

# Disrupting the Colonial Agenda within Graduate Teacher Education

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*The Truth and Reconciliation's Calls to Action (2015a) highlight education as a means of reconciliation. The purpose of our study was to understand if and how the content and pedagogy within a graduate Foundations of Education course using an anti-racist education framework enabled in-service teachers to challenge the colonial narrative and integrate Indigenous knowledges and perspectives into their classrooms. We interviewed six graduate students and identified key themes related to experiencing and enacting anti-racist education. The results suggest the necessity of identifying one's positionality, using relational pedagogy, and employing critical self-reflection to interrupt the colonial story and promote Indigeneity within the Canadian context.*

*Les appels à l'action de la Commission de vérité et de réconciliation soulignent l'importance de l'éducation comme moyen de réconciliation. L'objectif de cette étude était de comprendre dans quelle mesure le contenu et la pédagogie d'un cours supérieur portant sur les fondements de l'éducation et reposant sur un cadre antiraciste a permis aux enseignants en service de contester le récit colonial et d'intégrer des connaissances et des perspectives autochtones dans leur enseignement. Nous avons interviewé six étudiants aux cycles supérieurs et identifié des thèmes clés portant sur l'expérience et la mise en œuvre de l'éducation antiraciste. Les résultats semblent révéler un besoin d'identifier soi-même son positionnement, d'employer une pédagogie relationnelle et de s'engager dans une autoréflexion critique pour interrompre le récit colonial et promouvoir l'indigénéité dans le contexte canadien.*

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) *Calls to Action* (2015a) highlighted education as a means of reconciliation. Articles 62.2 and 63 (*Calls to Action* [TRC], 2015a) specifically described the responsibility of teacher education programs within the reconciliation process. To meet these directives, many post-secondary institutions are increasingly offering Indigenous Studies courses on campuses across Canada. The post-TRC era requires a new creation of space that centres Indigenous peoples' ways of knowing, being, and doing (Ermine, 2007). Some universities, in some faculties, have made the completion of an Indigenous Studies course a prerequisite for graduation. As a response to the TRC (2015b) the University of Winnipeg identified that all students who complete an undergraduate degree must complete a three credit-hour course to satisfy their Indigenous Course Requirement; content for the course is predominantly drawn from the local Indigenous community (University of Winnipeg, 2017). Similarly, Laurentian University (2016) has mandated that all Bachelor of Arts students complete six credit-hours related to Indigenous content to graduate. Across Canada, many

faculties of education have made courses related to Indigenous education compulsory for preservice teachers.

In spite of the best intentions of universities to carry out the TRC's *Calls to Action* (2015a), there has been resistance from students and/or educators and some of these efforts towards reconciliation are failing to be educative. Brian Rice, a professor at the University of Winnipeg in the Faculty of Education, who teaches a compulsory Indigenous teacher education course, has continued to experience resistance from some students to embrace Indigenous content (personal communication, Brian Rice, June 7, 2017). Peden (2013) also identified the resistance she observed from student teachers in the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba upon taking a compulsory Indigenous Studies course. Students initially demonstrated resistance to her course and she commented, "I was blind-sided by the amount of resistance presented when the topic of the Aboriginal Perspectives course was initiated" (p. 67). She has suggested that in order to deepen preservice teachers' understanding of the importance of Indigenous content and perspectives, students and teachers must acknowledge their own biases, positionality, and the racism that exists in our society. She has recommended that teachers be provided safe spaces for open and honest dialogue related to the harmful effects of colonialism and identify practices to counter these challenges (Peden, 2013). Our own lived experience as teacher educators within a Faculty of Education with a long-standing mandate in social justice education and a proven track record of success (Nova Scotia Department of Education, 2011; Tompkins, 2002; Tompkins & Orr, 2008; Walton, Tompkins, Hainnu, & Toney, 2016) positions us to make a timely and useful contribution to demonstrate how teacher educators can more effectively take up the TRC's directives related to teacher education (2015a), as related to education for reconciliation.

We are two Settler teacher educators living on the unceded territory of the Mi'kmaw people who teach a Foundations of Education course, the first in a 36-credit Master of Education (MEd) program. A salient feature contributing to the success of our MEd program is its use of an anti-racist education framework (Tompkins & Orr, 2008). The framework provides a social justice lens that underpins the program. Within the context of the TRC (2015b), we felt it to be timely and relevant to research if and how teacher attitudes and practices to Indigenize classrooms are cultivated in our graduate program and subsequently lived out in the field. Therefore, the purpose of our study was to understand if and how the content and pedagogy within Foundations of Education enabled in-service teachers to interrupt the colonial narrative and integrate Indigenous knowledge and perspectives into their classrooms. Two research questions guided this study:

- How has the use of an anti-racist education framework within a Foundations of Education graduate course impacted in-service teachers' beliefs and practices about Indigeneity?
- How has participation in this course subsequently impacted these in-service teachers' beliefs and practices within their own teaching contexts?

### **Context of the Study**

This study is set within an Atlantic Canadian Faculty of Education's MEd program that has had a longstanding focus on equity and social justice (Tompkins & Orr, 2008). Most of the students enrolled in the graduate program are educators that work full-time and attend university on a part-time basis. MEd students typically begin their program by coming on campus in the month

of July to complete their first two courses. Foundations of Education, taught in a two-week block, has three goals: to orient students to graduate education, to build an inclusive learning community, and to develop a social justice lens through which to examine schooling. Normally, the class size is between 20-22 students. Indigenous students, most of whom belong to the Mi'kmaw First Nation make up 10% of our graduate student population. Roughly 90% of the student population are identified as Settlers. Settler identity has been shaped by Eurocentric and colonial worldviews that have created systems and structures that have led to the highly unequal relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada. Settlers are most often of European descent (Barker, 2009). The term is somewhat problematic as it does not include minoritized peoples, who were forcibly and involuntarily relocated to what is now known as Canada (Ogbu & Simons, 1998).

### **Situating Ourselves within the Study**

The researchers in this study share many commonalities. Our shared research interests include decolonization, leadership, gender and leadership, and social justice education. We have team taught foundation courses at both the Bachelor of Education and MEd level. Ingrid entered teacher education after spending a decade in leadership and teaching roles in Alberta primarily within social studies education. Her doctoral research explored the leadership practices of Indigenous women principals within an Indigenous organization. Joanne spent her public school teaching and leadership career in Nunavut working towards Inuit-based education. She has worked as a teacher educator for 20 years teaching and researching in the broad areas of decolonization, equity, and social justice.

## **Literature Review**

### **Approaches to Date**

Educators of Indigenous Studies often have aspired for their students to work in solidarity with Indigenous peoples, however many students “struggle to move beyond simplified binary thinking” (Page, 2014, p. 24) and have not shifted their perspective to embrace Indigenous perspectives. To allow for students to have a more transformative experience in Indigenous Studies, Page (2014) has employed the use of the threshold concepts framework, which fosters critical thinking. Within her Indigenous Studies course, she introduced the threshold concept of voice and asked her students to consider who has the right to speak. The ensuing discussions enabled her students to recognize Indigenous perspectives.

Preservice teachers at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education were provided an opportunity to learn information related to Indigenous issues by attending workshops ranging from 45 minutes up to 3 hours. Nardozi and Mashford-Pringle's (2014) research has examined these students' perceptions of their experiences in the workshops and have found that most students were inspired to learn more, but did not receive enough instruction in the short time frame. They have suggested an examination of one's positionality, prior to the learning of Indigenous knowledges and perspectives, may create a more hospitable learning environment where students are receptive to learning about and for Indigenous peoples.

McFalls and Cobb-Roberts (2001) have identified the effectiveness of using cognitive dissonance as a teaching approach to enable preservice teachers to reduce their resistance to

diversity issues. Within their approach, students received content through lectures, readings, and discussions. They became aware of their hidden power and privilege through the practice of critiquing their own positioning.

Dion (2009) has examined teacher educators' learnings as they engaged in decolonizing their pedagogy. She has noted that in order to address the complexities of racism and colonialism, interrogation of self is necessary. Nicol and Korteweg (2010) have similarly contended that in-service teachers will be unable to disrupt the colonial narrative without critically examining their own cultural and historical positions. The researchers shared examples of Eurocentric assumptions they themselves held in the past and described the transformation that occurred as a result of their critical self-examination. Lastly, they identified the importance of "developing activities/assignments that prompt decolonizing reflexivity by the teachers" (Nicol & Korteweg, 2010, p. 186).

Phillips and Whatman's (2007) research, related to the implementation of a compulsory Indigenous Studies course for all teacher education candidates at the Queensland University of Technology, has identified approaches teacher educators have effectively used in teaching and learning for Indigenous peoples. In particular, their use of critical self-examination enabled students to "take personal responsibility in realizing the limitations of particular positions and cultural understandings and to provide opportunities for them to develop new tools for interpreting, and in many cases, razing 'old' knowledge" (Phillips & Whatman, 2007, p. 2).

### **Critical Reflection**

The use of critical reflection enables individuals to identify and question their assumptions within a cultural and historical context and develop alternative practices or ways of being (Cranton, 1996). Brookfield's (1995) scholarship on critical reflection has high applicability when it comes to preparing teachers to recognize their own positioning. He has reminded us that before leaping into teaching any [Indigenous] content knowledge, educators must understand the background and perspectives of their students vis-a-vis the learning.

Critical self-reflection situates teachers as learners. Rogers (2001) has asserted that reflection plays a valuable role in evoking long-lasting change in students' lives. Through an examination of one's beliefs and assumptions, students can gain new insights and understandings. As such, the purposeful use of critical reflective inquiry can enable students to more deeply understand their positionality and be more suitably prepared to engage with Indigenous content and pedagogies. Similarly, Shandomo (2010) has asserted the vital role critical reflection plays in disrupting students' thinking. She noted that the preservice teacher participants within her study lessened the gap between their own cultural backgrounds and those of their students through the use of critical reflection. This experience allowed them to more effectively relate to their students.

### **Anti-racist Education**

Scholars in the field of social justice education remind us that schools are not neutral institutions and power is always at play (Fine & Weis, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Anti-racist education provides a framework to think more deeply about decolonizing teacher education. St. Denis (2007) has noted that anti-racist education is appropriate as Settlers and Indigenous peoples are connected together by the joint processes of colonization and racialization.

Indigenous peoples are acutely aware of the forces of colonization and racialization that have shaped their lives and they live out the consequences of these daily (Battiste, 2013). Nowhere could this be more true than in the field of Indigenous education where, since Contact, an assimilationist agenda has always been at play (e.g., Jesuit education, Indian Residential Schools). Teaching educators to recognize the Eurocentric consciousness “in which all of us have been marinated” (Battiste, 2005, p. 123) takes considerable effort. Settlers have been taught racism from an early age (MacDonald, 2016) and are frequently oblivious to the existence and impact of these systems on Indigenous peoples and themselves. Moreover, Settlers continue to accrue benefits from the systems of colonization and racialization (St. Denis, 2007).

Anti-racist education unearths, examines, and challenges these deeply engrained belief systems. Anti-racist education begins with recognizing one’s positionality as an entry point to dismantle these larger systems of oppression.

Rather than deny and avoid [discussions about positionality]—and the pressure is great to participate in denial and avoidance of exploring how race continues to matter—educators must become informed on how racism has and continues to impact Aboriginal people and work towards developing tools for anti-racist education. (St. Denis, 2007, p. 1085)

Without this critical, often messy, and difficult self-examination by Settlers, reconciliation is unlikely to occur. It is not enough to incorporate Indigenous knowledge and practices into schools, for while important, they do not adequately address the individual, institutional, and systemic racism Indigenous students experience daily (St. Denis, 2007).

### **Settler Consciousness**

Often Settlers adopt the perspective of the “perfect stranger” (Dion, 2009, p. 179) in relation to Indigenous peoples, claiming no awareness of or connection to them. Settlers frequently have been unable to see their participation in the colonial project and sometimes have jumped enthusiastically into learning about Indigenous peoples, without having done prior examination of their own Settler narratives. What is needed is an end to the false binary that constructs Settler and Indigenous peoples as totally unconnected (Cannon, 2012; Page, 2014; Phillips, 2011).

As Settler consciousness (Alfred, 2010; Dion, 2009) emerges, it “upsets people’s [Settlers’] investment in seeing Canada as a fair, generous, and tolerant nation” (Cannon, 2012, p. 21). Similarly, Britzman (2003) has spoken of “difficult knowledge” in which learners must move away from the security of their ignorance towards knowledge that disrupts and contradicts their previously held views. The concept of *difficult knowledge* means interference to one’s personal security leading towards internal conflict. That is, the passion to accept one’s state in ignorance and to be simultaneously drawn to the internal invitation to know creates a contradictory situation (Britzman, 2003).

This new knowledge can trigger in Settlers a variety of emotional responses ranging from defensiveness, shame, guilt, anxiety, fear, pity, and sympathy, which often do not lead to deeper learning or action (personal communication, Enid Lee, September 10, 2003). However, emotions such as empathy, compassion, and even anger are more likely to lead to increased agency on the part of educators. But, even these emotions need to be problematized; Spelman (1990) has cautioned us that though well-intentioned, they can reinscribe unequal power

relationships between the oppressor and the oppressed. Navigating the terrain of difficult knowledge is hugely complex and is no easy task. Settlers become better positioned to take responsibility to challenge colonial beliefs and practices and can then begin to work in solidarity with Indigenous peoples when they deeply reflect on their beliefs. Pedagogies that actualize Settler consciousness are making their way onto the educational landscape. Two such pedagogies include the use of decolonizing autobiographies (Haig-Brown, 2009) and Indigenous Standpoint Pedagogy (Phillips, 2011).

### **Intercultural Education**

The field of intercultural education offers another lens through which to think about reconciliation. Nakata (1998) has used the term *cultural interface* to describe the space which lies between Settlers and Indigenous peoples. It is a space shaped by many complexities, most of which are below the level of consciousness. Indigenous learners are “already familiar with the complexities of the cultural interface” (Nakata, 1998, p. 6). Settlers, by virtue of the privileges afforded them through colonization, are less so. Ross (2006) has argued that Settlers have largely operated from a position of cultural arrogance or cultural ignorance. With increased cultural awareness, he has identified that cultural respect and humility can emerge. Similarly, Deardoff (2009) has advocated for the use of intercultural competence development.

### **Humility**

The process of colonization elevates the colonizers and creates in them a false sense of superiority and arrogance (Battiste, 2013). To engage in decolonizing work requires that colonizers demonstrate cultural humility as they recognize their positionality. Adopting a stance of humility, challenges the archetype of teacher as hero (Brown & Moffett, 1999) or teacher as saviour (Gomez, 1999). Furthermore, humility is required when engaging in decolonizing work as it requires that both instructors and students have an openness to increasing knowledge, a willingness to problematize their world view, and an ability to adopt a humble rather than arrogant positioning to learning (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). Humility challenges willful ignorance (Dei, Karumanchery, & Karumanchery-Luik, 2004). It is this learning, unlearning, and relearning (Freire, 1970) that allows for transformational learning to occur. A humble stance positions learners to grapple with their learning: “Grappling with ideas means to receive, reflect upon, practice articulating, and seek deeper understanding; grappling is not debate or rejection. The goal is move us beyond the mere sharing of opinions and toward more informed engagement” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 8).

### **Relational Pedagogy**

Relational pedagogues posit that learning happens when student and teacher relationships are given central importance. It is the human relationships, rather than the subject content, that opens the initial pathways to learning (Stengel, 2004). Culturally responsive pedagogues employ relational pedagogy as a foundation for creating connections among their students’ prior knowledge, cultural experience, and the formal curriculum (Gay, 2010). Within university teacher education programs, attention has focused almost exclusively on the cognitive and intellectual domains of the learner. More often than not, holistic approaches that address the

social and emotional needs of the learner have been absent. Relational pedagogy combined with anti-racist education allows critical social theory to be reified in educational settings.

### **Methodology and Methods**

This research study is a qualitative inquiry grounded in constructivist, decolonizing, and anti-racist perspectives. Constructivism is primarily concerned with understanding the experiences, knowledge, and practice (Flick, 1998) of research participants and how they make meaning of their world (Merriam, 2009). Decolonization (Battiste, 2013; Smith, 1999) and anti-racism education (Dei, 1996; Lee, 1985; St. Denis, 2007) are primarily concerned with surfacing and addressing power relationships between dominant and minoritized groups, such as Settler and Indigenous peoples, in educational contexts. This research study consists of two parts which we will discuss.

### **The Participants**

The participants in this study were six MEd Settler students who recently graduated from the program and currently work as educators in public schools and post-secondary institutions. They had been taught the Foundations of Education course by one of the two researchers. To protect the identity of the participants, we chose to use pseudonyms. Linda, of Italian ancestry, was teaching in an elementary school serving Settler students in a high socio-economic neighbourhood in Toronto. Catrina, of British ancestry and a recent immigrant to Canada, was teaching elementary school with a low Indigenous population in rural Nova Scotia. Kendra, of mixed Scottish and Irish heritage, also was teaching elementary school in a similar context to Catrina. Sharon, a community college instructor of Northern European descent, was teaching in a regional centre in the Northwest Territories. Eighty percent of her college's student population were First Nations, Métis, or Inuit, who relocated from their small communities to complete their post-secondary education. Patsy, a nurse educator of Northern European descent, was teaching in a community college program serving rural communities in Nova Scotia. There were few Indigenous students that attended the community college. Karla, a Polish-Canadian teacher, was teaching French immersion in a post-industrial, multicultural, urban setting in Nova Scotia. All of the participants resided within 50 kilometres of Indigenous communities. We selected our participants from a pool of four graduate co-horts (i.e., 80 students). From this pool, we identified a possible twenty students who had demonstrated a shift in their colonial thinking as a result of their engagement with the course material.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data collection consisted of semi-structured, open-ended, individual interviews with the six participants mentioned above (Creswell, 2005; Merriam, 2009). Prior to the start of the study we applied for and received ethics approval from the St. Francis Xavier University Research Ethics Board. Potential participants then received the Invitation to Participate form describing the study and explaining that participation was voluntary. Upon agreeing to participate, they reviewed and signed the Consent Form. The participants engaged in one to two hour-long interviews. They were asked about if and how the content and pedagogy in Foundations of Education influenced their ability to enact Indigenization within their classrooms. All interviews

were audio-recorded and transcribed. The interview format guided participants through preset questions so that they could address key themes while still allowing for an openness to change the sequencing in the interview (Kvale, 1996). An analysis of the interviews occurred after the researchers carefully and repeatedly read the transcribed data to gain an understanding of the phenomenon through the participants' responses. As co-instructors and co-researchers, we also brought to this study our own "reflection-in-action" and "reflection-on-action" (Schön, 1983) while working together closely over a span of four years. This positioned us to more effectively identify the emergent themes as we actively analyzed the participants' responses. Creswell (2005) has suggested identifying key ideas by coding them using few words to assign meaning to the text (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). These codes were then categorized into themes that emerged as the data were analyzed. The themes were inquired into and supported through the research participants' direct quotations and supported by the literature.

## **Findings and Discussion**

It takes considerable and intentional effort for Settler educators to recognize both the Eurocentric "marinade" (Battiste, 2005) in which they have been steeped, and the realities of colonization and racialization that have shaped Settlers and Indigenous peoples. From this new-found understanding of oppression, the logical next step for Settlers is to engage in solidarity with Indigenous peoples. This requires Settlers to move from a position of privilege, which Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) have described as floating in the current, to one where they challenge the status quo and effectively swim against the current. However, to consciously challenge Eurocentric attitudes and practices that have been so normalized in our larger society and schools requires critical consciousness and strategic thinking on the part of educators.

This is the teaching against the grain of which Cochran-Smith (1991) has spoken. When the graduate students in this study spoke of acting on their Settler consciousness, they demonstrated a range of actions that could be taken within various curricular spaces: formal, informal, hidden, and null. We divide our findings into two major sections. The first, *experiencing anti-racist education*, describes the intentional learning environment we created in Foundations of Education, in which critical self-reflection occurred. The second, *enacting anti-racist education*, both explores the ability of the graduate students to enact anti-racist education in their own contexts, and examines the struggles experienced by the students and instructors. Describing the pedagogical approaches and activities used in Foundation of Education is outside the scope of this study; however, interested readers can refer to previous studies (Tompkins, 2002; Tompkins & Orr, 2008) in which this is detailed.

### **Experiencing Anti-racist Education**

St. Denis (2007) and Battiste (2013) have advocated for the use of anti-racist education as a way to disrupt colonial thinking, by first foregrounding students' understandings of themselves within their own context. In order for our graduate students to examine themselves and their beliefs, we employ purposeful practices to enable the creation of a safe and trusting learning environment. This use of a relational pedagogy, respectful of Indigenous ontologies (ChiLinda, 2012; Wilson, 2008), enables our graduate students to understand their positionality. Our intentional pedagogical practices model anti-racist education praxis.

**Building community.** Our graduate students enter the MEd program with well-developed



identities that too often have been unexamined and/or affirmed. Through the use of relational pedagogy, where attention to human relations precedes the introduction of content knowledge (Gay, 2010; Stengel, 2004), we establish a safe space where both Settler and Indigenous identities can be explored. As anti-racist education requires us to disrupt colonial thinking, we mindfully created democratic spaces where graduate students can both express their own ideas and respectfully challenge and listen to the ideas of others. We invite graduate students to co-generate a community agreement with us that explicitly identifies the behaviours and attitudes required for effective communication across difference (Lee, 1994; Toll, 2010). A statement on the community agreement might be, “Our personal experiences are valid; however, they are not universal.” These kinds of explicit statements encourage our graduate students to be mindful, precise, and respectful in their communication. We employ community-building practices to allow our graduate students, who are at various levels of self-awareness, to commit to using an asset-perspective and see each other as potential allies (Smith, 2008). In so doing, we focus more on seeking to understand rather than to judge one other. This pedagogy produces opportunities for authentic, rich, and educative dialogue. Sharon commented on the value of the safe environment when she said, “[The instructor] made me feel very comfortable...We are all together in a group, and we’re able to discuss and talk and share a lot” (Interview, 2017). Small cooperative base group discussions enable graduate students to build trusting relationships with their peers. Sharon recounted an experience in her Foundations of Education class when a fellow Mi’kmaw graduate student demonstrated that deep intercultural learning does occur when trust has been established:

One thing that struck me with Cathy [Sharon’s classmate] was ... when she shared a personal story of her mother in residential schools ... I think the fact that, number one, that she felt comfortable enough within our cohort to share that story made me realize that she was a special person. (Interview, 2017)

When respectful spaces of learning exist, both Settlers and Indigenous educators can enter into dialogue. For Settlers, this can provide opportunities to acquire and deepen cultural humility while for Indigenous people it can provide validation and affirmation of their Indigeneity (Battiste, 2005).

**Employing a constructivist approach.** We employ practices that encourage our graduate students to share and reflect on their own personas. Using a constructivist approach, we ask our students to examine their personal and professional experiences and use these to elucidate their understanding of social justice concepts (e.g., power, privilege, equity). For example, we invite graduate students to create a timeline of their personal histories to invoke reflection on how privileges and oppressions have shaped their lives. This proves to be a highly educative experience. Using critical self-reflection allows our graduate students to reify abstract course concepts. Catrina identified the value of using critical self-reflection and sharing ideas with her peers when she said:

Having the opportunity in that course to actually reflect on yourself, because so often you’re reflecting on other people’s work, or on other people’s ideas. And so, it was really nice to actually be “forced”, to look at yourself, and, as part of your assignment, to actually think about where your beliefs came from ... [and] listening to other people’s stories, too. It was a very valuable experience ... It just helps contextualize everything. (Interview, 2017)

Much like Danforth (1997), when students critically examine their own biographies they see that concepts like power, privilege, and systemic racism are not abstract; rather they are frequently at play in their own lives, albeit often outside their consciousness.

**Decentering the teacher.** We deliver course content positioning ourselves as facilitators and primarily use decentred teaching approaches. We rely heavily upon in-class experiential activities and large and small group discussion. Student voice is foregrounded. The experience of connecting the learning to their own lives enables them to understand the concepts. Kendra said:

I think that there was a lot of variety and how it was delivered. There was a lot of opportunity or exchanges amongst us. And it wasn't just purely lecture ... I think they really helped me understand the content. It became stronger for me as a result of the approach. (Interview, 2017)

Kendra's statements affirm that decentering the teacher enables more opportunities for students to engage with course content and personalize their understanding of social justice concepts. Students engage with content through reading and discussing texts, videos, podcasts and we also use a variety of strategies and modalities where we ask them to make connections between the content and their lives. Some of these approaches to teaching include use of experiential and cooperative learning, guest speakers, critical autobiographical writing, and daily reflecting. We invite our graduate students to respond in writing (e.g., exit slips, essay), orally (e.g., small base group conversations, sharing circles) and through diverse ways of representing their knowing (e.g., building models, constructing metaphors).

**Validating professional judgment.** Traditional teacher-centred transmission-oriented approaches, where teachers exert coercive power over students (Cummins, 2009), are inherently colonizing. Conversely, we model a more decolonizing pedagogy as we share power with our graduate students. They identified that previously they had employed inclusive practices (similar to our own) to teaching and learning, but they noted that the presence of these approaches within the course validated the place of relational pedagogy. They could articulate more clearly for themselves and to others the significance of using such pedagogy to decolonize classrooms. Kendra identified that using inquiry and cooperative learning to build relationships has been central to her practice and she said:

When I took your course, it was sort of really affirming of well this is how I think ... I really believe that instrumenting those sorts of approaches that the children have a voice and the children have an economy, and yes, I'm the facilitator ... I think that myself I learned from them and I'm not a holder of all knowledge. (Interview, 2017)

Linda also acknowledged the power of such pedagogy when she said, "[Sharing circles] give everyone a voice and that [students] have to be respectful to others" (Interview, 2017).

Experiencing a carefully designed Foundations of Education course has taught the graduate students the course content while modelling a pedagogy that positions them to potentially enact anti-racist education within their own contexts. These graduate students show a deepened understanding of the need to decolonize their own practice. They now have the informed knowledge and have gained a sense of confidence to justify their pedagogy that could allow them to transform their own spaces of teaching and learning.

## **Enacting Anti-racist Education**

Our modelling of anti-racist education in our Foundations of Education course has translated into our graduate students' use of these practices in their own contexts. They identified that their new-found understanding of their positionality has influenced how they relate to their students, more specifically how their increased compassion and cultural humility has enabled them to more consciously employ practices that value their students' identities. They have learned to critically reflect and act in ways to challenge Eurocentrism, while actively seeking ways to infuse Indigenous knowledge and perspectives into their classrooms. Not surprisingly, the graduate students did identify some challenges associated with implementing anti-racist education. However, overall these practices have served a decolonizing function and have instilled in them an obligation to work towards reconciliation.

**Recognizing positionality through critical reflection.** Critical self-reflection leads students to an awareness of their positionality. Once the graduate students in this study were able to see the privilege that was previously outside their field of view, they became positioned to read the world with much more critical eyes. They were able to see Eurocentrism and colonialism and their accompanying injustices that translated into a willingness to challenge the status quo.

Prior to taking the course, Linda had knowledge of Eurocentrism but had not actively resisted it until completing the course and said, "I didn't give it enough action ... I'm much more aware of it now ... I would have to tell my brain more so to go outside that box. It doesn't come easily" (Interview, 2017). The course enabled her to understand the necessity of acting on her new knowledge and she has made a commitment to challenge her lingering Eurocentric attitudes and practices.

Similarly, through exposure to course content, Catrina's perceptions related to understanding multiple perspectives shifted dramatically and she said, "my awareness definitely rose ... when it came to White privilege ... it just really helped me understand some of my prejudices towards people" (Interview, 2017). Catrina expressed that she gained an understanding of the systemic barriers that exist and she has acted on this knowledge. All of the graduate students in the study identified how they now actively challenge Eurocentrism.

**Demonstrating cultural humility.** As our graduate students became aware of their positionality as Settlers, they spoke of their increased sense of compassion and empathy. As they unlearned the colonial narrative and relearned a more complete and accurate history of Settler/Indigenous relationships, they moved from a position of cultural ignorance or arrogance to one of cultural humility. Battiste (2005), Dearthoff (2009), and Ross (2006) have likewise identified cultural humility in decolonizing Settler consciousness. All these educators reside on Indigenous land and work within 50 kilometers of Indigenous communities and yet, for the most part, they have been "perfect strangers" (Dion, 2009) to these communities. Our graduate students were shocked, outraged, and humbled as they recognized the atrocities Indigenous peoples have faced. From a humbler location, they were more aptly positioned to challenge their ignorance (Dei, Karumanchery, & Karumanchery-Luik, 2004; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017) and begin to decolonize their classrooms. Catrina said, "I'm very conscious to try and make sure that I really understand how to do things in a way that is respectful" (Interview, 2017). Kendra added that following the course, "I brought with me a much stronger understanding of all of our differences" (Interview, 2017). Karla identified that the course allowed her to engage in perspective-taking that enabled her to increase her sense of cultural humility. She said:

Anytime something happens in my classroom I step back and I think about the situation, and I think about the individual. I think about what their background is. I ask different questions. I ask what their norms are ... Just to get a better understanding of the child as a whole, which I didn't necessarily do before. (Interview, 2017)

**Using relational pedagogy to reveal students' multiple identities.** With a heightened awareness of self and others, the graduate students recognized the importance of relational pedagogy (Stengel, 2004) and embraced it in their own classrooms. They intentionally and purposefully used it to build respectful and democratic spaces that affirmed and validated their learners. This community building was evident in our graduate students' teaching practices. Linda and Catrina have used sharing circles, while Karla has used practices so "that everyone feels comfortable in the setting" (Interview, 2017). They reported that students, who in many other contexts have felt marginalized and rendered largely invisible, became more engaged as a result of this pedagogy. For example, Sharon purposely posted pictures of her students' home communities throughout the North in her classroom in the regional center; she witnessed with this practice, "they began to feel a part of the...whole learning atmosphere of the college" (Interview, 2017). Sharon's seemingly small act of reflecting her students' identities in their shared learning space has attempted to make every student feel s/he belongs and has significance (Jensen, 2005).

The influence of teachers using student identity to increase student success is well documented (Cummins, 2009; Haig-Brown, Hodgson-Smith, Regnier, & Archibald, 1997). As a result of the experiences our graduate students had exploring their own identities in Foundations of Education, through activities such as the power flower (Lee, 1985) and the autobiographical timeline, they have come to understand the importance of making visible and affirming their own students' identities. Effectively, they have become better positioned to see the perspectives of all students, particularly those of minoritized groups. Kendra identified this when she commented:

It just spoke to me and it really touched me personally and professionally ... Examining the things that are going on with the children in the class, and all of the diversity that are there amongst all of them. It made me dig so much deeper and just look at all of the children because sometimes we can get really caught up with the outcomes. (Interview, 2017)

In our Foundations of Education course, we were able to challenge our graduate students' deficit thinking through the use of Thomson's (2002) virtual knapsack metaphor. This enabled them to recognize and validate the knowledge and skills their students bring into the classroom. Karla remarked that she has worked to ensure that she values her students' identities and said:

Because there's no child, out of the 265 that I teach ... I do not know who walks through my door each day. I know their names. I know things about them. I know where they live. I know what they like. And I know how I can help them ... I'm respecting them, and I'm supporting them, the way they need to be supported ... because of what I learned in the program. (Interview, 2017)

**Interrupting the colonial narrative: Challenging Eurocentrism through critical thinking.** In the Foundations of Education course, multiple opportunities arose for our graduate students to use and sharpen their critical thinking. The colonial narrative is presented

as the single and therefore inaccurate story of our joint history. Prior to enrolling in the graduate program, Patsy held a naïve and erroneous understanding of residential schools and said, “I thought it was nice of the government to look after these little children” (Interview, 2017). She identified later, after the course, that the schools were in fact engaged in cultural genocide (TRC, 2015b).

When the graduate students re-examined their autobiographies using an anti-racist framework, they became conscious and cognizant of their positionality. This revealed itself in their more critical analysis of both the content and pedagogical practices they have used in their own classrooms. This is evidenced by Kendra’s comments when she said, “[The course] made me more of a critical thinker and question things ... You made us really think deeply about [the content]” (Interview, 2017). Students developed critical dispositions as a result of their experiences in the course. Patsy commented, “It’s opening our eyes to what’s going on around us” (Interview, 2017). The course made them more able and willing to scrutinize their learning materials for examples of bias. This was evident in Karla’s comments:

I’m cognizant about talking to students about what was written in the past and Eurocentric beliefs. And you know to really question what’s in our textbooks ... just things in general, about society, that they’re not sure of. But more so in thinking of what was happening to this group of people, and what continues to happen to them today. (Interview, 2017)

**Infusing Indigenous content.** The course pedagogy created opportunities for graduate students to reflect on their own and others’ cultures and act upon these understandings. They demonstrated an ability to infuse Indigenous content in their respective contexts. Their increased awareness of Indigenous culture gave them a sense of agency that compelled them to educate differently. Catrina stated, “I feel very passionately now that I’m ... building my understanding of [Indigenous] culture, and beliefs, and identity” (Interview, 2017). Linda shared her shift in thinking when she said, “It just made me more mindful, even in the books, telling a story” (Interview, 2017). Kendra acted upon her beliefs as well and this was clear when she said:

It did cause me for the last three years since your course to spend more time educating the students and bringing more literature in about Mi’kmaq and reading books ... Just bringing the awareness to the students in the class of the fact that there are many cultures and just right here in the areas that we live in, there’s a First Nations community, and the kids are fascinated ... They are very engaged in learning about Indigenous communities and culture ... I would say my teaching has improved as a result of the course. (Interview, 2017)

Prior to taking the Foundations of Education course, Sharon’s English Language Arts content was completely Eurocentric, in spite of working with a primarily Indigenous student population. Having become more critically conscious in the Foundations of Education course, she began to decolonize the curriculum for her adult learners and she said:

And within the English curriculum, I feel lucky, because we’re able to order novels that are Indigenous, by Indigenous authors ... I find the students [now] more engaged. I think they feel more welcome ... They begin to feel a part of the whole learning atmosphere of the college. It’s so important. (Interview, 2017)

Sharon noted how academic engagement increased when her students were able to see themselves in the curriculum and have their identities affirmed.

The Foundations of Education course has been able to blend anti-racist education theory and practice in ways that has transformed educators. The beliefs and attitudes of the graduate students in this study have been changed, but more importantly, through our explicit modeling, this course has impacted their pedagogy. The adoption of a decolonizing paradigm has inspired them to consciously challenge power relationships in their own classrooms. Their anti-racist pedagogy has given space and voice to learners who have been traditionally marginalized or excluded.

**Experiencing barriers.** Resistance to anti-racist education is well-noted in the literature (Cochran-Smith, 1999; St. Denis, 2007). The graduate students in this study predominantly spoke about their sense of agency in moving an anti-racist education agenda forward; however, they all identified various challenges associated with this approach. They spoke of their heightened awareness of colonial and racist narratives and practices prevalent in schools. Patsy noted, “I heard one student say something about Indians, like they get such and such for free, and it just threw me for a loop” (Interview, 2017). They also identified their deeper sense of obligation to be “interrupters” of the colonial narrative (Fine & Weis, 2003) when they witnessed it. When Linda led a discussion in her kindergarten class about polar bears’ skin colour being black, she recounted this story:

One of our kids said “Ewww” so that felt like an opportunity there. I knew that they were thinking that a polar bear is weird to have black skin but it kind of had a deeper connection to me. I just had to say “No, everyone’s skin is different. Let’s all put our hands together and see that we’re all different colours.” I feel like I’m more aware now after taking the course, whereas an incident like that might have passed me and I would not have realized it. (Interview, 2017)

However, acting as an ally was a new role for many of the graduate students and this was evident after Patsy heard an inappropriate student comment and said, “I thought, oh geez, how do I deal with this?” (Interview, 2017). Both Patsy and Linda acknowledged how challenging it was to introduce difficult knowledge (Britzman, 2003) into their learning spaces. As they disrupted their own and their students’ previously held beliefs, they experienced the emotional work inherent in introducing this content into the classroom. They became aware of the significant cognitive and personal disruption that results from challenging the status quo. They came to appreciate the discomfort and ambiguity that is inherent in employing relational pedagogy within an anti-racist framework. They recognized the complexity of navigating this emotional terrain but that this alone is not a guarantee that power relationships have been altered. Spelman (1990) reminds us that seemingly benign emotions, such as empathy and compassion, need to be open to critical examination for reconciliation to occur between Settler and Indigenous peoples.

An additional challenge all our graduate students identified was the need for access to resources and on-going professional learning to increase their knowledge base. Some of our graduate students who taught at the elementary level noted the lack of appropriate and unbiased resources, in all curricular areas, available to support the teaching and learning for Indigenous peoples. Kendra said, “I want to have more resources” (Interview, 2017). Catrina shared her lack of content knowledge when she said, “They’re throwing resources our way but for me as a teacher I don’t have a great knowledge base or feel confident in what I’m teaching” (Interview,

2017). Catrina spoke of her lack of content knowledge and her lack of confidence in presenting the material in culturally appropriate ways. She said, “I try and make sure that I really understand how to do things in a way that is respectful and culturally relevant” (Interview, 2017).

As noted previously, all the graduate students taught in close proximity to Indigenous communities but few had developed relationality with their neighbours. Following the course, Catrina recognized the significance of building relationships and said:

We do have a First Nations community that does live relatively close to us and my hope is to reach out to them in the not too distant future and actually build my own learning as well as have them come in a speak to my own students. (Interview, 2017)

Overall the graduate students felt a strong sense of agency to transform their own classrooms; but they lamented the lack of institutional support to challenge Eurocentrism. Sharon commented, “I find that within my little group we try and work towards that [incorporating Indigenous learning] so I feel lucky that way. There are other programs in the college that I don’t see that happening at all” (Interview, 2017). Without system-wide advocacy and leadership, it is challenging for anti-racist education to take root.

### **Conclusion**

Interrupting the colonial narrative is inherently political, messy, complex, nuanced, and emotional. Schools have typically acted as “clerks of the empire” (Giroux, 1988). Decolonizing education is a daunting task for it challenges power relations in both schools and the larger society. As educators move towards becoming “critically conscious” (Cummins, 2009), they interrogate their own positionality and position their students to do the same. The findings of this study suggest that the use of anti-racist education is an appropriate framework to interrupt the processes of colonization and racism that have negatively shaped Settler and Indigenous relations. As long as the Settler/Indigenous binary exists, it is too easy for Settler educators to adopt a position of “passive empathy” (Dion, 2009) towards Indigenous peoples in which they see their histories, struggles, and destinies as peoples as unconnected. Clearly education can play a role in transforming these relationships. Anti-racist education allows for the possibility to create alliances between Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators. “Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers alike will have to make coalitions to do the work that is necessary to unpack the racism that we have all inherited” (Stewart, 2005, p. 111). Such alliances could work to create the solidarity Senator Murray Sinclair envisions when he speaks of education as reconciliation (personal communication, November 8, 2016).

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