

Book Review

Truth and Reconciliation Through Education: Stories of Decolonizing Practices

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It is a precarious time to review the work on truth and reconciliation in Canada, considering that in 2023, the country did not complete any of the 94 *Calls to Action* (Jewell & Mosby, 2023). Since 2015, only 13 have been completed, showing a refusal to listen to the survivors of Canada's residential schools (Jewell & Mosby, 2023). Within this context, it's unsurprising that many Indigenous People believe the concept of reconciliation in this country is dead (Murphy, 2020). However, the concepts of Truth and Reconciliation has been widely adopted by education researchers and has become a staple of the discourse surrounding the role of Indigenous education in Canada. Published in mid-2023, *Truth and Reconciliation through Education: Stories of Decolonizing Practices*, edited by Yvonne Poitras Pratt and Sulyn Bodnaresko, emerged from a master's certificate program in Indigenous education at the University of Calgary. The book specifically focuses on adult learners, some of whom are exploring the concepts of truth and reconciliation for the first time. The book is structured into two main sections: the first delves into program development and foundational concepts, while the second provides personal narratives from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators. These narratives discuss their proactive roles in responding to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's (TRC) *Calls to Action*, offering both inspiration and insights for educational efforts nationwide. In total, the editors compile 23 essays from contributors who blend theory with practice, sharing their stories from program creation to effective personal narratives of reconciliation efforts. The text serves as a guide and inspiration for incorporating reconciliation into education, aimed at educators, students, and anyone interested in how education can facilitate reconciliation.

The most powerful section of the book is the introduction, which proposes a metaphor of tobacco that is used as a framework throughout the book. This model is based on the relationship between one of the editors (Yvonne Poitras Pratt) and an Elder named kehteya Betty Letendre kichi acâhkos iskwew—Sacred Star Woman, who helped guide the development of the education program. The book begins with a teaching about tobacco from Elder Betty, as she is referred to, a story about reciprocity, and Yvonne gifting tobacco seeds to Betty to begin this process. In this way, the sacred tobacco plant becomes “more than a gift we give in ceremony; it has also become a metaphor through which we understand the program itself” (p. 4). This metaphor not only enriches the book's content but also serves as a model for other programs, illustrating the power of Indigenous cultural practices in fostering understanding and connection for a wide range of students. This relationship and explanation of the program by several faculty members at the University of Calgary round out the first section of the book.

A particularly innovative model of “critical service-learning projects” is described by Solange Lalonde and Aubrey Jean Hanson, which asks students to partner with and to support local Indigenous initiatives in their communities as a way to actively engage in reconciliation. This approach is a brilliant model of education that forces students out of the classroom and into their communities so they have the necessary experience to tackle larger structural issues within their future educational practice. The success of this program is highlighted later in the book through different local initiatives that students completed for their critical service-learning projects, with powerful examples of collaborations with programs such as the Rupertsland Institute, Telus Spark, and the Tsuut’ina people.

The next four sections (Parts 1–4) delve into the experiences of alumni and current students from the Indigenous Education program, highlighting their journeys of community reconnection and skill acquisition, aimed at driving reconciliation forward. These narratives span from revitalizing community ties to implementing service-learning projects in K–12 settings, underscoring the practical application of academic knowledge towards societal change. Further exploration into diverse service-learning initiatives showcases the extension of these efforts beyond traditional educational frameworks, touching upon early learning, observatory work, and artistic collaborations with Indigenous communities. There is a wide diversity of stories that many different people, including Métis, First Nations, Inuit, mixed-heritage, and non-Indigenous people, could relate to regarding teaching and learning within education in Canada. Acting as short vignettes of approximately 10 pages each, one can read the stories of over 15 students who completed the program and their journeys of reclamation or teaching others within the community. While each section is linked to different parts of the program or educational experience, the connective parts between sections struggle to keep up with the constant stream of new ideas. The transitions between these parts are just a title, such as “Stories of Learning with Community,” and do not provide an introduction or conclusion that would have kept a narrative thread throughout these parts and separate from the individual narratives of authors. As a result, some authors do a better job of explaining the connection their own learning had to the program’s model at the University of Calgary than others.

Additionally, I think the flow of the book may have been slightly improved by linking the case studies of the critical service-learning projects directly into the program model when they were first introduced at the start of the book, as they provide compelling testimony about the impact of this approach to adult education. Another addition to the book could have been a chapter that focused exclusively on critiquing concepts of truth and reconciliation, grounded in ongoing scholarship. While it is acknowledged that “scholars have varying views of what decolonization entails” (p. 29), a more fulsome critique of the role of the Truth and Reconciliation process within this effort would have been a welcome addition. Adding a final section of the book to highlight some of these significant structural challenges and specifically when these truth and reconciliation educational efforts fail, go astray, or are challenged—even with the best intentions—would have shown the ongoing work that still needs to be done across this country. Instead, the book focuses on the experiences of students who had constructive approaches, sharing inspiring experiences from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators, and highlighting their concerted efforts towards meeting the TRC’s *Calls to Action*. However, I think it would be just as important to discuss some of the students who did not complete the program requirements or experienced some pushback towards incorporating these ideas into K–12 schools or the local community. Creating a section dedicated to these challenges and experiences would have also provided readers a pathway to handle these issues when they arise in their own teaching practices.

Due to its regionally focused research within the contexts of the University of Calgary, I think the book would have its widest and greatest impact in faculties of education in Alberta who are training teachers in the province. I believe making this book mandatory for teachers in the province of Alberta would provide a strong grounding in positive truth and reconciliation approaches. I would also recommend this book for preservice teachers, novice teachers, and even experienced teachers due to the range of voices and perspectives that may resonate with their own educational approaches. Professionals engaged in truth and reconciliation initiatives within higher education, including upper administration, may also find the educational approaches relevant to their own decolonizing work. The book is particularly pertinent for those involved in the creation or implementation of similar programs within their own institutions, offering a wealth of knowledge from its shared experiences.

References

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