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Mino-Pimaatisiwin: Beginning the Journey Towards Decolonisation and Reconciliation

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Abstract

Mino-Pimaatisiwin is an Ojibwe term for life in the fullest, healthiest sense. Grounded in anti-colonial theory, this case study explores the impact of infusing Indigenous perspectives into an elementary school curriculum on students, school staff, parents, and community. With a focus on building self-esteem and cultural connectedness among Indigenous students, it uses the cultural frameworks of *Mino-Pimaatisiwin* and the Ojibwe seven sacred teachings of a good life. Findings indicate high levels of cultural connectedness and a reduced gap in self-esteem levels between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, an increased awareness among staff of Indigenous history and culture, a greater parent comfort level with visiting the school, and increased involvement from the community.

Keywords: *Reconciliation, Indigenous education, rural, Indigenous curriculum, student self-esteem and belonging*

Introduction

Although Canada was ranked “the No. 1 country in the world” and commended for caring about human rights and social justice in the 2021 Best Countries Report (US News, 2021), it still has a long way to go towards reconciliation with its Indigenous Peoples (Chartrand, 2021). For well over 100 years, education has been ‘done to’ Indigenous People in Canada. The destructive legacy of residential schools, the last of which closed in 1997, continues to this day, reinforced by recent discoveries of unmarked children’s graves at residential school sites across the country. The Canadian residential school system operated from the 1880s into the latter part of the 20th century. It was an extensive system operated by the Canadian government and administered by churches. With a stated purpose of educating Indigenous children, the main thrust was assimilation into White Christian, Canadian culture. Children were taken by force from their families for months at a time, during which they were forbidden to practise their language, culture and traditions (Hanson et al., 2020).

This project, Mino-Pimaatisiwin, conducted in the province of Manitoba. Located in central Canada, Manitoba is the eastern most of the three prairie provinces and is one of the main grain producing areas in the country. This study is a collaboration among university researchers, the staff of a rural school, named here as Prairie Elementary School (PES) (pseudonym), Prairie Fields School Division (pseudonym), and members of the Grasslands First Nation Community (pseudonym), working on systemic educational change by infusing Indigenous perspectives into the school culture, curriculum and community. The project, which is ongoing, was funded in part from September 2017 to March 2019 by Indigenous Services Canada, through the New Paths for Education Program.

Education and Reconciliation

Traditional Indigenous knowledge, as an epistemological fact of life and recognised through ceremony, oral teachings, stories, land-based practices, and ancestral languages, has been disrupted by colonial interventions (Coulthard, 2014; Simpson, 2004). The well-documented problems of Eurocentrism, racism, residential school history, and vast ontological and epistemological differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous worldviews and concepts about learning are major barriers for the provision of culturally competent education to Indigenous People in Canada (Goulet & Goulet, 2014; Regan, 2010).

Traditional Indigenous learning starts in the home (Smith et al., 2018), with family being the first teachers to provide the important skills that young people need to live in this world (Tunison, 2007, 2013). As evidenced by public inquiries such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (<https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1450124405592/1529106060525>), residential schools and the Sixties Scoop were among the documented colonial interventions that severed this traditional learning arrangement. As explained by Sinclair and Dainard (2016), “the ‘Sixties Scoop’ refers to the large-scale removal or ‘scooping’ of Indigenous children from their homes, communities and families of birth through the 1960s, and their subsequent adoption into predominantly non-Indigenous, middle-class families across the United States and Canada.”

School boards, administrators, and teachers committed to taking on the responsibility for overcoming our shared colonial history must seek points of connection to rebuild trust with Indigenous Peoples (Regan, 2010). Educational institutions can play a reconciliatory role by maintaining a position of accountability and openness to what First Nations Peoples say they need for the education of their People (Battiste & Youngblood Henderson, 2000). As Senator Murray Sinclair (2016, p. 1), chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, states, “Education holds the key to reconciliation. It is where our country will heal itself”.

Indigenous Educational Achievement

While Aboriginal is a general term used in the Canadian constitution that collectively refers to First Nations, Métis and Inuit people in Canada, currently the term used most frequently and used throughout this paper is Indigenous. First Nations refers to some 617 different communities, who, for thousands of years before European contact (circa 1500) have inhabited the landmass now known as Canada. The Métis are people of mixed European and First Nations ancestry who trace their origins to the Red River Valley in Manitoba and the prairies that lie beyond. The Inuit is a distinctive group of Indigenous people who inhabit the arctic and subarctic regions of Canada, as well as Alaska (US) and Greenland.

The 2016 Canadian census data (Statistics Canada, 2016) indicate gaps in achievement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in the K–12 system. For example, over 90% of non-Indigenous young adults (aged 20–24 years) have at least a high school certificate compared to 84% of Métis, 75% of off-reserve and 48% of on-reserve Indigenous young adults. Compared to Canada overall (4.1%), the percentage of the population that is Indigenous is higher in Manitoba

(18.4%). Of concern is that Manitoba high-school graduation rates for Indigenous students (36.1%) are lower than the Canadian average (Richards, 2017).

While low graduation rates may not be surprising, given data that show how gaps in achievement appear by income, race, and ethnicity (Johnson, 2002), an emphasis on achievement gaps clouds the complex interactions between issues and underlying structural factors (Fergus, 2016). The focus should be on why the gap exists and how it might be closed.

Addressing Educational Gaps

Educators must abandon the deficit approach to Indigenous learners and dispel the widespread notion that Indigenous students are predisposed to underachieve at school, by ensuring they have high expectations for Indigenous learners (Buxton, 2017; Sarra et al., 2018). As Sarra (2017) noted, “if we work from the assumption that they [Indigenous students] have strengths; and if we do things with them and their communities, then there is a tendency, *ceteris paribus*, all other things being equal, for them to succeed in education” (p. 8).

For learners receiving their instruction off-reserve, the integration of Indigenous and Western ways of knowing becomes the greatest challenge for educators. Creating balance between the two paradigms, by immersing Indigenous teachings within Western teaching frameworks, can create a more positive and welcoming learning environment for Indigenous students. One of the most important contributors to student success is to create schools and classrooms that are caring, trusting and inclusive. An inclusive mindset requires educators and community stakeholders to actively represent the local First Nations communities respectfully, throughout the school culture (Toulouse, 2013). Indigenous students need to feel they belong in the school, be aware of their strengths, gifts and capacities as learners, and become directors of their learning journey (Toulouse, 2008). Honouring of and connection to culture, community and literacy (language) are common threads to success. Community-based, locally developed, and hands-on activities make practices more relevant and engaging to learners (Tunison, 2007).

What is vital in Indigenising our schools and classrooms is an openness to recognise, as teachers, “the inherent power and privilege upon which our professional practices have been founded” (Burleigh & Burm, 2013, p. 117), and to transform the way we think, teach, learn and act so that Indigenisation of curriculum is not just a thing we do; instead, it becomes the way we do things (Richardson & Reynolds, 2014). The path to reconciliation requires an intertwining of a Western approach to education with an Indigenous worldview of education as an interconnected pathway to a holistic way of life.

Context

Rural school divisions often experience a distinctive set of challenges, such as isolation, limited resource allocation, community resistance to change, staff turnover, transportation costs, and infrastructure maintenance (Lamkin, 2006). The Prairie Fields School Division faces many of these challenges. This case study focuses on one of its schools, PES, a rural elementary school (K–6) located in a small town, employing 10.5 full-time equivalent teachers, three of whom are Indigenous. Of its 140 students, 62% are Indigenous from Grasslands First Nation, a local Indigenous community. Many of the Indigenous students are struggling readers, come from a low socio-economic background, and face challenges due to inter-generational trauma and despair. Absenteeism, transiency, and late arrival have been reported as ongoing concerns at PES. Other concerns identified include struggles with student self-regulation, negative self-concept, feelings of exclusion, negative perceptions of their own learning, and unfriendly social interactions among peers.

With the knowledge that building students’ self-esteem and resiliency skills may impact their academic, physical, and mental well-being (Ciarrochi et al., 2007; Witter, 2013; Yang et al., 2019),

and that weaving culturally and traditionally relevant material and stories into the curriculum might not only strengthen students' resilience, but also increase their literacy skills (Jackson & Heath, 2017), PES staff made a collective decision to weave Indigenous perspectives throughout the school, with a focus on building self-esteem and cultural connectedness within the entire student population. The premise of the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives is that the whole child will benefit and find a way towards the good life—Mino-Pimaatisiwin.

Cultural Framework: Mino-Pimaatisiwin

According to Hart (2012), Mino-Pimaatisiwin is an Ojibwe term for “*life in the fullest, healthiest sense*” (n.p.). Its foundations are wholeness, balance, relationships, harmony, growth, and healing. Hart explains that all aspects of the whole are in relation to one another: “*When we give energy to these relationships we nurture the connections*” (n.p.). Thus, student learning should include how parts work interdependently to create wholes (Bell, 2016). Indigenisation is a transformative process that highlights the importance of centring Indigenous people, cultures, knowledge systems, experiences and priorities in education (Battiste & Youngblood Henderson, 2000; Smith, 2013).

The traditional concepts that form the foundation of the Indigenous way of life are built around the seven natural laws, or sacred teachings. Each teaching honours one of the foundational qualities essential to the full and healthy life (the good life) that is termed Mino-Pimaatisiwin (Hart, 2012). These teachings are respect, love, wisdom, bravery, honesty, humility and truth. Toulouse (2008) embeds the implications of the seven sacred teachings in educational practices.

1. Respect: Having high expectations for the Aboriginal student and honouring their culture, language and world view in our schools.
2. Love: Demonstrating our belief (as educators) that all Aboriginal students can and will succeed through our own commitment to their learning-teaching styles.
3. Bravery: Committing to change our school curriculum through including the contributions, innovations and inventions of Aboriginal people.
4. Wisdom: Sharing effective practices in Aboriginal education through ongoing professional development and research that focuses on imbuing equity.
5. Humility: Acknowledging that we need to learn more about the diversity of Aboriginal people and accessing key First Nation resources to enhance that state.
6. Honesty: Accepting that we have much to learn from one another and reviewing the factors involved to encourage change in the education system.
- 7 Truth: Developing measurable outcomes for Aboriginal student success and using them as key indicators of how inclusive our curriculum and pedagogy really are. (Toulouse, 2008, p.2)

Using the cultural frameworks of Mino-Pimaatisiwin and the Ojibwe seven sacred teachings, the purpose of this study is to explore the impact of immersing an elementary school community in Indigenous perspectives.

Theoretical Perspective

For this project, we adopted an anti-colonial framework. Anti-colonial theory seeks to “*denaturalize the colonial discourse in that it supports and is based upon Indigenous world-views and practices*” (Hart, 2009, p. 37). Grounded in the understanding of Indigeneity and the pursuit of agency, it challenges dominant colonial practices and promotes the “*authenticity of local voice*” (Simmons & Dei, 2012, p. 72). Decolonising education, from an anti-colonial stance, supports reconnecting to Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing both inside and outside the classroom, celebrating lived experiences, and acknowledging the interconnections of all living things to the world we inhabit (Absolon, 2010; Hart, 2002, 2009). Anti-colonial education

provides space for exploration of the lived experience and history of self and other and for unpacking the issues concerning “interconnections of power, difference and resistance as augured in colonial geographies” (Simmons & Dei, 2012, p. 68).

The researchers in this study acknowledge their White privilege. Recognition of White privilege, that brings with it accountability and responsibilities, is a crucial component of anti-colonial practice (Simmons & Dei, 2012). Researchers and educators must be cognisant of the racialised foundations that have traditionally grounded educational policy and practice (Rodriguez, 2011). Acknowledging the roles of racism and other forms of colonial dominance that permeate inequity in the education system, challenging assumptions regarding culture and intelligence, and dismantling long standing silos of colour-blindness and meritocracy (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015) that prevail in contemporary reality is difficult work that comes with resistance (Evans-Winters & Twyman Hoff, 2011). Replacing “cultural estrangement with cultural engagement” (Simmons & Dei, 2012, p. 102) is critical work that educators and administrators must maintain focus upon in their school sites.

Foundational to anti-colonial theory is the grounding of knowledge in place and spirituality. Indigenous spirituality recognises that all things are interconnected, and that human beings are but a small part of the greater schema. It reinforces the need for living with balance, maintaining good relationships, and respecting all living and non-living parts of a wholistic system (Ritskes, 2011). This perspective complements the cultural frameworks of Mino-Pimaatisiwin and the seven sacred teachings that have guided the project from inception.

Research Framework

An overarching tool that has helped guide us in working with Indigenous and school division partners, and in all the education and research activities performed through this project, is a community research protocol that explicitly outlines the roles, responsibilities and Ownership, Control, Access and Possession Principles [OCAP]. OCAP principles “assert that First Nations have control over data collection processes, and that they own and control how this information can be used” (First Nations Information Governance Centre, n.d.).

Grasslands First Nation has been an active partner in the project since its inception; the Chief, Council members, and Elders from Grasslands First Nation, the Prairie Fields School Division, the PES principal, teachers, and educational assistants jointly planned all activities, events and celebrations. Recognising Indigenous ownership, all data and reports were shared with and approved by Grasslands First Nation. Grasslands First Nation members participated in all public knowledge dissemination events of the project findings.

Methods

This project was a case study of how one rural school and community worked towards decolonising its curriculum and its practices. Historically, two cycles of a success indicator survey (2015 and 2016), along with staff dialogue and additional assessment data, provided preliminary evidence supporting the need to create a school and curriculum that focused on the inclusion of Indigenous culture. As the purpose of this project was to bring about and explore change, it used case study as a method because it allows in-depth exploration of an intervention in a specific context (Yin, 2011), in this case the infusion of Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing into the curriculum of an elementary school. This project used mixed methods to collect data in the form of student surveys and interviews with school staff members. The school and community team used Mino-Pimaatisiwin to guide them in determining appropriate courses of action and strategies to meet the needs identified. Regular meetings were held to plan and reflect on progress.

Data Sources

The research team created two student surveys (self-esteem and cultural connectedness) to measure each construct. It conducted staff interviews around the process and impact of Indigenisation.

The cultural connectedness and self-esteem surveys were administered in fall of 2017 at the start of the project and again in fall of 2018. On each survey, students were asked if they agreed or disagreed with a set of statements. The cultural connectedness (K–G6) survey contained seven statements that focused on: others' feelings of respect for their culture; listening carefully to elders; the importance of knowing language and culture; seeing their cultural background in school; learning about Indigenous culture, history, and traditions; acceptance in school; pride in self and culture. The self-esteem survey for K–G3 students consisted of five statements regarding how they felt about themselves, how well they did things, their friendships, relationships with teachers, and their schoolwork, while the G4–G6 survey contained ten statements around these themes. Data were aggregated by grade level and analysed descriptively using IBM SPSS Statistics 21. Data from each year (2017 and 2018) were compared to data from the same students the following year; for example, data from Grade 5 students in fall of 2017 were compared with data from the same students in Grade 6 in fall 2018.

Semi-structured interviews lasting 1–1.5 hours were conducted with four school staff members, including the principal, in spring 2019. The purpose of these interviews was to explore educators' perceptions of the impact of Mino-Pimaatisiwin within the school context and of the Indigenisation of curriculum process. With permission of the participants, the interviews were audio-recorded. The audio files were then transcribed into anonymised, textual data by a research assistant. In the event that participants did not wish to be audio-recorded, the interviewer made field notes of the interview. These field notes were also transcribed into textual data, imported into NVivo software and subsequently analysed and coded by the research team. Several themes emerged.

Ethical Clearance

Ethics approval for this research was obtained from the Brandon University Research Ethics Committee, January 29, 2016, file no #22423.

Findings

Findings are presented, first by exploring the themes arising from the qualitative interviews. These themes were: Beginning the process, Engaging the community, Enacting Mino-Pimaatisiwin, Impact of Mino-Pimaatisiwin and the good life. Second, the findings of the student surveys on self-esteem and cultural connectedness are discussed.

What PES did: Beginning the Process

To start on the journey toward Mino-Pimaatisiwin required a transformative process with the whole PES staff. Self-reflection is a key component in education (Lew & Schmidt, 2011) and an integral part of this project. Educators look beyond their inner conflicts and biases to deeply examine their preconceptions, their predispositions, their beliefs and values, their philosophies of education, their internal responses to their students, their assumptions about families and communities, and the curriculum they teach (Nuri-Robins et al., 2012; Oskineegish, 2018).

Leadership in this process to embed Indigeneity within the school culture was key. The PES principal described how she needed to challenge her own belief system before inviting her staff to be part of a new direction for the school.

In the leadership role there are times when things need to be grassroots and move from the bottom. When you are talking about implementation of change, unless your principal

believes in it and is committed to it, you are not going to have what is required for people to change. When I first came on board, I immersed myself and made First Nations education the focus of my own professional development. I had to challenge my own belief system and I had to really take a look and get clear in my own mind about the direction that I wanted to go. Then it starts with one or two staff and together we started to implement change. They started to attend in-services with me. This then led to a systemic change as opposed to a principal-directed change. In terms of my professional practice, I had a lot of work to do up front before I could even ask my staff to do the same.

Studies show that professional development can have positive effects on teacher learning (Borko, 2004), and, with regard to Indigenous education, professional programs can increase educators' self-awareness of biases and assumptions so that they question their past practices and actions, and look for new ways of doing (Korteweg, 2010). Part of the grant funding was used to help fund division-wide professional development with Nigan Sinclair. Sinclair is an Indigenous leader and educator who is skilled at helping to structure respectful and critical dialogue in Indigenous educational practices. As Borko (2004) noted, professional development is more successful when there is a specific focus on subject matter and teachers are engaged as learners in activities.

As Ledesma and Calderón (2015) noted, dismantling long-standing assumptions and engrained beliefs and acknowledging the impact of colonialism on Indigenous peoples is difficult work. One teacher noted: *"It was not an easy process. The collaboration piece started right away and then the Indigenisation piece was introduced slowly."* Most teachers were open to acknowledge their own education had not included the history of colonisation (Burleigh & Burm, 2013), and they were supportive of the change in direction and appreciative of their principal's strong leadership, noting: *"Our leader's sense of social justice is phenomenal and how it has changed the culture of this building. When I first started working here there was a visible divide, even with staff."*

However, not all staff members bought into the new direction. As one teacher commented, *"The challenge is re-educating a generation of people who went through our school system believing what we were told was true. It's hard to undo that."* For those teachers who did not buy into the new direction, there were hard choices to make. Another teacher commented,

If they [staff members] don't understand, on their own personal level why this needs to be done, not just in our school, but in all schools. They [staff members] are like a big anchor; it threatens to drag things down. That's been part of the challenge. Some people have been transferred and some people have left.

Unsettling paradigm shifts of engrained beliefs, disturbing ingrained racialism and meritocracy, and engaging in critical change is hard work that can be both uncomfortable and painful, and a journey upon which not everyone is ready to embark (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015).

Engaging with the Community

Research highlights the importance of educator involvement and commitment to building relationships in Indigenous communities (Pratt & Danyluk, 2017). The PES school staff introduced the Mino-Pimaatisiwin initiative to the community by way of a Women's night with mothers and women Elders from the community. Together they made supper and ate together and talked about what they hoped to achieve. Engaging students with Elders, parents and local experts better reflects the knowledge, values and practices of traditional life in the local community (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2003). Further activities involving the community occurred throughout the year and included Elders and drummers in the school Remembrance Day service, drummers and dancers at the Christmas lunch, family days, an Indigenous athletics event, winter fun day, and a whole school pottery project in which staff and students created bowls for the whole school feast to celebrate the end of the year.

Enacting Mino-Pimaatisiwin

As Toulouse (2013) suggested, the PES staff held regular planning meetings and professional development activities. Indigenous history became an integral part of the curriculum. Each class reviewed what the good life is and linked it to the school beliefs. Mino-Pimaatisiwin and the seven sacred teachings were an integral part of each classroom. They posted visuals throughout the school. With the grant funding, PES purchased Indigenous artifacts and furniture, as well as many books with Indigenous themes. These books became integral to classroom practice and played a large role in literacy and in developing reading, writing and listening skills.

The Impact of Mino-Pimaatisiwin and the Good Life on PES

Teachers and administrators talked about change processes that had occurred in the system and at personal and professional levels. Several teachers related these changes to the influence of Mino-Pimaatisiwin and the seven sacred teachings. Sub-themes emerging from the interviews were: the influence of Mino-Pimaatisiwin on (a) school culture, (b) relationships among students and school staff, (c) family involvement, and (d) community involvement; and the benefits of Elder involvement with the curriculum, the students, and the staff.

Mino-Pimaatisiwin and School Culture

Teachers described Mino-Pimaatisiwin in several ways: as a felt sense that permeates the school—a sense of safety, belonging and acceptance; as a pedagogy that embraces addressing teachable moments, and as a way of doing and being. One teacher explained: “I don’t teach the seven teachings explicitly in class but rather try to live them in the way I teach ... to live in a good way by leading by example, by not just talking, by walking the walk.” Teachers described Mino-Pimaatisiwin as the foundation upon which to address teachable moments: “If there is a problem that needs to be talked about, I can say: are you showing honesty right now? Are you following the teachings? Is that an example of honesty or trust?”

Educators talked about tangible and intangible ways in which Mino-Pimaatisiwin had permeated the school culture; for example:

In terms of the change in the culture of the building, you can feel that. I mean you can see it but those are things on the wall. It’s when people feel safe, you can feel something nice in your building. ... I feel it when I go into [PES], the kids feel safe and looked after and when they feel that way we have a better chance of educating them.

Staff acknowledged the challenging social circumstances and disruptions present in many of their students’ home lives, including foster care and the disproportionate number of Indigenous children in care in Manitoba, and how that made the school so important as a safe space:

Some of these kids are dealt a shitty hand; basically, some of them don’t have the greatest home life and so if we can be a positive place for them to come and forget about what’s going on at home, or the fact that they have been moving in and out of foster care. That’s one of the reasons we work hard not to have any bullying or abuse at school. We deal with it right away; it starts with the kindergarten teachers.

Mino-Pimaatisiwin and Relationships

Several teachers and staff members observed an ethic of care and valuing of school-based relationships which they attributed to the influence of Mino-Pimaatisiwin. Students now have much more input into what their school looks like. One staff member commented: “You hear from the kids a lot more than you used to; they have more input into what their school is looking like, with students working in the hallways for example.” Another commented on increased staff/student interaction, saying:

[Mino-Pimaatisiwin] starts in the morning and staff are visible in the hallways interacting with the kids. The school [staff] makes a point of speaking with the kids, all of them. We establish a personal connection with students and value getting to know them.

Feeling that they belong and are valued are key factors in welcoming students in school (Toulouse, 2008). Importantly, teachers noted that students will not ask for help unless they have a relationship with a teacher or support staff member. Staff noted that building healthy teacher/student relationships resulted in less absenteeism, commenting: *“The kids feel safe, they feel trusted. For a small portion of our kids, attendance is an issue, but for the majority of them, they are on the bus every morning and they come in.”* Also important in creating a positive school space is the relationship development between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Although the student surveys indicated several students had difficulty making friends, staff noted a greater openness and acceptance of each other among students. Evidence of replacing *“cultural estrangement with cultural engagement”* (Simmons & Dei, p. 102) was embedded in the following comment:

I'm seeing less of a separation, less of an “us” and “them.” For example when an Indigenous student teacher got together and did ribbon skirt making with the girls and ribbon vest making with the boys, there were kids who were not Indigenous who chose to participate in those activities. I think that openness comes from what we are doing as a school.

Teachers noted improvement in student conduct and interactions with each other, commenting: *“You can see it in the smiles, hear it in the laughter. So when you hear someone upset, or arguing, you know that something is wrong because that’s not a daily occurrence.”*

Not only was the school more open to student voice and greater positive interaction was noted between staff and students and among students, but there was also more open dialogue among staff at the school. A staff member commented:

Other ladies are speaking up here a lot more, sharing their thoughts about being Indigenous, things they probably wouldn't have said earlier when I first started here. Now it's like everyone is speaking pretty openly about their concerns and thoughts.

The impact of Mino-Pimaatisiwin was not only perceived on the school culture. A non-Indigenous teacher spoke candidly about the transformative effects of the good life on their relationship to life more generally:

My understanding of the good life has changed since I have been here. Ten or twenty years ago [my impression of] the good life would have been more materialistic. Through some of my experiences here over the past decade, living and working here with this student population, my meaning of the good life has changed toward things that don't have as much to do with material or monetary things. I am more spiritual and reflective, with a greater appreciation for people and the natural world. Working here has been a life changing experience for me.

Impact on Family Involvement

In the interviews, teachers speculated about reasons for lower family involvement from families in the Community. They cited poverty as a barrier in the dispersed rural area, saying, *“If your car isn't working and you can't afford a cab it is hard to get from there to here.”* Historical trauma is also a major factor due to the residential school history. For many Indigenous parents, schooling has negative connotations. Another contributing factor that teachers acknowledged was that their contact with parents historically had been about academics or was problem-focused. Recognising this disconnect, PES hosted several special events as a way of re-building relationships between the school and Indigenous families, such as a Moms' night out and a Dads'

evening making button vests. Each spring, PES holds a family fun day. Elders also participate and there is a campfire with Bannock (a flat, unleavened bread, sometimes fried) and story-telling.

Teachers talked about improvements they observed both in parental involvement and staff attitudes since their activities around Indigenising the curriculum and the school. One teacher commented:

There are a lot more families from [the Community] coming into the school. It never used to be like that. We would talk about it and the attitude was like, "if they are not interested in coming, we can't do anything about it."

Staff reflected on how their own attitudes to Indigenous parental involvement had evolved from indifference to a proactive welcoming of families into the school. With a focus on building positive relationships, staff noted increased attendance at parent/teacher evenings and observed that parents, and mothers in particular, seemed more at ease in the school.

Impact on Community Involvement

Several teachers mentioned how much they valued the collaboration of community members and grandparents from the First Nation in several initiatives designed to involve students in traditional Indigenous activities. Describing an activity with a community member, a teacher noted the value of authenticity and lived experience:

He knows what he is talking about and is involved. He did some work with our kids when we went fishing. We talked about the basic stuff, the techniques and that sort of thing but then he taught the history of Indigenous fishing and the different things fish are used for.

Another teacher noted the strong involvement of grandparents, who are fluent in Anishinaabe, in their grandchildren's language development. This engagement is very positive and, although Anishinaabe language is taught in school, teachers also talked about being challenged by some fluent speakers from the Community. Just like in many other parts of the world, although the language may be a common one, it is traditionally an oral language, with dialects in different communities resulting in different pronunciations and nuances. And so, if the language is taught by someone from a different community, pronunciation may be seen as incorrect, which can result in criticism by local speakers. The teacher observed that at times this can be discouraging but looked on as an opportunity to learn, noting, "Fortunately I am resilient. I have family and an Elder supporting me, and I am able to think about it and learn from it."

There are many Indigenous communities across Canada with over 70 Indigenous languages and countless more dialects. Just as with language, traditions and ceremony differ among Indigenous people. As a settler community, we need to be aware of this and not place the responsibility for traditional and language knowledge on one small group of people.

Impact of Elder Involvement

Elders are the knowledge-keepers, the carriers of wisdom, story, culture, tradition and history; they are the role models, the teachers (Chiblow, 2020). PES teachers, staff, and the principal reported working collaboratively with Elders, parents, and students in promoting an ethic of Mino-Pimaatsiwin in their school, and indicated their appreciation of the time Elders from the Community spent in the school, the connections they made with all students and teachers, and their openness to provide advice and share their ceremonies.

Student Surveys

After data analysis, PES staff discussed the findings of each of the 2017 and 2018 student surveys on cultural connectedness and self-esteem, and prioritised action areas for the purpose of individual class and whole school planning.

Cultural Connectedness

The K–G3 cultural connectedness survey indicated that the majority of K–G3 Indigenous and non-Indigenous students agreed with the survey statements in 2017 and in 2018 (90% or over for six of the seven sacred statements), and so we can conclude that most K–G3 students do feel connected to their culture in school. Improvement was evident in the students' perception that *"time is spent teaching and learning about Indigenous culture in our school"* (96% in 2017, 100% in 2018), and *"pride in their culture and happy in who they are"* (96% in 2017, 100% in 2018). Similarly, the majority of the G4–G6 Indigenous students also agreed with all the statements on the cultural connectedness survey, both in 2017 and 2018. The average agreement increased from 90.7% in 2017 to 93.1% in 2018. In fall 2018, the greatest increases were seen in *"I think others around me respect my culture"* (85% in 2017, 92% in 2018), and *"I see my culture and background in the school"* (85% in 2017, 92% in 2018). It was evident that PES was succeeding in representing Indigenous culture within the school (Toulouse, 2013). As Sarra (2017) noted, such a finding is something to be celebrated, and shows that commitment to infusing Indigenous perspectives into the school is working and being recognised by the students.

The item with the lowest agreement was *"I feel accepted in school for who I am"* (83% in 2017, 80% in 2018). Toulouse (2008) noted the importance of students feeling that they belong in school. PES staff identified this as an area for continued focus.

Self-esteem

Analysis of the K–G3 self-esteem surveys (2017 and 2018) revealed much similarity in the responses of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. The item with the greatest increase in agreement (Indigenous and non-Indigenous students) was *"I can ask my teacher for help when I need it"* (86% in 2017, 94% in 2018), indicating that the efforts the school staff had made in building relationships with students were working, and students felt more comfortable approaching their teachers. As Wilson (2001) noted, having people and space with whom they can connect and feel they belong form the foundations for learning for Indigenous learners. However, the items with which fewest students agreed were *"I can make friends easily"* (78% in 2017, 63% in 2018), *"I am good at my school work"* (83% in 2017, 79% in 2018), and *"I can do things well"* (83% in 2017, 85% in 2017). Conversations with school staff revealed concern that children between the ages of 5 and 7 years already were feeling that they struggled to make friends and that they did not do other things well.

On analysis of the G4–G6 surveys, in 2017 differences emerged in the overall agreement between Indigenous (81%) and non-Indigenous students (97.3%) on the self-esteem survey statements. In 2018, the gap had decreased, and the level of agreement with the survey statements had increased to 89.2% for Indigenous students, compared to 93.3% for non-Indigenous students. As was evident in the K–G3 survey findings, the item with the lowest agreement level for G4–G6 Indigenous students was *"I can make friends easily"* (67% in 2017 and 70% in 2018). Other items with lower agreement from Indigenous students in 2017 and an increase in 2018 were *"I feel comfortable asking my teachers for help"* (75%, 92%), *"I can work peacefully with my classmates"* (70%, 78%), and *"I can express my opinions well to others"* (71%, 83%).

PES staff identified the top foci for students in the upcoming year as continuing to build relationships, making friends, and being able to express personal opinions. They reflected that this may involve more choice for students, ongoing teaching of friendship and social skills, creating more opportunities for students to be in controlled settings where these skills can be modelled and practised, purposeful planning of recess programs or intramurals where friendship skills can be practised, and learning how to accept peers for who they are. Staff noted that it is also important to tackle the topics of social media and friendships, as well as what a healthy friendship looks and feels like. They explained that using their voices can be difficult for many of the Indigenous students. They often need time to process, and the opportunity to share their

opinions in a quiet, calm setting. They may prefer to do it in writing or drawing, rather than in discussion or presenting. Thus, PES staff will explore choice in ways of expressing voice.

Limitations

This research was a case study of a small rural school in central Canada on its journey towards Mino-Pimaatisiwin. It is hoped that some of the findings will be transferable to other locations. Several challenges exist with regard to determining the impact of the Indigenisation of education. First, the process of Indigenisation is so multi-faceted and it is difficult to measure the movements of multiplicities, as Indigenisation is a process rather than an end-point. Second, there are no agreed indicators to measure what constitutes successful Indigenisation; therefore, this project seeks to identify indicators that could be of value in future studies. Third, finding culturally appropriate measures for evaluation will depend upon agreement of the concrete indicators and further training in Indigenous cultural competencies.

Conclusion

Commitment to the Indigenisation of curriculum and school culture was the greatest achievement demonstrated by the PES community. Each person interviewed provided examples of the efforts that they themselves, or other staff they observed, had made to increase their understanding and implementation of the Indigenisation of curriculum.

Community events that were held at the school or in the Community were highlighted in many of the staff interviews. Staff at PES stated that they had seen an increase in parent participation and they equated that to culturally relevant events held at the school (such as button dress workshops for the mothers, grandmothers and aunties, and button vest workshops for the fathers, grandfathers, uncles, etc.). They also mentioned that a Moms' night held at the school led to more regular appearances of Moms at the school, who had not been present prior. Parental and Elder participation at special events at the school (i.e., Thanksgiving and Christmas) were highlighted as significant moments for interviewees.

The cultural framework of Mino-Pimaatisiwin (good life) and the Ojibwe seven sacred teachings appear to have had positive effects on the school culture for both teachers and students, particularly as they related to increased levels of Indigenous cultural competency and inclusion at the school. This finding should be considered an indicator of "enabling conditions" (Oakes, 1989, p. 195) that may continue to facilitate progress toward the goal of improving learning outcomes for Indigenous students in the future. We highlight the importance of Indigenous knowledge, Anishinaabe pedagogy in particular, which utilises ceremony, teachings and stories to nurture spiritual growth; land-based practices to teach the physical; oral teachings about how to maintain an emotional balance between the heart and the head; and ancestral languages and integrative learning to develop mental capacities (Bell, 2016).

A sense of urgency emerged, informed by statements made by Indigenous language teachers on the importance of fluent language speakers for the transmission of knowledge and culture, further intensified by observations about the ages of Elders, mortality, and the fear that, with their passing, important knowledge will be lost. With limited time to develop meaningful partnerships between these Elders and the school, it is hoped that Elders can recommend how to move education forward for their grandchildren and other Indigenous students. Ongoing listening to these voices and making creative and patient efforts to collaborate are needed.

The journey through a history steeped in colonisation and oppression is still a long way from over. As educators we still need to continue to analyse and improve our methods of instruction for all students. For the education of Indigenous students, we need to remain focused on addressing all aspects of their well-being, ensuring that we are presenting materials in a way that is respectful of not just their intellectual being, but also the emotional, physical and spiritual

components of who they are. The integration of the cultural strengths of the local community towards education reform has led to an increased interest and involvement of Indigenous People in education in this rural community (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2003). Although the research part of this study is complete and the grant funding expended, Mino-Pimaatisiwin continues at PES as the staff balance a curriculum rich in Indigenous ways of knowing, doing, and being with the challenges of pedagogy and instruction that are necessary to continue to whittle away at the educational gaps that exist.

Development of identity and a sense of belonging and self-worth are critical in empowering students to learn (Richmond & Smith, 2012); yet measures of academic success too often focus on learning deficits rather than positive learning outcomes. PES has worked hard to develop a safe and trusting learning environment that is culturally rich. In June 2021, a school climate survey indicated 90% of students felt safe in school, 90% of students believed their culture was respected in the school community, and 94% said they had at least one adult in the school they could talk to. Although gaps still exist in literacy and numeracy, these have narrowed, with 93% of students showing one year's progress in reading and writing.

Finally, colonisation took much from Indigenous peoples, and its ongoing effects on the relationships between Indigenous communities and representatives of Euro-Western education institutions continue to challenge understandings of what Indigenisation means and what it looks like in mainstream curriculum. Proceeding with the knowledge that Indigenous education and everyday life are not separate entities (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2003), developing a set of indicators for Indigenisation requires a different framework for measurement than traditional Euro-Western educational indicators. Focusing on a whole child perspective, the framework of Mino-Pimaatisiwin has value for all students and educators, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, as we work together towards providing an education that supports all students.

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