

# Learning What Schooling Left Out: Making an Indigenous Case for Critical Service-Learning and Reconciliatory Pedagogy within Teacher Education

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## Abstract

As teacher educators, we argue that the colonial history of First Peoples, coupled with alarming educational disparities, warrants a specialized approach to Indigenous service-learning within teacher training that requires a critical examination of positionality by service-learners. Our study examines the service-learning experiences of non-Indigenous pre-service teachers working in Indigenous classrooms over a three-month period through reflections and focus groups. The results underscore the risk that a lack of critical reflection by service-learners could play in widening existing educational gaps, and concludes that a reversal of perspective on the education gap could enact the possibility of reconciliatory pedagogy.

*Keywords:* critical service-learning, Indigenous education, teacher education, reconciliatory pedagogy

## Résumé

Comme éducateurs d'enseignants et enseignantes, nous soutenons que l'histoire coloniale des Premiers Peuples, couplée avec des disparités éducatives alarmantes, justifie une approche spécialisée pour l'apprentissage de service autochtone dans l'entraînement des enseignants et enseignantes qui nécessite un examen critique du positionnalité par les étudiants et étudiantes de service. Notre étude porte sur les expériences de service-apprentissage des futurs enseignants et enseignantes non-autochtones travaillant dans les salles de classe autochtones sur une période de trois mois à travers des réflexions et des réponses des groupes de discussion. Les résultats soulignent le risque que le manque de réflexion critique par services apprenants pourrait jouer dans l'élargissement des lacunes éducatives existantes, et conclut qu'un renversement de perspective sur l'écart de l'éducation pourrait adopter la possibilité de la pédagogie réconciliatrice.

*Mots-clés :* critique apprentissage par le service, l'éducation autochtone, la formation des enseignants, pédagogie réconciliatrice

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## Introduction

As one of the fastest growing demographics in Canada, the Aboriginal peoples<sup>1</sup> in Canada are a young and increasingly urbanized population (Statistics Canada, 2011), who are often described as “vulnerable populations” (Alberta Education, 2009). With the reality of more Aboriginal learners soon entering schools, educators are well advised to remember that there remains a distinct difference between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians in several key quality of life indicators, including that of educational attainment.<sup>2</sup> In the province of Alberta, for instance, the three-year high school completion rates for non-Aboriginal students in 2014–15 was 76.5% as compared to 50.2% for Aboriginal students (Mah, 2016). In terms of drop-out rates, Howe (2013) reports similar findings in that 20.3% of the non-Aboriginal population does not complete high school, whereas 51.5% of the First Nations population does not complete their schooling. Similar educational disparities persist across Canada. Recognizing the persistence of educational inequities over the years, educators are increasingly being asked to consider their role in closing the educational gap between Aboriginal students and other learners (Association of Canadian Deans of Education, 2010; National Indian Brotherhood, 1972; Government of Canada, 1996; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015a, 2015b). At present, the alarming gap between Aboriginal and other Canadian learners is approached from a deficit model where the focus is on closing the “educational gap,” or the metrics that report on standardized achievement results between learners. As teacher educators, we challenge the concept of the educational gap through a unique approach to service-learning—one that asks educators to adopt a new perspective on their own deficits surrounding Indigenous history, culture, and contributions within an experiential learning opportunity. We intentionally focus on the service-learning experiences of the pre-service teachers

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1 We use the terms Aboriginal, Aboriginal peoples, Indigenous, and First Peoples interchangeably to denote the original occupants of Canada. The constitutionally recognized groups of Aboriginal people in Canada include First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples, but exclude several groups deserving of inclusion. The term Indigenous is generally used in an international context but is gaining greater usage with time.

2 The education mandate for the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples is divided between federal, provincial, and territorial governments, with First Nations falling under federal jurisdiction, and the Métis under provincial jurisdiction. The Inuit have moved to a more self-determining educational model with territorial governments in recent years.

who took part in our pilot program, rather than participating communities, as an essential pre-requisite to establishing ethical partnerships with Aboriginal communities.

As teacher educators working at a large post-secondary institution in Western Canada, the authors have worked together as allies in Indigenous pedagogy and practices for the past three years. Patricia grew up in northern Manitoba, where she spent the early part of her career working with remote First Nations and Métis communities, and this work has led to her present positioning as an ally. As an Indigenous scholar, Yvonne teaches a variety of courses, including a mandatory First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Education course to pre-service education students.

By asking pre-service teachers to take up service-learning in First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities, we are deepening teacher effectiveness and intellectual capacity through praxis, thereby disrupting the current educational status quo with a reversal of perspective. Importantly, our study extends existing knowledge surrounding critical service-learning within teacher education to an Indigenous context and demonstrates the potential for this type of critical service-learning to be seen as reconciliatory pedagogy.

## Relevant Literature

### Service-Learning in Education

Over the years, school systems have confronted the need to understand underlying community norms as critical to pre-service teacher preparation. In the following section, we acknowledge how service-learning has worked to fill this need over the years (Coles, 1993; Day, 1952/1981) and how service-learning is now shifting its focus to consider critical traditions within settler-colonial nations such as New Zealand, Australia, and, to a lesser extent, Canada. Pre-service teachers often volunteer their time in schools to expand their learning and to gain firsthand teaching experience. However, the act of volunteerism, steeped with a sense of “unidirectional missionary tendency” (Gaines-Hanks & Grayman-Simpson, 2011, p. 324), where good Samaritans feel called to serve others, can be limited in its scope. Service-learning, on the other hand, is viewed as reciprocal in nature and includes preparation for experiential learning. In such an environment, pre-service teachers can make meaningful contributions working with marginalized groups

(Coles, 1993; Chambers & Lavery, 2012). In this way, service-learning is more than volunteering; it includes preparation, action, reflection, and demonstration (Gaines-Hanks & Grayman-Simpson, 2011; Kaye, 2004). Above all, there is an element of mutual exchange in the learning and social action that takes place between service provider and the participating community. As with Soong (2013), we believe that a variety of service-learning experiences can enhance a person's intercultural competence; however, the catalyst for a meaningful learning exchange must intentionally involve careful and critical reflection.

To that end, Coles (1993) argues in his seminal work, *The Call to Service*, that deep reflection is not focused on the actual service act, or the recipients of service; rather, reflection needs to be turned inward on the service provider if it is to have lasting impact. For those engaged in service, whether young or old, his counsel is clear: "We [need to] spend a lot of time trying to look at *ourselves*..." (p. 59). Drawing on multiple studies and a lifetime of experiences in service-learning, Coles (1993) distinguishes what he terms the "satisfactions" and "hazards" inherent in service-learning across a variety of settings. The satisfactions realized through service-learning can include a sense of something done, someone reached, moral purpose, personal affirmation, stoic endurance, or a boost to success. Alternatively, the hazards of helping another person or group usually emerge after an extended length of service time, and may include weariness and resignation, cynicism, arrogance, anger and bitterness, despair, and even depression, or what is commonly referred to as "burnout" (Coles, 1993). Importantly, the latter state is not so much a limitation of the individual in service or even from interactions with those being served; rather, it is "the exhaustion and worse that can come from contemporary suffering [that emanates from] the hands of a society that won't relent in its punitiveness" (p. 117). The hazard then arises from the fact that service participants realize the need for change lies outside their individual scope of influence and that their contributions may be limited by an unrelenting societal need to maintain the status quo. It is the recognition of the broad and more persistent societal and structural elements that make up, and sustain, the need for service that signal a shift from service-learning to critical service-learning. Despite the sobering limitations that surround what can realistically be accomplished within any service-learning project, there are benefits for those involved if the program involves an intentional design of critical reflection and a broader vision for social change.

When service-learning experiences encourage participants to step outside their comfort zone, the results can include growth in the areas of confidence, empathy,

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leadership, self and societal reflection, and professional practice, along with increased knowledge and skills (Chambers & Lavery, 2012). Critical service-learning can also invoke transformative learning if and when participants encounter a disorienting dilemma that prompts them to question their previously held assumptions and perspectives (Mezirow, 2000). Such transformative episodes typically involve a process of questioning, validating, and revising perspectives (Cranton, 2006), accompanied by a series of often conflicting emotional states (Carson & Domangue, 2014). This state of discomfort, characterized by doubts and frustrations, along with an overwhelming need to regain a sense of harmony, is termed *cognitive dissonance* (see the work of Festinger, 1957). Service-learning scholar Elizabeth Doerr (2011) maintains that if we deliberately focus our efforts on questions of power and developing authentic relationships with the community we are serving, we can better address the root causes of social inequities (p. 80). She applies the descriptor of “dissonance by design” to justice-oriented service-learning projects that foster a sense of reciprocity and mutuality with the community (p. 77). Similarly, within the context of Indigenous education, we see a need for decolonizing processes and practices that challenge hegemonic norms and the invisibility of “white” privilege (McIntosh, 1988). This stance aligns with a critical race theory of education where “race matters” and where attempts to “interrogate the racial silences” (Gilbride-Brown, 2011, p. 35) are regularly made.

### **Service-Learning in Indigenous Education**

From an international perspective, a growing body of scholars point out the many parallels, and perils, of a shared colonial past, including an overall devaluing of Indigenous peoples and an ongoing legacy of intergenerational trauma within Indigenous communities as the source of educational challenges (Battiste, 2000a, 2000b; Duran, 2006; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2002; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). Additionally, many argue that Indigenous students struggle to meet a set of learning circumstances premised on a foreign worldview and a Eurocentric education system (Battiste, 2000a, 2000b; Association of Canadian Deans of Education, 2010; Dei, 2002; Wiggins, Follo, & Eberly, 2007; Phillips & Whatman, 2007). In Canada, national initiatives such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada are helping to bring awareness of the ongoing and negative repercussions of a colonial past enacted in large part through residential schooling:

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For over a century, the central goals of Canada's Aboriginal policy were to eliminate Aboriginal governments; ignore Aboriginal rights; terminate the Treaties; and, through a process of assimilation, cause Aboriginal peoples to cease to exist as distinct legal, social, cultural, religious, and racial entities in Canada. The establishment and operation of residential schools were a central element of this policy, which can best be described as "cultural genocide." (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015a, p. 1)

The harsh realities of a colonial past have largely been obscured by a biased version of history and a deliberate silencing of the Indigenous perspective by colonial powerholders. In the Australian context, Phillips and Whatman (2007) have referred to this practice as the "history of absence of Indigenous knowledge in the framing of the curriculum" (p. 7). In Canada, scholars have argued that these practices have resulted in a wide gap between what people *thought* happened and what *really* happened (Dickason, 1992; Francis, 1992; King, 2012). Canadian historian Daniel Francis (1992) once remarked that "Europeans have tended to imagine the Indian rather than to know Native people" (p. 8), while later scholars such as Godlewska, Moore, and Bednasek (2010) are far more pointed as they reflect on the state of contemporary learners relative to their knowledge of Indigenous matters: "[we are] dismayed by the ignorance of [our] students" (p. 418). This void of mainstream knowledge around Indigenous issues is a gap that spans across all ages and disciplines. In truth, many stereotypes and nation-building myths persist today—in wider society, within our classrooms, and with many teachers. Several Indigenous educators and allies, notably those working within anti-racism, assert that when teachers have not had an opportunity to confront their own beliefs around Aboriginal people, they risk passing these stereotyped ideas and beliefs onto their students (Kivel, 2011; Paradies, 2005; Peters, 2010; Phillips & Whatman, 2007; Santoro, Kamler, & Reid, 2001; Solomon, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005; St. Denis, 2007). A lack of understanding and awareness of Indigenous issues also limits the ability of novice and practicing teachers to break the cycle of discrimination within, and outside of, their classrooms. Service-learning, in particular critical service-learning, can prompt education students to question pre-existing notions of what constitutes the education gap.

Writing from an Australian perspective, Harrington and Brasche (2011) found that a teacher's preconceived ideas about Indigenous communities often resulted in negative

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expectations. Similarly, Australian teacher educators Labone, Long, Cavanagh, and Senese (2009) reported pre-service teachers were fearful of what to expect when teaching in an Indigenous community. Here in Canada, many pre-service teachers working for the first time in Indigenous communities are similarly overwhelmed by the differences in cultural traditions and overall living conditions (Danyluk & Sheppard, 2015). According to Wimmer, Legare, Arcand, and Cottrell (2009), teaching on-reserve<sup>3</sup> presents unique challenges that can include educational disadvantages stemming from a pervasive culture of poverty, a scarcity of resources, the complex dynamics of a close knit community, and a highly politicized educational environment that translates to an often unstable and unpredictable school environment (p. 831). Encountering these multiple and pervasive challenges for the first time can be disorienting for pre-service, and veteran, teachers alike and certainly helps explain some of the high attrition and turnover of educators in Indigenous schools. Without an understanding of how colonialism affected and currently affects Indigenous people, educators will be ill-equipped and quite likely ineffective in these classrooms.

In terms of pre-service-learning within Indigenous education, the work of (re)establishing trust with Aboriginal families and communities has been linked to successful engagement that, in turn, holds real potential to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal students. Benefits exist for the pre-service teachers as well. Australian educators Labone, Long, Cavanagh, and Senese (2009) found that pre-service teachers who had at least some experience working in Aboriginal schools were more confident in their abilities to relate to Aboriginal students and community members. Principals agreed that teachers' confidence levels in relational skills increased and that they demonstrated the knowledge and skills to adapt their classroom management strategies and pedagogical approaches to meet the needs of Aboriginal students. The teacher participants in the Labone et al. (2009) study also increased their involvement in the community and this led to stronger relationships between the school and the Aboriginal community. Similarly, a recent study on the role of non-Native teachers in remote First Nations communities in northern Ontario (Oskineegish & Berger, 2013) recognized a "teacher's willingness to

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3 According to *Our Words, Our Ways: Teaching First Nations, Métis and Inuit Learners* (2005), reserves refer to "secured land for First Nations but could also be used as a way of confining First Nations people" (p. 6). On-reserve schools refer to schools that are located on reserve lands.



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learn from colleagues, parents, and community members [as] the foundation for creating successful learning environments” (p. 118). While the study attributes a teacher’s ability to build authentic relationships, a strong sense of who they are, and an ongoing recognition of their “visitor” status within the community as vital components in their overall teaching success, the study does not directly address the issue of teachers’ positioning within a privileged discourse. As we see it, a critical service-learning program, imbued with decolonizing objectives, must challenge pre-service teachers to critically examine their own positioning in relation to the community being served (Phillips & Whatman, 2007; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). While the work of Nelson and Youngbull (2015) explores the role of Indigenous undergraduate students mentoring non-Indigenous peers through a service-learning experience, few studies exist on the service-learning experiences of pre-service teachers in Indigenous communities (Peralta, O’Connor, Cotton, & Bennie, 2016; Darby, Ward-Johnson, & Cobb, 2016). Our study serves to fill this gap.

### **Moving Educators beyond the Discourse of the “Gap”**

In this section, we challenge where the educational gap truly lies within the context of Indigenous education and how viewing this deficit from a different perspective has important implications for teachers, learners, and policy makers. Thanks in large part to Canada’s colonial history, Aboriginal learners arrive in classrooms with a unique history and culture that many Canadians, including teachers, do not know or understand. After conducting a review of the Ontario secondary school curriculum, Godlewska, Moore, and Bednasek (2010) came to the conclusion that “a profoundly purposive and wilful ignorance” (p. 419) exists relative to the history of Canada’s relations with Aboriginal peoples. The message conveyed by the Ontario provincial curriculum is that examining the lives of Aboriginal peoples is appropriate only for elementary and middle school, and this coverage is relegated solely to the past. These authors argue that the need for greater cultural competence is essential to improving educational outcomes for all Canadians. According to Rosenbluth (2011), the fact that elementary and high school teachers are “ill-informed about Aboriginal students in their classrooms; [that] they lack Indigenous knowledge and approaches, and do not engage the Aboriginal students in the class” (p. 16) means that many educational opportunities are lost. In light of this reality, we might question where this “education gap” truly resides. Moreover, what happens when

pre-service teachers who have had little direct experience with Indigenous people realize they lack knowledge that will make them better teachers for all students?

Reactions can vary from fear to hostility as teachers draw on pre-existing assumptions based on misinformation and racist stereotypes, and without proper information to guide their teaching, these uninformed biases can spill over into classrooms (Battiste, 2013; Kanu, 2005). Over the past several years, teacher education programs and educational leadership have been working to respond to this generalized lack of knowledge and cultural understanding around Indigenous matters. In 2010, the Association of Canadian Deans of Education (ACDE) formally acknowledged the role and responsibility of educators, and other educational leaders, in addressing historical injustices through a new approach to teacher education programs:

The time is right for a concerted and cooperative effort that creates transformational education by rejecting the “status quo,” moving beyond “closing the gap” discourse, and contributing to the well-being of Indigenous peoples and their communities. At the same time, ACDE recognizes that it has a role and responsibility to expand educators’ knowledge about and understanding of Indigenous education. (ACDE, 2010, p. 2)

Of note, the ACDE (2010) further counselled their readership on the value of moving this critical learning from classroom spaces into community settings: “To provide opportunities within all teacher education programs for candidates to have authentic experiences in a variety of Indigenous learning settings, whether urban, rural, remote, band-funded, or provincially funded” (p. 7). Recognition by these educational leaders of the importance of authentic and experiential learning experiences for education students supports the notion of service-learning as an integral part of teacher preparation programs.

In tandem with the recent work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015a, 2015b), educators are further called upon to recognize a fundamental principle of *public truth sharing*, where “Reconciliation requires sustained public education and dialogue, including youth engagement, about the history and legacy of residential schools, Treaties, and Aboriginal rights, as well as the historical and contemporary contributions of Aboriginal peoples to Canadian society” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015b, p. 4). Several scholars, including Donald, Glanfield, and Sterenberg (2012), have taken up the challenge of “moving beyond ‘closing the gap’

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discourse” (ACDE, 2010, p. 2) to embrace a refreshing perspective. These authors maintain that some Aboriginal communities may approach learning in a way that is different from a mainstream approach and this difference does not mean their learning is inferior. Furthermore, while a noticeable gap in achievement standards between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students has been the focus of policy-makers, educators, and educational specialists, it has only been recently that scholars have begun to recognize the importance of Indigenous community members as mentors in this important work (Darby, Ward-Johnson, & Cobb, 2016; Peralta, O’Connor, Cotton, & Bennie, 2016). As we see it, this scholarly recognition of difference in educational approaches represents promising moves toward closing the education gap; however, progress can be limited in scope and impact if these insights are restricted to theoretical and pedagogical discussions alone.

In response, we offer the possibility of transformational learning enacted through a critical service-learning program with Aboriginal communities as one route to decolonizing pre-service teacher programming. The next section details our approach to examining the experiences of our pre-service teachers through the use of phenomenology.

## Method

This study utilizes a descriptive phenomenological theoretical framework and methodology. Phenomenology was chosen for our study as it permits the researchers to get as close as possible to the experiences, feelings, and thoughts of the respondents, and seeks to produce an accurate description of facets of human experience (Ehrich, 2005). From a phenomenological understanding, there is no universal truth; each individual holds distinctive experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and values that encompass multiple perspectives (Danyluk, Luhanga, Gwekwerere, MacEwan, & Larocque, 2015). Within phenomenology, the meaning of human experience is accepted precisely as it is understood by the person experiencing it (Ehrich, 2005). While descriptive phenomenology describes the experiences of the participants as they report them (Giorgi, 1997), it also seeks to produce a general structural statement, or conclusion, that reflects the essential structures, or essences, of the experience under examination. For this reason, the questions we asked participants required them to share their perspectives on their most significant learning experience and their greatest challenge on a weekly basis.

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At our university, pre-service teachers enrolled in a two-year after-degree Bachelor of Education program are mandated to complete a course in First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) History, Education and Leadership. In this course, many students are introduced to Aboriginal perspectives for the first time in their lives. Students' initial reactions to this mandatory course vary widely: from a complete lack of knowledge or understanding, to anxiety, excitement, sympathy, guilt, and outright resistance. As part of this training, education students are told that there is an alarming "education gap" between First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students and other learners. Interestingly, very few see this educational issue as a federal or professional responsibility, or even as their own learning deficit (Cannon, 2012). Instead, the tendency is to look at Aboriginal people and communities as the source of the problem from which there is no easy solution. This course attempts to provide alternative perspectives to this positioning within a university classroom setting; notably, there was no opportunity prior to this service-learning program for students to experience Indigenous learning, or community perspectives, outside of a formal field placement. These limitations in a teacher's learning experiences have the potential for serious consequences for both teachers and learners. We believe it is vital that interested pre-service teachers gain at least some real-world experience in Indigenous education before they take on their first teaching position. As Oskineegish and Berger (2013) so aptly point out, "a paper document cannot replace personal contact" (p. 116).

In January 2015, the researchers sent an email to all Bachelor of Education students notifying them of an upcoming service-learning opportunity with nearby First Nations schools.<sup>4</sup> In order to participate, students had to agree to travel to the First Nations schools on a weekly basis and work in classrooms for a minimum of one hour per week, attend monthly focus groups and submit weekly reflections.

In total, 13 non-Indigenous individuals<sup>5</sup> voluntarily participated in the service-learning program in its first year. Participating pre-service teachers volunteered their time in three different community-based and federally-funded Aboriginal schools across Alberta. As a pilot project, students did not receive credit or compensation for their involvement but did receive reimbursement for mileage from a small grant. The average

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4 The first year of our service-learning program involved only First Nations community schools; our hope is to extend this program to Métis and Inuit communities in later years, if possible.

5 All participants remain anonymous within this study and no schools have been identified.

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age for participating students was 28 years, and the majority of students (85%) had little to no former experience with Indigenous peoples. Most students (70%) were first year students in a two-year after-degree education program. Some students spent considerable time in community, attending on a weekly basis over a three-month period. Due to a variety of factors, including the voluntary nature of this project along with winter driving conditions, three of these students attended less frequently.

Our study began by asking students to consider what they might encounter prior to their entry into the service-learning program, in order to assess prior knowledge and expectations. Many of the participants reported that while they had grown up in close proximity to First Nations communities, very few had ever ventured into the communities and most had little to no knowledge of Aboriginal people, beyond stereotypes or misinformation, prior to this project. Knowing that students held either stereotyped, limited, or no knowledge of Aboriginal people, we organized a preliminary information session for volunteering students where a panel of Indigenous educators relayed basic information about history from an Aboriginal perspective, shared local protocol standards and cultural norms, and answered questions from the students. We also shared an article on a white teacher's first impressions working within an Indigenous community setting as an introductory reading for the students so they had a sense of what they might encounter (see Taylor, 1995).

Following this, participants wrote weekly reflections framed on the following three questions: what activities were you involved in at the school, what was your greatest challenge, and what was your greatest learning experience? Monthly focus groups provided the opportunity for participants to share experiences with one another and debrief with the researchers.

## **Data Analysis**

Consistent with the phenomenological method, all data were collected prior to undertaking analysis. Consistency was ensured by having the pre-service teachers respond to the same questions on a weekly basis. Credibility of the data analysis was enhanced by allowing each researcher to read the data separately before meeting to discuss our individual findings. By coming together, as Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, to discuss similarities and differences in their individual findings, the researchers were then

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able to identify the essence of the data. As phenomenology instructs, no research can ever be totally objective. As a result, this research follows the paradigm of interpretivism in that it does not seek one truth but rather multiple truths, such that the study epitomizes the various experiences of the individuals who have participated.

Participants engaged in a form of bracketing during their first reflection when they were asked to write about what they believed about First Nations schools and communities and what the benefits and challenges of their experiences might be—prior to beginning their service. Following this writing exercise, students were asked to bracket, or set aside, their pre-existing beliefs and assumptions and become open to the experience itself. Without the benefit of a more extended service-learning experience, or pre-service preparation, this request served as a prompt for students to examine their own assumptions prior to the service-learning experience.

The data analysis process also required the researchers to engage in bracketing in an effort to reduce bias. In order to engage in bracketing, the researchers discussed their own preconceptions and presumptions, and then deliberately set them aside as they agreed to let the data determine the findings (Giorgi, 1997). This was followed by immersing ourselves in the data to determine its meaning. Finally, we sought the essence, or the fundamental meaning, behind the pre-service teacher reflections relative to the experience of service-learning within First Nations communities.

## Findings

In analyzing the data, it became clear that participants' reflective comments fell into different relational layers of understanding their experiences that corresponded to the amount of time spent in community. For many, an initial fear or anxiety of not being welcomed or accepted was followed by a period of delight, and even surprise, at being welcomed into these communities of learning. These observations were found in the first and second reflections of the participants. With more experience, participants began to express some doubts and frustrations, along with a growing recognition of the complexities of FNMI schooling; these indicators signal the onset of cognitive dissonance. For a few students, this dissonance triggered transformative learning experiences evidenced by the unsettling of prior assumptions and beliefs, a deeper examination of structural and

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systemic inequities, and notably, deeper examination of their own positioning relative to this learning experience.

### **Initial Feelings of Fear and Anxiety—Entering “forbidden land”**

Prior to visiting the school for the first time, many of the pre-service teachers expressed fear and apprehension, the roots of which likely stem from pre-existing stereotypes and misconceptions learned from wider society and media sources. Students expressed fear about entering what one termed the “forbidden land,” while another disclosed that they had “never stepped on reserve land, merely 40 km from where I was born and raised.” There were also fears around how they might work with challenging students whose “learning ability might be less than average.” One student described what she expected to find at the school in the following way: “Based on what I have heard and been led to envision...the behavioral students outweigh the easy ones, because many of the families are in difficult situations.” Similarly, another student asserted: “I do not imagine much higher level learning takes place at the school.” Many believed that the schools would be substandard, run down, or what one participant termed “squalor.” These low expectations were common amongst the students prior to entering the community.

In these early stages, fears and anxiety around their own positioning arose several times prompting one student to question if they might “find common ground with residents.” Another wrote: “I truly believed I would not be accepted because I am white,” and in a similar expression of anxiety, another disclosed: “I believe rapport and trust will be a challenge because I am a non-Aboriginal.” Another student was convinced that, “I may not be initially welcomed by the students I am working with... I [will] be seen as an outsider and yet another authority figure imposing moral judgments on their lives.” In these disclosures, it is obvious that the real divide, or gap, consists primarily of a colonial mindset of “us versus them” and by encountering the unknown and the feared, these students were demonstrating a form of perceived risk-taking even at the onset of the service-learning.

### **Welcoming Atmosphere—“not at all what I expected”**

Midway through the volunteering experience, the pre-service teachers began to write about how much they were enjoying their experiences in the community. The schools,

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principals, staff, and students were described as kind and welcoming, and some felt there was a “family-like” environment quite distinct from the mainstream schools they had experienced elsewhere. Several of the students took note of the ways in which local culture is embraced and showcased in the schools and, overall, many were surprised at the positive aspects of the schools: “There is a respect of the culture that is present on the walls and students are encouraged to say hello in their own language.” This statement is indicative of the disruption of students’ previously held beliefs where: “I wasn’t expecting the school to be so modern, or for lack of a better term ‘nice.’” Yet alongside what Coles (1993) would deem to be the “satisfactions” of working side-by-side with students and staff at Aboriginal schools, was an emerging awareness of some of the challenges that can reside within First Nations communities and a modicum of discomfort signaling the onset of cognitive dissonance. For some, the greater risk of Coles’ (1993) “hazards” was on the horizon.

### **Unsettling Dips into Realities—“I am now aware”**

As initial apprehension abated and a growing sense of comfort within the formerly unfamiliar setting developed, service-learning participants became increasingly attuned to the complexities and challenges of teaching within an Aboriginal community. These later observations conflicted with their initial optimistic, and for some idealistic, first impressions. After a few weeks of volunteering, participants started to notice that the schools often dealt with issues far more complex than they had initially recognized. In one reflection, a participant started to question some of the school norms: “Why is the front door locked? Why are breakfast and lunch served at the school?” and later, “[I am now] aware of drug use in the community.” Other students started to question why security was present at the schools and some began to wonder why buzzers on doors were necessary. They also started to note the high level of absenteeism in the classrooms and that teachers were necessarily focused on basic matters of survival, such as student safety and proper diet, rather than theoretical orientations or pedagogical innovations. In a telling observation, one student remarked: “No one at [this school] is worried about constructivist theory because there are larger issues at hand.” In some cases, service-learners started to note that the community was dealing with deeper societal issues, such as extreme poverty



and alcoholism, and that these insidious factors deeply impacted student learning and attendance.

While the level of student awareness around underlying issues increased over the weeks, several observations revealed a true lack of awareness or understanding of our nation's colonial past and its negative repercussions within present day schooling for Aboriginal students and communities. In an apparent lack of recognition around the poverty some families experience, one student questioned why parents would send their children to school without first eating breakfast. Others were shocked that students would routinely be allowed to come in late and disrupt classes. A few of these service learners opted to reduce the amount of time spent in the service-learning program.

### **Realizing Personal and Societal Obligations—“I feel responsible”**

In tandem with the unsettling realities that many were now realizing, students began to express a strong appreciation for the commitment of the schools and teachers to their students. These service-learners acknowledged the very real need for a focus on Indigenous education. One participant described their growing recognition in the following way: “I got a sense of the struggles of the teachers, and the different dynamics at play in this district, and I also [got] a sense of a strong willingness to help despite very complex situations. It is always crucial to consider the whole student (home life, social, etc.) but especially in this community.” For one pre-service teacher, this recognition of an individual's commitment broadened to the need for greater societal awareness and an ethic of care from fellow Canadians: “Low attendance, pipes burst, boil water advisory...[amongst all of this] I thought once again how unimportant First Nations issues are amongst the general public.” Here, the student is viewing the chasm of the gap discourse from a distinctly new perspective.

Of some interest, several participants began to question whether the curriculum being taught is relevant to the lives of the students. As one student put it, “Young Indigenous [people] do not require a prescribed education, they require *transformative* education.” Another participant's reflection midway through the community service-learning experience suggests the need for more exposure to, and discussion around, relevant literature as a way to introduce and inform the complex realities that surround Aboriginal education. However, while questions of curricular relevancy started to emerge along with

strands of questioning governmental responsibility to support Indigenous education, it took a longer period of time for participants to begin an examination of their own socio-political and cultural positioning.

For one student, the unsettling environment of the service-learning experience became a transformative event, replete with traces of Coles's (1993) hazards. This was most evident in his last reflection, where he talked about his service in relation to the community and his own positioning in Canadian society:

Now after five weeks and just 15 hours of exposure of mandated curriculum in an Indigenous context, I have learned that my supposed independence from the matters of Indigenous oppression is merely a false pretense for my internalized dominance. I feel responsible for that ignorance, and learned that the hegemony imposed by European ideology—the culture with which I personally identify—is still very much in action, albeit achieved through conditioning rather than overt force or intimidation.

My assumptions have been challenged, although more in terms of my ability to think and act through a social justice perspective (referenced the work of Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). For example, how naïve was I to be so impressed that children are taught [their own language] *at their own school, in their own community, with their own elders*, when in fact I should have been drawn to the unfortunate circumstances that these children *merely receive one period of class per day devoted to their native culture*. How naïve I was to think that confining the children to desks and keeping them quiet was a reasonable education strategy, when *their history as nomadic people requires movement and an intimate familiarity with the environment*. By the fifth week in the school, I did not feel as I had initially assumed at the beginning of the volunteer experience, that I was indeed being helpful to the students in the grand arc of oppressive history in Canada.

Here we witness the full potential of praxis alongside the risks inherent in unsettling the learner's positionality for the few who spent considerable time in community. While this account is somewhat indicative of early learning around Indigenous peoples, this candid account also speaks strongly to the need for ongoing student support throughout this learning experience.

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## Discussion

In our overall analysis of the data, we noticed a pattern emerge in how teacher candidates positioned themselves in relation to the communities they were serving and the length of time that they spent in community. Pre-service teachers who were able to regularly spend time in the community experienced a shift toward examining their own positionality with several indicating transformative learning as a result. Initially, there was much anxiety around what students might witness in these communities along with a fear of not being welcomed; however, once in the community, students expressed surprise and even delight at being welcomed and most were appreciative of this unique learning experience. This is consistent with Coles' (1993) reference to "satisfactions." Notably, and as Labone, Cavanagh, and Long (2014) suggest, we found that direct interaction with Indigenous communities resulted in an overall lessening of the students' fear and apprehension. Students who volunteered one or two times were more likely to remain at surface level awareness and their reflections revealed a lack of critical orientation. Those who had the opportunity to attend more frequently began to notice particular events that were either disorienting or dissonant to their earlier experiences. They began to ask questions such as: why are there buzzers, why are the children receiving meals, and why are there dogs running free on the school grounds? This stage signaled an emerging awareness of the complexities of Indigenous schooling and, for the few who volunteered on a more longstanding basis, a deeper awareness of their own privileged positioning became evident. In a few cases, some of our students experienced a deep dive into awareness-raising as their initial impressions became subsumed beneath the harsh realities of a colonial reality—one that had them questioning their positioning and a version of reality, a status quo, they had never thought to question prior to this experience. As we see it, these submersive moments are indications that students were entering a different layer of critical consciousness, one that holds the potential for students to see their role in reconciliation.

While students' initial reactions reflect a measure of satisfactions (Coles, 1993), we maintain it is the presence of cognitive dissonance that signals the onset of transformational learning within this particular service-learning program (Mobley, 2011; Doerr, 2011). Service-learning scholars, such as Coles (1993) and Gorski (2011), remind us that the potential of service-learning to enact some social change comes not from the service itself but from the learning that occurs within the individual service provider. Although

uncomfortable and frustrating at times, entering the stage of dissonance is crucial to personal and social transformation during service-learning, according to Doerr (2011). This observation is also critical to our work as teacher educators. The comments included in the reflections underscore the emotional component of service-learning that is often overlooked (Carson & Domangue, 2014). For the majority of participants in this project, evidence of significant learning occurred through a growing awareness of the complexity of First Nations schooling and their own positioning relative to this work.

Overall, our study highlights the importance of being involved in the important work of relationship and trust building with Indigenous communities. It should not be too surprising that the issue of trust sits at the core of today's educational issues in Indigenous education, yet this realization was often news to our service-learning participants. Teaching programs have begun to include some of the knowledge necessary to address our ignorance about the history of Canada's relations with Aboriginal peoples; however, as Godlewska and colleagues (2010) point out, much of that cultural knowledge is mired in a pre-contact past and does a disservice to meaningful reparation. Our lack of knowledge about Canada's relations with Aboriginal Peoples is used as the basis for our existing relationships (Godlewska et al., 2010). This ignorance is based on "omissions, silences, nationalist self-congratulation, apology, problematic placement, the continuance of colonialist narrative and the relegation of Aboriginal Peoples to primitive place/time" (Godlewska et al., 2010, p. 436) and represents a shaky foundation at best. We maintain that if participants in this study are even remotely representative of the overall Canadian population, a great deal of fear surrounding Indigenous peoples exists on the part of non-Indigenous Canadians. Our findings further underscore the risk that a lack of genuine critical reflection by education students, particularly critical self-examination, could play in widening existing educational gaps. It also speaks to the importance of working with local Indigenous communities as learning partners in future service-learning programming.

The current school view of Indigenous schooling suggests that oppressed groups need to be filled with the dominant group's knowledge in order to succeed in life. This dominant mindset has a malevolent side-effect of keeping young minds from developing the critical consciousness needed for them to survive in a precarious and rapidly changing world (Freire, 1973/1993; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). It also fails to recognize that other kinds of knowledge are valuable and that there are different ways of schooling that

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are based on a culturally relevant pedagogy that may be more successful (Donald, Glanfield, & Sterenberg, 2012; Goulet, 2005). This mindset also limits our ability to develop the authentic relationships that Doerr (2011) maintains are integral in addressing social inequities. As Oskineegish and Berger (2013) point out, it is not the First Nations students who are failing and in need of changing, it is the learning environment itself.

By being present in these communities, our students experienced modern interpretations of rich and vibrant cultures, but just as importantly, they witnessed the tragic repercussions of a colonial past on Canada's First Peoples: the continued distrust of schooling, a schooling system that is chronically underfunded, and families working through challenges brought about through a system of oppression. Producing teachers who are better able to understand the complexities of Indigenous schooling means shifting their understanding of the educational gap from a purely deficit perspective to their own gaps in knowledge. This unsettling may also challenge education students to examine their own positioning within society. By placing education students in First Nations communities where their pre-existing assumptions and stereotyped beliefs are upended, our project provides a unique learning opportunity to move theory into praxis, with a hope of reconciliation.

## Conclusion

If we truly mean to prepare pre-service teachers for the important work of reconciliation, then we must move learning beyond the classroom to include meaningful community-based experiences. By taking part in community-based experiences with Indigenous populations, pre-service teachers witness the implications of a colonial past and are prompted to examine the privileges of their own positioning within Canadian society. This could be accomplished in a variety of ways; however, we see the opportunity to spend prolonged periods of time in community, either through a service-learning, immersive learning program, or practicum placement, where pre-existing assumptions can be challenged, and even discarded, as key to this transformative learning. Based on what we learned through our students' feedback, future program designs will incorporate community perspectives, more time in community, additional relevant readings, and other learning

supports to encourage participants to examine their own positioning and role in Indigenous education.

In sum, the implications of this study extend beyond teacher education to the possibility of other educators taking up reconciliatory pedagogy within post-secondary settings. In taking critical service-learning across a variety of disciplines and grounding it in community-identified needs, post-secondary institutions have the opportunity to respond meaningfully to the national calls to action issued by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015). By moving learning to praxis, critical service-learning holds the potential to realize a reconciliatory pedagogy which transforms classroom learning into the hope of reconciliation.

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