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Wyi wah mamaskacikiwey itota: The time is now to bridge the gap from what is to what could be!

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Wyi wah mamaskacikiwey itota: The time is now to bridge the gap from what is to what could be!

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Abstract

This journal article emanates from my original Dissertation-in-Practice (DiP) focusing on the integration of Indigenous culture and academics at Riverview High School, within the Prairie Lakes School District (both names are pseudonyms) in Manitoba, Canada. The article addresses the long-standing Problem of Practice (PoP) concerning the underachievement and lack of engagement among Indigenous students as evidenced by four-year graduation data released by the Manitoba government's Ministry of Education and Early Childhood Learning. Utilizing a collaborative, community-based approach informed by Indigenous perspectives and change management principles, this article proposes a transformative framework. Key theoretical constructs, including "Two-Eyed Seeing" (Etuaptmumk), TribalCrit, and Deming's PDSA cycles, are employed to analyze the PoP and guide the change process. The article explores my positionality as a Red River Métis educator, the importance of voice and equity, and the alignment with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. It details the problem posed, proposed solutions, communication strategies, and evaluation frameworks, culminating in a call for urgent and sustained action.

Keywords: *Educational leadership; early childhood education leadership; distributed pedagogical leadership; effects of leadership for children*

Introduction

The landscape of Canadian education, particularly in provinces like Manitoba, is marked by persistent disparities in the educational outcomes of Indigenous students. Despite incremental improvements, the goal of achieving equitable and culturally responsive education remains elusive. This article builds upon a Dissertation-in-Practice (DiP), "Wyi Wah Mamaskacikiwey Itota: An Integration of Indigenous Culture and Academics at a Manitoba High School," to provide a more comprehensive exploration of the proposed transformative framework. (Wyi wah mamaskacikiwey itota translates as: The time is now to do something incredible)

The focus is on Riverview High School, a school within the Prairie Lakes School District (both are pseudonyms), where a significant portion of the student body identifies as Indigenous. The central Problem of Practice (PoP) revolves around the underachievement and disengagement of these students, a complex issue rooted in historical and systemic inequities such as the intergenerational trauma caused by Residential Schools and the systemic racism Indigenous people have endured via the Indian Act.

To be clear, the use of the umbrella term "Indigenous" has emerged over the past several decades. Still a legally recognized term, the word "Indian" exists primarily within government documents such as the Indian Act of Canada. The term has mostly been dropped from conversation and has evolved over time from "native" to "aboriginal" to Indigenous. All of these terms have been used to lump together and anonymise the people who first walked these lands. Pan-Indianism, the belief that all Indigenous people are the same, has long been a challenge for the over 600 First Nations, five Métis councils, and Inuit communities that inhabit the northern regions of North America. It is important to understand that all are distinct people, both culturally and linguistically (Canada, 2021).

In the region this work originates from, the majority of First Nations people identify as Anishinaabeg, Ininiwak, Anisininewuk, Dakota Oyate, and Dene (Canada, 2021). This region is also the homeland of the Red River Métis. In terms of the school system, the provincial government has tried to identify Indigenous students in schools via voluntary data collection sheets given to parents and caregivers at the time of school registration. However, it must be understood

that many students and their families do not wish to self-identify on a form presented to them by a school system that, for many, represents another tool of colonialism used to identify and assimilate (Brayboy, 2005).

As a Red River Métis educator, I approach this research with a deep personal and professional commitment to fostering educational equity. The guiding principle is to bridge the gap between Indigenous knowledge systems and Western academic practices through a process of collaborative co-creation. This article delves into the theoretical underpinnings, methodological considerations, and practical strategies outlined in the DiP, providing a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with integrating Indigenous culture and academics in a high school setting.

Problem of Practice and context

The PoP addressed in this article is the persistent underachievement and disengagement of Indigenous students at Riverview High School. This forces leaders to think about how to respond in a manner that maintains the high academic standards the staff demands while at the same time actively listening and responding to parent, caregiver, and student voice with regard to any solutions that are developed. It is important to recognize that this issue is not unique to Riverview; it reflects a broader national and international trend (Louie & Gereluk, 2021).

Statistical data from Manitoba's provincial education reports have consistently highlighted lower graduation rates and higher dropout rates among Indigenous students compared to their non-Indigenous peers. For example, recent provincial data indicates graduation rates for self-identified First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students are significantly lower than the provincial average and the gap is widening, not shrinking (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2022). While yearly numbers fluctuate, the trend remains concerning. On a day-to-day basis, this is manifested in poor class attendance, low academic achievement, and behavioural challenges directed at staff and peers.

The province's history is marked by the legacy of residential schools, the forced removal of Indigenous children from their families, and the ongoing impacts of colonization (Feir, 2016). These historical factors continue to shape the educational experiences of Indigenous students in many ways, the vast majority being negative, such as poverty, involvement in the justice system, and other challenges. Schools are where much of this trickles down, having adverse effects on student well-being and achievement, including graduation (Feir, 2016).

Riverview High School is a mid-sized, urban high school, located in a regional prairie hub with a diverse student population. Over half of the student body is made up of Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC), with the largest and fastest-growing segment being Indigenous. The school is located between two neighbourhoods. Lying to the northeast are middle to upper socioeconomic, predominantly settler homes interspersed with restaurants and retail properties. Lying opposite is a section of the city with higher-than-average poverty rates. This is where the majority of the Indigenous students reside. The rest of the population is evenly divided between newcomer and settler students from outside the catchment area. The school has been recognized as one with high academic standards and produces a large number of students bound for post-secondary education. Unfortunately, most of those students are not Indigenous.

PESTE (Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Environmental) Analysis

Schools are open systems, which means they are constantly influenced by outside forces (Deszca et al., 2020; Hallinger, 2003). Effective leaders need to understand how these forces shape the experiences of everyone in the school community: Indigenous students, their caregivers, staff, and the leadership team itself. To understand what is happening at Riverview, and why the PoP matters, a PESTE analysis is appropriate (Deszca et al., 2020). Although many different factors affect schools, this analysis focuses only on those most connected to the PoP.

Political factors

Leaders at Riverview are forced to balance two competing political pressures. The first is working to improve outcomes for Indigenous students, while the second is responding to the concerns of non-Indigenous parents and staff who want to protect programmes that have been successful for many of them over the years. This tension becomes clear when comparing the strong performance of out-of-catchment students with the challenges faced by in-catchment Indigenous

students.

On the one hand, the Parent Advisory Council (PAC) and long-standing staff members have used their influence to resist changes they fear may harm current successes. On the other hand, many Indigenous caregivers are not yet using their voices in school decision-making. Some feel unsafe, unheard, or disconnected, and usually speak up only when emotions run high, leaving both staff and families feeling misunderstood (Feir, 2016).

Leaders also recognize that Indigenous student voice has rarely been invited into conversations, even though it is powerful when expressed. An example of this was shown by the response of parents and caregivers and their children to the powwow dancing sessions provided because students asked for them (Donovan, 2015; Walsh et al., 2019). This response showed that meaningful opportunities for Indigenous students and caregivers to share their perspectives could lead to positive change if leaders are willing to create the conditions to listen and then actually do just that (Gartner, 2023; Lara & Saracostti, 2019).

Economic factors

Many Indigenous students at Riverview face food insecurity, which makes learning extremely difficult (Hale et al., 2019). Contributing factors include high unemployment rates, limited caregiver education, and poverty. The school offers free breakfasts and snack baskets and records show that Indigenous students rely on these services the most. School district data from the pandemic confirm this, as most food hampers were delivered at that time to Indigenous families.

A significant number of Riverview's Indigenous students live in public housing, where families move frequently. This results in disrupted attendance and learning. Frequent moves also make it harder for caregivers to stay involved with the school or join the PAC, reducing their influence when concerns need to be raised. This in turn makes it harder for leaders to elicit evidence and hear the voices of Indigenous students and their families.

Social factors

A sense of belonging is deeply connected to confidence, school engagement, and achievement (Brendtro et al., 2019; Hattie, 2023). Across Canada, most Indigenous youth report pride in their identity and find belonging within their cultural communities (Anderson, 2021). This is a strength - but it also reveals a challenge at Riverview.

While many Indigenous students gather together for support, this sometimes results in disengagement from school programming. In 2021, nearly 20% of the Grade 9 class, mostly Indigenous students who share strong social connections did not earn enough credits to stay on track for graduation. A major factor was poor afternoon attendance; students met at lunch, made plans together, and then left school for the day.

However, when programming is culturally meaningful, students respond with overwhelming enthusiasm. Powwow dance sessions filled instantly, and visits from Elders required larger and larger rooms to accommodate all the students who attended. This shows that students value their culture and participate when learning feels safe and relevant (Kanu, 2017; Mitra et al., 2012).

Technological factors

Technology plays a major role in student learning and self-confidence (Hattie, 2023). The policy of the School District encourages the school to have a one-to-one device approach, but many Indigenous students cannot afford personal devices. School laptops are limited, and many students do not have reliable Wi-Fi at home. This makes it nearly impossible to use the district's cloud-based tools or complete assignments outside of school, resulting in significant frustration (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2018).

In a school that relies heavily on collaboration and project-based learning, students without technology fall behind and may feel embarrassed. Their inconsistent attendance makes group members hesitant to work with them. Teachers have also noted that there are too few alternatives for students who cannot access technology.

Environmental factors

Winter weather in the region is extremely harsh, and when temperatures reach dangerous lows, students question

whether they should even try to get to school (Hale et al., 2019). Many do not have warm clothing or reliable transportation. The district does not provide bussing unless students are in specialized programmes, and public transit is expensive. Families often have to prioritize the needs of younger children. Although warmer months are less of a challenge, the coldest months line up with key school periods: January exams and the start of second semester in February. Missing school during this time creates gaps that are hard to recover from.

What this means for Riverview's leadership

These PESTE factors show that Riverview has a group of Indigenous students who are proud of who they are, and eager to join cultural activities when they are offered. While weather can be difficult, many still make it to school. The deeper issue is that when students must choose between social belonging and learning experiences they see as irrelevant or harmful to their self-esteem, they often choose to leave class. Technology gaps and limited cultural relevance in coursework make this worse (Flanagan et al., 2011).

At the same time, Riverview leadership faces significant pressure to maintain the status quo. The school has earned regional and national recognition, and many non-Indigenous students, staff, and alumni want programmes to remain unchanged. Some staff believe that students should simply adapt to the school's existing expectations, which shifts responsibility away from the system and onto Indigenous students themselves (Louie & Gereluk, 2021; Louie & Scott, 2016). This belief aligns with assimilationist thinking that TribalCrit directly challenges (Brayboy, 2005; Krueger, 2021).

From a leadership perspective, the real work of this PoP is not about maintaining a "line in the sand." It is about erasing that line altogether. Leaders must draw a circle around the entire school community, inviting everyone in. This includes Indigenous students and their families, encouraging them to learn, ask questions, listen deeply, and work together to create meaningful, respectful change.

Positionality and leadership lens

My positionality as a Red River Métis educator is central to this research. My personal experiences, cultural background, and professional expertise as both an educator and leader shape my approach to addressing the PoP. As an Indigenous educator, I bring both lived experience and academic knowledge to the process of creating a more inclusive and equitable educational environment.

This unique perspective informs my deep commitment to advocating for Indigenous students, ensuring that their voices are heard and their educational experiences are enriched with Indigenous knowledge and perspectives. My experience as an educator serving in multiple schools and roles, provides an authentic understanding of the challenges Indigenous students face, as well as the strengths and resilience existing within Indigenous communities.

At the core of my leadership approach are four foundational pillars that guide my work. The first pillar, relationships, emphasizes the importance of building strong connections with students, families, and community members (Goleman et al., 2013). Establishing trust and fostering collaboration are key to meaningful and sustainable change-leadership. The second pillar, the leader's capability for capacity building, focuses on empowering students, teachers, and community members by providing opportunities for growth and learning. This includes professional development for educators, mentorship for students, and community engagement initiatives that strengthen collective knowledge (Hattie, 2023; Lambert, 2007). The third pillar, inviting and amplifying voice, ensures that Indigenous perspectives are not only included but actively valued in decision-making processes. Leaders must be adept at creating spaces where Indigenous voices are heard. This is essential for fostering a truly inclusive school environment (Berryman & Eley, 2018; Kanu, 2017). Finally, the fourth pillar, ensuring physical and psychological safety, highlights the importance of creating a supportive and secure learning environment where all students feel respected, valued, and free to express their identities without fear of discrimination or marginalization (Banwo et al., 2022; Chamberlain et al., 2021).

Through my positionality, leadership approach, and commitment to Indigenous education, I can play a pivotal role

in driving meaningful change within Riverview High School, ensuring that Indigenous students receive the respect, representation, and support they deserve.

Theoretical frameworks for analysing the Problem of Practice and guiding change

This research draws upon several theoretical frameworks to analyse the PoP and guide the proposed change process. These frameworks can be divided into two groups. The first provides critical insights into the interplay between Indigenous knowledge systems and the impact of colonization on education. Two-Eyed Seeing (Etuaptmumk) is the way in which Indigenous people simultaneously bring Indigenous knowledges together with 21st-century skills (Bartlett et al., 2012; Battiste, 2018). Juxtaposed with that is Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit), a means of understanding and breaking down the processes and motives of colonization as it impacts Indigenous people in North America (Brayboy, 2005; National Educational Policy Center, 2020).

The second group offers frameworks that assist in providing structured approaches to change management such as Kurt Lewin's Three-Stage Model and Deming's Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) Cycles. Lewin's framework was useful in bringing structure to guide the overall change process (Burnes, 2020). Deming's Cycles offered guidance in setting the smaller steps in the change process by giving a set structure to the work (Aggarwal, 2020).

Each of these frameworks offers a unique perspective that contributes to a comprehensive understanding of how educational institutions can foster inclusive and effective learning environments for Indigenous students.

Two-Eyed Seeing (Etuaptmumk)

The idea of Two-Eyed Seeing (Etuaptmumk) comes from Mi'kmaw Elder Albert Marshall and offers leaders a powerful way to bring together Indigenous and Western ways of knowing (Bartlett et al., 2012). Two-Eyed Seeing encourages us to look at the world through both perspectives at the same time, recognizing that each has strengths. Indigenous knowledge is connected to land, community, relationships, and cultural practices, while Western knowledge often focuses on scientific evidence, data, and structured methods. When leaders use Two-Eyed Seeing, they commit to creating learning environments that value both systems of knowledge instead of placing one above the other (Battiste, 2018; Bujold et al., 2021).

In schools, applying Two-Eyed Seeing means leaders recognize that Indigenous teaching methods such as storytelling, hands-on experiences, land-based learning, and community relationships are just as valid as traditional Western approaches like tests, lectures, and individual assignments (Louie, 2020). When both perspectives are included, schools can become more welcoming and empowering for Indigenous students, celebrating the gifts and perspectives that they bring. This approach also supports the broader leadership goal of decolonizing education, which means questioning and changing practices that focus only upon Eurocentric viewpoints. By leading with Two-Eyed Seeing, educational leaders can help build schools where multiple worldviews are respected, Indigenous students and their families feel seen, and learning is culturally meaningful for everyone.

Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit)

Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit), created by Bryan Brayboy (2005), helps leaders understand the specific experiences of Indigenous peoples in schools and other institutions. While it grows out of Critical Race Theory (CRT), TribalCrit shifts the focus to Indigenous perspectives, especially the continued impact of colonization, the struggle for sovereignty, and the reality of systemic inequalities that Indigenous communities still face.

A central idea in TribalCrit is that colonization is not just something from the past. It continues to shape policies, institutions, and everyday expectations (Black & Verbos, 2022). In education, this can be seen in the historical suppression of Indigenous languages, the limited representation of Indigenous scholars, and the dominance of Western knowledge systems, especially in Residential Schools, which still impact Indigenous students several decades after the last school closed (National Educational Policy Center, 2020). TribalCrit argues that both U.S. and Canadian policies have long been influenced by imperialism and assimilation, which has created barriers that restrict Indigenous self-determination, including in schooling and governance.

TribalCrit also recognizes that Indigenous peoples consistently assert their right to sovereignty, self-determination, and self-identification. From a leadership perspective, this highlights the responsibility to design educational policies that respect Indigenous governance, cultural integrity, and community-defined success, rather than imposing outside definitions of what achievement should look like (Brayboy, 2005).

Another key point of TribalCrit is its rejection of deficit-based thinking (Black & Verbos, 2022). Instead of framing Indigenous learners as lacking something, TribalCrit reminds leaders that Indigenous students bring rich knowledge systems, cultural strengths, creativity, and resilience to their learning environments. It also emphasizes the deep relationships Indigenous peoples have with the land, their communities, and the wider society. Strong educational leadership recognizes these relationships and builds learning environments that honour Indigenous worldviews, values, and environmental stewardship.

By applying TribalCrit, educational leaders can create more equitable and culturally grounded learning spaces. This includes inviting and strengthening Indigenous voices in decision-making, revising curricula to reflect Indigenous histories and perspectives, expanding Indigenous representation in leadership, and building learning environments that are culturally safe and supportive. TribalCrit is also an important guide for school systems that are trying to Indigenize their practices and disrupt long-standing colonial structures.

Change management models

Implementing meaningful change within educational systems requires structured approaches that help leaders facilitate sustainable transformation. Two widely recognized change management models that inform this research are Kurt Lewin's Three-Stage Model and Deming's PDSA Cycles. These models provide practical strategies for guiding institutional shifts in policy, curriculum design, and pedagogical practices.

Kurt Lewin's Three-Stage Model

Kurt Lewin's Three-Stage Model outlines a structured process for change, consisting of three phases: **unfreezing**, **changing**, and **refreezing** (Bhayangkara et al., 2020; Hussain et al., 2018). This model fits this conversation well as it is easily explained and implemented, somewhat neutral in its language, and its use of the metaphor of unfreezing and freezing in a climate that experiences that very phenomenon on an annual basis is easily embraced.

The **unfreezing** stage involves preparing an organisation for change by identifying existing challenges and fostering a sense of urgency (Hussain et al., 2018). In the context of Indigenous education, this may involve recognizing systemic barriers, engaging with Indigenous communities, and challenging assumptions that reinforce colonial paradigms.

Changing represents the implementation phase, where new practices, policies, or curricula are introduced. This step requires collaboration, professional development, and ongoing support to ensure that the change aligns with the needs and aspirations of Indigenous students and communities.

Refreezing ensures that the changes become embedded within the institution's culture and structures (Bhayangkara et al., 2020). This phase might involve policy revisions, continuous assessment, and reinforcement of culturally affirming practices to sustain long-term impact. By applying Lewin's model, educational institutions can navigate the complexities of change while ensuring that transformative efforts are well-planned and sustainable (Burnes, 2020).

Deming's PDSA Cycles

Deming's Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) Cycles offer an iterative approach to continuous improvement. This model emphasizes experimentation, reflection, and refinement, making it particularly useful for addressing complex challenges in education (Aggarwal, 2020; The W. Edwards Deming Institute, 2023).

Plan: Identify specific areas for improvement and develop a strategy for change. This might involve consultations with Indigenous communities to design culturally relevant curricula.

Do: Implement the planned changes on a small scale, such as piloting a new Indigenous studies programme or

incorporating Indigenous pedagogies into classrooms.

Study: Assess the effectiveness of the implemented changes through feedback, data collection, and evaluation.

Act: Based on findings, refine the approach and scale up successful strategies.

PDSA Cycles align well with Indigenous ways of learning, which often emphasize reflection, adaptability, and community engagement (Aggarwal, 2020). By utilising this model, educational institutions can ensure that changes are responsive, iterative, and community-driven (Abeyta et al., 2020).

Vision for change and guiding questions

The overarching vision for change at Riverview High School is to create a more inclusive and equitable educational environment that celebrates rather than simply tolerates Indigenous culture, knowledge, and voices. This vision aims to foster a school community where Indigenous perspectives are not only acknowledged but actively integrated into all aspects of education, from curriculum development to student engagement and decision-making. By embracing this vision, Riverview High School can work toward a learning environment that supports the academic success and well-being of Indigenous students while strengthening relationships with Indigenous families and communities.

Several guiding questions emerge from the PoP that help shape the direction of this change. One key consideration is how Indigenous knowledge systems can be effectively integrated into the curriculum. This question is based on my own experiences of writing and implementing a high school curriculum in a neighbouring province which was widely accepted and is now entering its fourth decade in classrooms. That curriculum was successful because it was written as a joint project between Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators looking for a way to help all students learn together. Thus, success involves exploring ways to work with Indigenous families, students, and educators to meaningfully incorporate Indigenous histories, languages, and perspectives into classroom instruction and ensure that these contributions are recognized as valuable and essential components of education rather than merely supplementary additions.

Another crucial question is how the school can create a culturally responsive learning environment that fosters engagement and academic success for Indigenous students. This question is important. It focuses on the fact that all people need to feel belonging. An environment where people feel they are not seen or valued will not hold them for long or at all (Brendtro et al., 2019; Hattie, 2023). Thus, leaders, in conjunction with Indigenous students and their families, need to examine teaching practices, school policies, and support systems that address the unique needs of Indigenous learners. A culturally responsive approach would ensure that Indigenous students see their identities reflected in their education, leading to increased motivation, belonging, and overall achievement (Banwo et al., 2022).

Building strong relationships with Indigenous families and communities is also a vital aspect of this vision. The school leaders must consider how to foster meaningful partnerships with Indigenous leaders, Elders, and families to ensure that educational practices align with community values and expectations (Cajete, 2016). Collaborative engagement can help bridge the gap between school and home, creating a more supportive network for Indigenous students (Bettez, 2011).

Additionally, it is essential to assess the degree to which the Prairie Lakes School District will be open to the changes proposed by the staff and Indigenous community. Institutional support and the deftness of leadership will play a significant role in the successful implementation of new initiatives.

Finally, the school leaders must address how to ensure that Indigenous voices are heard and valued in decision-making processes. This means creating formal structures for Indigenous representation in school leadership, policy discussions, and curriculum development (Berryman & Eley, 2018; Brearley, 2015). Establishing advisory councils or Indigenous student leadership groups could be effective ways to ensure that Indigenous perspectives are consistently included in shaping the school's future (Kanu, 2017; Quinn & Owen, 2016).

By addressing these guiding questions, Riverview High School can take meaningful steps toward creating an educational environment that is truly inclusive, equitable, and responsive to the needs of Indigenous students and their communities.

Solutions and strategies

Strengthening equity and belonging at Riverview High School requires leadership that is both responsive and visionary. The original DiP offered three strategic mindsets that, when paired with intentional communication and engagement practices, positioned leaders to guide the school toward a more culturally grounded and inclusive future.

The first mindset reflects a leadership stance committed to reinforcing what is already working. This includes expanding culturally relevant curriculum, deepening mentorship opportunities for Indigenous learners, and strengthening existing partnerships with Indigenous organisations. By amplifying successful initiatives and stabilizing what is already showing promise, leaders create momentum without overwhelming staff or fracturing community trust.

The second mindset emphasizes leadership's role in mobilizing internal assets and honouring local expertise. This approach recognizes the District's Indigenous Education Team, knowledge keepers, Elders, and Indigenous educators as essential partners in shaping curriculum, pedagogy, and school culture. Leaders adopting this mindset prioritize relationship-building, inviting caregivers into dialogue, co-designing learning experiences with community members, and fostering authentic collaboration that aligns with Indigenous values and local context.

The third mindset calls upon the leaders to consider innovative and transformative options, such as establishing a school-within-a-school or creating specialised Indigenous learning pathways. Such models offer deeper integration of Indigenous language, land-based learning, and cultural teachings. While more disruptive, these options demonstrate leadership's willingness to reimagine structures so that Indigenous students see themselves reflected, valued, and empowered in their daily learning.

Across all three mindsets, several strategic actions support sustained progress. Leaders can champion collaborative curriculum development that embeds Indigenous knowledge across disciplines; promote culturally responsive teaching practices, including land-based and experiential learning; and ensure ongoing professional development that builds cultural competency among staff. Purposeful partnerships with Indigenous organisations, Elders, and cultural centers ensure that Indigenous voices remain central in decision-making. Leaders can also create dedicated spaces such as cultural rooms, Indigenous student clubs, and mentorship programmes that nurture identity, connection, and community. Additionally, employing frameworks such as a community-building model helps leaders to guide the school through the stages of developing trust, addressing conflict, and ultimately moving toward a unified vision of shared responsibility (Peck, 1998).

However, leadership action alone is insufficient without a robust communication and engagement system. Effective communication is foundational to transparency, trust, and collective ownership of change. Leaders must establish predictable avenues for information sharing with regular staff and community meetings, workshops, and listening sessions that not only provide updates but also invite meaningful feedback. These forums normalize open dialogue, surface concerns early, and generate shared solutions.

To reach all stakeholders, leaders should employ multiple communication channels such as email, newsletters, and social media to highlight progress, celebrate successes, and share relevant cultural and educational content. These platforms help keep the community informed, particularly students and families who engage more readily with digital communication.

Leaders must also cultivate spaces where dialogue can occur safely. Town halls, discussion circles, cultural gatherings, and collaborative forums allow students, caregivers, staff, Elders, and community partners to contribute their perspectives. These interactions deepen relational trust and ensure that decisions reflect collective wisdom rather than top-down directives. Establishing culturally grounded group norms, co-developed with Indigenous community members, that reinforce respectful engagement practices and affirms the importance of active listening, relational accountability, and inclusivity.

Taken together, these leadership approaches, are strategically aligned with the DiP's three mindsets. Paired with intentional communication and authentic engagement position Riverview High School they will move beyond surface-level initiatives toward a transformational model of Indigenous education. By leading with humility, purpose, and community partnership, the school can create a learning environment where Indigenous students feel seen, supported,

and empowered, and where the entire Riverview community participates in building a more equitable and culturally responsive future.

Conclusion

The challenges faced by Indigenous students at Riverview High School call for leadership that is intentional, reflective, and deeply committed to listening. The data, the stories, and the lived realities of students and caregivers all point to the same truth: meaningful improvement cannot occur without putting Indigenous voice at the centre and following a clear, well-designed process for change. This PoP is not an anomaly or an unexpected disruption. It is a long-standing problem rooted in systemic issues that extend far beyond the classroom. As such, leaders must move strategically, guided by structured change frameworks, Indigenous ways of knowing, and sustained community partnerships.

A central leadership responsibility is ensuring that Indigenous students and caregivers are not merely observers but respected contributors. The insights offered by Indigenous students, families, and the greater community must be heeded and shape decisions about curriculum, programming, support systems, and school culture. When the school honours the age-old mantra “Nothing About Us, Without Us!” growth will surely follow (Marsden et al., 2020). This requires processes that are transparent, predictable, and grounded in relationship-building. Leaders must resist quick fixes and avoid imposing predetermined solutions, and instead move forward through an approach that is deliberate, collaborative, and continuously evaluated.

To guide this work and ensure that leadership decisions are rooted in inclusivity, accountability, and community wisdom, the following five recommendations are offered.

Five leadership recommendations

1. Establish a formal Indigenous Advisory Council

Create a standing group of Elders, caregivers, students, and Indigenous educators to provide input and recommendations to the school leadership. This ensures that Indigenous perspectives are central and not on the outside looking in when it comes to school leadership and planning.

2. Implement structured listening and dialogue processes

Hold regular listening circles, consultation sessions, and town halls using culturally grounded facilitation methods. These forums allow leaders to hear concerns early, understand community priorities, and make decisions informed by real voices, not assumptions.

3. Adopt a phased, clearly communicated change process

Use established frameworks (e.g., Lewin’s model, PDSA cycles) to chart the steps of change: preparing, implementing, evaluating, and refining. Share timelines, expectations, and progress updates openly with all stakeholders.

4. Prioritize Indigenous representation and leadership

Ensure Indigenous educators, staff, and students have formal roles in curriculum design, programming decisions, hiring committees, and school-wide planning. Representation strengthens trust and fosters greater cultural safety and connection.

5. Commit to culturally responsive, community-driven professional learning

Provide ongoing professional development that is co-designed and co-delivered with Indigenous experts. Focus on Two-Eyed Seeing, land-based learning, relationship-building, and anti-colonial practice to build staff capacity and confidence.

By following these recommendations, leaders of educational communities can adopt a decision-making method that is much more relational, intentional, and community-based, ensuring that Indigenous voices are present when matters connected to Indigenous students and programming are discussed. By taking this approach and considering these five recommendations, Riverview leadership will demonstrate its commitment to listen and lead in a way that will close the

gap between Indigenous students and their peers, ensuring success for everyone.

AI declaration

No AI was used to write this journal article.

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