Decolonizing Professional Learning

Gathering Together for educational change

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The impetus

IN 2019, THREE of us (Leyton, Joelle, and Carol) attended a conference in San Diego that focused on professional learning networks (PLNs), with a specific emphasis on how they enable educators to "tear down boundaries" to connect and learn with colleagues beyond our own schools. It was a productive meeting of scholars from North America and multiple European countries. The group focused on professional learning, collaborative inquiry, and educational change, sharing varied perspectives. But as we reflected on our learning, we began talking about what *wasn't* part of this conversation: the ways in which PLNs can reproduce colonial ways of knowing and being, by:

- excluding the voices and experiences of racialized and minoritized educators
- centring Western ways of knowing at the expense of other knowledge systems
- maintaining strategies that, even though they purport to challenge the status quo by "tearing down boundaries," continue to operate in ways that maintain the structural systems that harm and marginalize so many people.

In fact, little attention has been paid to the colonizing practices and assumptions embedded in the vast majority of professional learning (PL) initiatives (Washington & O'Connor, 2020). Donald (2012) describes the colonial project as one of division, excluding ways of being and knowing as well as value systems that are different from a Eurocentric point of view. Present-day education systems are implicated in this colonial project, where curriculum (a focus on constructing subject areas that privilege a particular type of knowledge), pedagogy (approaches to teaching and instruction), and classroom routines (e.g. grading, grouping) contribute to institutional structures that privilege some students to the expense of others who are often racialized and minoritized within this system (Yee, 2020).

Alas, from these observations, the idea for the *Decolonizing Professional Learning* event, held in St. John's, N.L., in August 2022, was born. The 30

participants were educators and researchers from across the country who were already working to develop decolonizing education practices. They were focused on cultivating culturally sustaining, relational pedagogies in ethical relationship with equity deserving communities (Donald et al., 2011; Ermine, 2007). The central goals of the gathering were two-fold:

1. To find synergies between regionally-based professional learning (PL) programs of research that take up decolonizing pedagogies and leadership practices; and
2. To initiate a national PL education equity network that would enable members to leverage one another's research, policy, and pedagogical contributions in order to decolonize PL practices and policies.

Ultimately, our goal is to rethink and reconstitute professional learning as a collaboratively constructed, transformative, and decolonial practice.

What is decolonization?

At the centre of the gathering was the concept of **decolonization**. Decolonizing professional learning is about decentring settler colonial practices and their curricular and pedagogical Eurocentricities. All levels of education in Canada are working to implement initiatives that respond to the *94 Calls to Action* put forth by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015). In turn, terms such as decolonization, reconciliation, and Indigenization are now being taken up in higher education and the K–12 schooling systems.

The scholars and practitioners who attended the gathering came together to discuss their understanding of decolonizing and how they promote this concept in research and professional learning. Some drew on the concept of decolonizing education as intentionally identifying, challenging, and dismantling colonial practices and policies (Lopez, 2021), while others focused on interrogating and unlearning colonial ideologies (Donald, 2022).

The intent of the gathering was not to agree on a single definition of decolonization, but rather to share ideas and create a network for learning in which we move forward together. We came together guided by our "learning spirits" (Battiste, 2013, p. 18), sharing the stories of our collective work to disrupt colonial school systems in our local settings.

IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE OF *EDUCATION CANADA*, WE SHARE SOME OF THESE STORIES WITH YOU.

Design and processes for authentic unlearning

There is an assumption of neutrality in professional development approaches; therefore, we sought to disrupt the "typical" conference format when designing this event. We wanted a less hierarchical approach – so instead of having a few presenters deliver an address to a largely passive audience, we offered a series of collaborative experiences. Across the three days, we worked to create space for all participants to share their work within small groups of interested teachers, administrators, and researchers.

The gathering was guided by a series of questions, for example:

- Where are we coming from? How do we situate ourselves as educational leaders and researchers in these spaces?
- What work and research are we doing in our representative regions to decolonize professional learning in the context of K–12 education? What can we learn from each other?
- In what ways are we disrupting conventional views of professional learning to create spaces that honour multiple knowledges and ways of knowing?

Coming together: The event began at a small gathering place at a local park. Mi'kmaw knowledge keepers Sheila O'Neill and Marie Eastman welcomed participants to the traditional territory of the Beothuk and Mi'kmaq. Following introductions, they shared some of the history of the land, discussed the ongoing struggle for the recognition of Indigenous Peoples in the province, and talked about their work with Mi'kmaw communities to strengthen the language and culture.

Small fires: Each day, participants could choose from among three to five "small fires," each hosted by one of the attendees. In these small groups, the hosts shared their research and practice related to decolonizing professional learning. Each SSHRC-funded participant served as a small fire host on one day of the program.

Sharing circles: Once each day we came together in Sharing Circles. Participants chose one of three different circles – such as mindfulness practice, nature walks, and talking circles – to participate in. Attendees reflected on what they were noticing or wondering, and connections they were making to their own practice. These sharing circles invited deeper conversations about what we heard in the small fires and our experiences in different contexts (K–12 schools, post-secondary institutions, communities).

Writing activities: To support the building of connections within this emerging community, we embedded daily opportunities for collaborative writing. We began by inviting everyone to write about their own decolonizing work. Next we invited people to explore the connections and intersections between their work and the work of others. We hoped that discovering these relationships would encourage continued collaboration and sharing once everyone returned to their communities.

VoicEd panels: Two live-streamed panel discussions were hosted by Stephen Hurley from [VoicEd Radio](#). Colleagues discussed colonization and placelessness, disrupting deficit thinking, inclusion and exclusion, educational change networks, and more. Online participants were encouraged to submit questions to the panel. Recordings of the [Decolonizing Professional Learning](#) panels are available on [VoicEd Radio](#).

Final sharing circle: To end the gathering, we all joined in a final circle to share our thoughts about our time together and how we might move forward together. Each person had a turn to share what they thought were key themes, next steps, and opportunities missed. Attendees spoke of forming a network, meeting together virtually and/or in person, writing an edited collection of chapters, presenting together at conferences, and this *Education Canada* issue.

What was evident to us all was that we had not collectively defined decolonization, and that future collaborations between us need to both honour the diversity of our approaches *and* include opportunities to define key terms and expectations. In this debrief, participants also surfaced the different aspects of power and privilege we carry and/or do not have in our various roles and contexts. Our identities, roles, and educational change efforts can and must be returned to as part of decolonizing work, and trying to move too quickly to consensus and definitions is counterproductive. This work takes patience and time.

Moving forward

The Decolonizing Professional Learning gathering that took place in Newfoundland was a starting point for what we hope will become a larger conversation and impetus for collaborative action across Canada. There is already some pan-Canadian work that genuinely connects researchers and practitioners with a commitment to educational change and improvement. We know from previous research that a considerable number of professional learning activities are happening across Canada, but there are inequities in access to quality professional learning for people who work in education (Campbell et al., 2017). There is also a need to consider the purpose and content of such professional learning. If educators are to care for all students and support them in

developing to their fullest potential, it is essential that professional learning activities for educators are critically examined to ensure that structural inequities are not un/intentionally reproduced.

We are at a moment in time when valuing Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing, fulfilling the Calls to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and addressing and undoing systemic racism from generations of colonialism and genocide are urgent and essential. This is the call to move forward with conversations to understand and share approaches to decolonizing professional learning and to act together – researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers – for educational equity and improvement in Canada.

An important starting point is for further discussion about the concept of "decolonizing professional learning" itself and the linked work of "unlearning" historically embedded assumptions. As educators, it is our job to continuously learn, but that can be challenging when confronting ingrained colonial ways of seeing and living in the world. We also need to consider what this work looks like in practice. Bringing together practitioners with applied researchers was a beginning, but it is important to share our stories, our evidence, our ideas, and our examples widely. Deprivatizing individual or isolated practices and mobilizing knowledge by sharing in conversations and communications are powerful strategies.

This collection of articles for *Education Canada* is a way to reach out and call on people across Canada (and beyond) to join in connecting, collaborating, and sharing to advance decolonizing professional learning in and through education.

Photo: Nicholas Ng-A-Fook

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DECOLONIZATION TERMS EXPLAINED

It is important to share the understandings that guide and frame decolonization work. Below we offer working definitions of some key terms, recognizing that these terms can have different meanings in different contexts.

Decolonization: Decolonization is about decentring Eurocentric, colonial knowledge and practices, and recentring knowledge and world views of those who have been placed on the margins by colonization.

Decolonization involves active resistance to colonial practices and policies, getting rid of colonial structures, and centring and restoring the world view of Indigenous peoples. It demands an Indigenous starting point; Indigenous people will determine appropriate approaches and acts of decolonization. It also involves recognizing the importance of land – in particular, how colonized peoples were cut off from their land and traditions – and the return of land to Indigenous peoples.

Indigenization: Indigenization calls on educational institutions and stakeholders to establish policies, processes, and practices that are led by First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples toward ensuring their particular ways of knowing, being and doing are nourished and flourish.

This includes creating opportunities for K–12 school leaders and teachers to learn how to develop and enact curriculum that honours First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples' histories, perspectives, and contemporary issues. It also calls on school leaders and teachers to embed relational and responsive culturally nourishing pedagogies and curricula as part of the values of their K–12 school community.

Positionality: Positionality refers to one's identity – how we position ourselves within our society. To identify your own positionality, you need to consider your own power and privilege by thinking about issues of race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, educational background, citizenship, and so on.

As educators, our positionality impacts how we make sense of the world and how we engage in it. It takes self-assessment and reflection to identity the ways in which our assumptions and beliefs, as well as our own expressions of power, influence how we (co-)create learning environments in our classrooms and schools.

Systemic racism: Systemic racism refers to the aspects of a society's structures that produce inequalities and inequities among its citizens and specifically, the institutional processes rooted in White supremacy that restrict opportunities and outcomes for racialized and minoritized peoples.

Systemic racism includes institutional and social structures, individual mental schemas, and everyday ways of being in the world. Schools and school systems must engage in anti-racist education practice to address the systemic issues particular to racialized students.

Unlearning: Unlearning involves removing ideas, practices, and values grounded in coloniality and colonialism from everyday practice.

It is rethinking and reframing what we thought we knew about many aspects of everyday life, including traditions grounded in Eurocentric ways of knowing, and replacing it with decolonized knowledge.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER LEARNING

Culturally Nourishing Schooling for Indigenous Education, University of New South Wales. www.unsw.edu.au/content/dam/pdfs/unsw-adobe-websites/arts-design-architecture/education/research/project-briefs/2022-07-27-ada-culturally-nourishing-schooling-cns-for-Indigenous-education.pdf

Decolonizing and Indigenizing Education in Canada, Eds. Sheila Cote-Meek and Taima Moeke-Pickering. https://canadianscholars.ca/book/decolonizing-and-indigenizing-education-in-canada

Indigenization, Decolonization and Reconciliation (chapter in *Pulling Together: A guide for curriculum developers*). **https://opentextbc.ca/indigenizationcurriculumdevelopers/chapter/indigenization-decolonization-and-reconciliation**

The UnLeading Project with Dr. Vidya Shah, York University. www.yorku.ca/edu/unleading

Truth and Reconciliation Commission. https://ehprnh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Executive_Summary_English_Web.pdf

Universities and teachers' associations provide myriad resources to support the development of anti-racist practices in schools. See, for example: **www.ualberta.ca/centre-for-teaching-and-learning/teaching-support/indigenization/index.html**

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