relationships to allow students to achieve the best they can. Hargreaves (2021) points to the importance of these relationships, describing "teaching as an "emotional practice" in which the well-being of students and teachers is reciprocally interrelated" (p. 1835). This was aided by the school's commitment to the First Peoples Principles of Learning, which states, "learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place)" (First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2014). It was obvious early on that this was of the main keys to success, as the students began to respond to my attempts to connect with them.

With time and persistence, I began to see a change in the students I was teaching. Perhaps the simplest, yet most impactful way that our school achieved the welcoming environment and sense of community necessary to cultivate a productive learning environment was sharing meals

with one another. During the morning break each day, the entire school would gather to eat a meal that had been prepared by the foods class, which was always scheduled in the first block of the day for this purpose. It was during these moments that some of the most important connections were made between staff and students. During those morning meals, all of us were equal, all shared the same food, and all were served together. There was no special treatment for the staff, and we were served exactly in the order we entered the room. It was made clear very early by the principal that it was expected that all staff would join in these morning gatherings, even if we did not eat, and his leadership helped ensure this became an integral part of the culture of the school. I discussed the importance of community and relationship building in my literature review, noting the work of Hargreaves (2021), who suggests that "those elements of teaching and learning that provide teachers as well as students with positive senses of accomplishment, that honor teaching and learning as emotional practices and not just cognitive ones, and that grasp how important in-person relationships in schools are as a foundation for learning and well-being, must be strengthened" (p. 1848).

This daily tradition also served an important function beyond being a relationship building exercise. For many of our students, it was the only guaranteed meal they had all day. A distressing number of our students experienced daily food insecurity and came to school hungry each day, with many not knowing day to day where they would get their next meal. The school's commitment to feeding all students, regardless of need, at no cost and with no questions asked, thus became a lifeline for several of our most vulnerable students and ensured that they came to school each morning. In my literature review, I discussed the challenges with food security that continue to affect many First Nations communities. Brant-Birioukov suggests that "Indigenous

communities are disproportionately at risk of suffering the worst consequences of Covid-19...due to access to quality health care, safe drinking water, and lack of food security" (p. 254)

Once there, most stayed and viewed school as a secure, safe place. However, some students' challenges came not from food insecurity, but from the classroom environment itself. For these students, it was crucial that we provide learning experiences that met their unique intellectual and cultural needs.

Land-Based Experiences

To connect with these students who did not thrive in the regular classroom environment, I leaned heavily on the expertise of the Indigenous Student Support Workers in the school. These support workers were long-time residents and were cousin, aunt, or grandmother to a large percentage of the student body. They were thus crucial to understanding the complex family dynamics and unique needs of the students, and their connections with local traditions and elders were invaluable. With their help, my colleagues and I were able to plan many unique and meaningful land-based experiences for students, to the great benefit of the many who required something outside the regular classroom.

The most impactful of these experiences were the trips taken through a local river valley of great cultural and spiritual importance to the Indigenous people of the area. It was during these hiking trips that we were able to connect students to the culture of the area most of them had grown up in, and which many had become disconnected from or never connected to in the first place. The importance of the land to Indigenous peoples is well known, and connection to it is crucial to creating authentic learning experiences. As the University of Saskatchewan (2021) notes, "in First Nation and other Indigenous communities, the land plays a primary role in the development of people's individual and collective identity and relational web" (p. 3).

From the beginning of the park, where elders laid tobacco at the entrance to the valley and asked the Creator for safe passage, to the stunning pictographs that lie in a deep valley at the end of a grueling hike, the valley is filled with opportunities for powerful cultural teachings. These days had a tremendous impact on our most vulnerable and challenging students, many of whom would come to school on those days with an enthusiasm and excitement never witnessed in the classroom. These experiences were as transformational to me as an educator as they were for the students, as they were integral to cementing my philosophy that education is incomplete without learning about the land on which you are gathered. As the University of Saskatchewan notes, "for land-based educators, the land is both a place of learning and a place where we can renew our sense of selves and our connection to each other in a web of social, cultural, spiritual, emotional and physical relationships" (p. 21). Even if this weren't the case, land-based education would have been crucial at our school because it kept our students at school, out of trouble, and connected to their teachers. These experiences continue to influence my teaching to this day and are the blueprint for my strategy of re-engaging Indigenous students in my current context.

Experiences in Administration

Following my years in this community, I accepted an administration position in a small northern BC community. This was an exciting and frightening prospect, as I was moving from informal teacher leadership to the daunting task of formal, administrative leadership very early in my career. However, my excitement overwhelmed the fear, as I was thrilled to finally be able to implement my educational vision at a school that needed compassionate leadership. However, as I began this position in August of 2020, the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic hung over my appointment as administrator.

Context

My current home is a small, somewhat isolated northern community, located over 100 km from the nearest major centre. The municipality was founded to support the nearby coal mining operations, and coal remains the main industry, alongside the newer pursuits of tourism and archaeology. Perhaps the most important difference for my context between my current and former districts is the presence of a treaty between the federal government and local First Nations. My current district sits on treaty territory encompassing parts of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Northwest Territories. As this is an industry town with most residents employed in some capacity in the energy sector, there appears to be a different relationship to the land than in many other parts of British Columbia, including in my old district. The land is viewed from a primarily extractive lens by most residents, and land-based learning opportunities are often secondary in the minds of students and parents. This is likely influenced by the lack of a specific, permanent settlement of Indigenous peoples in the area, as there is First Nations or Métis band that lays claim to the land. Rather it is viewed as a historically shared territory to be traversed through rather than settled permanently.

The highly transient nature of the population and the relative youth of the municipality itself means that many residents do not “come from” here but have moved there from elsewhere. This means the Indigenous population is a mixture of First Nations and Métis groups from BC and Alberta, Inuit from the territories to the north, and eastern groups such as a Mi'kmaq from the Maritimes and Newfoundland. Such a mixture has potential to create a vibrant culture based on sharing traditions, but in practice often means Indigenous culture is secondary and becomes subsumed into the greater culture of the community.

The Secondary School

Beginning in administration in the early stages of the pandemic, as BC shifted from emergency remote learning to in-person instruction with cohorts, mask mandates and physical distancing, presented tremendous professional challenges. From the beginning it was clear that we had an enormous task ahead of us as a school, as many students had become disconnected and fearful. Like many students across the province, several students at our school struggled to reintegrate into the school environment, and this trend continues to this day.

As we began to dig deep into the data, alarming trends began to emerge. We quickly discovered that the students who were the most disconnected and had missed the most school once we reopened in September of 2020 were Indigenous students. After many years of improving Indigenous attendance and achievement, there was a sudden reversal of this trend. While we made many overtures to families, attempted to remove barriers by reducing workloads and attendance expectations, and leveraged our Indigenous Support Worker's connections to family, we still experienced challenges with Indigenous student engagement. Many of these issues persist to this day, as our Indigenous achievement continues to lag behind and disciplinary measures based on behaviour are disproportionately required.

This year, however, we have implemented changes that have led to some positive outcomes. As I reflected on my prior experience, I was reminded of the transformational power of my old school's food program and the importance it held for so many of our most vulnerable students. To that end, the administrative team decided to implement a similar program at our school, where all students would have access to food and be fed each day, regardless of need or family status. The results have been extraordinary, as many students who previously did not attend, or only did so occasionally, now come to school on a regular basis to receive a meal. As

well, students who routinely attended but often displayed problematic behaviours have become less challenging as we have begun to feed them regularly. We have striven to ensure that there is no shame or stigma attached to this program, and all students are encouraged to take advantage of it. We have chosen to be transparent about it being a draw for some students and have been open in acknowledging that some students may miss some class time and instruction because they are being fed first. This simple, yet often overlooked factor has led to an enormous change in the culture of the school and helped draw our most vulnerable students back into the school, where they are now more ready to learn and can feel like they are members of a caring community. While we still have a great deal of work ahead of us, by creating a welcoming, caring school environment that seeks to care for the material as well as intellectual needs of students, we have begun to make headway in re-engaging the most vulnerable students.

Summary

My varied experiences in a majority Indigenous school district located on the shared territory of three nations and 19 First Nations bands has given me a particular insight into the unique needs of Indigenous students and communities. I have used the learning I was gifted by the many knowledgeable colleagues I have worked with as well as my own learning to implement strategies such as a safe, caring environments and land-based learning to re-engage vulnerable Indigenous learners in both districts. Through these experiences I have come to believe strongly in the power of these strategies to mitigate the disconnecting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and potential future challenges that may threaten our communities' cohesion and connection. In the final chapter, I will consider the effect these experiences have had on my growth as an educator and explore the implications of my argument, as well as discuss its further practical applications.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

As I complete this reflection on my educational experiences and the challenges Indigenous students have faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, I remain firm in my belief that the chronic disconnection from school among Indigenous students across Canada can be mitigated through the integration of authentic, culturally relevant, land-based content woven through the curriculum, and the creation of caring, welcoming schools built on relationship-building, guided by the teachings of the First Peoples Principles of Learning. The experiences I have recounted in this capstone have had a propound impact on not only my practice as an educator, but also on my day to day life. Prior to my entry into an education program, I had a great many preconceived notions about what education was. These were largely informed by my own experiences as a student, but also by popular culture and what I perceived to be the work of education. It did not take long after beginning my teaching career for the true state of education to be revealed to me. Like many Canadians I was not initially well informed about the history of the Residential School system and the generational trauma that exists in many Indigenous communities. Working in remote, rural locations with large Indigenous populations has allowed me to see a reality that many will never experience, and I consider myself fortunate to have been a part of efforts to improve the education and well-being of youth in these communities.

Summary

In the first chapter of this capstone, I have contextualized my topic within the ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic and described its detrimental impacts on education, particularly on Indigenous students. Next, I discussed my personal journey as a teacher and learner, with a focus on my experiences in remote, rural Indigenous communities and how we overcame the challenges of our context with a focus on relationship building and land-based learning. Finally, I

present my argument, which is rooted in both research and my personal experience as an educator.

In the second chapter I present the context of Indigenous communities and students in Canada and discuss the arguments of educators and educational institutions from across Canada who have successfully implemented programs to reengage Indigenous students who have been disconnected from their community schools. These programs have significant similarities to programs I have helped administer in multiple schools.

In the third chapter I apply my argument to two contexts in which I have worked, including my current context as an administrator. I use the examples of positive relationship building, the presence of a free food program, and the use of land-based learning to describe successful examples of Indigenous students being meaningfully re-engaged in school.

Implications

The intent of this capstone is to contribute to two theoretical conversations that closely intersect with one another. The first is the western colonial education system and its ongoing inability to reach Indigenous learners, and how this can be remedied. Presently there is a significant gap between the on-time graduation rates of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in BC, with a great deal of academic discussion devoted to effective approaches to this problem. The second is the ongoing recovery from COVID-19 in education. Although the pandemic is no longer the all-encompassing emergency it was, with lockdowns, travel restrictions, and vaccine passports largely a thing of the past, the effects of that long-term societal disruption continue to present themselves in education. The academic discourse on this topic will likely continue for many years, as the obvious and potential effects of the pandemic are addressed.

My intent is also to describe productive ways schools can re-engage Indigenous learners after they have been disconnected from school during the pandemic and how these strategies can help improve education for Indigenous students overall. As more and more attention is paid to truth and reconciliation and education authorities increasingly recognize the importance of Indigenizing the curriculum, there has never been a better time for educators to seize on the moment and meaningfully impact Indigenous learners. Through integration of authentic Indigenous content and land-based education in schools, regardless of the ethnic composition of the student body, educators can create more positive educational experiences and move closer to closing the achievement gap in Canada. Until the Canadian education system is able to support Indigenous students in schools to the same degree as non-Indigenous students, including on-time graduation with Dogwood diplomas, this work must continue.

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