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Indigenous leadership in a non-Indigenous space

A leadership story

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Abstract

This article explores the leadership journey of an Indigenous leader working within a non-Indigenous institutional context in Canada, focusing on the ongoing processes of decolonization and reconciliation. Grounded in the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, the article examines how Indigenous leadership principles are enacted in environments shaped by colonial structures and assumptions. Attention is given to the systemic, relational and personal obstacles that challenge effective leadership, including resistance to change, cultural misalignment, and the emotional labour associated with reconciliation work. The Medicine Wheel is employed as both a conceptual framework and a reflective tool, illustrating its role in guiding holistic, ethical and relational approaches to leadership and organizational transformation. By situating Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing at the centre of the analysis, this article contributes to emerging scholarship on Indigenous leadership in non-Indigenous spaces and offers insights for educators, administrators, and policymakers engaged in meaningful decolonization and reconciliation efforts.

Keywords: Reconciliation; decolonization; Etuaptmumk, Two-Eyed Seeing; Niinwi-kiinwa-kiinwi; Indigenous leadership

Introduction

This article is based on research and experience of writing my dissertation-in-practice (DiP), and I would position it to be largely auto-ethnographical, with a focus on oral Indigenous Knowledges. For this article I have focused on writing as an Indigenous leader in a non-Indigenous space, and on a decolonizing and reconciliation journey. I am mindful of the advice given by The Honourable Mr. Justice Murray Sinclair, who notes that: "there should be no change about us, without us." Leading as an Indigenous person in non-Indigenous spaces requires balancing cultural identity with navigating systems shaped by different worldviews. It involves bringing relational, community-centered values into environments often focused on individualism and hierarchy. Indigenous leaders carry the responsibility of representation while challenging stereotypes and systemic barriers. They draw on traditional teachings of respect, reciprocity, and humility to foster inclusive, holistic approaches to leadership. This role demands resilience, cultural integrity, and advocacy for equity. By embodying Indigenous ways of knowing within non-Indigenous contexts, leaders create pathways for meaningful dialogue, decolonization, and greater understanding across cultural boundaries.

Indigenous identity and positionality

I am of European and Ojibwe heritage, a member of Garden River First Nation which is part of the Robinson Huron Treaty. Long before today, my ancestors were the stewards of Turtle Island, entrusted to us by the Creator. I live on the land of the Anishinaabeg people, which include the Odawa, Ojibwe, and Pottawatomi Nations, collectively known as the Three Fires Confederacy. The Wendat Nation (Huron) also occupied these lands prior to the middle of the 17th century. This territory is covered by the Upper Canada Treaties. I work on the traditional lands of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishinaabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples. This land is covered by Treaty 13 and signed with the Mississaugas of the Credit, and the Williams Treaties signed with multiple Mississaugas of the Credit and Chippewa bands.

I recognize and deeply appreciate my historic connection to this place. I also recognize the contributions that Métis, Inuit, and other Indigenous peoples have made, both in shaping and strengthening my community. I am dedicated to honouring my Indigenous history and culture as well as recognizing the enduring presence of Indigenous peoples on this land. I am committed to moving forward in the spirit of harmony and respect with all people.

My experiences mean that I must not only hold true to myself as a female, Indigenous, Christian leader, but also

as one who also wants the best for my organization and all those in the organization's community. This means balancing my faith, honouring my Indigenous heritage, and leading in a way that creates unity, equity, and harmony in my school. This journey as an Indigenous leader has its genesis far before my work on my dissertation began, it starts with the brave work of survivors of residential schools and those that document their stories as part of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission

In 2015, Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) issued a report containing 94 Calls to Action to help move the nation toward reconciliation with the Indigenous people living in Canada. The report is broken into several sections, each addressing various concerns regarding Canada's Indigenous population. The section I focused on is reconciliation, and the Calls to Action that talk specifically about education for reconciliation. The TRC Calls to Action were largely in response to the generational trauma suffered by Indigenous people at residential schools. They are a springboard for a discussion of Indigenous issues, but by no means an exhaustive document. The report specifically addressed, in Calls to Action 62, 63 and 64 (TRC, 2015, pp. 7-8), ways that educational institutions, including North Urban School where I am Principal, can effect change and implement policies that encourage, not only reconciliation, but also decolonization. The scope of my leadership goes beyond what is laid out by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and I believe is the best representation of the change needed, especially given the amount of research and further development that has happened since the commission first released their report in 2015. While the Commission's focus was specifically toward making reconciliation for residential schools, the current research would demand more in-depth change.

When the Truth and Reconciliation Commission released their Calls to Action in 2015, it gave specific advice about how publicly funded schools could educate staff and students about the horrors of residential schools, intergenerational trauma, and the stories of survivors. Calls to Action 62, 63 and 64 outline how K-12 educational institutions can work toward reconciliation through curriculum, teacher training, funding, and partnership with Indigenous communities (TRC, 2015, p.7). Private educational institutions were not given any specific direction, so they must decide for themselves if they wish to adopt any sort of reconciliation programme.

As the leader of a faith-based private school, and a woman of European and Indigenous heritage, I felt that I was uniquely positioned to map out a path for my organization to embark on a journey of reconciliation, decolonization and pursuing *Etuaptmumk*. *Etuaptmumk* or Two-Eyed Seeing is a guiding principle that involves learning to use two different perspectives to see the world: one eye through the strengths of Indigenous ways of knowing, and the other through the strengths of Western ways of knowing. It is a cross-cultural approach that encourages combining these perspectives for a more complete and beneficial understanding, rather than blending them into a single viewpoint, developed by Mi'kmaw Elder Albert Marshall (Indigenous Knowledge and Science, 2020).

Indigenous leadership in a non-Indigenous space

I wanted to explore and understand my own Indigenous heritage more, so my exploration initially began as a personal journey. The more I learned, the more I came to realize that; "what is good for Indigenous students, is good for all students" (Pierre, 2023; Baskatawang, 2023). However, North Urban School can't complete this journey on its own. While it can certainly undertake some of the reconciliation and decolonization process by itself, there is a missing piece to the puzzle. That is, a reciprocal relationship with Indigenous Knowledge Keepers and Elders who are willing to share their knowledge and wisdom with North Urban School as a community. This type of partnership is in keeping with the idea of *Niinwi-kiinwa-kiinwi*, which means moving from an 'us and them' position to an 'all together' position (Morcom & Freeman, 2018). This relationship will deepen the reconciliation and decolonization process but also allow North Urban School to pursue *Etuaptmumk* in classroom resources, curriculum delivery and assessment practices (Chrona, 2022; Cote-Meek & Moeke-Pickering, 2021; Toulouse, 2018).

I have centred my leadership around the Indigenous decolonizing school leadership framework (IDSL) as outlined

by Khalifa et al. (2019). I have chosen this framework for three reasons. Firstly, because it makes sense as an Indigenous leader to use an Indigenous framework. Secondly, it models a decolonizing process and thirdly, it uses two leadership styles that I already am familiar with and identify with, servant leadership and adaptive leadership. Monte Randall (2022) supports the idea of an Indigenous leadership framework using aspects of both servant and adaptive leadership. He notes that these two leadership styles serve the community, not the leader, and help to promote the development of tribal methodology. I take guidance from variations of the Medicine Wheel (see Figure 1) as shared with me by various Knowledge Keepers. I have entwined the Indigenous methodologies with Western frameworks to echo Etuaptmunk.

While working through my DiP, I have developed a deeper understanding of myself as a leader, as an Indigenous woman, and as a woman of faith. I have begun a lifelong journey of self-discovery but also intend to point others toward a path of reconciliation, decolonization and pursuing Etuaptmunk. My strong belief is that this type of change is more than just a response to the TRC Calls to Action, or even best practices in the education sector. It is a moral imperative, where all students inhabit a space that is inclusive, welcoming and offers them the opportunity to thrive.

I am leading North Urban School (pseudonym), a private, conservative, faith-based co-educational school in an urban setting in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. While we are a faith-based school, we do not restrict student admissions to students of other faith backgrounds. This openness to diversity is a strength of our programme and is something that sets us apart from other faith-based schools. We average 420 K-12 students, including an international student population of about 70 across all grades, and are very multicultural in our student and staff make-up. We have an academic centred programme, with almost 95% of our alumni attending university. Two distinctive aspects of our school are a robust aquatics programme and a long-standing tradition of land-based education at our outdoor education facility known as Aspen Grove (a pseudonym).

My leadership position is unique within my organization. I am the first female principal at in its 45-year history, and the first principal to have Indigenous heritage. I am currently in my ninth year as principal, but I have been associated with the school for just over twenty years. I began as a high school humanities and drama teacher immediately after graduation from my teacher's programme. I have always felt extremely comfortable at North Urban School and have been supported not only financially, but professionally, as I have pursued further education. I moved into an administrative role as the head of guidance after three years and returned to the same position after an extended maternity leave.

Given the length of time I have been associated with my school, I am aware and appreciative of the school's culture, welcoming community, and unified staff. As the principal, I take pride in our programme and the quality of education we are offering our students. What I have become aware of as I develop my leadership skills, and engage in high-level observation, is that it is extremely easy for an organization like mine to become stagnant in practice and philosophy. This is why Chapman et al. (2014) specifically caution that leaders and aspiring leaders in faith-based schools must undergo continual renewal, growth, and development.

When I stepped into a leadership role, I was very intentional in settling on a leadership framework. I wanted to stay firmly away from the authoritarian approach that some of my predecessors had cultivated. This was for two reasons. First, I did not feel that an authoritarian style of leadership would be appropriate for me, considering my personal qualities, and second, I felt that it was detrimental to the type of school culture that I wanted to create. I have been fortunate to have several school leaders that I could go to with questions, concerns, and problems. All had different methodologies, but they were all leaders whom I respected and felt had the best interests of their organizations in mind. Forefront in my mind was how many of the families I served would accept having a female in charge. That was evidence of my own insecurities, but I did feel that it could present an issue.

As I continued in my leadership and personal exploration of my Indigenous background, I found myself wondering how my school community would respond to the leadership of someone of Indigenous heritage. As North Urban School has an open admissions policy and welcomes students from all backgrounds and faiths, I believe my insecurity stemmed from my own uncertainty of my connections to my Indigenous roots. In short, would I be viewed as a fraud, either by my school community or by my Indigenous community for trying to navigate life in both places? My

research and coursework in the EdD program have helped me to solidify those connections and made my convictions stronger. While this process began as a personal exploration for knowledge, I have come to believe, wholeheartedly, that this is the path for my organization to remain relevant and continue to provide a robust educational experience (Apple, 2016).

As my school community comes to understand the scope of the change required through a decolonization and reconciliation process it is especially important to me that my staff feel safe and supported. Within smaller private schools, employment is often based on enrollment. I have encountered years when I received redundancy letters, not knowing if my job was secure from year to year. I also experienced situations where I did not feel supported in what I was asked to do at the school. Neither of these experiences are what I want for my staff. I want my staff to develop trust in me so that they know I will support them (Sinek, 2017). Normore and Brooks (2016) talk explicitly about the importance of a trust relationship being a foundational component to leading effective change.

One other consideration, as I explored possible leadership frameworks, is that, although I identify as a servant leader, I am not sure about its efficacy in leading change. Through the doctorate programme, I have been exposed to many leadership frameworks. Ethical leadership as defined by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2022), transformative leadership as defined by Shields (2019), and culturally responsive leadership as defined by Khalifa (2017) are all leadership frameworks that I can see as being effective and stretching my own comfort zone. These were areas that I explored prior to landing on the framework of Indigenous, decolonizing school leadership (IDSL) (Randall, 2022).

My path to IDSL was a winding road. On May 5th, 2023, I attended a leadership conference where Dr. Tod Bolsinger from Fuller Theological Seminary, spoke about his book *Tempered Resilience* (Bolsinger, 2020). He discussed how to lead during times of turmoil, and he spoke about adaptive leadership having two stages: acute and adaptive. The acute stage is about survival during a crisis. For me, the crisis point was contemplating the unmarked graves discovered on sites of former residential schools. The adaptive stage addresses the underlying issues that we did not have the will, nor the resources, to confront before the crisis, and the needed movement toward reconciliation and decolonization. At that point in my doctorate journey, and using this definition, I felt that adaptive leadership would suit both my natural tendencies in leadership style and fit the change that I wanted to see happen at North Urban School. Khalifa et al. (2019) and Randall (2022) all outline an Indigenous leadership framework that would combine my inclination to servant leadership with the aspects of adaptive leadership outlined above, and braid them together through a decolonizing Indigenous lens.

Organizational context

North Urban School is governed by a volunteer, parent board of directors. The board is generally very receptive to my input and the initiatives I propose for implementation. I believe I have far more latitude to chart my organization's path than administrators in public school boards, who must remain supportive of a board's strategic plan even if it doesn't fully fit their specific way of thinking.

As a leader with Indigenous heritage, I am compelled to move forward with reconciliation, decolonization, and pursuing Etuaptmumk within North Urban School. I currently inhabit two worlds, and my DiP is, in part, a result of my self-reflection on how to fit into both. I continue to explore my Indigenous roots, understanding that my cultural explorations are not those of my school community. I am doing this in a faith-based context where there is currently a great deal of tension within Indigenous communities between those who are Christian and those who are not. It is a complex issue, one rooted in trauma and mistrust between the two groups (Knowledge Keeper, 2022). As I navigate this on a personal level, it does affect how I move forward. One area that I am currently cultivating is gaining more traditional knowledge for my own personal enrichment. I do want to be acutely aware of the fact that those who generously speak into my life as Elders and Knowledge Keepers do not automatically become my organization's Knowledge Keepers, at least not without their consent. This is a difficult duality to navigate, as the new knowledge enhances my understanding of learning and my growth mindset.

Additionally, I have also come to a great appreciation of the importance of sharing knowledge through oral

traditions. I have utilized oral storytelling and knowledge sharing extensively in my DiP, both in guiding the frameworks that I used, and to gain a better understanding of Indigenous methodologies and pedagogies. This is a gift that many have generously given to me, and I want to treat that gift with the reverence and respect it deserves (Chan, 2021; Gunawardena & Brown, 2021). It is important to me that as I continue to learn about my Indigenous roots, the knowledge passed on to me through oral means is treated and valued the same as any written source.

I lead a conservative, private, faith-based school that has an academic focus. Working in such a context means that change is sometimes slow to happen, if at all. Foundationally, conservatism focuses on a trifecta of influences on children, traditionally home, church and school. As described by Gutek, “schools emphasize an academic curriculum, culture core, and traditional values, build on and extend the value formation begun in the family and the church” (Gutek, 2013, p.254). Our school philosophy and core values are consistent with this statement. However, I do not believe that this reflects the totality of what North Urban School is trying to accomplish.

Chapman et al. make an important distinction when talking about faith-based schools and their fundamental purpose: “I refer to the integration of religion(s) in education as being open to ideas of democracy and citizenship that can assist learners in their deliberations about issues of relevance to a pluralistic society” (Chapman et al., 2014, p.280). I make this distinction because the assumption, by many, is that faith-based schools provide programmes for the purpose of indoctrination. That is not my experience, nor my philosophy of education. We do deliver a programme through a faith-based lens, but not to the exclusion of what others believe, or in a way that is meant to create a chasm between our students and the wider community in which we are situated.

When I examine other factors within my organization that may play a role in my DiP implementation, I need to acknowledge that I have a lack of Indigenous representation in my school. This could be because parents need to pay tuition for their child to attend, or it could be that the geographical area of my school does not have a large Indigenous population. According to the City of Toronto website (2016), Statistics Canada states that as of 2021, 44,636 people identifying as Indigenous live in the Toronto area; however, “over 90 per cent of Toronto’s Indigenous population lives below the (before tax) low-income cut-off which would make attending a private school without financial assistance almost impossible.” As a school that does not service a particular Indigenous community, we currently have no strong ties or connections to one. Since one of the hallmarks of reconciliation, decolonizing and pursuing *Etuaptmumk* is that there be Knowledge Keeper and Elders input (Hager & Mawopiyane, 2022), this is something that will need to be cultivated as my DiP work moves forward.

At North Urban School, our staff and student population are very representative of the community in which we are situated. And we are also a more heterogeneous school population compared to other faith-based schools in our school association. We are an open admissions school, so students and families do not need to profess a belief in a particular faith. This means we also have several competing and complementary viewpoints on any given issue. This recognition of our multicultural environment is a key trait, as my organization understands and deals with issues around marginalized group representation and sourcing multiple voices. North Urban School tries to focus on helping students develop critical thinking skills that include having conversations and friendships with those that have differing, or even opposing, viewpoints. Our multicultural and multifaith population means that this happens at an organic level as students navigate daily life at North Urban School (Frediani, 2022). This is not to say that we are without tensions and conflicts. However, as I speak with principals from other schools who struggle with their school communities being proactive in social justice causes, this is not something that registers at North Urban School.

A transformation of this magnitude will require not just a change at the policy and procedural level, it will I believe take an internal change at the personal level for all those in the North Urban School community (Keliipo et al., 2018). This is one of the reasons I was hesitant to place a timeline on my DiP, because of the deeply relational nature of the changes we as a community will be required to make. It feels disingenuous to assume that I will know precisely how long it will take for my community to adjust their perspectives.

Obstacles to change and effective leadership

The feedback that I have received as I crafted my DiP is that the hierarchical nature of my organization leads to a top down, leader-led change framework. I acknowledge that without concerted effort, this could very easily be the pattern that is followed, especially because this is exactly what has happened in the past for other initiatives. While I see myself spearheading the change at first, I believe that as the process continues and relationships are established, I would then shift my role to be more of a liaison, rather than the only contact person. This needs to be a collective effort. I need to act as a catalyst, not a superhero (Eckert, 2023).

What might pose a more serious obstacle to my DiP are the preconceived ideas that those in a conservative mindset have about critical theory in general and tribal critical theory (TCT) specifically. Early in my research I focused on the tenets of tribal critical theory, as outlined by Capper (2018), where she states eight aspects of tribal critical theory in a way that I could see meshing with the ethos of faith-based schools. The primary tenet is that “colonization is endemic to society” (Capper, 2018 p.136) (Brayboy et al., 2014).

It will be important that my organization accepts these tenets as truths and works toward reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, even if just at North Urban School. The Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action, specifically 62, 63 and 64 (TRC, 2015, pp.7-8), will be guideposts for the reconciliation and decolonization process and the movement toward pursuing Etuaptmumk at North Urban School.

In a time and age when many facets of education have become politicized, educating the volunteer board and the broader school community about TCT will be a crucial factor in promoting my DiP (Campbell & Fullan, 2019). The only exposure that many have to the ideas of TCT is what they see in the news, which is highly reflective of the issues surrounding TCT in the United States and not educational about the actual concepts or how they might apply to North Urban School directly. Faith-based schools should function, in part, as proponents of social justice. This is a mandate found throughout the Bible. The Biblical direction to take care of widows and orphans (New International Version, 2011, James 1:27), to look after those who are disadvantaged (New International Version, 2011, Matthew 25:43), must include those who have been marginalized. Loving your neighbour as yourself (New International Version, 2011, Mark 12:30-31) is an action to be put into practice no matter what a person’s culture, religion, or system of beliefs. It is, as Christians, our highest mandate.

Indigenous scholars and research

I could not, in good conscience, create a DiP involving reconciliation, decolonization and Etuaptmumk without including the work of Dr. Marie Battiste. Battiste, a Mi’kmaq scholar, looks at all areas of education and gives guidance on how to make it more accessible for Indigenous students. Her work tackles the tough questions about embedded racism in curriculum and assessment practices and examines the importance of cultural and language education for Indigenous students. Her book, *Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit* (2013), is a seminal work around decolonization. Dr. Battiste has written extensively on cultural and language autonomy for the Indigenous people in Canada. Her focus on curriculum development and decolonizing education for Indigenous students has resulted in her receiving two honorary doctorates and recognition as a leading force in the promotion of Indigenous Knowledges, Indigenous languages, and decolonizing education (Tepi’ketuek Mi’kmaw Archives, 2013).

It is important to note that Battiste only explores Indigenizing for Indigenous students. So much has been taken away from Indigenous people groups that I understand the attitude of not wanting to share Ways of Knowing with others, as that knowledge has not been treated as a sacred gift in the past (Crow, 2022). Battiste is not the only Indigenous scholarly practitioner to focus on Indigenizing for Indigenous students. Leo Baskatawang (2023), an Anishinaabe scholar from Lac Des Mille Lacs First Nation in Treaty 3 territory, also addresses the education issue when he discusses treaty rights, specifically for those who live in Treaty 3 territory. The focus for Indigenous leaders in education is on fixing the education system for Indigenous students, transforming it into one that is accessible but also follows traditional Indigenous pedagogies. Those who have written about Indigenous influences in mainstream settings usually do so with a focus on truth and reconciliation (Chrona, 2022; Styres & Kempf, 2022; Toulouse, 2018). This is

important and worthwhile work, but it stops short of the decolonization and pursuing Etuaptmumk that I am seeking for North Urban School.

My DiP focuses on reconciliation, decolonization and pursuing Etuaptmumk for primarily non-Indigenous students. Battiste and Baskatawang provide an excellent framework for my DiP, however, I do stray from their original intent. I need to acknowledge that the idea of a faith-based school adopting Indigenous practices will not be met with approval from all Indigenous communities. While most would agree with a decolonizing process, there are some communities who feel Indigenousizing should only be used to educate Indigenous students (Crow, 2022).

If Battiste and Baskatawang's works provide the framework for my DiP, then *Wayi Wah! Indigenous Pedagogies: An Act for Reconciliation and Anti-racist Education* by Jo Chrona (2022) and *Truth and Reconciliation in Canadian Schools* by Pamela Toulouse (2018) are the "How-To" guides on reconciliation, decolonization and Etuaptmumk in education. Chrona (2022), of Ts'msyen and European heritage, takes the stance that reconciliation, decolonizing and pursuing Etuaptmumk should happen for all learners. She (Chrona, 2022) focuses on the importance of context and stresses the practice of reflection. She also examines, closely, what Indigenous-informed pedagogy looks like for non-Indigenous students. This is a distinction that I appreciate. In my research and studies, I have determined that Indigenous education looks different for Indigenous learners and non-Indigenous learners. For example, Indigenous learners should have a language component as part of their instruction (Monroe et al., 2013). This is not necessarily true for non-Indigenous learners. Chrona (2022) actively acknowledges that this is a consideration and encourages the reader to develop their own contextual understanding.

My research also draws on other Indigenous scholars including Calliou (1998), Cassidy and Marsden (2009), Cote-Meek and Moeke-Pickering (2021), Doetzel (2018), Hagar and Mawopiyane (2022), and Louie (2019). The work they have done in terms of identifying and defining reconciliation and decolonization in education is foundational to my problem of practice. Without the ability to clearly define what reconciliation and decolonization can look like; I would have no starting point or reference for where I want to go with my DiP. The variety and scope of the research is important because it gives a good cross section of reconciliation and decolonization, which can differ according to context (Chrona, 2022; Toulouse, 2018).

However, given the importance of oral history and the passing of knowledge, developing personal connections to local Indigenous communities will be key to engaging authentically with Elders and Knowledge Keepers. Their direct input will be the foundation for the developing Etuaptmumk process at North Urban School. This is the only way that the concept of Niinwi-kiinwa-kiinwi can be achieved.

Context is especially important in Indigenous teachings (Battiste, 2013; Martin & Garrett, 2010; Chrona, 2022; Toulouse, 2018), so staff will need to be aware that what works for a colleague may not work for them. There will be a period of trial and error as a balance is sought. Staff should be encouraged to try new things, even at the cost of these attempts not being well-received or successful. The fear of failure hinders many teachers from changing because of the inherent risk. As a leader, it is important that I make it acceptable to try new things, even with the chance of failure existing (Bolman & Deal, 2021; Northouse, 2019; Shields, 2019; Sinek, 2017).

Using the Medicine Wheel

While the reconciliation process, and to some extent, the decolonization process might be achieved without the partnership of an Indigenous community, pursuing Etuaptmumk without the guidance of an Indigenous Knowledge Keeper or Elder would be disrespectful and stray into the area of cultural appropriation, not appreciation, which is what Etuaptmumk is striving to achieve. It is with this understanding and respect for Indigenous teachings that I want to frame my leadership as we work through a change process.

Using the Medicine Wheel (see Figure 1), we begin in the East with the question, "What do I need to unlearn?" as well as going to the South, where we focus on, "What do we need to learn?" The East starting point, with movement to the South, coincides with reconciliation as North Urban School explores the truth of the Indigenous experience in Canada. This will include learning about residential schools, the 1960s scoop which involved forcibly removing

Indigenous children from their homes, and racist government policies that promote Indigenous children being assimilated into western, Euro-centric culture (Joseph, 2018).

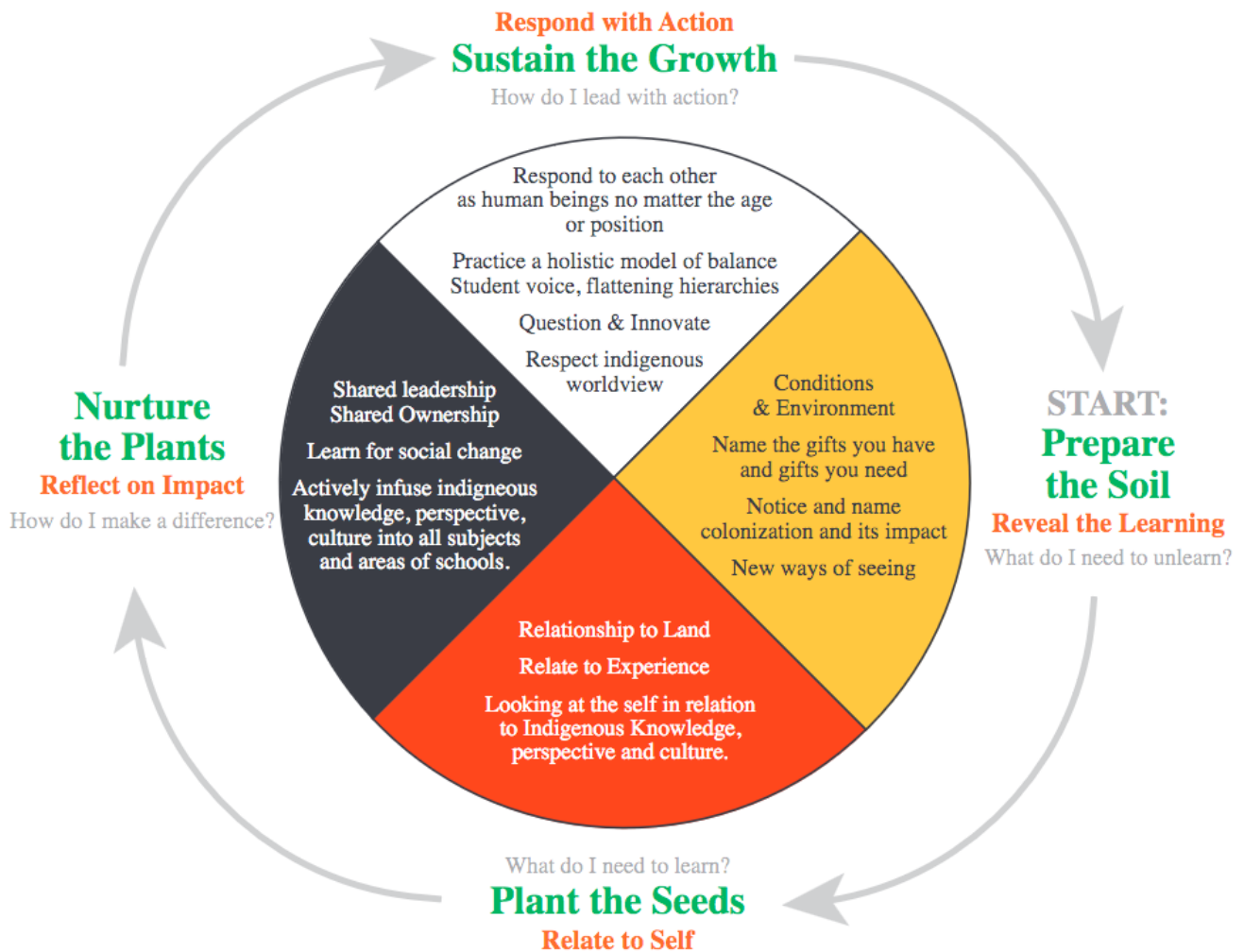


Figure 1: Using the Medicine Wheel (Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board, 2022)

Reconciliation calls for us to commit to recognizing and addressing racism in both the public and private sector. This includes: developing an understanding of how policies continue to benefit non-Indigenous peoples while continuing to dismantle Indigenous culture; acknowledging Indigenous land rights and treaties; asking the government to meet its obligations to Indigenous peoples as outlined in legislation, and ensuring that Canada responds to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP) (Chrona, 2022; UNDRIP, 2007). All Indigenous people have been affected by the legacy of residential schools, whether it be through loss of culture, loss of language or dislocation from families and communities (Toulouse, 2018; Hamelin, 2023). Reconciliation, then, is for all Canadians, for the non-Indigenous to learn about the truth of Canada's relationship with its First Nations, Metis, and Inuit people, and for the Indigenous to enter a better relationship with those who inhabit treaty lands.

We continue in the South of the Medicine Wheel, as we examine ways that we can relate to the land through education. I do not believe it is a coincidence that as the interest in decolonizing curriculum increases, there is also a large portion of the education sector that is focused on land-based education models (Hopkins, 2020). This is in line with the understanding that Indigenous knowledge is based on the idea of remembered experiences that are formed and connected to the land (Smith, 2019).

We next go to the West on the medicine wheel where we focus on, "How do I make a difference?" Decolonization

won't happen all at once. It needs to occur in increments, otherwise I fear an organization could easily become overwhelmed with the work that it needs to do. I see decolonization occurring in three distinct areas: classroom resources, curriculum delivery and assessment practices (Hopkins, 2020; The Institute for Educational Leadership, 2013). To go one step further, I must determine what decolonization looks like in a faith-based school, specifically North Urban School. Frediani uses the term postcolonialism and says that it can mean a "resistance to oppression or as an adjective or reflection of a God that works for justice" (Frediani, 2023, p.6). This is where I find hope that a faith-based school can continue to teach through a faith-based lens and still participate fully in a decolonizing process.

This process may involve moving away from a European Christianity and moving toward an attitude that "God works as a post-colonializing agent in the lives of the oppressed and through practices that reflect God as that agent" (Frediani, 2023, p.19). This means that when we put Christianity into a different cultural context, we can break out of the colonial norms in which it has become entrenched. This is an important distinction in the ability for a faith-based organization to move forward, even if it is an educational organization.

Kelsey Dayle John, a Diné Indigenous scholar, talks about how decolonization is a resistance to a colonial worldview. As a result, one of the major tenets of decolonizing education is moving away from academic language and reframing it to fit something that is more culturally relevant. For the Diné people, it would be the horse. The Diné worldview is often associated with what they know or observe about horses. The process is less about helping those understand what is meaningful from a Euro-centric standpoint but rather trying to frame issues from an Indigenous standpoint, focusing on the sacred, on land and on communication.

Conclusion

Indigenous leadership within non-Indigenous organizations highlights the transformative potential of decolonization as both a structural and relational process. Rather than conforming to dominant frameworks, Indigenous leaders introduce alternative epistemologies grounded in community, reciprocity, and respect for interconnected relationships. This disrupts colonial hierarchies and opens possibilities for organizational practices that reflect pluralism and equity. The decolonization process thus requires more than representation; it demands a reconfiguration of power, policy, and culture to accommodate Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Indigenous leadership serves as both a catalyst and a guide in this work, advancing reconciliation while envisioning sustainable, inclusive futures. My experience has been mostly positive, but I recognize that this is not the norm as I hear from other Indigenous leaders. As I move forward in the decolonization and reconciliation process, I learn just how much decolonization I must do on an individual basis, which then shines a light on how much work my school, and Canada, as a country, must do. I am extremely grateful for the community that supports me and the broader faith-based school community that continues to reach out about the issues surrounding decolonization and reconciliation.

AI declaration

AI was not used in the creation of this document; all research, conclusions and experiences are those of the author's.

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