

“Living a Good Life”: The Crisis in Education for Canadian Indigenous Peoples

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Abstract

The well-being of any population focuses primarily on economics, health, education, and cultural traditions; this is especially true for communities in rural and remote Canada. At the forefront of well-being for people living in these northern communities is educators who can deliver professional educational services to those living rurally and remotely. Specifically, living a good life, in part, can fall at the feet of teachers who offer continuous supports to students. In this paper, we examine the influences that impact the education of Indigenous populations living in rural, remote, often reserve lands in Canada, particularly the province of Ontario. Consistent access to current world issues (through stable internet and technology) and recruiting and retaining qualified professionals who are culturally competent and integrate Indigenous ways of knowing and being, are key aspects to overcoming the hurdles of living a good life in rural and remote communities. Additionally, ensuring that educators are given the tools to teach a decolonization curriculum, which includes culturally appropriate education for Canadian Indigenous Peoples.

Keywords: Indigenous, education, remote, rural, Canada

Introduction

In the broadest sense, the well-being of any population necessitates investment and coordination of economic, social, environmental, political, and educational factors to ensure a good life. In Canada, the consistent and persistent lack of well-being in respect of education services to Indigenous Peoples, highlights the federal government’s failure to properly implement a national policy that recognizes and prioritizes the rights of Indigenous Peoples. Such failure perpetuates a colonial attitude of racism toward Indigenous Peoples; an assimilation and segregation of Indigenous Peoples from their communities and worldviews; (Reading & Wien, 2009) and reflects a continuing lack of political will at the federal level to redress long established inequities.

In this paper we examine the influences that impact the education of Indigenous populations living in rural, remote, often reserve, lands in Canada, particularly the province of Ontario. Most notably, we focus on the difficulty in attracting and retaining highly qualified teachers to meet the critical needs of the children and adults living in rural and remote communities. We recognize from the outset that creating the conditions for equitable education services among vulnerable Indigenous populations requires genuine acceptance of their unique cultural, historical, and geographical contexts. Much of the northern part of the province is inaccessible by road or only has vehicle traffic over ice roads in winter. Many of these northern areas are fly-in communities and motorized transport within the communities is mainly by snowmobiles in the winter and boats in the summer. Equitable

education services also require collaboration, mutuality, and a shared responsibility between the federal government, the provincial government, and Indigenous communities seeking self-determination and control of education. Systemic change cannot be merely a downloading of services to community bands without systematic modelling and facilitating of effective organizational structures and mentoring of key personnel to deliver equitable education. Decolonizing the classroom involves equity in education and must be community-based and requires a coming together of diverse, knowledge-bearers: band leadership, community members, federal and provincial personnel, and educational deliverers to ensure long-term, meaningful well-being.

The Report on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015), established the concept of reconciliation as a fundamental precursor to Indigenous well-being which Toulouse (2016), identified as “the holistic development of our children, youth, and world” (p. 1). Well-being is living the good life where the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual are in harmony within oneself and with the Other. Toulouse (2016), provides a meaningful perspective on the good life:

What matters to Indigenous peoples in education is that ... all community members are able to contribute to society (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) and are physically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually balanced.... It is about fostering identity, facilitating well-being, connecting to land, honouring language, infusing with teachings and recognizing the inherent right to self-determination (p. 1).

Previously, the Assembly of First Nations (2010), asserted that the primary role of First Nations holistically balanced learning systems was to “transmit First Nations ancestral languages, traditions, cultures, and histories, while at the same time preparing and making accessible to the learner support and tools that will allow them to achieve full individual potential in any setting they choose” (p. 10). From a First Nations perspective, the gateway to the good life is the provision for and access to lifelong learning in educational systems that privilege programs and services grounded in Indigenous languages, values, traditions and knowledge. Traditional Indigenous education of youth involved parents, grandparents, elders and community members and was founded upon observation, practice, socialization (family and community), oral teachings, and active participation in community ceremonies and culturally habituated celebrations. Apprenticeship was a key component in the acquisition of values, beliefs, knowledge, skills, and training in medicine, survival techniques, ceremonies, and oral histories necessary for adult life (McCue & Filice, 2011/2018; Mueller, et al., 2011; Toulouse, 2016).

Lifelong learning for every Indigenous child needs to begin in a learning system that includes pre-kindergarten and preschool Head Start programs at one end of the educational continuum and post-secondary and adult learning programs at the other end. Learning systems are heavily dependent upon a number of factors, not least of which, is the reliance on highly qualified classroom teachers and their specialized support workers. The key elements of lifelong learning addressed by the Assembly of First Nations (2010) include “language immersion, holistic and culturally relevant curricula, well-trained educators, focused leadership, parental involvement and accountability and safe and healthy facilities” (p. 3). As noted above, this paper will focus on the elements that directly relate to education in Indigenous communities.

Educational hurdles of rurality and remoteness

The historical and geographic uniqueness of Canada presents a variety of unique challenges for the hiring and retention of qualified teachers to serve in Indigenous communities. Canada is constituent of 10 Provinces and 3 Territories that under the British North America (BNA) Act, have jurisdictional responsibility for public education and the federal government has a responsibility for the education and healthcare of Indigenous Peoples. From an educational perspective, the federal government facilitates the operations of over 500 band-operated schools, which accommodate approximately 110,000 students. Nearly 150 of those schools are considered remote, special access (i.e.: winter ice-roads or fly-ins, spring-fall), or north of the 55th parallel (Blatchford, 2016, n.p.). In February 2020, Education Canada, a federal website that lists employment opportunities for Indigenous reserves and remote communities, was still advertising for teaching positions for the 2019-2020 school year. In total, across Canada, there were 492 positions in Indigenous education that had not been filled. Nearly half of the vacancies were in Ontario (237) chiefly because there are in Ontario; “205 reserves and nine First Nation settlements. ... 126 First Nations live in these communities, [and] in other, non-Indigenous communities throughout the province. In 2016, there were 210,159 registered Indians living in Ontario, 46 per cent of whom lived on reserves” (McCue & Filice, 2011/2018, n.p.).

Every challenge that typifies Canada's vast rural and remote areas is magnified by distances, economics, supply management, human resource availability, personal and professional needs, and community characteristics. For the majority of Indigenous communities, federal control of education is problematic and the hiring and retaining of teachers chronically difficult, if not, in some instances, near impossible. It bears keeping in mind as we revisit the Canadian historical context, remote communities have played a crucial role in nation-building and continue to this day to attract people who are drawn to vista landscapes and to a quieter way of life. However, such idyllic attractions are not always commensurate with the realities of life and living in Indigenous communities. Limited fiscal capacity hampers the leadership in rural and remote communities to provide the infrastructure that is needed to build future economic prosperity and educational sustainability. A lower rate-payer density and continuing out-migration of youth also hamper efforts to build more livable and thriving communities that can attract the talent needed to ensure economic and educational well-being, necessary to live the 'good life'.

Mueller, Carr-Stewart, Sleeves, and Marshall (2011), contend that, "teacher recruitment and retention are critical factors in the delivery of quality education services in rural and remote areas including reserve schools"(n.p.) and that, "teacher retention has been identified as a key determinant of student learning outcomes"(n.p.). But there are additional determinants that serve as educational hurdles for rural, remote, and reserve communities that must be cleared if highly qualified pre-service and in-service teachers are to be hired and retained. Among the determinants that contribute to teacher retention and attrition are school location; socio-economic factors including housing and working and living conditions; class sizes and student/teacher ratio; number and variety of subjects to be taught; and, compassionate leave and compensation packages including pension benefits. Add to these the following: 1) personal and professional characteristics of the teacher such as chronological age, teaching experience, level of preparation, holistic well-being, career satisfaction; 2) student characteristics of individual behaviours, attitudes, commitment, and responsibility to learning; 3) student to family responsibilities and home support for the learning process and the education system; and, 4) community characteristics such as the level of band and board support to teachers and education personnel; and, it becomes easier to see that attrition drives "system spending on teacher recruitment and training as well as significant human resource time" (Mueller, et al., 2011, n.p.). Brandon(2015)identified these challenges as having insurmountable geographic, economic, social, and cultural conditions.

Recently, an Indigenous faculty member who is now a classroom teacher in a public school with a predominantly Indigenous population, described how he had been teaching in a reservation school but had left three years before and had accepted a teaching position with a public board. When asked why he had made the change he replied that he was tired of the band politics and its negative effect on education. He went on to explain that when federal monies are transferred to the band, the first priority for the band leader is to look after himself/herself and those of the band council that are usually close friends or relatives and then, and only then, to turn their attention to other matters of importance. Education, because of its cost in salaries and resources is often at or near the bottom of the list of priorities. This colleague concluded his observation with the following:

"I didn't want to have to fight the chief, the council and parents, year after year, in order to provide a decent education for their children. In the last reserve school that I taught in, we were doubling and tripling the grade levels in classes at the elementary level and inadequately providing for the foundational needs of students at the secondary level. In some instances, elementary students were repeating three or four grades with a very few progressing to secondary studies at the high school and even fewer attaining graduation. I got tired of the fight and fed-up with the politics, so I left and went to the public system where compensation is better for me and where there is money for the resources that my students need" (JH, Personal Communication, 10 March 2020).

The situation described above is not unique to First Nation schools in northern Ontario. In writing of the plight of remote First Nations communities in northern Manitoba, Caruk (2018), reports that many of the classrooms lack a certified teacher and that while teacher salaries are equivalent in First Nations schools, "schools funded federally through Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada get less funding than those that are provincially funded" (n.p.). The conditions are such that in several northern communities, educational assistants are striving to fill the teacher vacancies with some schools reporting a vacancy of 16 positions at the start of the school year and, that in one school, during the previous year, "Grade 3 and Grade 5 students only had classes every second day" (n.p.). Additionally, the start-up of the school year was delayed because of teacher vacancies; some of which had been open for over a year. One School Division Superintendent reported:

“... substitute hours are time spent without instruction from a certified teacher. It means that the person who is their instructor doesn't have a Bachelor of Education degree. They may have a degree and are on a limited teaching permit. They may have been in school for years as an EA [educational assistant] and suddenly are pressed into service because we're desperate for somebody in the classroom” (n.p.).

Laboucane (2010), reported that, “[p]rovincial schools are paid more than double that of on-reserve schools for student tuition” (n.p.) and calculates that, on average, on-reserve schools receive \$2000 less tuition per student annually. The disparity in funding has resulted in little to no funding for Indigenous school libraries, for the purchasing of texts and other library resources, for adequate salary and benefit packages for teachers, for vocational training in secondary schools, and for extracurricular sports or co-curricular recreation programs (Laboucane, 2010, n.p.). Drummond, a former chief economist with Toronto Dominion Bank, stated that based on his 2013 investigation, “First Nations children living on reserve receive at least 30 percent less funding for their education as children under provincial jurisdiction” and continued, “First Nations peoples' happiness, health, and engagement in community would improve with better quality education” (Porter, 2016, n.p.). McMahon (2014), working off Drummond's 30 percent estimates that, “the difference was as large as \$8000 per student in Ontario” (n.p.). Mueller, et al. (2011), asserted that financial services provided to Indigenous schools “are established by federal funding formulas and for the last decade have been tied to volume increase (in students) and a 2% price increase” (n.p.). Mccue and Filice (2011/2018) assert that “funding gaps prevent school officials from providing Indigenous students with adequate care, education, and support for those who must leave their reserves in order to attend school away from their home communities” (n.p.).

While federal monies are specifically allocated for the education of each child, a change to self-government does not address the chronic problem of underfunding nor can it be expected to accomplish the educational tasks imposed on Indigenous communities. Downloading, delegating, or transferring educational programming and services from the federal government to First Nations community bands must be accompanied by effective organization and infrastructure management training and high-quality in-service for key educational personnel who will be tasked with delivering a culturally appropriate education for all students that will address social inequity and the historic and ongoing loss of cultural identity while ensuring the acquisition of learning skills essential for ‘living the good life’ in the world of today and beyond..

The challenges enumerated above exist for all teachers, but other challenges specific to non-Indigenous pre-service teachers persist such as an inability to adapt curriculum that is reflective of Indigenous cultural content and context, (Hall, 2012, Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2003; Murray-Orr & Mitton-Kukner, 2017). Reformers of Indigenous curriculum, educational leaders and policymakers are “attempting to reintegrate traditional teachings and provide more cultural and language-based support to enhance and improve the outcomes of Indigenous children in the education system” (Mccue, 2011/Filice, 2018). Another challenge for non-Indigenous pre-service teachers is the mass media projection that rural, remote, or reserve Indigenous communities are “abject place[s] of deficit and disadvantage” and decidedly not “a cozy place of belonging and comfort” (Somerville & Rennie, 2012, p. 193). One must acknowledge and understand the colonial bias that frames these challenges. Non-Indigenous pre-service teachers are acutely disadvantaged in that they seek to access the culture, content, and context of Indigenous pedagogy based on a Euro-centric history of dispossession and a lingering hegemonic reality of colonialism.

Considerations to address the hurdles

Unquestionably, Indigenous histories and life-world perceptions must become more prominent if education is to become a platform for the emergence of Indigenous sovereignty and self-governance (Battiste & McLean, 2005; Kirkness, 1999; Anthony-Stevens, Stevens, & Nicholas, 2017). But transitioning away from Eurocentric perspectives in education and curriculum requires more Indigenous teachers be employed and retained throughout the education sectors of rural and remote communities.

Teacher Attrition

In the pedagogical relationality of adult to child, the teacher has more direct impact on the learning experience of each child than any other school-based factor (Brucato, 2005; Rowe, 2007). The teacher has a three-fold obligation to the child. They have the custodial responsibilities of safety and security; the parental (in loco parentis) responsibilities of caring, nurturing, and appropriate discipline; and the educational responsibilities in teaching cognitive content and non-cognitive context ways of knowing, understanding, meaning-making, being,

and becoming. Researcher, Darling-Hammond (2000), has suggested that the teacher is more important to the student's success in attaining specific learning expectations than family or community.

Teacher attrition at the end of each school year or during the school year has profound negative implications and effects on students and their ability to be successful academically, socially, and culturally. Students are the silent educational stakeholders who are most profoundly affected by frequent changes (usually annually or semi-annually) in educational personnel and the resultant disruptions in their educational programs. The persistent outflow of teachers, year-after-year, results in an incessant parade of inexperienced teachers whose lack of experience and pedagogical maturity manifests itself in ineffectual teaching and ineffective learning strategies which result in significantly lower achievement for students who do not have the opportunity to be taught by more experienced, more mature, teachers. Darling-Hammond (2000), and other researchers (Hall, 2012; Holme, Jabbar, Germain, & Dinning, 2018) contend that consistent and sustained effective teaching year-over-year contributes to a higher quality of instruction which directly results in a higher quality of student learning and achievement of learning expectations thereby increasing the over-all quality of each student's educational experience.

Sadly, non-Indigenous pre-service teachers, once hired, are prone to leave Indigenous community-schools after only a short period of time. And, in Ontario like Alberta, while demand is high for teachers with strong qualifications, there are few opportunities for teachers to train near the communities where they will ultimately teach. In Alberta, 77% of those who leave the community for professional training later choose not to return to the community to teach (Dupuy, Mayer, & Morrisette, 2000). Such teacher attrition has a detrimental impact on schools and their students (Hall, 2012; Holme, et al., 2018; Papay, Bacher-Hicks, Page, & Marinell, 2017; Weldon, 2018). To stem the tide of attrition and to increase non-Indigenous teacher retention, the challenges identified above must be systematically and systemically addressed by Federal, Provincial, and First Nations bodies who have the responsibility to govern and direct education. Programs that are directed toward improving teacher retention in Indigenous communities have resulted in positive impacts for learning and increased student achievement of specific expectations (Cherng & Halpin, 2016; Hall, 2012; Holme, et al., 2018; Somerville & Rennie, 2012).

Hiring of Teachers in Rural and Remote Communities

The challenges listed above are not new, they are historically political in nature and habituated in socio-cultural and educational practice. Centuries of Indigenous cultural destruction by colonial populations have resulted in a need for reconciliation. Indigenous communities are further challenged to overcome the debilitating effects of poverty, higher maintenance costs for their schools, excessive heating, and transportation costs for supply and resources as well as an inability to attract and properly house qualified teachers in a community or environment that offers little of the amenities commonly associated with urban living. In order for reconciliation to be effective, it must include a critical examination and revision of political ideologies and policies that have shaped current sectors of Canadian society including, but not limited to, government, healthcare, and education (CMEC, 2010; Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). It is not enough to plan for an increase in the number of Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers in rural and remote communities; it is of equal importance that a retention plan also be in place. As mentioned above, research indicates that improved teacher retention in Indigenous schools greatly impacts the learning achievements of students (Cherng & Halpin, 2016; Hall, 2012; Holme et al., 2018; Somerville & Rennie, 2012).

Indigenous teachers are an essential part of the health and well-being of individuals in Indigenous communities. Fovet and Hall (2012), and Hall (2012), posit that Indigenous teachers are predisposed to remain in Indigenous communities for longer periods of time than are non-Indigenous teachers; especially if the school is located in their home community. There is a stronger sense of personal identity and belonging for Indigenous teachers in their home communities (Somerville & Rennie, 2012). Home, a connection to place and people, is strong within Indigenous peoples and Indigenous teachers are more likely to develop meaningful connections with students, community elders, parents, and other teachers and adapt teaching to meet the specific needs of Indigenous students, while positively contributing to the growth, development, and sustainability of the community (Hall, 2012). Challenges facing the hiring and retention of teachers in the rural and remote regions of Canada, if properly addressed and appropriately redressed, would go a long way to recruiting and retaining non-Indigenous and Indigenous teachers.

Added to the above, there are four dominant challenges related to the hurdles of education in rural and remote areas of Canada. These challenges are: 1) inadequate bandwidth for implementing digital education resources and services; 2) lack of Federal funding for Indigenous education when compared to provincial and territorial funding; 3) lack of consistency in band-operated board and systems of education; and 4) Decolonization of Indigenous education, which includes culturally appropriate education for Canadian Indigenous Peoples.

Technology

First, in a technocratic world, broadband internet service is a mainstay in the lives of people in urban centres and is quite often, taken for granted. This is not the case, generally speaking, for people who live in rural and/or remote areas of Canada where internet service is at best spotty and at worst, non-existent. Most of the new classroom teachers in Indigenous communities come from southern small towns and big cities. They are essentially urban, have been educated in urban environs where access to telecommunications and the internet are commonplace, and have an urban sense of entitlement to digital services and resources. However, northern rural and remote communities epitomize the digital divide and in such locales and teachers are hard pressed to incorporate digital resources into the classroom; to employ learning management systems (LMSs); or to accept digital submissions of homework and course assignments.

Slow internet service renders schools and teachers unable to access digital learning in the form of online resources and online collaboration. While broadband advances are being made in rural and remote areas of Canada, the costs are high, the progress is slow, the demand ever increasing. It will take a concerted effort on the part of Federal, Provincial, and community leaders working in partnership with businesses and schools to facilitate an infrastructure that allows equitable access to digital education tools, resources, and services for northern and Indigenous students and patients that match those living in urban towns and cities.

Funding

Second, for the majority of Indigenous communities' governmental control of education is problematic and the hiring and retaining of teachers chronically difficult, if not, in some instances, impossible. In terms of education, the magnitude of unfilled employment opportunities, nearly 500 mid-way through the 2019-2020 school year, speaks to the critical nature of hiring for and retaining teachers in reserve schools which are often in remote locales of the nation. However, among the calls for highly specialized experts, none speaks more loudly than the call for healthcare support workers to education in the fields of trauma and psychological therapy. Clearly, there is a pervasive need, and that pervasive need is largely because Indigenous communities across Canada are in the throes of decolonization that include experiences with colonial education policies, including residential schools.

An improved state of education will be a long, arduous, and in some instances, traumatic process for Indigenous peoples who mistrust imposed governmental systems. They fear that their children are and will be unable to develop a positive sense of their identity because provincial and territory policies and practices respecting mandated curricular practices rarely reflect Indigenous history, diverse cultures, languages, natural medicinal treatments, and the contributions made to nation-building in Canada by Indigenous peoples. As it relates specifically to education programs in Indigenous schools, the Federal government has for the most part adopted the curricula of the province or territory wherein the school is located. For example, Indigenous schools in Ontario follow the mandated curriculum as established by the Ministry of Education, Province of Ontario. However, the Federal government continues to control the funding for all education programs in Indigenous schools: "A comprehensive education system did not devolve from the Federal level to First Nations; rather, individual schools or authorities were funded to manage or administer schools on behalf of the government of Canada" (Mueller, et al., 2011, n.p.). Federal control of the funding for Indigenous education and provincial control of the funding for healthcare are perhaps the last and most enduring vestiges of colonialization.

Consistency in systems

Third, not surprisingly, Fovet and Hall (2012), and Hall (2012), indicate that Indigenous teachers are more committed to teaching long-term in Indigenous communities, especially in their home communities, than are non-Indigenous teachers. The deep sense of belonging and reassurance of place and people are factors that profoundly root Indigenous teachers to home communities and result in them wanting to make positive contributions to the life and living of both children and adults in those communities. Additionally, as Hall (2012), points out other factors contributing to the long-term commitment of Indigenous teachers working in home communities are the

ability to adapt and modify mandated curricula to meet “the specific needs of remote Indigenous students”, and the ability to engage in meaningful educational dialoguing made possible through “cross-cultural collaboration with [other] Indigenous teachers and communities”(p. 194).

The key to addressing the education status of people in Indigenous communities is through education programs. A partial solution to address the challenges to the hiring and retention of Indigenous teachers is to create employment opportunities. Researchers contend that the lack of access to localized professional training in and for rural and remote areas in Canada is directly contributing to an inability to acquire and retain teachers for those areas and that the trend is becoming increasingly problematic(Eaton, Dressler, Gereluk,& Becker, 2015).

While the strategy to access localized professional training in education may seem obvious, it would require the concerted efforts of Faculties of Education working with community partners and governmental agencies to support their Indigenous students after graduation. It is common practice enacted in several US states, by teacher education programs, primarily located in north-west and mid to south-west US(Oregon, Montana, Minnesota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Arizona), to access Federal funding to increase the number of Indigenous teachers by partnering with communities to identify teaching positions that pre-service teachers would eventually fulfill. From admission to completion of certification process to employment, pre-service teachers are supported institutionally to obtain specific teaching positions usually at schools within their home communities.

Buckskin (2016), describes a similar employment initiative in Australia to increase the number of Indigenous students that enter the teaching profession and are encouraged to remain in teaching positions across Australia. However, such an equivalent initiative does not exist in Canada. Canadian universities do exceptionally well in preparing pre-service teachers for employment, but only a few, notably the University of Alberta’s Aboriginal Teacher Education Program (ATEP), Brandon University’s Brandon University Native Teacher Induction Program (BUNTIP), University of Winnipeg’s Community-based Aboriginal Teacher Education Program (CATEP), Nipissing University’s Indigenous Teacher Education Program (ITEP),and St. Francis Xavier University’s community-based Mi’kmaq Teacher Education Program (MTEP) exist to promote practicum experience and employment of Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers in rural and remote communities in Canada.

The programs with the highest employment rates of Indigenous pre-service teachers are those who have their pre-service teachers complete their practica in or near their home communities. For example, St. Francis Xavier and its partnership with neighbouring Mi’kmaq communities has prepared in excess of 100 Mi’kmaq teachers for work in provincial and band-operated schools (St. FX, 2017). The Nunavut Teacher Education Program (NTEP), a partnership between Nunavut Arctic College and the University of Regina offers pre-service teachers the opportunity to stay in their home community and complete their practica in a community-based school where they will eventually be employed. As a result, the Nunavut Arctic College (2016) reports that the “majority of graduates of the Nunavut Teacher Education Program are employed within the school system in Nunavut.” (n.p.). Aside from the efforts of Universities and community partnerships noted above, primary recruitment and retention strategies enacted for teaching positions in rural and remote community-schools, is largely left to the promotional devices of the local school board(s); to their presentations at university sponsored career fairs; or, to their university on-site visitations and interviews of perspective pre-service teachers.

There is perhaps reason to criticize university faculties of education for not doing more to position themselves and their pre-service teachers for long-term employment in rural and remote communities; but the number and availability of teaching positions depends on provincial and federal investments that fall short in the context of Canadian rural and remote communities. Currently, in Ontario, the provincial government’s underfunding of school boards and cuts to teaching positions are widely contested by teachers’ unions, concerned parents, and community stakeholders(People for Education, 2020). As previously noted in this paper, Canadian federal investments in Indigenous education programs and students consistently fall short of financial resources provided to non-Indigenous learners (CMEC, 2010; Malatest& Associates, 2004). As such, governments at the federal and provincial levels must be held to account for failing to fulfill their fiduciary responsibilities to Indigenous students. Indigenous pre-service teachers require more funding to access teacher education programs whose practica are home based and located in rural and remote communities and school boards in such areas, require increased funds to hire more Indigenous teachers. As we close the circle, we return to the need for increased technological infrastructure to provide reliable and viable internet connection between rural and remote communities and larger urban and metropolitan centers and more specifically, connection to online support from

university teacher education programs. Ontario has instituted a New Teacher Induction Program (NTIP, 2006/2019), which has proven quite successful in forestalling teacher attrition in the early years of their career. Such a mentoring/coaching/collegial approach to supporting new teachers in rural and remote communities is essential to the enduring health and wellness of present and future generations of Indigenous children and adults.

While the challenges faced, particularly in Ontario, in relation to hiring suitably qualified teachers may be shared by many jurisdictions across the country and abroad, there is reason to remain optimistic about the potential to attract and retain highly qualified teachers in remote and rural areas. Within the social context of an increasing awareness of the role that teachers have in supporting our youngest citizens, and with the recent challenge of COVID-19 in supporting all of us who are “in this together”, there seems to be growing respect for teachers that is evolving rapidly across Canada. Smale and Holliday (2020), posit that “... participation in education is critical preparation for work as well as for ongoing personal development and its positive impact on our living standards and social networks. Creating more opportunities and encouraging greater participation in all forms of formal and informal education-related activities in rural areas of Ontario would serve to enhance well-being because of their influence in many domains”(p. 23). Those domains, in addition to education, include healthcare in all of its manifestations and government funding cuts to education and healthcare directly impact teachers and their students, for whom they have daily responsibility. The dialogue in private and public forums must continue if the trend toward the inequities and inequalities in hiring and retaining teachers for rural and remote communities is to be reversed and real, genuine, reconciliation is to be achieved.

Decolonization of Education

Fourth, the overall picture of education today is inherent with power and control structures over Indigenous peoples. Combating historical and current educational structures is not an easy task and must be faced head-on with Indigenous peoples leading the way in defining an educational system that is appropriate. A culturally based educational system, where students can develop a stronger sense of self and identity, may be one way to negotiate the difficult work of redefining education for Indigenous peoples. However, culturally appropriate education must be defined and determined by and with the Indigenous peoples whom this curriculum serves.

Aquash (2013), asserts that “Canada as an evolving colonial entity has used education as a process of colonization of First Nation communities, families, and children...” (p. 121). It is imperative to recognize that one of the greatest challenges confronting Indigenous students when they enter the classroom, is the longstanding history of oppression, colonialism, and racism that occupies that space (Cote-Meek, 2014). Furthermore, that space is held within an institution that holds policies and procedures within an academe that also comes from a place of colonialism. Oppressive spaces, once institutionalized, such as residential schools, imposed European ways of knowing and learning (Regan, 2013) upon First Nations children. Cote-Meek (2014,) posit the colonial agenda as four dimensional composed of the acquisition of land for the benefit of European settlers and for the creation of settler states; the promotion of a Western cultural worldview designed to create divisions between and among Indigenous peoples in order to more easily exploit human and natural resources; the systematic employment of physical and symbolic violence toward Indigenous peoples; and, the continuation of violence, racism, bigotry, and oppression as socializing agents to eradicate ways of knowing, culture, language, ceremony, and traditions of Indigenous peoples. Understanding these and other impacts of colonialism is essential to critically examining and constructively reflecting on the particular experiences Indigenous students have within a Western educational system. As mentioned earlier in this paper, a failure or inability on the part of non-Indigenous teachers to fully comprehend these impacts contributes to the propagating of colonial ideology and a shortage of non-Indigenous teachers who lack the comfort and confidence to teach in predominantly Indigenous locales. A possible solution is to equip pre-service teachers with the skills, attitudes, and knowledge to design and deliver educational practices that account for Indigenous cultural and colonial sensitivities. Another valuable element for adequate preparation of non-Indigenous teachers for a culturally appropriate curriculum delivery is to have teachers understand their self-location in an effort to comprehend how to work respectfully with students, what they bring to the classroom, and how their actions and values alter classroom learning (Peltier, Manankil-Rankin, McCullough, Paulin, Anderson, and Hanzlik, 2019).

Indigenous ways of knowing and approaches to education were, and remain, antithetical to a Euro-centric view of learning which sought to have all children conform to a lock-step standard of educational progression. Munroe, et al. (2013), cite Battiste and Henderson and their view that Indigenous learning is characterized as “sacred, holistic, and a lifelong responsibility ... and that every child is unique in his or her learning journey and

knowledge construction” (p. 322). The hegemony of the Euro-centric view regarded Indigenous ways of knowing as insignificant and inconsequential had and continues to have devastating consequences for Indigenous children, their families, and communities. Wagamese (2012), in vivid detail, recounts his family’s experience with Residential Schools:

“All the members of my family attended residential school. They returned to the land bearing psychological, emotional, spiritual, and physical burdens that haunted them.... Each of them had experienced an institution that tried to scrape the Indian off of their insides, and they came back to the bush and river raw, sore, and aching. The pain they bore was invisible and unspoken. It seeped into their spirit, oozing its poison and blinding them from the incredible properties within their Indian ways. When the vitriolic stew of unspoken words, feelings, and memories of their great dislocation, hurt, and isolation began to bubble and churn within them, they discovered that alcohol could numb them from it. And we ceased to be a family. Instead, the adults of my Ojibwa family became frightened children, The trauma that had been visited upon them reduced them to that. They huddled against a darkness from where vague shapes whispered threats and from invasions of their minds, spirits, and bodies that roared through the blackness to envelope and smother them again” (in Rogers, Degagné, Dewar, & Lowry, p. 154-55).

Advocates for Indigenous education maintain that it must be a decolonizing form of education. Battiste (2004), posits two steps to the process, “deconstruction and reconstruction” (p. 10). However, Aquash (2013), identifies a seven-step process to decolonizing education consisting of: rediscovery; recovery; closure; continuous reinforcement of rediscovery, recovery and closure; visioning based on hopes and dreams and specifically seeking out new structures and new systems that re-evaluate existing colonial political, social, economic, judicial, administrative and educational structures; commitment; and action based on the continuous reinforcement of the vision (p. 131). Whatever the number of steps in the decolonizing process the goal is to reassert Indigenous knowledge as foundational for reinforcing and rediscovering language, culture, and spiritual customs that empower Indigenous communities to speak with one voice and to move forward united in their determination to address decolonization.

Another priority of Indigenous peoples in efforts directed toward decolonization of education is the building of meaningful and trustworthy relationships that recognize and restore the rights of Indigenous peoples to self-determination, to sovereignty over themselves, individually and collectively, and to sovereignty as nation-states over lands. Maintaining a focus on self-determination within Indigenous cultures necessitates community empowerment where the voice of the one is the collective voice of the many and where action and involvement is controlled, planned, and disciplined. The challenge for many Indigenous communities is how to maintain their cultural identity while maintaining and achieving for their children, youth, and adults an equitable education.

Decolonization necessitates a new perspective shaped by the critical awareness of colonial cultures that build power structures that maintain privilege and inclusion for some and marginalization or exclusion for others; and, by a creative reimagining of a more holistic, more humane, more inclusive system of social relations and educational learning spaces. Palmer (1993), captures the pedagogical essence of a learning space in the following: “But to study with a teacher who not only speaks but listens, who not only gives answers but asks questions and welcomes our insight, who provides information and theories that do not close doors but open new ones, who encourages students to help each other learn – to study with such a teacher is to know the power of a learning space” (p. 70).

The power of a learning space must generatively and reciprocally be created by mutual partners in the context of ultimate hospitality, which means receiving each other, exposing ignorance, testing newly perceived hypotheses, challenging alternate facts or misconceived information, respectfully criticizing thought and feeling and constantly encouraging an environ of openness and care. Hospitality, as an ethic of care, openness, and concern, is founded on equitable engagement and a welcoming relationship between educators and students. It involves a mutual transmission of knowledge, Indigenous and Western, and is premised on elements that Parker (1993), noted above; namely, dialoguing, listening, and learning from the one and the other. Freire (1970/2000), contends that dialogue as an encounter among peoples is a “fundamental precondition for true humanization” (p. 137). True humanization might well be the way forward between Indigenous peoples and educational officials (band, district, provincial, federal) as they conjunctively decolonize education and strive to re-imagine and create an educational environment that is welcoming of each child and privileges the child’s needs, comforts, and customs over those of the system.

Conclusion

There are many unique factors that contribute to the well-being of those living and working in rural and remote communities and to the overall objective of living a good life. Financial equity and government supported resources that are in balance with other areas of the country and recruiting and retaining effective and experienced professionals working in the education field have been identified as elements that would improve well-being. Stable working conditions, including reliable internet services, and the consistent employment of qualified teachers to educate those living in Indigenous communities are key hurdles that government policy makers should direct their attention to address. Training and mentorship programs utilizing an apprenticeship model of learning can be an effective format to overcome the identified hurdles that are specific to education that impact the well-being of people living in these communities. Indigenous ways of knowing and being should be used as an overarching philosophy and an essential component and driving force for implementation of well-being in any teacher education program seeking to alleviate the inequities faced by those in rural and remote communities. The cumulative action of various levels of government working in partnership with university faculties of education and in cooperation with Indigenous bands and community leadership, is essential if the unique factors identified and discussed throughout this writing are to have the desired effect of hiring and retaining teachers that can and will contribute to 'living a good life' in rural and remote communities in Ontario and in Canada.

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