

Indigenous Student Success in Public Schools: A “We” Approach for Educators¹

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What does Indigenous student success look like in public school boards? Seven urban Indigenous educators' interview responses to this question were interpreted and reported by the lead author, a teacher and researcher of English, Irish, and Scottish heritage—a Settler Canadian. The “Connected Beads Model” is the result of these educator-to-educator interviews. It shows how Indigenous students' success can be promoted when Settler and Indigenous educators take a “We” stance alongside students, families, and communities through honoring story, relationship, and holism in school. The concepts embedded in the model and its practical applications are explored through participants' quotations and considered alongside related literature on Indigenous education.

À quoi ressemble la réussite des élèves autochtones dans les conseils scolaires publics? Les réponses en entrevues des sept éducateurs autochtones en milieu urbain ont été interprétées et dévoilées par l'auteur principal, un enseignant et chercheur d'origine anglaise, irlandaise et écossaise—un Canadien « de souche ». De ces entrevues entre enseignants découle le modèle dit des « perles liées » qui démontre l'effet positif sur la réussite des élèves autochtones qui se crée lorsque les éducateurs « canadiens de souche » et les éducateurs autochtones adoptent une attitude de solidarité avec les élèves, les familles et les communautés et qu'ils rendent hommage aux récits, aux relations et à l'holisme à l'école. Les concepts incorporés au modèle et les applications pratiques de celui-ci sont explorés par le biais des commentaires des participants et dans le contexte de la littérature connexe portant sur l'éducation autochtone.

It is important to describe the meaning and intentions behind words—especially words that have multiple semantic understandings and varying uses. Two important terms used throughout this paper are *Indigenous* and *Settler*.

Indigenous refers to people who first inhabited the land we now call Canada and their descendants. This term is used by the United Nations (2007) and Indigenous scholars such as Battiste (2013), Iseke-Barnes (2008), and Kovach (2009). *Aboriginal* was the term I originally used in interviews to reflect the language used in my professional context. I have changed my own language to Indigenous but retain participants' use of the word Aboriginal in their quotations.

Settler refers to people who settled in Canada within the last 500 years and their descendants. I capitalize the term to recognize that, like Indigenous, this identity carries historical, political, cultural, and social implications. Participants rarely used the word Settler—I have chosen the word to reflect its purposeful use by some Indigenous and Settler scholars—including Cornthassel (2012) and Regan (2010)—and to draw attention to the connection

between Canada's history of colonization and schooling.

Both terms encompass multiple groups, histories, and identities, and many people in Canada identify with both. I recognize that it can seem ironic to separate Settler and Indigenous identities in an article about a "We" approach to education, yet the distinction facilitates discussion about how people with distinct heritages can interact in ways that benefit students.

Context

Justice Murray Sinclair, chair of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, has indicated that public education plays an important role in reconciling Canadian-Indigenous relations (People for Education, 2015). While major structural changes are needed in the areas of curriculum, programming, policy, and even in (re)conceptualizing public and Indigenous education (Deer, 2014; Hampton, 1995; Kearns & Anuik, 2015), public school teachers also need immediate guidance in their roles. This study offers both conceptual and practical guidance for public educators seeking to contribute to Indigenous students' school success.

As a Settler Canadian teacher of English, Irish, and Scottish descent, I recognized that I needed guidance from Indigenous colleagues as I interacted with talented and insightful Indigenous students who were not always rated as "successful" according to the standardized measures we used in school. I needed to know if my teaching was relevant to how Indigenous educators viewed success in education. Out of this realization came the question: How do Indigenous educators describe "success" for Indigenous students in a large urban public school board? This research is a formalized extension of learning from Indigenous colleagues as I worked alongside them in urban public school settings. I present this research in the hope that others in the field of public education may find it useful.

The centerpiece of this paper is the "Connected Beads Model"—a synthesis of the participating Indigenous educators' anecdotes and insights. The model depicts Indigenous students' success in urban public schools—not as a particular endpoint or outcome, but as a state of being that involves teachers, students, families, and communities. I frame these findings in literature on Indigenous teachers and Indigenous concepts of educational success and discuss how the key elements of the Connected Beads Model interact with other scholarship on Indigenous education. Furthermore, I indicate how the findings can inform educators working for Indigenous students' success in public school boards.

Indigenous Teachers

Although Indigenous educators are diverse in their backgrounds, experiences, and areas of expertise (St. Denis, Bouvier, & Battiste, 1998), the literature points to trends that are relevant to this study. One trend is that many are open to sharing their insights with their Settler colleagues (St. Denis, 2010; St. Denis, Bouvier, & Battiste, 1998). These interactions can be positive when they are rooted in equality, mutual respect, and reciprocal sharing of knowledge and support (St. Denis, 2010). However, it can be challenging for Indigenous teachers when Settler colleagues devalue them, their views, or experiences; expect Indigenous teachers to take over when an Indigenous student is experiencing difficulty; or assume Indigenous educators are prepared to advise on all aspects of Indigenous education (Cherubini, McGean, & Kitchen, 2011; Reid & Santoro, 2006; St. Denis, 2010). In addition to fulfilling regular classroom teaching duties and supporting the learning of Settler colleagues and administrators, many Indigenous

teachers take on advocacy, liaison, and support roles (St. Denis, Bouvier, & Battiste, 1998) stemming from deep commitment to Indigenous students, families, and communities (St. Denis, 2010; Cherubini, McGean, & Kitchen, 2011). Thus, Indigenous teachers often hold special (Stairs, 1995) and yet underappreciated (Cherubini & Barrett, 2013) roles in Indigenous education.

Indigenous Concepts of Educational Success

A large body of literature (Anuik, Battiste, & George, 2010; Battiste, 2013; Cajete 1994; Hampton, 1995; Little Bear, 2009; Simpson, 2014) has addressed Indigenous traditions and philosophies of education, including their present implications. Much of this literature has depicted education as a lifelong endeavor that is not limited to formal school contexts, but involves nurturing and relating across generations, in connection to the land, and within the larger community (Cajete, 1994; Simpson, 2014). The stated purpose of individual learning is the development of strengths and gifts in the presence of, and for the benefit of, the community (Anuik, Battiste, & George, 2010; Hampton, 1995). Formal schooling, then, is one component of a larger lifelong pursuit of learning that is holistic and embedded in multiple relationships (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007). In the present study, I asked Indigenous educators specifically about Indigenous students’ success within public schools.

Methodology and Research Design

This research engaged qualitative methods (Creswell, 2014; Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013) shaped by the relational orientation of Indigenous approaches and methodologies (Donald, Glanfield, & Sterenberg, 2012; Kovach, 2009). The data included individual participants’ descriptions of their experiences as educators and their concepts of Indigenous students’ success in public schools. I sought the views of a very specific demographic: Indigenous public educators in one Canadian city.

Inspired by Kovach (2009), this study reflects certain aspects of Indigenous methodologies such as prioritizing strong and trusting relationships between participant and researcher, and gathering data in a manner that invited participants to direct the conversation. I also formed a *circle of advisors*, and asked Indigenous colleagues to guide me as a Settler researcher seeking to undertake respectful and meaningful research in Indigenous education. Procedures aligned with traditional qualitative research also informed my method; participants’ insights and anecdotes were initiated by one interview question and sometimes guided by prompts, adhering to Eurocentric qualitative research traditions as represented by methodologists like Creswell (2014). This blend of qualitative research and Indigenous methodologies reflects my own identity as a Euro-Canadian researcher educated in Eurocentric institutions, seeking to learn more and to honor Indigenous community members, perspectives, and methods in research and education.

Elements of grounded theory (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012) were incorporated in the research design to develop a cohesive representation of what Indigenous students’ school success means to this group of Indigenous educators. I analyzed data for themes by constantly comparing participants’ views on Indigenous student success with one another (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). My reading of literature on Indigenous students’ school success was directed by the themes derived from participants’ interview responses (Charmaz, 2014). The product of my analysis is

an original visual model (Creswell, 2014), presented in Figure 1 in the findings section. It depicts unifying ideas shared by participants and is elaborated through specific examples given by participants from their school contexts.

Circle of Advisors

Several Indigenous colleagues in academia and public schools agreed to help guide my work. One helped me in the process of choosing a meaningful research question; some informed the development of the sheet of optional prompts that I used in interviews; and some coached me through the local protocol of beginning an interview by offering tobacco to the participant and presenting my request for an interview. This circle of advisors helped me think through underlying concepts, question my assumptions, and conduct research that aimed to be meaningful and respectful.

Site and Participants

The research site was a diverse Canadian city, home to multiple First Nations and Métis people as well as recent and well-established Settlers from all over the world. The largest demographic was Euro-Canadians (Statistics Canada, 2006). The seven participants in this study were employees of publicly funded school boards. They held diverse roles: classroom or specialist teachers, administrators, and board-level specialists. Their work settings were also diverse: elementary and secondary schools, schools in high- and low-income neighborhoods, some with many Indigenous students and some with fewer, some with high ethnic diversity and some fairly homogenous. Male and female participating educators ranged in age and experience, most with multiple years of experience in multiple settings, including other provinces, smaller communities, and band-run schools. I withhold precise details about individual participants to maintain anonymity, which was a condition of access required by one school board. Sadly, this means losing valuable contextual information and the opportunity to directly recognize the people and groups whose wisdom is shared here.

To recruit participants, I invited each person individually—six of whom I knew professionally or personally, and the seventh who I met through a mutual contact. Since most relationships were established before the study began, we built on a foundation of trust and already shared some understanding of Indigenous education in our city's school systems. I chose to work with seven educators in order to access multiple experiences and views and still have a small enough sample that I could explore each person's perspective in depth. After speaking with the seven participants, analyzing their responses, and contrasting them with one another (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012), I had sufficient information to build the Connected Beads Model.

Interviews

I addressed the research question, *How do Indigenous educators describe "success" for Indigenous students in a large urban public school board?* through interviews with open-ended questions. I asked one guiding question, and participants were given the freedom to interpret and answer however they chose (Freebody, 2003). Before the interview, I provided participants with a document containing a guiding question, *How would you describe success for an Aboriginal student in the public school board?* along with optional prompts and rephrased

versions of the original question; I also provided a hard copy when we met. Some participants used the follow-up questions as prompts for discussion and others did not. Participants answered in multiple ways, such as telling stories from their personal, family, and work lives; sharing teachings from Elders and Indigenous community members; and speaking about policies and practices at the school, board, community, provincial, and national levels.

Although Davis and Silver (2003) have noted that participants can try to please interviewers, I am confident that participants' responses were drawn from their own priorities and values; they exposed me to new perspectives (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012) and the interviews reflected dynamics present in preexisting learning relationships. The interviews were conducted in March, April, May, and June 2013 and varied in length from 20 minutes to over two hours, based on each participant's availability. Most interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. The tone was collegial and interview settings included schools, family homes, and coffee shops according to participant preference.

Analysis and Presentation Processes

My analysis employed many aspects of Tesch's (1990) coding steps and the constant comparison process characteristic of grounded theory (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012). I listened to the audio recording of each interview multiple times and highlighted ideas that individuals emphasized and ideas that were common to many or all interviews. The result of this process was a key themes document for each interview and a collection of major categories across the data set. I then represented these in a model with a central core and related elements—a move away from simply identifying themes, instead integrating the themes into a theoretical form (Benaquisto, 2008).

Throughout the process—and particularly when it came time to create the model—I prayed for guidance to effectively and respectfully synthesize the views shared by participants (Moon, 2014). I invited participants to critique my work by routinely emailing them with transcripts, key findings summaries, a synopsis for a conference presentation, the visual model, and finally a thesis draft personalized to highlight each individual's contributions. A few participants responded to this member checking (Sandelowski, 2008). They affirmed my interpretation or provided additional insights that I then integrated.

Participants were careful to note that there is no single model for Indigenous students' success. Thus, the model I share here is situated and contextual, not overarching or prescriptive. It necessarily reflects my own life experiences, values, and perspectives and those of the seven participating educators. It is influenced by the history, politics, and direction of our particular province, city, and school boards. Its unique context means a unique contribution to the literature—a model about Indigenous students' success built from the words and experiences of Indigenous public educators.

Findings

The Connected Beads Model (see Figure 1) is a synthesis of participants' views and the anchor for my interpretation. The three central strands represent themes common to all seven participants' interviews: story, relationship, and holism. Together, this central core forms the idea of “We”—that public Indigenous education is a forum where Indigenous and Settler educators work together for the success of Indigenous and Settler students. The beads, which

are held together by the central strands, are practical approaches recommended by the Indigenous educators in this study.

We



The term “We” was used by many participants when they spoke about Indigenous students’ school success. A We approach affects how teachers operate, how they see students, and how public schooling fits into the larger picture of communities and Canadian society. In choosing the word We in their descriptions of success, participants referred to themselves (as Indigenous educators) and me (as a Settler colleague) as peers in Indigenous education.

We extends from educators’ collegial relationships and shared goals to include both Settler and Indigenous students. Participants were clear that the perspectives and practices they bring forward to benefit Indigenous students will foster the success of all students. For example, one participant observed that “not only are Aboriginal students succeeding, but all students succeed ... [M]any of those Indigenous ideologies that support a First Nations/Métis way of seeing, knowing, doing, and believing actually [work] for all students.” Participants wanted all students to be absorbed in Indigenous storytelling, in exploring their own cultural identities, and in learning environments where their families are valued and included. Correspondingly, several educators noted that Settler students’ attitudes and understanding of Indigenous perspectives affect their Indigenous peers.

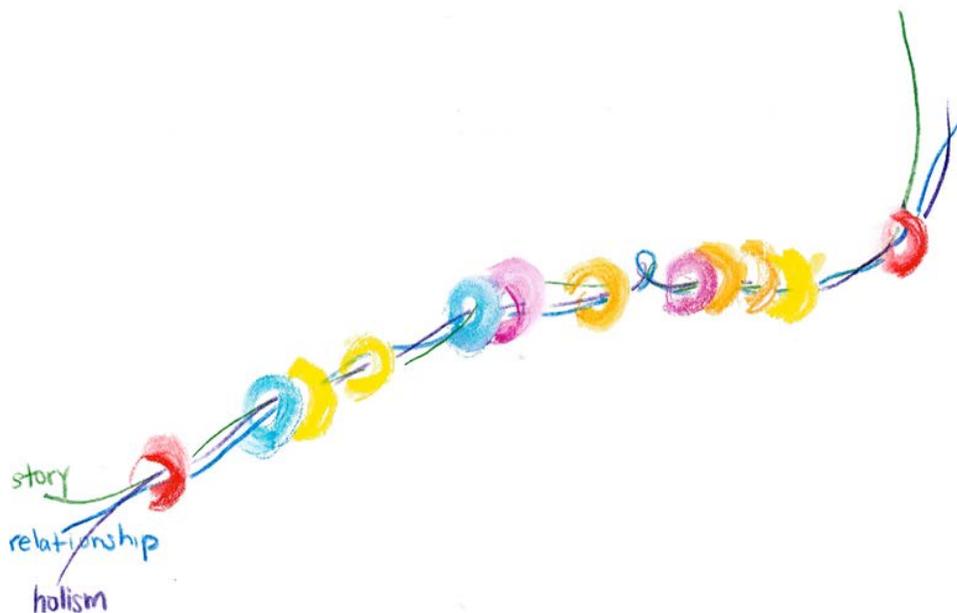


Figure 1. Connected beads model. Beads, which are practical approaches, build on a central “We” core of story, relationship, and holism.

For me, that’s [the] success of Aboriginal education generally, is getting kids excited learning about Aboriginal people. And if kids are excited about it, Aboriginal people are going to feel good about who they are. And if they feel good about who they are, they’re going to belong. And if they’re going to belong, they’re going to be successful ... They’ll have the confidence to perform, however that looks for them.

This quotation is a reminder that the success of each student is an important focal point; yet at the same time, individual success is affected by other students’ learning and attitudes.

Furthermore, a We orientation in schools is reflective of a larger We stance that some participants felt would benefit all Canadians.

If [Aboriginal education] becomes part of who we are instead of something we do, it’s a very different perspective ... ‘This is just who we are. We as Canadians are Treaty people. We as Canadians are survivors of the Residential School.’ Cause you know—we are. People think, ‘Oh, it’s just the Aboriginal people.’ Well no, it impacts all of us in Canada, and we all need to heal from it, right? So, I mean, how can you give teachers that perspective instead of the us-and-them game?

Abandoning the “us-and-them game”—the concept that Indigenous students and Indigenous education are somehow separate from the education of all Canadians—in favor of a stance that considers all educators, students, families, and communities as intrinsically linked is a hallmark of this study. Each strand in the Connected Beads Model is bound together in that understanding, and each bead rests on that premise.

Story



Honoring multiple stories and perspectives in public school classrooms was a common theme in participating educators’ descriptions of Indigenous students’ success. To frame this idea, two participants referred to Nigerian author Adichie’s (2009) TED Talk: *The Danger of a Single Story*. One participant, who spoke about welcoming many cultures’ stories into the classroom, applied her message in this way: “If there’s only a single story, that’s what breeds ignorance and hate. But when all the stories are mixed together, what it breeds is diversity and richness. And that is what I strive for in my classroom.” Multiple participants emphasized that welcoming all students’ stories, and giving them the opportunity to explore their stories in the school context, is central to Indigenous students’ school success. Several explained how teachers’ learning is part of this; teachers who acknowledge that “there are differing perspectives other than their own” are well positioned to welcome multiple stories.

In contrast, participants noted that stereotyping or “single storying” (Adichie, 2009) is a barrier to students’ success. One participant said, “So how do we change that perception of that single story? Well we listen to the other stories.” Participants warned against an assumption that success looks the same for all Indigenous students and emphasized that each person has a unique story. Through multiple examples and anecdotes, participants showed that when teachers welcome multiple stories—students’ stories, families’ stories, Indigenous stories about the land and its people, and balanced accounts of Canadian-Indigenous relations over time—

they contribute to Indigenous students' school success. Story is an important part of the We core; students' success in public schooling is fostered when they know that their stories and perspectives matter and when they have the opportunity to connect with the experiences of others.

Relationship



Each of the educators emphasized relationships as foundational to Indigenous students' success in school. They described relationships at the nation-to-nation level, as well as the daily interactions between educators, students, and families. One participant addressed the nation-to-nation context this way:

The Crown and Aboriginal people, it's the second-oldest relationship in North America ... And that relationship was built out of trust, and over the years that trust has been shifted and changed, and the dynamics of the relationship have become unstable, but that relationship has to still exist.

Participants conveyed how teachers' "background knowledge" of the legal, political, and social history of Indigenous-Settler relationships affects how they interact with Indigenous students and families: "Accurate knowledge is important – the better-equipped you are, I think the more confident you will be to create that relationship that I spoke about earlier." Thus, a link is formed between teachers' understanding of the We story of Canada and their daily practice with respect to Indigenous students.

Participants believed that Indigenous students' school success is directly affected by the quality of the relationships in the school setting:

One of the key characteristics for success of any Aboriginal student is looking at creating a sense of belonging. An environment of trust where families are comfortable in sharing and in asking questions and where students are feeling the same.

Noteworthy here, and common across other interviews, was that not only students, but also their families, are drawn into relationship when schooling is successful. Participants spoke about diverse modes of engaging schools, families, and students with one another, such as school events and celebrations, family spaces inside the school, relating through friendly conversations, phone calls with students' families, collaborative goal setting, and meeting with new families to learn about students' interests, strengths, and backgrounds. Some participants indicated that Elders' presence is pivotal to students' success as they support and teach staff and students. Through both interpersonal relationships, and an awareness of the larger picture of longstanding relationships between Indigenous and Settler peoples in Canada, participants showed that valuing relationships is central to Indigenous students' school success. When teachers, students, and families strengthen their ties as We, a sense of belonging is developed, and this underlies success.

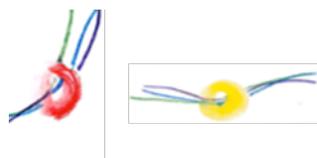
Holism



Holism is another central strand in the We core. The term *holism* encompasses two sets of themes in participants’ responses: the idea that students are physical, emotional, intellectual/mental, and spiritual beings, and that schooling itself is part of an intricate array of influences on students’ lives. One participant stated, “Success is about uncovering the gifts that Creator gave you and then it’s about nurturing those gifts ... as you develop those gifts, you’re growing and developing mentally, emotionally, physically, intellectually, and spiritually.” School can be an important part of this process as students “come in contact with diverse perspectives, diverse people, [and] diverse understandings.” This emphasis on each individual’s development physically, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually surfaced in many interviews, as did the value of diverse contexts for this learning. A concern that was commonly shared amongst participants was that schools tend to overemphasize intellectual development and underemphasize physical, emotional, and especially spiritual development. Participants were strongly committed to students’ academic growth, although their views on the use of measures of this growth vary. They consistently expressed, however, that success in school extends beyond these measures to involve opportunities for students to explore “who they are” and “their role in life.” This type of success in school contributes to greater purposes like being able to “help advocate for their own people [and] for people as a whole.” Thus, at the level of the individual student, holism is central to success in that school is a place for deep personal formation and the opportunity to relate meaningfully with others.

The success that comes from holism was also addressed at a system level. Some participants spoke about the importance of integrating schooling with services that are often considered separate, such as health and child and family services. They showed how students’ success is shaped by interacting components and relationships beyond what is contained in the classroom. Participants’ anecdotes demonstrated that treating students as whole beings means working toward physical, intellectual/mental, emotional, and spiritual balance. This balance itself was how some participants defined success.

Beads: Practices Built on Story, Relationship, and Holism



How does a We approach formed by story, relationship, and holism look in daily teaching practice? The beads that I now present to complete my description of the Connected Beads Model (Figure 1) are on-the-ground ways that teachers build on the central We core to promote Indigenous students’ success. These teaching practices are part of a larger set that includes board level policy and programming (Moon, 2014).



Hope and guidance. Teachers' views of themselves and their students influence students' success. When students are valued and seen as important members of the school community with unique stories and gifts to share, students' sense of belonging can increase, which participants articulated as an important condition for academic achievement. Teachers who are determined to see students progress in their own way and in their own time create an atmosphere of hope where students are spurred onward in their individual development. One participant stated, "Our job is about a guide. Really, we are a guide supporting," noting that this way of seeing things means that power and agency then lie with the student. This attitude of hope for each student's growth can materialize in many ways. Participants spoke about celebrating students' gains through personal learning plans or assemblies, and simply by recognizing that each person is on their own learning journey marked by growth in social, emotional, spiritual, and academic realms. This is centered on understanding each student's story as unique and valuable through relating to people holistically in a collaborative or We manner.



Our students. When teachers see themselves as guides for students who have intrinsic gifts, dreams, and potential, their practices reflect this. One example is commitment to "in-house support" for students. While participants conveyed the importance of including community knowledge holders like Elders in public schools, they were critical of some teachers' practice of immediately "off-loading" Indigenous students to an outside Indigenous specialist when struggle was perceived. This was a concern voiced by multiple participants, often framed in terms of teachers' attitudes. One participant referred to the "important relationship-building" that can occur when classroom teachers support students through their struggles. Another used the phrase "owning our students" to explain the effective attitude teachers can have: "They're our kids. We need to look after them." Yet another participant said, "Students come first. Our students. Not Aboriginal students. Our students ... We respond to their needs as learners, not as Aboriginal learners." A teacher stance that is conducive to students' success assumes that We, as school community members, have a sense of one another's stories, are committed to the relationship we share in our learning context, and see schooling in a holistic, not compartmentalized way.



Student voice. When teachers live out a We approach that values story, relationship, and holism, they welcome students' voices in the classroom. With respect to letting students take responsibility and listening to their views on school issues, one participant stated, "If we open our eyes, our students can also teach us." This idea was supported by another participant who emphasized treating children as equals based on traditional teachings that honor each stage in the cycle of life. Several participants described class projects they assigned or planned to assign with the purpose of giving students room to explore and share their identities and values. One said, "We provide opportunities for them to explore who they are on their own terms," and described a project where students make a book about "home" based on their own story. The participant emphasized the need for schools to provide the opportunity for students "to nurture

their self-identity, and not just be what other people see them as. They need to be themselves. And whatever that is, is up to them.” Others spoke about designing projects toward a similar end using visual arts, journaling, film, and music. When school is a forum for students to explore who they are, the implication is that their stories matter to their teachers, that relating to one another can take a deeper form, and that students are valued as whole people. This is a We approach to student success.

Summary: Connected Beads Model

The Connected Beads Model is a synthesis of seven Indigenous educators’ views on Indigenous students’ success in public boards. It is built around a We core; Indigenous students’ success depends on the interconnectedness of Indigenous and Settler teachers, students, families, and communities, and this interconnectedness benefits all students. The We core is established through valuing multiple stories and perspectives, establishing strong relationships, and understanding schooling holistically. When centered on these concepts, teachers’ daily practices promote student success.

Discussion

As noted in the findings section, a core finding of this study is the We approach that is prevalent in participants’ descriptions of Indigenous students’ success. Depicted in the Connected Beads Model, this We form of success comes to be when educators, students, families, and communities are connected through listening to and valuing one another’s stories, building strong relationships, and treating schooling as a holistic endeavor. While literature exists on the importance of teachers learning and dialoguing alongside their students, particularly across power differentials (Freire, 1970), it is noteworthy that this We approach is not commonly found in the schooling of Indigenous students in Canada (Hampton, 1995). Rather, Settler Canadian policymakers and teachers have continually imposed Eurocentric schooling on Indigenous people (Battiste, 2013; Hampton, 1995; Hookimaw-Witt, 1998). There is a small but growing number of studies that, in my estimation, reflect a We orientation to schooling (Beatty & Blair, 2015; Berger, 2009; Deer, 2014; Goulet, 2001; Munroe, Borden, Murray Orr, Toney, & Meader, 2013; Oskineegish & Berger, 2013; Tompkins, 1998) and disrupt that oppressive norm. By seeking to implement local Indigenous education practices, traditions, and visions for schooling, this research recognizes the importance of Indigenous people and their knowledge in current Canadian contexts. Some of these studies are presented below in light of how they interact with the Connected Beads Model.

The interconnectedness of all educators, students, and people in Canada is a framing concept for many participants in this study. Interconnectedness between Settler and Indigenous people in Canada’s education systems is central to Donald’s (2012) theoretical work and to the practical insights shared by Indigenous teachers in public schools (St. Denis, 2010; St. Denis, Bouvier, & Battiste, 1998). As Indigenous educators in Saskatchewan’s public school system indicate, “change is everyone’s responsibility” (St. Denis, Bouvier, & Battiste, 1998). Settler teachers, then, have a role to play in Indigenous students’ success in public schools. This role, however, is not to be carried out in isolation; the We approach is at the center of the Connected Beads Model because interconnections between Indigenous and Settler educators, students, and communities are foundational. Participants’ examples of how teachers can participate in a We

approach give practical meaning to concepts like story, relationship, and holism.

Story (Archibald, 2008; Dion, 2009), relationship (Donald, 2012; Kirkness, 1999), and holism (Battiste, 2013; Little Bear, 2009) are well established as foundational concepts in the literature on Indigenous education. They are not, however, explicitly linked through the We approach in other writing. One reason for this might be that literature on Indigenous education is not necessarily written directly for a public educator audience, or for Settler teachers who are seeking to participate respectfully in Indigenous education. Something to consider is whether literature on Indigenous education that does address Settler teachers also centers on the We approach. It seems to me that it does—both in positive examples of Settler teachers working for Indigenous students' success (Goulet, 2001; Oskineegish & Berger, 2013), and in examples of unsuccessful attempts that Settler teachers make in that pursuit (Archibald, 2008).

Teachers' involvement in learning from community members and families is emphasized in many studies that address Settler teachers' work in First Nation or Inuit communities (Berger, 2009; Goulet, 2001; Oskineegish & Berger, 2013; Taylor, 1995; Tompkins, 1998). When teachers interact meaningfully with community members and Elders, school becomes more relevant to students (Goulet & Goulet, 2014; Oskineegish, 2015). While fewer studies directly address Settler teachers' roles in Indigenous students' success in urban settings, there seems to be support for the trend that teachers' connections with Indigenous community members promotes Indigenous students' school success. Studies conducted by Beatty and Blair (2015) and Dion and Cormier (2015) give examples of Indigenous students' school engagement when teachers and their classes are involved in sustained learning alongside community knowledge holders.

Community contact is not always present and I believe some studies show that the We approach could be a protective factor against pitfalls that can arise for well-meaning teachers. Some examples come from studies about teachers introducing Indigenous stories into school curricula. Dion (2009) and Archibald (2008) have strongly advocated for this practice, but point to examples where teachers' attempts have actually been harmful because the Settler teacher has fallen back on colonial attitudes (Dion, 2009) or disrespected Indigenous stories or people by teaching without the guidance of Elder storytellers (Archibald, 2008). In the present study, Indigenous students' success is linked to teachers seeing themselves as part of a greater We, which assumes interconnection. I presume that this interconnection would imply teachers' accountability to the community members with whom they have developed relationships, thereby helping teachers to be respectful and effective in how they engage with Indigenous stories. This runs parallel to Smith's (1992) description of how non-Maori researchers can conduct respectful research through relating closely with Maori mentors or community members. In short, a We approach can draw Settler teachers into respectful engagement in Indigenous education.

In the Connected Beads Model, story, relationship, and holism—which are foundational concepts in the broader Indigenous education literature (Archibald, 2008; Little Bear, 2009)—are affirmed in urban public school contexts. Settler teachers are drawn into the picture through the We approach, which requires connections between Indigenous and Settler students, families, and communities. Indigenous students' school success is premised on these connections.

Conclusion

According to the participants in this study, success for Indigenous students in public schools is

the opportunity for each to shape her/his own life path through learning in contexts that are defined by a We approach. Depicted in the Connected Beads Model, success is honoring each student’s story while introducing them to multiple perspectives, engaging in strong relationships with peers, educators, and the wider community, and developing as a whole person. Public school teachers play an important part in Indigenous students’ school success when they see themselves as interconnected with Indigenous and Settler students, families, and communities. Tangible examples of living out this We approach in urban public schools are presented as beads in the Connected Beads Model. The model is part of the much larger tapestry of Indigenous education and public education. It provides one entry point for educators who seek to contribute to Indigenous students’ school success.

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Note

1 This paper is written in the first person by the lead author. The second author was the thesis supervisor and provided technical and conceptual support. As the named authors of this paper, we take responsibility for any omissions or errors. This article summarizes some of the findings in Martha Moon's M.Ed. thesis, "Defining 'success' in Indigenous education: Exploring the perspectives of Indigenous educators in a Canadian city." Early versions of these findings were presented at the American Association of Geographers' Annual meeting (April 2014), the Canadian Society for Studies in Education Conference (May 2014, June 2015), and a teachers' convention. Brief synopses have also been submitted to professional journals for teachers. Funding from SSHRC, Lakehead University, and the Ontario Graduate Scholarship supported this work.

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Appendix: Semi-structured Interview Guide

Main Question: How would you describe success for an Aboriginal student in the public school board?

Elaborations on the Main Question:

- As an educator of Aboriginal students who is not Aboriginal myself, what should I know about ‘success’ for Aboriginal students in the public board?
- Can you help me understand what we are aiming for when we speak of Aboriginal students’ success?
- What do you see in a successful Aboriginal student?

Potential Follow-Up Questions:

- Could you tell me the story of an Aboriginal student’s success in the public board? Are there some characteristics in this story that could be applied broadly?
- Would you describe success for an Aboriginal student differently answering from your perspective as a family member/community member/former student/Elder (if applicable)?
- Is success the right word to use? Is there a better word?
- What might the ideal learning environment be like for an Aboriginal student? (Ideal could be defined as “best” or “most effective”, or feel free to provide another definition).
- How would the student know s/he was successful?
- How would the teacher know the student was successful?
- How would the family know the student was successful?
- How would the community know the student was successful?
- How would stakeholders such as the school board and [the province’s education department] know the student was successful?
- How might teachers contribute to the student’s success?
- What do you see as important for non-Aboriginal teachers to know about Aboriginal people? For instance: are First Nation names important? How might curriculum, tasks, and ways of learning contribute to the student’s success?
- How might school structure, school culture, board policies, and [the province’s education department] contribute to the student’s success?

- Would success for an Aboriginal student look the same as success for a student of a different background? How might success look the same?
- Could success be measured? Should it be? How would it be?
- Can success for Aboriginal students be defined broadly, or is it different for each person?
- Are there certain common characteristics of success in the public school system? Would those characteristics apply to all Aboriginal students?
- Would they also apply to students of different backgrounds?

- Would success be different based on whether the student's experiences were reserve, rural, or all urban?
- Would success be different if the student was in an Aboriginal school vs. a school with students of various backgrounds?