Transforming School Leadership: Advancing the TRC's Calls to Action through Decolonial and Multicultural Education

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Abstract

This capstone argues that transformative leadership, based in decolonial pedagogy and critical multiculturalism, is essential to advancing reconciliation and equity in Canadian education. Despite the presence of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's education-related Calls to Action, there has been no progress in recent years, limiting opportunities for systemic change in schools. In response to this, school leaders must engage with decolonial and multicultural frameworks in order to disrupt dominant power structures, prioritize Indigenous ways of knowing, and foster inclusive school cultures.

Chapter One introduces the TRC's education-related Calls to action as a foundation for reconciliation-informed leadership, as well as the shifting demographic in Canadian schools. Chapter two reviews key theoretical literature, following the evolution from surface-level multiculturalism to critical and decolonial approaches. Chapter three applies these theories to practical leadership contexts, through professional development around intercultural competence, curriculum development, family engagement practices, and school policy and programs. Chapter four analyzes personal reflections from diverse teaching contexts in Alberta, British Columbia, and China, connecting theory to lived experiences.

Together, these chapters show how a dual commitment to decolonial pedagogy and critical multiculturalism can transform school culture. Implications include a need for professional development in intercultural competence, support for decolonial teaching practices, and sustained relationship-building with Indigenous and multicultural communities. This leadership approach not only responds to the TRC's Calls to Action but also advances equity, diversity, and belonging within educational systems.

Keywords: Decolonial Pedagogy, Critical Multiculturalism, Intercultural Competence, School Leadership, Reconciliation, Calls to Action, Inclusive Education

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Background and Problem Statement

In 2015 the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015) released a comprehensive report outlining steps that Canada, the government, the people, and its institutions can take to reconcile with the First People who have inhabited this land long before settler contact and continue to reside here today. These steps are known as the "94 Calls to Action". Within these "Calls", there are several that pertain to education. These Calls to Action will involve the work of several educational departments and people which includes schools, school districts, ministries of education, staff, students, and educational stakeholders across the country, all working together to address these Calls to Action and ultimately work towards reconciliation. Calls to Action 6 to 12 directly address education. These include the elimination of educational gaps (Call 7), the elimination of funding discrepancies in education (Call 8), the publication of reports on funding (Call 9), the inclusion of Indigenous peoples in the development of Indigenous legislation (Call 10), adequate financial support for Indigenous students pursuing post-secondary education (Call 11), and the development of culturally appropriate education programs for Indigenous families (Call 12) (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Within Calls to Action 10, this legislation must include several principals, including: sufficient funding to close educational gaps within one generation, improving education attainment levels, developing appropriate curricula, protecting the rights of Indigenous languages, as well as teaching Indigenous languages, enabling parental responsibility with their children's schooling, and respecting and honouring Treaty rights and relationships (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

When this report was initially released, many stakeholders across Canada were working towards achieving the objectives of these Calls to Action (Jewell & Mosby, 2023). Unfortunately,

this momentum has subsided and many Calls to Action have not been addressed, either partially or at all. The Yellowhead Institute's Accountability Update from 2023 shows that only thirteen Calls to Action have been completed since the report was released, and worse, is that zero Calls to Action were completed in 2023 (Jewell & Mosby, 2023). On an update from the Federal government of Canada, they state that "First Nations or mandated First Nation education organizations continue to express interest in the development and renewal of regional education agreements with ISC which will continue to support First Nations control of First Nations education and a pathway to service transfer" (Government of Canada, 2022). This pertains to the tenth Call to Action (Government of Canada, 2022) but all six Calls to Action have similar commentary, a written commitment to support and monitor progress but no details on how to move forward or with a specific action plan.

This lack of action presents a critical opening for transformative school leadership. While school leaders cannot directly implement federal legislation, they can take localized, impactful steps towards reconciliation through inclusive leadership, culturally responsive teaching, and partnerships with Indigenous communities. If school leaders ground their work in the Calls to Action, they can address some of the gaps the federal government has yet to resolve, while also supporting our diverse learners and families, too.

"Transformative leadership begins with questions of justice and democracy; it critiques inequitable practices and offers the promise not only of greater individual achievement but of a better life lived in common with others. Transformative leadership, therefore, inextricably links education and educational leadership with the wider social context within which it is embedded" (Shields, 2010, p. 559). This implies that transformative leaders within schools are focused not only on academic outcomes but on challenging inequities within society and their school communities, creating and transforming schools into inclusive and just environments. This requires a level of moral courage, critical reflection, and ultimately, action, which are qualities of transformational leadership. These leadership qualities are the components needed to advance

both reconciliation and multicultural inclusion, which can be addressed by the objectives of the Calls to Action.

Connection to the Master of Education Program

This capstone project was directly inspired by the course *EDUC 5041: Diversity - Constructing Social Realities* through a critical review of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). During this critical review, I analyzed the stagnation of progress and reflected on my role as an educator with social privileges. The critical review challenged me to examine the Calls to Action through a multicultural lens, and this is where I recognized the overlapping goals between reconciliation and critical multiculturalism.

As I explored the relationship between intercultural competence and educational equity, I realized that school leaders must play a pivotal role in addressing systemic inequities. This includes supporting teachers to facilitate classroom practices, impacting school culture, implementing policy, and developing professional learning. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015) should therefore be viewed as a catalyst for change by fostering Indigenous rights and ways of learning within schools, while also supporting multicultural learners.

This topic is important to me because I live and teach in northern British Columbia, and we have a school community demographic that is rapidly changing. More families are moving to the north for economic opportunities and affordability, which is changing both our school staff and student population. With a large push for reconciliation, I realize that these initiatives can also support the way we work with each other and with our entire classroom community. The Calls to Action can be used to support other ways of knowing and learning, which aligns with the goals of critical multiculturalism.

Throughout the M.Ed program, I have begun to see that reconciliation, inclusive leadership, and critical multiculturalism are deeply interconnected. This capstone project brings

those components together. The capstone will reflect a commitment to acting on the Calls to Action (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015) in both practical and systemic ways, to support all learners through transformative leadership based in decolonial pedagogies, intercultural understanding, and critical multiculturalism.

Purpose of the Capstone

The purpose of this capstone is to demonstrate how transformative leadership rooted in decolonial pedagogy can also advance multicultural inclusion, as outlined through frameworks such as critical multiculturalism. Both pedagogies share many of the same objectives, and the Calls to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) offer a concrete set of goals that school leaders can use to address them. This includes a focus on equity, giving everyone a voice, and systemic change. This is crucial because school leaders support diverse student and staff communities and treating reconciliation and multiculturalism as separate efforts is not an effective use of a transformative leader's time. There is a significant amount of research around both frameworks, and throughout this capstone the connections between the two will be evident as well as how the goals of both frameworks can be applied to support all students and school stakeholders.

This capstone will therefore synthesize theory, real-world applications, and my personal teaching experiences rooted in both frameworks, highlighting how they support the initiatives such as the TRC's Calls to Action (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). The goal, therefore, is to demonstrate how school leaders can practically respond to the TRC's Calls to Action in such a way that it supports all learners and school stakeholders.

Central Argument and Rationale

This capstone argues that school leaders who ground their practice in reconciliation and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action also advance critical multiculturalism. This is because the Calls to Action promote equity and inclusion not only for Indigenous students and families but for all members of diverse school communities.

First, the Calls to Action (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015) (particularly 6–12) promote equity and inclusion across multiple domains including curriculum, funding, and governance. This demonstrates their broader relevance that goes beyond reconciliation. These goals directly align with the principles of critical multiculturalism, which emphasize systemic equity and culturally responsive education (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015; Pratt & Danyluk, 2024).

Second, decolonial pedagogy and critical multiculturalism share a common foundation: they both challenge dominant cultural narratives and seek to have marginalized voices heard. These frameworks require educators and leaders to develop ideological clarity, which is an awareness of how their beliefs and practices intersect with systems of power and privilege (Sleeter, 2005).

A third reason is that leadership practices that are rooted in reconciliation support the establishment of Indigenous Education Councils and culturally responsive engagement with families, which also strengthens multicultural inclusion. Research by Schnellert et al. (2022) and Kuttner et al. (2021) shows that these approaches foster relational accountability and build trust across diverse communities.

A counter-argument to integrating these two frameworks, along with using the Calls to Action as both a guide and a catalyst for transformation, is the concern that combining them could dilute the distinct objectives of each. This concern is outlined by Nyawasha (2025):

> Although treating decolonization as multiculturalism offers another pathway to understanding what decolonization entails from the perspective of those affected by its implementation, the thinking also presents some theoretical difficulties. First, it sidesteps critical issues that are the core of on-going struggles for decolonization especially in the global South. Among these include the place of race and power in scholarship. Second, prioritizing multicultural perspectives, identities and diversity

runs the danger of maintaining the status-quo which triggered the need for

decolonization in the first place. (p. 132)

By framing decolonization as multiculturalism, critical issues addressed by decolonization

are overlooked, and if we prioritize multiculturalism over decolonization, there is a risk that

those in power may stay in power. This is because multiculturalism alone does not

"disrupt" current systems in power such as decolonial pedagogy (Nyawasha, 2025).

A second counter-argument comes from Sprecher (2011), who argues that adding

cultural perspectives to curriculum often fails to address colonial power relations unless

they are critically interrogated. "Critical multiculturalism has much to offer practitioners.

However, in order to be relevant for contemporary contexts, critical multiculturalism must

expand to include local-global analyses that thoroughly examine the implications of

colonialism, imperialism, and global capitalism for hierarchies and oppressive

relationships among people everywhere" (p. 87). This reinforces the concern that

multiculturalism may fall short of achieving the goals of decolonization, while potentially

preserving the inequities it seeks to challenge if colonial systems of power are not deeply

interrogated.

Significance of the Topic

The significance of this capstone lies in the changing composition of today's classrooms

in Canadian schools; they have become increasingly diverse and multicultural. This diversity

presents a crucial opportunity for school leaders to respond to the TRC's Calls to Action (Truth

and Reconciliation Commission, 2015) while supporting all learners through an integration of

decolonial pedagogy and critical multiculturalism.

This shift in classroom demographics has been well-documented. For example,

Statistics Canada projects that by 2036, between 39.3% and 49.1% of children aged 15 and

under will be of a multicultural background, with another 5% being Indigenous. This equates to

about half of all school children coming from diverse communities (Statistics Canada, 2021).

The BC Ministry of Education also acknowledges this demographic shift: "Our vision is to provide inclusive and responsive learning environments that recognize the value of diversity and provide equity of access, opportunity and outcome for all students including students with disabilities or diverse abilities" (Ministry of Education and Child Care, 2024). Similarly, the 2021 census reported that 34.4% of British Columbia's population were visible minorities and 5.9% were Indigenous (Statistics Canada, 2022). Together, these statistics underscore the urgent need for school leadership that is inclusive and culturally responsive.

On the side of reconciliation, urgency has grown due to government inaction. Since the publication of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action in 2015, the rate of implementation has stagnated. For example, the Yellowhead Institute reported that none of the Calls were completed in 2023, and only 13 of the 94 have been fulfilled since 2015 (Jewell & Mosby, 2023). Their tone reflects growing frustration: "With yet another year of no Calls to Action—zero Calls to Action—being completed, we hope you might forgive us if frustration and anger have made us question what exactly the point of this work is" (Jewell & Mosby, 2023). Similarly, Indigenous Watchdog reported that "there are limits to how many times you can write a report about how Canada, once again, has failed to make any meaningful progress" (Indigenous Watchdog, 2023).

This lack of political momentum creates space for schools to lead. The Calls to Action (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015) related to education are Calls 6 to 12, and they remain unfulfilled which presents a leadership opportunity for schools. By centering practice around Call to Action 10, which focuses on curriculum, Indigenous language and culture, and family engagement, school leaders can meaningfully fill some of these gaps.

Systemic inequities identified by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015), as well as those faced by multicultural communities, require transformative leadership that addresses not only academic outcomes but also equity, belonging, and justice for all members of the school community. "Transformative leadership,

therefore, recognizes the need to begin with critical reflection and analysis and to move through enlightened understanding to action—action to redress wrongs and to ensure that all members of the organization are provided with as level a playing field as possible…" (Shields, 2010, p. 572).

In my own teaching, I've observed that while many school leaders allocate resources for academic success, fewer are willing to disrupt the status quo or confront the systems of power that shape school culture. This includes making space for Indigenous and multicultural students to be seen, heard, and reflected in curriculum and community life. For this, school leaders must foster systems of authentic collaboration with both Indigenous and newcomer communities. Such systems exist, such as the RESPECT model developed by Joseph & Joseph (2019). This model provides a concrete framework for reconciliation-informed, inclusive leadership which will be discussed in depth throughout this capstone.

Overview of Chapters

This capstone consists of five chapters, each of which builds upon the central argument that transformative school leadership rooted in reconciliation also advances multicultural inclusion.

Chapter two presents the literature review, outlining the key theoretical frameworks that shape the capstone: decolonial pedagogy, critical multiculturalism, and intercultural competence. It explores the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (2015) Calls to Action and their intersections with these frameworks. The chapter also examines research on multicultural education, decolonial approaches to schooling, inclusive leadership, and critiques of liberal multiculturalism to underscore the need for critical and systemic change in educational settings.

Chapter three provides an analysis of practical applications and case studies that integrate the theoretical frameworks from the literature review. This includes a focus on staff professional development, curriculum and pedagogy, family engagement and school culture, and school policy and systems.

Chapter four is a reflection of my personal teaching practice in diverse contexts, and the programs I was able to be a part of that align with the TRC's Calls to Action, decolonial pedagogy, and critical multiculturalism. These contexts include teaching in private schools in China, teaching in First Nation Band schools in Alberta, public school teaching in rural Alberta and British Columbia, along with my teaching practicum experience in Kenora, Ontario.

Chapter five is the conclusion, which reiterates the rationale for this capstone research, identifies the connections between theory, practical applications, and personal practice, and then discusses the overall success of the capstone paper. It also identifies gaps and offers broader implications for leadership and systemic change.

Throughout the capstone, these chapters demonstrate how school leaders can use reconciliation-informed, critically multicultural leadership practices to support all learners and enact meaningful responses to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). To begin this work, chapter two introduces the theoretical foundations that inform this project: decolonial pedagogy, critical multiculturalism, intercultural competence, and the TRC's Calls to Action.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This literature review builds upon the central argument that transformative school leadership, when rooted in decolonial pedagogy and critical multiculturalism, plays a crucial role in advancing reconciliation and improving equity for all educational staff, students, and families. It begins by outlining key education-related Calls to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015), which provide both a moral and practical framework for reconciliation in Canadian education. These Calls to Action emphasize curriculum change, teacher training, intercultural understanding, and systemic inclusion which are priorities that directly inform the theoretical frameworks explored in this chapter.

The review then traces the development of multicultural education, beginning with the additive and surface-level approaches, and moves toward critical and decolonial frameworks.

These frameworks focus on the lived experiences of learners, examine power structures within education, and call for the systemic changes needed for equitable outcomes. These pedagogical shifts discussed are then analyzed in their relation to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015), with a focus on those connected to curriculum development, teacher training, and inclusive leadership.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action

Education is one of the central themes within the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's *Calls to Action*. This capstone draws on both the core education-related Calls (6–12) and a selection of others that highlight leadership, curriculum, teacher education, and community collaboration. The following are the most relevant to this project:

- **Call 7**: Eliminate educational and employment gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians.

- **Call 10**: Improve Indigenous educational attainment and success through culturally appropriate curricula and programs.

- **Call 23**: Increase the number of Indigenous professionals in education and provide comprehensive cultural competency training.

- **Call 57**: Train educators and public servants in Indigenous history, treaties, and the residential school legacy.

- **Call 62**: Fund Indigenous curriculum development and teacher recruitment and retention strategies.

- **Call 63**: Build educator capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect.

(Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015)

These Calls are closely tied to the themes of decolonial pedagogy, critical multiculturalism, and intercultural competence, which this capstone uses to guide its analysis of leadership practices, professional development, curriculum, and school culture.

Other education-related Calls (6, 8, 9, 11, 12, and 93) are referenced in the broader context of education reform but are not directly examined. Additionally, Calls 64 and 65, which emphasize intercultural education and youth engagement, are reflected in the implications and recommendations outlined in Chapter 5 (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). Through these connections, the TRC's Calls to Action are not only situated within the capstone but are used as a lens for identifying actionable pathways for educational leaders seeking to advance both reconciliation and inclusion. The next section explores how these Calls intersect with the goals of critical multiculturalism.

Foundational and Recent Research in Multicultural Education

Canadian classrooms have been reflective of the growing diversity of greater Canadian society. For example, one in four people in Canada are foreign born right now, and projections indicate that racialized groups will make up over 40% of the population by year 2041 (Statistics Canada, 2022). In British Columbia, the Ministry of Education (2024) reports that almost 30% of K-12 students speak languages other than English at home. These demographics raise questions on how schools have responded to this growing diversity. One response to this has been the emergence and growth of multicultural education. On a surface level, multicultural education includes learning about different cultures and celebrations, which focuses on celebrating differences, but doesn't challenge current systems or provide concrete support for our multicultural learners. As classrooms become increasingly diverse, educators must go beyond surface-level inclusion and provide meaningful, systemic support for all learners. This chapter will explore how multicultural education has evolved from liberal approaches to more critical and decolonial pedagogies that seek to transform our education systems.

Multicultural education, particularly in its more critical forms, gained momentum in part as a response to the failures of standardized education reform in the United States. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), introduced by President George W. Bush and enacted by Congress in 2001, was a massive federal reform that aimed to improve student achievement

through increased accountability (Sleeter, 2005). However, it ultimately failed because it had such a narrow focus on literacy and numeracy skills and did not teach students to think critically or demonstrate how schools should function in a democratic society in the 21st century. Instead, it emphasized standardized testing and "de-professionalized" our teachers (p. ix).

While the NCLB was a U.S. policy, its emphasis on standardized academic testing also influenced education reforms in Canada. Across Canadian provinces, standardized assessments and achievement frameworks often failed to account for social and cultural realities of diverse student populations, especially Indigenous and minority communities (Kanu, 2011; Pashby, 2011).

In response to these failures, multicultural education began gaining traction, but its early stages were often surface-level and tokenistic, failing to create any systemic change. "Multicultural curriculum should be strongly informed by transformative intellectual knowledge, but very often it is not. Much that passes as a multicultural curriculum is actually mainstream knowledge with bits of 'diversity' added in" (Sleeter, 2005, p. 85). When textbooks "sprinkle" pieces of diversity into their content, this is known as an additive curriculum, as opposed to a transformed curriculum. These sprinkles of ethnic content do not challenge any dominant norms, making the content an example of "tokenistic" inclusion such as celebrating cultural differences but not actually addressing educational inequities. When teachers (and school leaders) are not prepared to create multicultural curriculum, they often resort to additive approaches by bringing in (adding) a hero or heroine from a marginalized group: "I often see teachers digging up and adding in heroes and heroines, such as great women artists, African American scientists, or Latino political leaders" (p. 88). While this is a start, it fails to influence the educational system in ways that produce lasting or transformative change. Schools need frameworks that actually shift power and not just acknowledge differences. But how do we get to this framework? It's not as simple as just handing over the curriculum.

I do not advocate simply handing the power to determine curriculum over to teachers without also engaging teachers very seriously in the work of teaching responsibly, and then supporting conditions that enable this work. It is true that in far too many classrooms, teachers teach poorly and the curriculum is weak. But trying to solve that problem by prescribing what everyone should teach and learn undermines open inquiry and freedom of thought. (p. 171)

The limitations of this tokenistic multiculturalism were then a catalyst for more critical approaches. These approaches examined race, power, and systemic oppression. This critical approach required that educators and school leaders look at themselves and their role in the marginalization of others, even if it was unconscious and due to historic, systemic designs of curricula and Western education. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) point out that the current practical demonstrations (at that time) of multicultural education in schools included artifacts, songs, or foods of other cultures, similar to what Sleeter (2005) stated about the additive curriculum, which was still a dominant culture with a "sprinkling" of diversity. This brought forward the debate of multiculturalism, and what it actually is. Multiculturalism is not an educational reform or new curriculum, it is a political philosophy, including many cultures existing and tolerating each other (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). "Thus, outside of the classroom multiculturalism represented the attempt to bring both students and faculty from a variety of cultures into the school (or academy) environment" (p. 61). Ladson-Billings and Tate argue that this liberal form of multiculturalism does not offer the structural changes needed to address educational inequity. They state that "the current multicultural paradigm functions in a manner similar to civil rights law. Instead of creating radically new paradigms that ensure justice, multicultural reforms are routinely 'sucked back into the system'" (p. 62). This highlights how efforts toward equity can be neutralized when they are not designed to disrupt existing power structures. This is where Critical Race Theory comes in (CRT). CRT is a theoretical framework that challenges the systemic foundations of racism in education. Rather than aiming

to be everything to everyone, it puts race in the foreground for understanding oppression. "Thus, as critical race theory scholars we unabashedly reject a paradigm that attempts to be everything to everyone and consequently becomes nothing for anyone, allowing the status quo to prevail" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 62).

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) focus on race and oppression, and Dillard (2000) takes the critique a step further by questioning the foundation of educational knowledge systems. Dillard points out that valid sources of knowledge do not only come from the dominant culture, the ministries of education, the school districts, or the teachers. They are also from the learners themselves. "I write to legitimate not only a different way of knowing, but to legitimate the knower herself, whose knowledge continues to be questioned, if not rejected, within the academy" (p. 662). While the westernized and Eurocentric education system often fails to value the lived experiences of learners, recognizing who holds knowledge is just as important as what knowledge is prioritized. Knowledge is not just tactile or limited to the words in a textbook: "It is the spirit that enables us to name what we know, to make visible the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (p. 662). The path forward in education is to value not only standardized forms of knowledge, but also the unseen, lived, and internal knowledge that learners carry with them every day.

Critical multiculturalism pushes us to confront systems of race and power, but decolonial pedagogy goes even further because it demands not only a critique of the system, but a transformation of how we understand knowledge, learning, and the purpose of education itself. This is emphasized by Dillard (2000), who explains that knowledge must include the lived experiences of racialized learners and not just the norms of the dominant culture. This shift aligns with the TRC's Call to Action 10 (iii), which urges "the development of culturally appropriate curricula," and Call 65, which calls for building capacity for reconciliation through research and teacher training (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Without such a shift in what counts as knowledge, as Dillard (2000) warns, schools risk continuing to

silence Indigenous voices rather than reconciling with them. To truly advance reconciliation and educational equity, transformative school leadership must go even further by embracing decolonial pedagogy as a framework that reclaims Indigenous ways of knowing and reimagines the very foundations of education.

The next section explores decolonial pedagogy as a distinct yet complementary framework, one that demands not just critical awareness, but a re-centering of land, relationships, and Indigenous ways of knowing in both classroom and leadership practice.

Foundations of Decolonial Pedagogy

Where critical multiculturalism identifies injustices based on race, decolonial pedagogy goes further by challenging the very foundations upon which the education system is built. This includes confronting the systemic inequities embedded in curriculum design and implementation across Canadian schools. The "sprinkling" of diversity content onto a westernized curriculum reflects a liberal multicultural approach, and identifying racial discrimination within education reflects a more critical multicultural approach. However, as Tuck and Yang (2012) emphasize, decolonial pedagogy must involve a fundamental reclamation of education, that centers on Indigenous ways of knowing and directly challenges colonial and settler structures in schooling.

Paulo Freire redefined the relationship between the teacher, the learner, and knowledge with his historic work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). In this work, Freire discusses how in the mainstream education model, students are seen as empty "vessels" that teachers can deposit knowledge upon or into. "Those who use the banking approach, knowingly or unknowingly (for there are innumerable well-intentioned bank-clerk teachers who do not realize that they are serving only to dehumanize), fail to perceive that the deposits themselves contain contradictions about reality" (p. 61). Freire argues that this model of education is a mirror to colonial structures because it silences the learner and reinforces the imbalance of power. In its stead, Freire advocates for a dialogical model of education, where content and facilitation are co-constructed through action, authentic dialogue, and reflection. "Thus, the dialogical character

of education as the practice of freedom does not begin when the teacher-student meets with the students-teachers in a pedagogical situation, but rather when the former first asks himself *what* he will dialogue with the latter *about.* And preoccupation with the content of dialogue is really preoccupation with the program content of education" (p. 81-82). Freire is saying here that education begins with the authenticity of engagement and conversation between educational stakeholders, not when students pull out their textbooks, or sit and become "vessels" to educational content. This authenticity through dialogue leads to "conscientization", where the learners become aware of an inequitable system. "The awakening of critical consciousness leads the way to the expression of social discontent precisely because individuals come to perceive that their discontent is not a private matter but the result of an unjust system" (p. 36). This banking model Freire discusses is evident within Canadian systems through a standardized set of curriculum and assessment structures, which favour the dominant narratives as these assessment structures do not include Indigenous ways of knowing (yet). As such, Freire's insistence on education as a practice of freedom lays the groundwork for decolonial pedagogy, a dismantling of hierarchical structures in how knowledge is shared, taught, and valued by all stakeholders.

Velásquez Atehortúa (2020) builds on the work of Freire (1970) by offering decolonial pedagogy that is based in intersectionality, grounded in power awareness and social transformation. "The pursuit of becoming a tool for empowerment and confronting injustice is at the core of decolonial pedagogy. It frames critical consciousness to raise students' awareness in social issues, power differences, and how to work collectively to facilitate change" (Atehortúa, 2020, p.160). These intersectionalities include student experiences that are shaped by multiple variables, including race, gender, class, and ability, which makes decolonial pedagogy more responsive to the complex realities most learners are bringing into the classroom. As such, the classroom needs to become a place where knowledge is co-constructed through facilitation and shared inquiry by students and teachers. At the leadership level, this includes creating

conditions where the intersectional identities of students inform school practices, policies, and curriculum. The critical analysis of school systems through decolonial pedagogy can still be undermined if decolonization is not approached as a catalyst to include all learners at the classroom and school level.

When decolonization is misused or diluted in educational contexts, it no longer becomes a tool for social justice or inclusion, as outlined by Tuck and Yang (2012). Decolonization is not to be used as a metaphor.

> Decolonization as metaphor allows people to equivocate these contradictory decolonial desires because it turns decolonization into an empty signifier to be filled by any track towards liberation. In reality, the tracks walk all over land/people in settler contexts. Though the details are not fixed or agreed upon, in our view, decolonization in the settler colonial context must involve the repatriation of land simultaneous to the recognition of how land and relations to land have always already been differently understood and enacted; that is, all of the land, and not just symbolically. (p. 7)

Within education, this means that decolonial pedagogy cannot only be about representation or culturally responsive strategies. It must confront the settler-colonial structures that Canadian schools were and are built upon. When schools substitute, use metaphor, or "sprinkle" Indigenous ways of knowing without creating authentic partnerships or without addressing the actual inequities, this becomes a risk of maintaining current power dynamics, or the status quo. Tuck and Yang (2012) warn that this work must involve accountability, reflection, and commitment to Indigenous sovereignty, not just becoming a new buzz word for diversity or reconciliation efforts. This reclamation must then also focus on the relationships to land because land is also a teacher. Datta (2018) explains that land-based learning is both a pedagogy and an act of resistance to dominant educational norms. "Land is not merely a passive backdrop, but an active participant in knowledge production" (p. 285). In educational contexts, this means

engaging learners in ways that connect knowledge, culture, and land through reciprocal relationships.

Decolonial pedagogies are able to take form within K-12 settings when there is a focus on the relationships between teachers and students, as outlined by Barkaskas & Gladwin (2021). "Talking circles, which are sometimes referred to as sharing circles or more broadly as circle work, are used in many contexts across different Indigenous traditions and cultures" (p. 21). This approach aligns with Freire's vision of education as dialogical and relational as opposed to hierarchical. Talking circles promote an authentic and reciprocal exchange that Freire (1970) advocated for, in contrast to the 'banking model' of education where students are empty vessels waiting to receive deposits. Similarly, this approach also supports Dillard's (2000) assertion that the lived experiences of learners must be recognized as valid sources of knowledge within educational settings. "Used as a method of communication, understanding, and education, talking circles showcase an alternative pedagogical practice that encourages people to listen openly to other viewpoints and perspectives that may differ from their own (Sams, 1990, as cited in Barkaskas & Gladwin, 2021, p. 21). Practices such as talking circles offer a culturally grounded alternative to traditional classroom discourse and lesson structures, laying a foundation for practical strategies that school leaders can use to support inclusive systems and pedagogy. Similarly, Bowra et al. (2021) emphasize Indigenous-led classroom approaches that honour local language, ceremony, and relational accountability. They argue that such pedagogy must be embedded at the policy level, not simply enacted by individual teachers.

Decolonial pedagogy, as shaped by the works of Freire (1970), Velásquez Atehortúa (2020), Dillard (2000), Tuck & Yang (2012), Datta, Bowra et al. (2021), and Barkaskas & Gladwin (2021) emphasizes the need to challenge power, center lived experiences, and resist the appropriation of decolonization as a metaphor. Together, their combined frameworks can build a model that is relational, intersectional, and is grounded in justice. Their ideas and

frameworks directly align with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015) around education. This includes Calls 10, 62, 63, and 65. For example, Call 10(iii) calls for "developing culturally appropriate curricula," while Call 62 urges governments to fund teacher education programs that integrate Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy. Call 63 advocates for the development of "age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools," and Call 65 supports community-based research to advance reconciliation. These calls cannot be meaningfully addressed through surface-level reforms. They require a decolonial commitment to transforming educational relationships, systems, and knowledge production itself. This transformation also requires school leaders and educators to cultivate the intercultural competence needed to navigate these shifts with awareness, humility, and sustained community engagement, which is the focus of the next section.

Intercultural Competence and Inclusive Leadership

Regardless of the pedagogical choice of the teacher, there also needs to be conditions set within the school to allow those pedagogies to thrive. This is where a transformative school leader's vision and facilitation come into play (Shields, 2010). School leaders are therefore essential for schools to achieve their goals, which includes the creation of a multiculturally inclusive environment and one that allows other knowledge systems, such as Indigenous ways of knowing, to be at the forefront.

For school leaders to be able to facilitate such an environment, they must be able to navigate cultural complexities, which is based in both critical multiculturalism and decolonial pedagogies. "The call to develop the skills and abilities to live and work with culturally different others is no longer specific to a few particular disciplines and professions but rather is a call to cultural consciousness in a much wider context" (Deardorff, 2009, p. 121). For school leaders to acquire this cultural competence, they need to possess or seek to acquire specific attributes and approaches as outlined by Deardorff (2006): respect (valuing other cultures, cultural diversity), openness (to intercultural learning and to people from other cultures, withholding judgement),

and curiosity and discovery (tolerating ambiguity and uncertainty) (p. 254). For school leaders to

move towards desired internal and external outcomes, they must possess strong listening,

observation, and interpretation skills along with the ability to analyze, evaluate, and relate with

others (Deardorff, 2006, p. 254). Deardorff concludes that all individuals enter into these

frameworks at different points, and the attitude of the individual is essential for the development

of intercultural competence.

> This process model also demonstrates the ongoing process of intercultural competence
>
> development, which means it is a continual process of improvement, and as such, one
>
> may never achieve ultimate intercultural competence. As with the pyramid model, the
>
> attitudinal element in this process model is the most critical, and as such, attitudes are
>
> indicated as the starting point in this cycle. (Deardorff, 2006, p. 257).

Therefore, for school leaders to facilitate school environments that can foster decolonial

knowledge systems and multiculturalism, they need to have the desire and traits to do so. As

Battiste (2013) emphasizes, educators must engage in ethical relationality and cognitive justice,

by recognizing the legitimacy of Indigenous knowledge within educational systems. Similarly,

Little Bear (2000) notes that this work requires a fundamental shift in worldviews, switching from

Eurocentric dualism to holistic, relational modes of understanding. This is also discussed by

Byram (1997), around communicative intercultural competence: "Even the exchange of

information is dependent upon understanding how what one says or writes will be

perceived and interpreted in another cultural context; it depends on the ability to decentre and

take up the perspective of the listener or reader" (p. 4). One model that a school leader can

utilize to both support and respect the communication and cultures of others is the RESPECT

model.

The RESPECT model from Joseph & Joseph (2019) is a valuable leadership framework

that ensures school leaders are fostering inclusive environments for all school stakeholders.

This model focuses on a process that develops Indigenous relations by addressing the three

Rs: Recognition, Respect, and Reconciliation. "The appropriate process in any given situation will change depending on the communities involved and on the various policies and legal, cultural, and regional considerations on the table" (p. 71). The acronym RESPECT stands for the following: research, examine, strategize, present, evaluate, customize, and transform. Effective leaders must intentionally learn about the cultural, historical, and social contexts of the communities they serve in order to build authentic relationships (Joseph & Joseph, 2019). Leaders must then examine their own biases, assumptions, and the broader sociopolitical context to understand how their actions could impact diverse communities. Then, school leaders need to strategize by developing inclusive, culturally responsive policies and practices and then present themselves in a way that is open and respectful to others in terms of language choice, mannerisms, and cultural awareness. Leaders must evaluate the effectiveness of their actions and policies through open feedback from all stakeholders, and customize their approach and strategies based on that ongoing feedback. Finally, over time, leaders transform their relations, approaches, and collaborations with all stakeholders through this continual use of the model and their engagement with others (Joseph & Joseph, 2019). The RESPECT model supports the goals of critical multiculturalism and goes further by encouraging leaders to rethink power, knowledge, and culture in ways that reflect Indigenous perspectives. This makes it a powerful tool for transforming school communities and putting the TRC's Calls to Action (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015) into practice.

When school leadership is grounded in intercultural competence and inclusive frameworks like the RESPECT model (Joseph & Joseph, 2019), they are also advancing the Calls to Action (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). This includes Calls to Action 63, which urges education leaders to build capacity for cultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect, and Call to Action 57, which calls on all educators and administrators to receive training in the history of Indigenous peoples and the ways in which colonialism continues to shape our systems (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). By engaging in this work

around intercultural competence and inclusive leadership practices and using them as tools, leaders can take actionable steps towards meaningful reconciliation.

Critiques of Liberal Multiculturalism

In the current educational landscape in Canada, schools are resorting to a liberal multiculturalist framework to address both decolonization and inclusion; which unfortunately isn't enough. As Tuck and Yang (2012) argue, when decolonization is reduced to metaphor or symbolic gestures without confronting settler colonial structures, it fails to produce meaningful change. Liberal multiculturalism involves "sprinkles" of diversity woven into an already-developed mainstream curriculum and framework that values the viewpoints and history of the dominant culture. This is shallow at best and doesn't offer solutions to inequitable systems for our staff and students from different cultures. When we make the appearance of our teaching differ but the substance is still the same, meaning we may change some of the content to include diversity, but we still teach and assess in the exact same way we always have, this is the additive approach mentioned by Sleeter (2005). When we resort back to what we know and make short visits to new territory, only to return quickly to what we know, this is also known as the tourist curriculum. "A few elements of living culture through which people interpret and negotiate daily life are taken out of context and simplified, translated for students, and frozen in time and space; multicultural curriculum as food or songs is an example" (p. 88). With this approach, an assumption is made that we can find equity for all educational stakeholders without confronting the hard questions or acknowledging power dynamics.

A common example of using the tourist curriculum or the additive approach is also mentioned by Freire (1970), with the banking model of education. As discussed, students are recipients of their learning content, expected to absorb the information and then reproduce it. There is minimal interaction or authentic dialogue between teacher and student, and the content is pre-determined by the course materials and curriculum, leaving little room for co-construction or critical reflection. Students do not get the opportunity to reach self-actualization under such a

model, so even if the content is diversified, there is little chance that it transforms a school into an inclusive, participatory learning community. This approach also fails to acknowledge other knowledge systems, such as the lived experiences of learners, as emphasized by Dillard (2000), and it ignores the institutional and structural racism discussed in Critical Race Theory. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argue that race remains a primary factor in educational inequality, yet it is routinely left out of mainstream educational discourse, and liberal multicultural frameworks don't even begin to address it.

Liberal multiculturalism is very "visible," meaning that when it is implemented, it is easily seen because it exists on the surface. It rarely addresses deeper inequities or creates systemic changes, as it is often performative rather than substantive. If the efforts of decolonization are performative, such as being used metaphorically, they lose their power to disrupt colonial structures (Tuck & Yang, 2012). This liberal multicultural approach turns reconciliation into a well-meaning gesture, which is not aligned with what the TRC (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015) had in mind. On the outside, the school looks safe and "trendy," but it does not actually challenge inequitable systems or include the voices of other knowledge systems. Liberal multiculturalism is therefore seen in the majority of schools because it is easy to adopt; it requires no deep or systemic changes, just inclusive "sprinkles" throughout the school. One example is a daily land acknowledgement during morning announcements. While this is a respectful gesture, it raises an important question: has this led to any substantial changes or improved outcomes for Indigenous students and their communities?

This framework falls short of creating meaningful change for students and staff participating in inequitable school systems. Without directly confronting power structures, acknowledging the lived experiences of school stakeholders, or valuing different knowledge systems, liberal multiculturalism becomes a hollow gesture. As Tuck and Yang (2012) argue, symbolic approaches that fail to challenge settler colonial structures amount to performative reconciliation. Similarly, Freire (1970) and Dillard (2000) emphasize that education must center

the living experience and knowledge of marginalized communities in order to be truly transformative. Liberal multiculturalism also fails to meet the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015), which demand structural change, rebuilt relationships, and the integration of Indigenous ways of knowing within schools. To respond meaningfully, school leaders must adopt a transformative approach that is grounded in decolonial pedagogy and critical multiculturalism, to advance reconciliation and support all learners.

The next chapter explores how this leadership approach can be applied in practice through inclusive systems, curriculum, and staff development that reflect the values outlined in the literature.

Chapter Three: Practical Application and Case Studies

This chapter will connect the theoretical frameworks discussed in the literature review with real-world applications for school leaders to implement critical and decolonial pedagogies. Each application and case study will be grounded in the central argument, that transformative leadership needs to be rooted in decolonial pedagogy and critical multiculturalism in order to advance reconciliation and equity. Throughout this chapter, there will be actionable strategies presented around professional development, curriculum design, family engagement, and policy transformation. These strategies are aligned with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015) to action and are supported by both academic research and actual leadership practice. By putting these theoretical frameworks into leadership action, the following chapter sections provide a roadmap for school leaders that are committed to systemic changes to the school system, relational accountability with school stakeholders, and the meaningful inclusion of Indigenous and culturally diverse voices within education in Canada. Grounded in practical experience, these applications take place across multiple educational settings which include the classroom, school-wide planning tables, senior

administrative contexts, and community learning environments such as outdoor and land-based education.

Staff Professional Development

School leaders play a pivotal role to design and help facilitate professional development that builds intercultural competence, relational accountability, and critical consciousness. This includes creating opportunities for staff to reflect on their own assumptions and biases, and to develop the skills needed to communicate effectively across cultural differences with colleagues, students, and families. It also involves developing accountability measures for leaders themselves, ensuring that relationships with Indigenous and multicultural community members are sustained and grounded in respect and reciprocity. The following strategies offer impactful ways that school leaders can infuse these principles into ongoing professional learning.

Developing Cultural Competence Through Self-Reflection

Initiating professional development with activities that allow staff to reflect on their own cultural backgrounds, positionality, implicit biases, and assumptions about students and colleagues is a valuable first step toward developing intercultural competence and fostering equitable leadership. According to Deardorff (2006), intercultural competence requires personal attributes such as curiosity, openness, and respect for other cultures, as well as deep self-awareness.

> Of the specific components of intercultural competence noted, many of them addressed an individual's personal attributes, such as curiosity, general openness, and respect for other cultures. Other delineated components involved cultural awareness, various adaptive traits, and cultural knowledge (both culture specific knowledge as well as deep cultural knowledge). (p. 248)

Before educators can meaningfully engage with cultural differences in their school communities, they must first understand their own cultural identities and how those identities shape their

perceptions and interactions. This is particularly important for staff who come from dominant cultural backgrounds, such as British and European ancestry, as the Canadian school system was historically designed to reflect and reproduce the norms from those cultures. Without understanding their own cultural positioning, educators may unconsciously reproduce systems of inequity. Deardorff also highlights the importance of engaging with and valuing other cultures through direct experience (2006). By creating opportunities for staff to explore their own histories and reflect on their place within broader systems, school leaders can foster curiosity, empathy, and readiness to support culturally diverse students and colleagues more effectively.

To create a space for this self-reflection for staff, school leaders need to value teachers' and students' stories as sources for learning and insight. Cultural humility then requires school leaders to value the lived experiences of school community members. This includes opportunities during professional development for staff to share their backgrounds, the backgrounds of some of their students, and their insights and perspectives on various learning topics, in order to develop a broader understanding on a topic. "Thus, alternative epistemological truths are required if educational researchers and leaders are to be truly responsible, asking for new ways of looking into the reality of others that opens our own lives to view – and that makes us accountable to the people whom we study, and their interests and needs" (Dillard, 2000, p. 662). School leaders must implement alternative ways of knowing, such as the lived experiences of others if they want to lead in an ethically and responsible way in education. They must also be willing to hold themselves accountable to the students and staff they work with. Educators and leaders must move away from the idea of "neutral" relationships and embrace knowledge that is formed through relationships and connections (Dillard, 2000). This relational approach to knowledge challenges the traditional hierarchies in education and reminds school leaders that professional development is not only about acquiring new skills, but transforming how we listen, learn, and lead within diverse school communities.

For school leaders and teachers to be able to achieve the level of self-reflection needed to identify both conscious and unconscious biases, to recognize their positionality, to consider the lived experiences of learners, and to develop curiosity about school community members, they need to be given the opportunity to practice with targeted professional development. "PD that uses external and active guidance of this reflection process can change belief systems and help decrease discomfort with diversity or possible prejudice" (Romijn et al., 2021, p. 12). Effective critical reflection within professional development should be taken into consideration by transformative leaders as they create space to support all staff and students. Professional development that includes guided self-assessments, facilitated discussions, cultural case analyses, and peer feedback sessions can help participants move toward that critical self-reflection and make meaningful changes to their classroom practice (Romijn et al., 2021). The next application of meaningful professional development is to ensure that training leads to action by centering anti-racist education and an understanding of the systems that maintain inequities in education for diverse learners.

Centering Anti-Racism and Examining Systemic Barriers

Professional development that prioritizes and centers anti-racism must engage staff to critically examine how both historical and current systems of oppression shape school environments. This includes an analysis of how policies and practices have been impacted by systemic racism, including the unacknowledged benefits some school stakeholders receive. School staff need to be able to reflect on their positionality and possible privilege while also connecting it to larger systemic structures. However, this reflection is only meaningful if it is grounded in an understanding of the historical development of the educational system. Without this connection, efforts towards reconciliation and multicultural inclusion may risk becoming "metaphorical" as warned by Tuck and Yang (2012).

In order to avoid performative or metaphorical approaches to decolonization and reconciliation, professional development must include opportunities to identify and analyze the

systems that create inequities in school. Tuck and Yang (2012) warn that touching on diversity through isolated activities or celebrations of culture will not create the meaningful change that is needed to support all learners. Staff need to learn how the dominant culture is embedded in schooling through curriculum and school policy, and how that impacts marginalized and multicultural learners. By applying Critical Race Theory to education, staff can be shown how the British and European roots of Canadian educational policy have created a system that benefits students and staff with similar historical ties. Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995) showcase that the disproportionate amount of poor American families, who happen to be African American, is not due to "poor performance" in schools, but rather schools being structured and designed to be advantageous to the dominant culture. "While some might argue that poor children, regardless of race, do worse in school, and that the high proportion of African-American poor contributes to their dismal school performance, we argue that the cause of their poverty in conjunction with the condition of their schools and schooling is institutional and structural racism" (p. 55). This systemic structure is also evident in Canada, with Indigenous people and other marginalized populations. As such, a transformative school leader must help facilitate opportunities for professional development representatives to understand and share this truth.

Some of Canada's largest school boards have supported and initiated the "infusion" of CRT within their schools, including the Toronto District School Board and the York District School Board (Skelton, 2025). Smaller districts need to follow suit, particularly those with higher Indigenous populations. One of the variables that is holding this progress back, is the confusion of what CRT actually is. "The faulty interpretation of critical race theory by its critics is part of the problem. CRT does not theorize that White students need to feel ashamed and guilty about their race. Rather, CRT theorizes that the dominant perspectives of certain races ignore the collective experiences of historically marginalized groups, such as Indigenous and racialized people (James & Shah, 2022, as cited in Skelton, 2025, p. 28). Therefore, school leaders,

including professional development representatives, must approach CRT training carefully and collaboratively, especially by learning from districts with greater experience, like the TDSB.

CRT training for school staff follows directly with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Call to Action 57, which urges education leaders to provide training on the history of Indigenous peoples, the legacy of residential schools, and the ongoing impacts of colonialism (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). Professional development must explore how historical policies still inform curriculum development, disciplinary practices, and school structures, so school staff can see how their choices, while seeming "normal," are only normalized within a system that encourages those choices to begin with. The next section examines how school leaders can support teachers in constructing curriculum that is culturally grounded, dialogical, and ultimately transformative.

Curriculum and Pedagogy

To enact reconciliation and decolonial education, transformative leaders must infuse Indigenous worldviews into the core of teaching and learning. The following section explores how oral storytelling, talking circles, land-based learning, and Elder involvement can shift curriculum and pedagogy away from Eurocentric models toward relational and experiential education. These approaches respond directly to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015), and these examples show how school leaders can create inclusive learning spaces by partnering with Indigenous communities and bringing back Indigenous ways of knowing.

Embedding Oral Storytelling and Indigenous Worldviews

A powerful way that transformative school leaders can support culturally responsive curriculum is to provide the tools and resources necessary for teachers to embed oral storytelling and Indigenous worldviews into classroom practice. In Indigenous culture, storytelling is utilized as a pedagogical method to transmit values, knowledge, history, and ways of being (Barkaskas & Gladwin, 2021). One way that this pedagogical approach can be utilized

within classrooms is through talking circles. "We maintain that pedagogical talking circles provide one successful method of destabilizing and rewriting the narrative of Eurocentric educational systems, where students can feel supported when expressing themselves about challenging concepts, topics, and/or histories" (p. 21). This dialogical form of education is also supported by Freire (1970), where he describes authentic dialogue between learners and teachers as a "humanizing pedagogy": "The only effective instrument is a humanizing pedagogy in which the revolutionary leadership establishes a permanent relationship of dialogue with the oppressed" (p. 55). Freire is saying that if teachers are willing to engage in open discourse, build relationships, and engage with students as they formulate their oral responses, students will reach a level of autonomy with their learning that doesn't happen with "traditional" forms of education, as described through his banking model. "Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers" (Freire, 1970, p. 67). Through authentic discourse, teachers and students become collaborative and embark on a learning journey together. Furthermore, the use of talking circles supports the importance of transformative knowledge when implementing multicultural curriculum as opposed to the additive curriculum, outlined by Sleeter (2005). Transformative knowledge

> serves as an umbrella term for bodies of knowledge that have been historically marginalized or subjugated, such as Chicano studies, gay/lesbian studies, women's studies, or ethnic studies. (2) It draws attention to understandings that challenge many mainstream assumptions, and that re-envision the world in ways that would benefit historically oppressed communities and support justice. (p. 83)

By creating a space for teachers to utilize talking circles, school leaders are not only reclaiming pedagogies that have been historically marginalized but are also creating conditions for students to engage in collective learning, share diverse perspectives, and express

understanding through culturally grounded forms of communication that originated before "formal" schooling.

Another impactful way that school leaders can support reconciliation and multiculturalism through curriculum, is by bringing in Indigenous Knowledge keepers into schools to teach through stories and share their world views. Within Manitoba, a pilot project was initiated in the 2021-2022 academic school year that brought Elders to the classrooms from various First Nations in Manitoba. This pilot project identified important findings, such as a need in schools for identifying appropriate protocols and developing cultural safety training for school staff around Indigenous culture and education, as well as having a designated contact person for schools when needed (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2022). Bringing in traditional Knowledge Keepers also alleviates anxiety for non-Indigenous educators, as they may not be subject matter experts and may feel uncomfortable discussing certain topics around Indigenous history and culture. Indigenous Knowledge keepers also bring in alternative teaching methods as many Elders provided teachings using stories. Perhaps, the most impactful and unintended consequence of the pilot project is helping build relationships between Indigenous students and the school system, as well as with the greater Indigenous communities. "There has been a difficult history of relations between Indigenous Peoples and public institutions. Our kids don't thrive here; they just try to survive. Elders can play a role in bridging that relationship, in building trust" (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2022. p. 27).

The use of talking circles and the inclusion of Indigenous Knowledge Keepers are practical applications that directly respond to several of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action. These pedagogical approaches support Call 62, which emphasizes the need for age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools and Indigenous content, as well as Call 63, which advocates for intercultural understanding and respect through curriculum reform (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). By supporting and facilitating

these practices, school leaders help create inclusive and culturally grounded learning environments for all students.

Land-Based Learning

Another way that schools, school leaders, and teachers can infuse Indigenous ways of knowing into the curriculum and support all learners is through land-based learning. Land-based learning is a transformative educational approach rooted in Indigenous knowledge systems and sovereignty (Datta et al., 2025). In this model, land is understood not as a resource but as a teacher that fosters "deep ecological literacy," "community resilience," and "Indigenous-led environmental stewardship" (pp. 2–3). Land-based learning can be provided to students in a variety of ways, but there are specific recommendations on how to do so while respecting Indigenous protocols. This includes mentorship from Elders, which means schools need to find ways to develop partnerships with Indigenous communities so students can get out and learn from the land with the guidance of a traditional knowledge keeper (Bowra et al., 2021). Land-based learning activities are often considered integral for intergenerational knowledge transfer, so the involvement of community members is important to follow the protocols of Indigenous ways of knowing. By including Elders, community members, and youth in land-based learning, the skills get passed on to future Indigenous generations to allow the learning to continue. Activities within land-based learning include hunting, fishing, food preparation, language practice, along with ecology. Opportunities for students to hear Indigenous languages on the land are considered forms of land-based learning, as the formation of these languages were influenced by the land where they originated from. Because of these protocols, school leaders need to ensure they have developed intercultural competencies and cultural humility, and that they have established trust-based relationships with Indigenous communities and Knowledge Keepers to provide these opportunities to students. Understanding the beliefs, behaviors, and meanings of cultural groups, even if they are not "part of the elite social group which has imposed them on the nation," is crucial for fostering meaningful intercultural communication and

interaction in educational contexts (Byram, 1997, p. 20). If school leaders have this level of competence, they can use land-based learning as an opportunity for reciprocal learning and relationship building between the school and Indigenous community, while also providing a deeply meaningful learning opportunity for all students and staff.

The integration of land-based learning into school curriculum and pedagogical approaches applies directly to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action 10. Call 10 emphasizes the importance of culturally appropriate curriculum, as well as support for Indigenous learners (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). The support of land-based education by school leaders, and the effort to help facilitate it, shows a commitment to community relationships, language, and traditional ecological knowledge. The competencies required to make these opportunities happen shows a school leader's role in advancing reconciliation and inclusion, along with school culture. The next section will explore additional practical applications that specifically shape school culture and enhance family engagement.

Family Engagement and School Culture

Inclusion and reconciliation in schools requires deep, sustained relationships with the families and communities that shape the school environment. School leaders play a crucial role in building these relationships by creating a school culture based in mutual trust, intercultural competence, and shared decision-making opportunities. This section looks at how humanizing practices like family-school collaboration and design circles can create equitable engagement, especially for Indigenous and multicultural families. As our schools become increasingly diverse, it is also important to look at the school experiences of families and students from these communities. Through authentic dialogue and listening, school leaders can learn how to support them, which will be showcased through a study on Sikh students and families in Canada. These strategies reflect both a decolonial and multicultural approach to leadership and align with the TRC's Calls to Action that focus on intercultural understanding and systemic change.

Fostering Equitable Family Engagement Through Humanizing Practices

One of the most important tasks for a school leader is to positively shape a school's culture and to increase family engagement. To help forge a positive school culture, school leaders need to build equitable relationships with the families that are members of the school community. However, meaningful engagement can be challenging when cultural or linguistic differences exist between school staff and the families they serve. School leaders can address these challenges by adopting intentional, humanizing strategies that acknowledge and bridge these differences. One effective strategy involves building genuine partnerships with families by creating opportunities for warm, inviting interactions alongside shared decision-making processes.

The development of parental partnerships with schools can take the form of a council or a committee, "a body legislated to include parents in the development of school improvement plans and the disbursement of state funds" (Kuttner, et al., 2021, p. 142). Not all councils and committees are created equal, and the objectives of these groups may vary. A strong school leader with a diverse school community can utilize school councils to bring everyone together and work towards a common goal, such as improving the school community for everyone. For example, involving families in decision-making processes rather than limiting their participation to volunteering at events. "This includes efforts for schools to share power with families as leaders and decision makers, recognizing the wealth of knowledge and assets that families provide as well as the power of organized parents to promote education justice and systemic change" (p. 143). This type of collaboration, known as family-school collaboration, requires strong relationships between schools and families that are based on mutual trust. The components for a school leader to establish this level of trust with families include:

(a) respect, which includes authentically listening to another person and considering their perspectives; (b) personal regard, which is expressed through a proactive willingness to engage and be open; (c) competence, which is the sense that

someone has the knowledge and skills to fulfill their role; and (d) personal integrity,

which determines whether an individual does what they say they will do. (pp. 143-144)

These components are particularly lacking in schools where the workforce is from the dominant

culture and the student body is composed of bicultural and immigrant communities (Kuttner, et

al., 2021). Practical recommendations to overcome this, which are crucial for a school leader

working towards reconciliation and inclusion, include the utilization of "design circles". This is

where school community members gather to co-design theories and solutions to pressing

school issues (Kuttner, et al., 2021). Community members involved in a design circle can share

their thoughts and experiences with an additional goal of building relationships, developing a

collective analysis of each other's stories, discussing larger socio-political structures, and the

co-creation of solutions to issues impacting the school (Kuttner, et al., 2021).

The emphasis on a collective analysis and collaborative solutions through design circles

aligns with Velásquez Atehortúa's (2020) decolonial pedagogy, which makes a call for

educators and school leaders to critically engage with how intersecting identities like race,

gender, class and religion shape people's experiences within schools. Design circles honor the

lived realities of diverse families through the participatory processes involved in them, so when

school leaders facilitate strategies like this, they take important steps towards inclusive practices

at the family level, along with improving school culture. The need to use effective strategies

such as design circles to support marginalized students and families is becoming more apparent

as our diversity grows within Canadian schools, such as with our growing Sikh populations.

Supporting Sikh Families Through Culturally Responsive Engagement

There is a growing population of Punjabi-Sikh students and families shaping the cultural

landscape of many Canadian school communities (Statistics Canada, 2022). Sikh families often

express respect for teachers and have high hopes for their children's futures, but research

shows that they also experience systemic barriers to meaningful school engagement, similar to

Indigenous students (Drake, 2020). Schools often lack the cultural understanding and training

required to fully support the needs of Sikh students. Cases of bullying have been documented around Sikh cultural markers like the turban, uncut hair, and steel bracelets. One teacher admitted that after a Sikh student's *patka* (a head covering worn by young Sikh boys) was nearly pulled off his head by another student, she was not sure how to properly address the incident among her students. Although Punjabi-Sikh parents generally think their child's school and teacher respect their cultural backgrounds, they felt the school's ability to understand and engage with them was lacking, especially when it came to communication as a major barrier to the parents' engagement with their child's education.

To overcome these barriers, school leaders must develop the intercultural competencies needed to lead diverse communities with authenticity. Deardorff (2009) outlines key attributes for interculturally competent leaders, including openness, cultural humility, deep cultural knowledge, and a willingness to adapt practices based on the needs of others. These traits must be developed through continual reflective practice and built experience. Byram (1997) similarly argues that effective intercultural communication requires more than surface-level respect. It involves the ability to interpret, compare, and negotiate between cultural frameworks to foster understanding and connections with school community members. Without these continually developed capacities, school leaders could unintentionally make families from diverse communities feel excluded or reinforce dominant culture hierarchies (British and European heritages). Supporting diverse communities such as Sikh students and families is an opportunity for school leaders to put forward the necessary skills and attributes that critical multiculturalism requires to support all community members and transform school culture.

Design circles offer a practical model for advancing critical multiculturalism by allowing families and educators to co-create solutions and build trust. This is only possible if school leaders have an adequate level of intercultural competence, particularly in the areas of openness, adaptability, and respect (Deardorff, 2009). In addition to these skills, school leaders must also demonstrate strong intercultural communication competence to effectively engage

with diverse families and sustain meaningful relationships. These competencies, along with the use of design circles, align with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Call to Action 63, which promotes intercultural understanding and mutual respect (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). Although the Calls to Action focus on Indigenous reconciliation, the principles behind these calls can guide engagement with all school community members, making equitable outcomes a priority for everyone. This is also true when developing school policies, which will be discussed in the next section.

School-Wide Policy and Systems

In order to achieve lasting systemic change in education, transformative leadership must extend into broader structures that shape how schools operate. This includes school policy, frameworks, and system-wide programs that promote equity, inclusion, and reconciliation. School leaders need to engage with communities on a relational level but also advocate and create policies that infuse those relationships into the school's operation. This section demonstrates how transformative leadership can influence systemic change by developing Indigenous Education Councils, using data-informed processes from education change networks to drive practice and training, and incorporating frameworks like the RESPECT model to create long lasting, sustainable relationships with our greater communities and to develop policy collaboratively.

Education Change Networks and Indigenous Accountability

In order for school leaders to facilitate meaningful measures that build towards reconciliation, inclusion, and equitable opportunities, they need to develop processes of internal accountability that work towards them. This can be achieved through collaborative processes, where teachers, school leaders, and educational staff have opportunities to learn from traditional Knowledge Keepers, Elders, and Indigenous educators (Schnellert et al., 2022). This collaborative process can provide the skills, dispositions, and resources for school leaders to hold themselves internally accountable as they make reconciliation, inclusion, and equity a top

priority in their practice. A practical application of such a collaborative process is an Education Change Network, which has a goal of how "...to develop student and teacher capacity and enable culturally sustainable pedagogies and system transformation" (p. 4). Without such a collaborative opportunity such as an Education Change Network, teachers may not feel "internally accountable" because they do not have the training, resources, confidence, and newly developed attitudes towards reconciliation and decolonial pedagogy. An ECN might "support educators to collaborate with Indigenous community members and researchers to better meet the needs of all learners by taking up holistic Indigenous ways of knowing and being in inclusive classrooms" (p. 2). What makes an ECN different from traditional professional development is that it creates space for educators to engage in authentic conversations around their practices and through reflection. "From the onset of learning, educators engage in questioning, making connections, drawing inferences, challenging, and reconstituting knowledge; they articulate and make explicit why they do what they do as the basis for improving their practice" (p. 2). There is significant research that shows when teachers partake in an ECN they are more likely to sustain their attention on the goals discussed, try new ideas, persist in efforts of innovation, and to transform their teaching practice based on students and their needs (Schnellert et al., 2022).

Educators involved in an ECN that was grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing, reconciliation, and decolonial pedagogy reported feeling "awakened" to structural inequities. They recognized a pressing need for external resources to support reconciliation work in schools and identified the importance of developing new skills to decolonize their practice and move toward meaningful action (Schnellert et al., 2022). The awakenings included an understanding of characteristics of colonial culture, a recognition of complicity, and further reflection of power dynamics within classrooms and school systems. Over the course of the year, through several sessions in the ECN, teachers also reported a change in their dispositions, including increased courage around having hard conversations with students

around race, and realizing a crucial need for "ethical spaces for engagement" (p. 6). Some of the external resources educators realized they needed included developing relationships with Indigenous Knowledge Keepers, Elders, and Indigenous educators at local First Nation schools. From this realization, some teachers even invited the Cultural Coordinator involved in the ECN to speak to students in their classroom (Schnellert et al., 2022).

The most important outcome of the ECN, however, was the transition from reflection to action. This action centered on teacher participants' realization of the need to decolonize their practice and to uphold relational accountability (Schnellert et al., 2022). This form of accountability emphasizes educators' responsibilities to their relationships with students, families, community members, and the land. Through the ECN, relational accountability became a core part of teachers' practice through sustained collaboration with Indigenous partners. This engagement included the introduction to Indigenous ways of knowing, where educators learned that success can be defined by culturally sustaining and community-identified indicators, not solely by standardized outcomes. The collective goal of the ECN was to "increase all students' access to leading-edge, culturally sustaining learning" (p. 9).

The work of an Indigenous Education Change network aligns directly with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action 62 and 63, which require the development of age-appropriate Indigenous curriculum and the advancement of intercultural understandings within education systems (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). School leaders can move beyond performative acts of reconciliation through the fostering of relational accountability and embracing Indigenous definitions of success, which can then create a lasting systemic change. Furthermore, the ECN's dialogic, non-hierarchical structure reflects Freire's (1970) vision of education as a mutual process of learning and transformation. "The teacher is no longer merely the one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach" (p. 66). Participants within the ECN co-constructed knowledge through their critical reflection, which led to action. Transformative school leaders play a critical

role in supporting this shift by integrating ECN-inspired practices into school policies, strategic plans, and professional learning frameworks. By doing this work, they create systems that prioritize culturally sustaining pedagogy, uphold the voices of Indigenous partners, and ensure that accountability is relational. The next section will explore how these voices are elevated through the development of Indigenous education councils.

Indigenous Education Councils and Collaborative Structures

A transformative leader is able to support Indigenous students through collaborative structures like an Indigenous Education council. With such a council, a school can utilize a whole-community approach to help improve Indigenous education outcomes. With a council, members are able to collaborate and find trends that can help the schools they work with, improve graduation rates, and find resources that respond to the Indigenous community's needs (Central Okanagan Public Schools Aboriginal Education Council, 2018). Through the use of a council, the Okanagan Public schools (located in Kelowna, British Columbia) were able to prioritize issues and strategic ways to improve Indigenous student success, integrate Indigenous-centered courses in the high school's department, develop cohorts of support networks for students that included teachers, Aboriginal Advocates, Aboriginal Tutors, and members of the wider community (Central Okanagan Public Schools Aboriginal Education Council, 2018).

Councils such as this, are created through the Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement, which includes involvement between the local schools and district, local Indigenous communities, and the B.C. Ministry of Education (Central Okanagan Public Schools Aboriginal Education Council, 2018). Local schools and districts are responsible for the creation of their Education Agreements, with the support of the Ministry and the authentic inclusion of local Indigenous communities who have community members in their schools. One of the first priorities of the Education Enhancement Agreement is to develop an Indigenous Education council, now mandated under the BC School Act (British Columbia, 2023). This is a stakeholder

committee with representatives from schools, districts, and Indigenous communities (Central Okanagan Public Schools Aboriginal Education Council, 2018). For a school leader focused on reconciliation and inclusive education, active engagement in such councils is critical, either directly or through a selected staff member.

Once the council is established, there is a recommended order of operations to pursue to optimize efficiency of the council. First, members of the council need to build strong relationships with local First Nation communities and consult together as part of the work of the council (Central Okanagan Public Schools Aboriginal Education Council, 2018). Then, integration of Indigenous-centered courses, particularly at the high school level, to improve the school's learning community and ensure Aboriginal tutors are available to support students. The creation of a specialized "study track" to help Indigenous find courses that suit their needs, interests, and skills can help them work towards graduation, alongside the support of tutors and advocates (Central Okanagan Public Schools Aboriginal Education Council, 2018).

The use of Indigenous Education Councils offers a promising avenue for inclusion and reconciliation. These councils function as collaborative decision-making frameworks that enable Indigenous students and community members to take meaningful control of their learning pathways. Because Indigenous Education Councils are co-led by Indigenous communities, they successfully transfer control and disrupt systems, while avoiding the pitfalls of symbolic or metaphorical gestures toward inclusion that Tuck and Yang (2012) warn against. These councils represent a transformative model because they are not reduced to consultation, as they involve Indigenous community members throughout the decision-making process. This aligns with Calls to Action 7, 10, 62, and 63, which call for closing educational gaps, integrating Indigenous content, and fostering intercultural understanding (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). For school leaders, active participation in such councils demonstrates a commitment not only to reconciliation but to structural change in how schools function. By embedding Indigenous leadership into school decision-making frameworks, councils become a

living example of what it means to decolonize education in practice. For Indigenous Councils to thrive, there needs to be a process of building and maintaining relationships with Indigenous communities, which will be discussed next with the RESPECT model.

The RESPECT Model as a Policy and Relationship Framework

A transformative leader within schools who is focused on improving educational outcomes for all students, working towards reconciliation, and making schools accepting of all cultures needs to consider the process for establishing and building relationships with the greater communities involved in the schools. This includes Indigenous communities and multicultural communities. The RESPECT model is a framework that can be utilized by a transformative school leader to establish and build these relationships, which can then in turn create better outcomes and collaborative opportunities for all school community members.

Joseph and Joseph (2019) identify that there is not a single process that you can use that will work in every situation when working with Indigenous Peoples, and they establish that "…the appropriate process in any given situation will change depending on the communities involved and on the various policies and legal, cultural, and regional considerations on the table" (p. 71). This means the model is designed to help leaders build authentic, long-term relationships with Indigenous Peoples, but its principles also extend to supporting all minority groups. By walking through each phase of the RESPECT model (Research, Examine, Strategize, Present, Evaluate, Customize, and Transform), school leaders can develop flexible, localized practices that ensure equity and inclusion are at the foundation of school policy and culture (Joseph & Joseph, 2019).

The first step in the RESPECT model is Research, which involves understanding the community's cultural, historical, and political context before engaging (Joseph & Joseph, 2019). "No successful international business person would go to another country to do business without researching legal and cultural differences and considering their impact on existing businesses, and practices" (p. 72). This approach should also be applied in schools when

building relationships with Indigenous communities and other communities involved in the school. This includes knowing key cultural practices, local histories, and systemic challenges such as those faced by Indigenous and immigrant communities.

The Examine stage emphasizes the importance of critically reflecting on how community dynamics intersect with school goals, and how a leader's actions may impact those they aim to support. As a school leader, it is important to process and examine all the information available, and to understand the potential impact of the community's key issues on the school, along with the school's impact on the community (Joseph & Joseph, 2019). This can include understanding the appropriate time to make an approach with an Indigenous community. "Timing can be everything for the person who is looking to build relationships with an Indigenous community" (p. 80). Being aware of what is happening in the communities a school serves (and ensuring those events are not disrupted) is important. This includes recognizing cultural events, historical commemorations, and recent demonstrations, which helps ensure that engagement efforts are respectful rather than intrusive. This awareness should also extend to holidays and traditions celebrated by multicultural staff and students, fostering a more inclusive and informed leadership approach.

In the Strategize phase, leaders develop intentional, community-informed plans and policies that promote equity and sustain authentic partnerships. This includes putting together a strategy for approaching the community that you hope to engage with (Joseph & Joseph, 2019). This can be developed in a school and district's formal Indigenous policy, which includes measures for community relations, and through Indigenous Councils (once they are developed). This can also be applied for our multicultural family engagement strategies, such as family-school collaboration initiatives and the use of design circles to build relationships with school community members.

The Present stage focuses on how school leaders introduce themselves and their intentions to communities, ensuring that initial meetings prioritize relationship-building over

agenda-setting. To prepare for this, a school leader needs to plan out the first meeting in advance, understand the cultural protocols, be aware of cultural mannerisms and body language, and choice of language (Joseph & Joseph, 2019).

The Evaluate stage encourages school leaders to assess the effectiveness of their engagement efforts and the school's inclusive practices, using both feedback and outcome data. "Any meeting with an Indigenous community, or one of its members, should be followed by an evaluation of how things have gone so far" (Joseph & Joseph, 2019, p. 129). As a school leader, this can include assessing the impact on the promotion of inclusion within the school community through engagement with staff and students, and with community members from Indigenous and multicultural communities. Further evaluation can include assessing the level of support provided to staff in implementing Indigenous education, as well as examining educational outcomes, student well-being, attendance, and the availability of extracurricular activities for students and community members.

In the Customize stage, leaders adapt their approaches based on what they have learned from evaluation and community dialogue, ensuring that solutions are responsive to the unique needs of each group. This includes the incorporation of the feedback received and any requests that have been made during these dialogues (Joseph & Joseph, 2019). Therefore, a school leader using the RESPECT model will need to continually customize their approach to better serve and support the community, staff, and students they work with. This should be done through a participative leadership approach so that voices are heard by staff and the entire group is involved in decision making processes. The collaborative adjustments at the Customize stage will ensure relationships remain authentic and mutual with all stakeholders.

The final stage, Transform, challenges school leaders to embed these relationship-based, inclusive practices into the school's structures, policies, and culture which will make equity a systemic reality, not a temporary program. This is done through the creation of policies and frameworks that promote long-lasting relationships with Indigenous communities and

multicultural community members. This stage is where Indigenous Education Councils (developed collaboratively between school districts and local Indigenous communities) are formed to guide programming and support Indigenous student success. It is also where Enhancement Agreements are created (between the Ministry of Education, local school district, and Indigenous communities), Family-School Collaboration initiatives are developed (at the school level), Education Change Networks are implemented (between the school and Indigenous communities and stakeholders), and design circles (also at the school level) begin to influence school policy and culture. This is when a school leader must "return to the community to present your customized presentation (Joseph & Joseph, 2019, p. 133). This final stage ensures relationships are maintained and voices are heard, and through the design of the RESPECT model, there can be continued evaluation, customization, and transformation of any of the policies or procedures developed.

The RESPECT model from Joseph & Joseph (2019) ties in a lot of the literature discussed throughout this capstone. This includes the intercultural competencies discussed by Deardorff (2009) and Byram (1997). The structure of the RESPECT model promotes dialogic, decolonial education as promoted by Freire (1970), and it reflects the lived realities of Indigenous people, as described by Barkaskas & Gladwin (2021). The implementation of this model disrupts structural racism as discussed by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), by allowing Indigenous communities to have a say in their education through their essential roles in the model and the development of school policies. Finally, it aligns with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action by transforming reconciliation from a gesture into a system-wide commitment. This includes Calls to Action 62 and 63 (advancing intercultural understanding and teacher training), Call 7 (closing achievement gaps), and Call 10 (improving educational success through culturally relevant programming) (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). In the following chapter, I reflect on how my professional experiences across diverse

educational contexts have revealed the impact of these practical strategies and the necessity of grounding leadership in both research and relational accountability.

Chapter Four: Reflections from Practice

This chapter contains reflections on my personal teaching experiences across a variety of educational contexts, while also examining how different school systems, programs, and settings have engaged with inclusive practices in support of multiculturalism and reconciliation. From private schools in China, to First Nation Band schools in Alberta, and public school districts in western Canada, these reflections explore the realities of teaching, leading, and learning in spaces that differ in culture, structure, and community dynamics. Each reflection is grounded in a distinct practical setting, which includes classroom instruction, staff meetings, off-campus retreats, and community gatherings. This chapter highlights how transformative leadership and intercultural competence can be engaged to make an impact within a diverse school community. These experiences serve as personal applications of the theoretical and practical case studies discussed in earlier chapters. Together, they reinforce the central argument that school leaders play a crucial role in advancing reconciliation and inclusion by infusing decolonial pedagogy and critical multiculturalism into everyday educational structures. This reflection begins by analyzing the process of adapting the Canadian curriculum within a private school context in Guangzhou, China.

Teaching in a Private School in China

My first year of teaching, upon completing the Bachelor of Education program at Lakehead University, brought me to teaching the Alberta curriculum in the metropolis of Guangzhou, China. I had been advised to head west upon graduation to find work as a new teacher, so I attended the Faculty of Education job fair at the University of Calgary. By the end of that day, I had signed my first teaching contract with the Canadian International School of Guangzhou. The following experiences therefore apply to a classroom setting.

Guangzhou is the largest city in Guangdong province in southern China. The city has a rich cultural history and its official language is Cantonese. However, Mandarin is used in schools, aligning with the language policies centralized in Beijing. Students at the Canadian International School were often multilingual, with English being a third or fourth language for many of the students I taught.

As this was my first year of teaching, there were expected challenges. However, working in a multilingual and multicultural classroom required additional flexibility and creativity, including the solutions that were only possible due to the support of my school administrator. For example, as a Grade 2 homeroom teacher, I was expected to teach the social studies content focused on Canada's prairie provinces, including geography and the experiences of Ukrainian Canadians in Manitoba and Saskatchewan. After getting to know my class, I realized that out of 23 students, only one had ever visited Canada, which was to Vancouver. Teaching about regions and people that none of my students could meaningfully relate to posed a serious challenge.

After consulting with my principal, I proposed adapting the unit to focus on similar rural provinces within China that also had unique regional cultures, lower population densities, and agricultural economies. My administrator, himself a Ukrainian Canadian from Saskatchewan, enthusiastically supported the idea and even visited our class near the end of the unit to share cultural clothing and artifacts he had brought to China. The students were highly engaged, especially since many had been to the rural regions we discussed. This approach localized the curriculum and transformed it to reflect the lived experiences of the learners, aligning with Sleeter's (2005) call for transformative, rather than additive, multicultural curriculum. This would not have been possible without administrative support and a shared belief in student-centered teaching.

While living in China, I recognized the importance of developing intercultural competence and began taking weekly Mandarin lessons with the school's language teacher. I

integrated Mandarin phrases into classroom routines to affirm students' identities and show respect for the effort they were making to learn English. I also read two books on Chinese history to deepen my cultural awareness and better understand the complex social and economic dynamics I witnessed. These efforts align with Byram's (1997) framework of intercultural communicative competence, particularly in cultivating relational empathy, cultural humility, and an openness to learning from others.

This teaching experience helped me understand firsthand the need for school leaders and educators to adapt curriculum and pedagogy to reflect student realities, and to create authentic relationships across cultures. It reinforced the argument that multiculturalism in education must move beyond the "additive approach" and become embedded in both what we teach and how administrators lead. In the next section, I will reflect on how decolonial pedagogies and school programs were applied in First Nation Band schools in Alberta through land-based learning and community-driven change.

Educating in First Nation Band Schools in Alberta

While teaching at a First Nation school in northern Alberta, I was lucky enough to take my Grade 5 class to learn off the land with Elders throughout the year, during different seasons. The setting for this learning opportunity was outdoors, at a sacred site known as "Two Valleys".

During each term, students and teachers would be given the opportunity to travel to this land-based learning site to gain important knowledge aligned with seasonal teachings. This included learning about which berries were edible, and which were not, the trees used for making traditional canoes, gutting fish (pike, trout, and walleye), preparing waterfowl (plucking feathers), navigation through trail systems using natural landmarks, and Cree language acquisition opportunities. Oftentimes, Elders would translate what they were saying from English to Cree, and anything a student pointed at or picked up off the ground, Elders would explain their use as well as their meanings in Cree.

These land-based learning opportunities exemplified Indigenous ways of knowing and aligned closely with the pedagogical practices described by Bowra et al. (2021) and Datta (2025). Without full support from school administration, and strong community partnerships with local knowledge keepers, these initiatives would not have been possible. Taking students out to learn from the land with Elders and Knowledge Keepers directly supports the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Call to Action 10, which urges the integration of Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into the classroom (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015).

While working as a Learning Support Teacher with a southern Alberta First Nation, serving both an elementary and secondary school, I participated in several initiatives that supported Indigenous cultural teachings, student wellness, and community-led school planning.

The first program was a Monday morning cultural assembly that was devised by our school administration. Each week, the entire elementary school would meet in the gym, sit in a circle, and listen to an Elder open the week with a greeting in both Blackfoot and English. At every assembly, the Elder would share a traditional Blackfoot story with a moral, sing a song, teach about the drum, and explain the significance of smudging in Blackfoot culture. This approach provided students with meaningful oral storytelling experiences, delivered in the form of a traditional circle, aligning with the pedagogical model described by Barkaskas & Gladwin (2021). In addition to its cultural significance, the assembly also functioned as a wellness check-in for students and allowed staff to identify any supports that may be needed early in the week.

The second initiative took place at the policy level under the Nation's local education authority. At the end of each school year, this body organized a board-wide retreat, gathering school administrators, selected teachers, support staff, community members, Elders, and members of Chief and Council. The purpose of this off-campus retreat was to collaboratively build school improvement plans, share reflections, and design more culturally responsive programming. In my year of participation, the retreat was held in a nearby urban center at a

hotel conference room. Most planning took place in structured meeting blocks, but shared social time also helped foster deeper relationships among stakeholders.

This retreat reflected the goals of Education Change Networks (ECN) as described by Schnellert et al. (2022), and was comparable to the collaborative nature of design circles promoted by Kuttner et al. (2021). While not officially called a design circle, the retreat created a similar space for community-led decisions and solutions. The programs showed a commitment to building educational experiences around the needs of the Nation's students, based on trust and collaboration. They also modeled transformative leadership practices in action through relational accountability, land-based pedagogy, and meaningful inclusion of community voices in school policy.

These programs and initiatives showcased a systemic commitment to reconciliation and inclusion that I have rarely observed or seen replicated in public school contexts. In the next section, I reflect on the programs that I have observed and been a part of within rural Alberta and British Columbia.

Public School Experiences in Alberta and British Columbia

While working as a teacher in a rural district in southern Alberta, I had opportunities to work as a Teacher Teaching on Call (TTOC) in several of the district's communities. Eventually, I was offered a term contract at one of the schools as a Grade 4 homeroom teacher. While working at this school, I noticed there were often visitors from nearby First Nation communities helping out in classrooms. I eventually learned this was part of the Elders-in-Residence program, developed through a partnership between these Nations and the school district. These programs were experienced directly at the classroom level, as the Elders who were visiting for the week would work in specific classrooms that had members from their Indigenous communities. They supported students by sharing oral stories, offering cultural teachings, and often helping students regulate emotions by taking them for short walks, providing breaks, and supporting teachers in the moment.

Although the program was visible in daily classroom interactions, it would not have been possible without ongoing relationship-building efforts by district leaders and Indigenous Education Councils. It is reflective of a transformative leadership approach because it infuses Indigenous pedagogies, centers community values, and honours relational accountability.

These principles are also illustrated in the RESPECT model (Joseph & Joseph, 2019), particularly the "Examine," "Customize," and "Transform" stages. School leaders who facilitated this program would have needed to examine local histories and cultural contexts, customize school practices to reflect Indigenous partnerships, and transform school policies to enhance classroom experiences through the daily presence of Elders. Because Elders were involved not only as student supporters but also as cultural educators, the program also aligns with Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) Call to Action 63, which advocates for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect through inclusive curricula and leadership decisions.

The Elders-in-Residence program gave students a daily, normalized connection to Indigenous culture, not just as a unit in the curriculum, but as an active presence in the school. Though impactful, this type of program remains uncommon. In my current district in British Columbia, Indigenous engagement is often limited to annual events or short-term arts-based workshops. For example, one program brings in Indigenous artists and Knowledge Keepers once per year to teach Metis jigging and painting with selected students. While valuable, these limited-time engagements lack the relational depth and sustained presence needed to enact transformative change, and they do not include all students. Another program worth highlighting emerged during my practicum in rural northwestern Ontario. This program demonstrated how school districts can build sustainable relationships with Indigenous Nations to advance reconciliation and inclusion at the classroom, school, and district levels.

Observations of Reconciliation-Based Teaching and Inclusive Practices

While completing my student-teaching practicum in northern Ontario, I observed a powerful example of inclusive and reconciliation-focused leadership. In many classrooms, especially in schools serving high numbers of Indigenous learners, Indigenous support staff from two First Nations were employed as education assistants, cultural liaisons, and support workers. The setting for these observations was primarily the classroom, but the impact extended to staff meetings, school culture, and district-level hiring and partnership practices.

This initiative was part of a formal partnership between the school district and local First Nations. It not only improved academic and emotional support for all students, but also ensured that students from Indigenous communities saw trusted adults from their Nations working in the school. This relational visibility was crucial because it created a more welcoming environment, increased student comfort and trust, and provided students with Indigenous role models. For many students, having support staff from their own Nation provided an anchor during difficult moments, such as when dealing with visits from Child and Family Services (CFS) or engaging in counselling and wraparound services coordinated by the school.

This partnership aligns closely with the "Customize" and "Transform" phases of the RESPECT model (Joseph & Joseph, 2019), in which school leaders adapt staffing and engagement strategies to reflect community needs and support equity-based transformation. It also reflects Kuttner et al.'s (2021) emphasis on humanizing family-educator relationships, and Velásquez Atehortúa's (2020) argument that truly inclusive schools must address intersecting identities and systemic barriers. By co-creating visible, daily roles for Indigenous community members within the school environment, the school district demonstrated how systemic inclusion can move beyond curriculum to encompass staffing, wellness, and community presence. In my current teaching context, I have been told such a program would not be able to work as it would require the district to admit they cannot adequately staff their schools, but if it is framed in a way that shows the benefits of a sustained relationship between the school district and local First Nations, then this should be plausible in any school district.

The diverse teaching and leadership experiences explored in this chapter demonstrate that inclusive and reconciliation-focused practices are not only possible, but are already taking shape in varied educational settings across Canada. From classroom adaptations and outdoor cultural education, to system-level partnerships with Indigenous communities, these examples illustrate that school leaders play a critical role in transforming educational spaces into sites of relational accountability and equity. In particular, the integration of Indigenous support staff from the First Nations in northern Ontario, working in the local district's schools highlights how staffing practices and district-wide collaboration can foster cultural safety, continuity of care, and deep community trust. These are also principles embedded in the TRC's Call to Action 63, which urges the development of intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect through inclusive leadership (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). When school leaders base their decisions in sustained relationships with Indigenous and multicultural communities, and engage in reflective practice rooted in models such as RESPECT (Joseph & Joseph, 2019), they can create conditions where systemic transformation can take hold. The final chapter draws together the key implications from the literature, practical case studies, and personal observations to illustrate what transformational school leadership looks like. This form of leadership is based in multicultural and decolonial pedagogies, with the Calls to Action serving as a catalyst for change.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

The central argument I have made in this capstone is that school leaders play a crucial role in advancing reconciliation and fostering inclusion, through the adoption of transformative leadership practices that are based on multicultural and decolonial pedagogies. This work is urgent for two reasons: the shifting demographics of Canada, with an increase in diversity among students and staff, and the ongoing responsibility to respond to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, particularly those directly related to education. This calls upon school leaders and educators to support Indigenous knowledge systems, engage in

authentic relationship-building, and to implement lasting change, including at the systemic level. In this conclusion, the development of this argument will be revisited through the chapters of the capstone, and I will examine how both theory and practice reinforce this central claim. Finally, a discussion on the broader implications for school leadership in Canadian education systems will be offered.

Rationale for this Capstone

The original inspiration around the central argument of this capstone began in the course *Diversity: Constructing Social Realities.* During the critical review assignment, I explored the alignment between the goals of critical multiculturalism, the TRC's Calls to Action, and the principles of decolonial pedagogy. I realized that many school leaders are overwhelmed when trying to meaningfully address all these frameworks within schools, particularly in northern and rural districts. This is a challenge for school leaders in the district I work in, where rapid demographic shifts have brought on new challenges that require new solutions. The northeast region of British Columbia is seeing an influx of families, educational staff, and students from the lower mainland due to affordability and economic opportunities, but many current staff are unprepared to work within a multicultural community as it is a new development in the north.

Therefore, I designed my capstone paper to explore how school leaders can build intercultural competence, shift school culture, and implement reconciliation-informed practices by drawing on practical models such as RESPECT (Joseph & Joseph, 2019) and the concept of relational accountability (Schnellert et al., 2022). This includes understandings of intercultural competence and communication (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006), the lived experiences of students and community members (Dillard, 2000; Velásquez Atehortúa, 2020), and decolonial pedagogies (Bowra et al., 2021; Datta et al., 2025; Freire, 1970). These concepts and their applications will be further examined in the following section, which connects the core chapters of this paper.

Chapter Connections

In the introductory chapter, I introduced the argument by situating it in both a national and local context. Drawing from the Yellowhead Institute's reporting on government inaction regarding the Calls to Action (2023), I argued that educational leaders must fill this gap by infusing reconciliation and inclusion into their leadership practices. This call is especially urgent in rural and northern areas where population and diversity is increasing, but professional development and district policies lag behind.

In chapter two, the literature review established a strong foundation of research for this argument. I examined the evolution of multicultural education, beginning with liberal and additive models, and moved toward critical multiculturalism and decolonial pedagogy. Sleeter (2005), Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995), and Dillard (2000) helped show the limitations of surface-level educational reforms, and argued for deeper changes that address systemic racism, the marginalization of knowledge (especially from the non-dominant classes), and institutional inequities. The literature review then explored decolonial frameworks, through the work of Freire (1970), Velásquez Atehortúa (2020), and Tuck & Yang (2012), who indicated the importance of dialogical teaching, intersectionality, and the refusal to reduce decolonization to a metaphor. The literature review then connected these works to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, particularly those involving curriculum, teacher training, and systemic reform. Finally, the chapter explored how intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006; Byram, 1997) and inclusive leadership models like RESPECT (Joseph & Joseph, 2019) are necessary for transforming school systems to meet the needs of diverse and Indigenous communities. The literature review achieved a theoretical foundation for the argument that school leaders must enact transformative change based on cultural competence, relational accountability, and a commitment to equity.

In chapter three, the argument was applied to practical school leadership settings, demonstrating how theory can be forged into systemic and pedagogical change. The first

section of that chapter looked at how staff professional development can be a foundational area for advancing reconciliation and equity. It particularly focused on the role of self-reflection and intercultural competence, drawing from Byram (1997) and Sleeter (2005). It also looked at how anti-racist training and critical inquiry into systemic barriers are essential to transform school culture (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The second section focused on curriculum and pedagogy, and indicated how oral storytelling, land-based learning, and engagement with Elders can decolonize curriculum. This is supported by Freire (1970), Datta et al. (2025), and Barkaskas & Gladwin (2021). The third section of this chapter looked at how to increase family engagement and reshape school culture through humanizing relationships, participatory design with families (Kuttner et al., 2021), and how to support diverse students and families through culturally responsive engagement, such as our growing Sikh populations in certain regions of Canada (Drake, 2020). Finally, policy and systemic shifts were addressed, including the use of the RESPECT model (Joseph & Joseph, 2019) and the involvement of Indigenous education councils to foster accountability and relationality. These practical cases affirmed that transformative leadership is not only possible but necessary to meet the moral and political demands of reconciliation and inclusion in Canadian schools.

In the fourth chapter, I reflected on my own teaching and leadership experiences across diverse educational contexts. This includes international private schools in China, First Nation Band schools in Alberta, and public school districts in rural Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario. These firsthand accounts provided a critical application of some of the theoretical and practical models discussed in chapter two and three. Whether adapting the curriculum in Guangzhou to reflect student realities, participating in land-based learning at "Two Valleys", or witnessing systemic partnerships in northern Ontario that embedded Indigenous staff into schools, each setting reinforced the central argument that transformative leadership must be based in community relationships, cultural responsiveness, and equity-focused practice. These reflections demonstrated that the principles outlined in the RESPECT model (Joseph & Joseph,

2019), relational accountability (Schnellert et al., 2022), and intercultural competence (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006) can be enacted when school leaders are willing to lead collaboratively with school community members, adapt school structures, and sustain meaningful partnerships. Combined with chapter three, this chapter showed that the transformation called for in the literature is not only theoretical, as it is already making an impact in Canadian schools, led by school leaders who engage in reflective, relational practices based in reconciliation.

Evaluating the Success of the Paper

This capstone successfully demonstrated the central argument that transformative school leadership rooted in decolonial pedagogy and critical multiculturalism is essential to advancing reconciliation and inclusion in Canadian schools. The inclusion of both research and classroom-based applications, along with personal reflections, provided a substantial and grounded exploration of the topic. This integration also helped identify gaps that point to areas for further inquiry and collaboration across schools, districts, and provinces.

Identifying Gaps and Looking Ahead

At the practical level, this capstone showcased that individual school boards, schools, and school leaders across Canada are implementing reconciliation-focused and inclusive practices with varying degrees of success and sustainability. While some districts have implemented systemic strategies such as the Elders-in-Residence programs, community-led retreats, or district-wide partnerships with First Nations, not all have utilized practices that create lasting change. Others have relied on short-term, symbolic initiatives that have limited depth. Having worked in multiple provinces with significantly different programs and policy outcomes, I have observed a lack of coordinated knowledge-sharing across districts and regions. To address this gap, a national or provincial consortium could be developed, where school and district leaders meet to share impactful practices, examine challenges, and co-develop strategies that are adaptable based on the localized context. This type of collaborative network could mirror the Education Change networks described by Schnellert et al. (2022), and provide

a sustainable framework for collective learning. Without something in place, innovative and successful practices may remain inaccessible to other educators looking for innovative ways to support their students and families. Further research could look at how multi-district collaboration could be formally supported by provincial ministries, First Nation communities, and Indigenous education councils. This can ensure reconciliation efforts are shared and sustained across Canada.

Broader Implications

The arguments and findings in this capstone will only grow in relevance over the coming years as Canada's population becomes increasingly diverse. According to national census projections, the fastest-growing segments of the Canadian population are Indigenous peoples and immigrant communities (Government of Canada, 2022). This demographic shift will continue to shape the composition of schools across the country, particularly in northern and rural regions where economic opportunity is drawing families from varied cultural backgrounds. In these settings, there will be a need for transformative school leadership that is based in reconciliation and critical multiculturalism, to properly address the challenges of a rapidly growing and shifting demographic.

The insights and frameworks discussed in this capstone can be viewed as a roadmap for how leaders can respond to these changes through relational accountability, inclusive curriculum, and meaningful community engagement and partnerships. These partnerships can include supporting community-led youth initiatives aligned with reconciliation education, as encouraged by Call to Action 65, which urges the federal government to fund community-based youth organizations to deliver programming on reconciliation (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015).

Furthermore, the stagnation of the TRC's Calls to Action signals a broader pattern of inaction at the governmental level. In this context, school leaders are no longer just school administrators, but agents of social change. The work of transformative school leaders can fill

the void left by the delays of inactive government and policy. However, this will only be possible if leadership development and teacher education programs are restructured to include direct preparation in intercultural competence, decolonial pedagogy, and Indigenous community partnerships, as envisioned in the TRC's Call to Action 64. Call 64 focuses on developing intercultural understanding and building capacity for Indigenous education through teacher education programs (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015).

As the case studies and personal reflections in this capstone have shown, meaningful and sustainable progress depends on leadership that prioritizes equity and recognizes the cultural realities of the communities that these leaders serve.

Closing Statement

In this moment of demographic change and ongoing delays in national reconciliation efforts, school leaders must move beyond traditional approaches and work to transform their schools in ways that reflect the diverse realities of their communities. Through the implementation of reconciliation-informed and critically multicultural leadership, school leaders can become catalysts for a more inclusive and equitable Canadian education system.

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