Inclusive Education Research: Too Early for Indigenous Study

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While the term ‘inclusion’ often seems to be a buzz word in the education community, the heart of the term encompasses feelings of acceptance, worth, and influence. Those seeking out inclusion in schools are looking for acceptance of those with exceptionalities, for valuing their worth, and for influence in the world around them. Continually, no matter how good of intentions our school districts, government, and teachers have, there exists a group of students in our schools who do not reap the benefits of inclusion as laid out in our policies, according to the research available. This particular group who I have observed not being able to express feelings of acceptance, worth, and influence in our school communities are Indigenous students. Research in the field of education regarding inclusion does not focus on Indigenous students for reasons including ethics, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s *Calls to Action* document, and the infancy of approaching inclusive practices in our schools with Indigenous students. This is not to say that there will never be a time where Indigenous students should be surveyed, interviewed, or be asked to be participants in research, simply that it is too early. Ultimately, protecting Indigenous students and their families is of the utmost importance in conducting education research in the area of inclusion.

**Ethics**

According to the American Psychological Association (APA), there are five general principles in the *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* document. These five principles include, beneficence and nonmaleficence, fidelity and responsibility, integrity, justice, and respect for people’s rights and dignity (2010). These principles are not ethical standards for researchers to adhere to, but to “guide and inspire psychologists toward the very highest ethical ideals of the profession” (American Psychological Association, 2010). Considering these principles is important to pave the way for implementing research standards outlined by the APA, as the ethical standards:

set forth enforceable rules for conduct as psychologists. Most of the Ethical Standards are written broadly, in order to apply to psychologists in varied roles, although the application of an Ethical Standard may vary depending on the context. The Ethical Standards are not exhaustive. The fact that a given conduct is not specifically addressed by an Ethical Standard does not mean that it is necessarily either ethical or unethical. (APA, 2017)

Choosing to study an Indigenous community for the purpose of learning about inclusion in schools is likely under researched because it could be viewed as unethical. Not only could researchers be unnecessarily bringing up trauma with those individuals due to their complex history with the Canadian education system, but should not be treating individuals in Indigenous communities as subjects meant to be studied at this time.

The APA in their ethics standards suggests that research should only be done with communities who the researcher understands. This is mentioned in article 2.01 Boundaries of Competence where the APA states:

Psychologists provide services, teach, and conduct research with populations and in areas only within the boundaries of their competence, based on their education, training, supervised experience, consultation, study, or professional experience . . . psychologists have or obtain the training, experience, consultation, or supervision necessary to ensure the competence of their services, or they make appropriate referrals . . . Psychologists planning to provide services, teach, or conduct research involving populations, areas, techniques, or technologies new to them undertake relevant education, training, supervised experience, consultation, or study . . . psychologists nevertheless take reasonable steps to ensure the competence of their work and to protect clients/patients, students, supervisees, research participants, organizational clients, and others from harm. (2017)

While there is no doubt that researchers take incredible care of their work and the people helping them, it is important to consider the lasting effects of residential schools in Canada and how Indigenous communities have had a limited time to cope with those effects. The number of Indigenous individuals affected by residential schools in Canada is extensive, “More than 150,000 First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children attended the church-run schools between their establishment in the 1870s and the closure of the last school in the mid-1990s” (Wilk, Maltby, & Cooke, 2017). Given that residential schools were attended by a generation of Canadians who are still alive today, I would suggest that the first, second, and third generation survivors have had limited time to seek out the assistance of professionals in the mental health field and engage in wellness opportunities. The devastating and lasting effects have been “health problems, substance abuse, mortality/suicide rates, criminal activity, and disintegration of families and communities” (Wilk, Maltby, & Cooke, 2017). From my perspective it seems far too early to engage Indigenous communities in dialogue about inclusive policies in schools. Wilk suggests that historical trauma applies to the case of those who have a connection with residential schools where “the effects of these disruptive historical events are collective, affecting not only individual Survivors, but also their families and communities . . . Recent findings suggest that the effects of the residential school system are indeed intergenerational, with children of attendees demonstrating poorer health status than children of non-attendees” (2017). The access professionals have to counseling Indigenous individuals is also limited, as many professionals are learning about how to best serve Indigenous communities, and many Indigenous communities are underserved by the healthcare system. The mindset professionals must have in counseling Indigenous persons is stated by Sinacore and Ginsberg in their book, *Canadian Counselling and Counselling Psychology in the 21st Century*:

counselling Indigenous individuals from a non-Indigenous perspective (i.e., a Western perspective) is a form of continued oppression and colo­nization, as it does not legitimize the Indigenous cultural view of mental health and healing. “A postcolonial paradigm would accept knowledge from differing cosmologies as valid in their own right, without their having to adhere to a separate cultural body for legitimacy” (Duran & Duran, 1995, p. 6). (2015)

Significant strides and shifts in mindset in the area of Indigenous counselling have paved the way for a better understanding, most notably the “Aboriginal healing movement” (Sinacore & Ginsberg, 2015). While the standards set out by the American Psychological Association are intended for those practicing psychology and conducting research in this area, the area of studying inclusive education falls into this category as well. I have chosen to focus my discussion regarding ethics on the area of competence, as many professionals are able to skim the surface of understanding Indigenous issues in Canada. The reason, I suspect, of the lack of understanding Indigenous issues in Canada is that the history of Indigenous Peoples in Canada was previously colonized and provinces are currently going through the curriculum with the intent to decolonize it. Therefore, with the infancy of understanding Canadian history from a decolonized standpoint, research about best practices in counseling Indigenous persons is still developing.

For researchers to understand Indigenous issues in Canada, a component of being humble and aware of privilege is required. Two researchers, Brown and Strega, write about how researchers can see themselves as being both oppressed and as an oppressor in conducting research. Brown and Strega state:

Most of us can recognize oppression when it occurs or when we are being oppressed ourselves, but can we also recognize the complicity that each of us has in creating and sustaining oppression over others? This is even harder, especially for all of us who are well-meaning people. For White, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual people, this is our most important work in anti-oppressive practice—recognizing our own privilege and working to dismantle the unjust systems that keep us in that privileged space. The key in recognizing oppression is seeing the oppression that occurs through the various activities, social relations, and social practices we engage in with others. One such activity is the research process, even when as a student researcher you feel like the least powerful person in the world. (2005)

This particular sentiment should resonate with researchers, especially those who conduct research in areas with participants who are in minority groups. It is simply not enough to intend to be competent in research, as “Good intentions are never enough to produce anti-oppressive processes or outcomes” (Brown & Strega, 2005). Research samples and locations, therefore, should be broad and expansive, and include various aspects of health, including physical, mental, and generalized health conditions.

There are a number of mental health effects residential school survivors and their descendants experience, including “depression, anxiety, substance abuse (e.g. drugs or alcohol), paranoia, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), sexual dysfunction, personality disorders, stress, effects on interpersonal relationships, psychological or nervous disorders” (Wilk, 2017). The prevalence of mental health complications due to residential schools cannot be dismissed even if there are other traumas an individual may have endured post-schooling. At the same time, the perspective of those who did attend residential schools and reported no experience of trauma should not be ignored: “while the studies reveal negative effects in relation to the residential school system, this cannot be said for everyone who attended. For example, some studies have found better overall reported health among those with family members who attended” (Wilk, 2017). It should be noted that there are multiple perspectives in regard to residential schools and their effects. However, it is important to be cognizant that a majority of residential school survivors have had negative experiences in residential schools.

In searching education articles regarding Indigenous students and inclusion in Canada, I found two results. One of which focuses on post-secondary inclusion of Indigenous persons, published in 2016 (Pidgeon, *More than a checklist: Meaningful indigenous inclusion in higher education*). Another result listed a book which outlines how to integrate Indigenous ways of knowing into the curriculum, which was published in 2017 (Tanaka, *Learning and teaching together: weaving Indigenous ways of knowing into education*). I found the lack of the results in the research to be very telling: there is a reason why there is no elementary or middle school research on Indigenous students in the area of inclusion. This reason, in my opinion, is that conducting research on a community of people who continue to experience trauma in schools is ethically wrong, especially given how fresh and significant of an impact residential schools in Canada have made on the descendants of those who attended those schools. Wilk notes:

Mental health, and particularly emotional well-being, was the area of health most commonly identified as affected by residential school attendance. Forty-three studies reviewed found that personal or intergenerational residential school attendance was related to mental health issues such as mental distress, depression, addictive behaviours and substance misuse, stress, and suicidal behaviours. (2017)

While schools across Canada are providing a better service to students by entrenching Indigenous ways of knowing into the curriculum, by addressing issues affecting Indigenous students and doing their best to serve all students, it should not be the goal of research in inclusion at this time to assess whether or not an Indigenous group experiences inclusion. If the heart of inclusion is to experience feelings of acceptance, worth, and influence, guiding questions in research should be the focus of the research and accompanying interviews and surveys for a set of randomized students in a school, rather than isolating research and results to focus on a particular community at this time.

**Call to Action**

In the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s final report on Canada’s residential schools, the Committee indicated that:

the schools failed as educational institutions. Many Aboriginal students who attended residential schools were so ill-served there that they later struggled to succeed, either in furthering their education, or in the market economy, or in more traditional activities such as hunting and fishing. They were, as the Survivor John Tootoosis famously observed, “left hanging” between two worlds. (2016)

It is no surprise that inclusion in Canadian schools still requires change, as the effects of residential schools has followed families for generations. These effects include:

chronic unemployment or underemployment. Beyond that, it led to levels of poverty, poor housing, substance abuse, family violence, and ill health. Although educational success rates are slowly improving, the fact remains that Aboriginal people still have lower educational and economic achievements than other Canadians. This is the legacy of residential schools. Non-Aboriginal Canadians have also been disadvantaged by educational systems that taught them that Aboriginal people were ‘heathens’ or ‘savages.’ Even today, those same systems routinely neglect the history and experiences of Aboriginal Canadians altogether. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2016)

To study inclusion from the perspective of Indigenous students requires researchers to ask questions which may bring up the reality of the effects of residential schools for students who have never attended residential schools but have the experiences passed down through stories. The potential effects following this line of questioning stir up ethics issues, because it seems wrong to isolate a group of people for the purpose of research, potentially at the expense of their mental health.

Our education system continues to undergo significant improvement in the area of inclusion. However, it should be noted that in regard to Indigenous learners:

In spite of efforts to be more inclusive of Aboriginal learners, public schools are not Aboriginal places of learning. Although efforts are being made, such as the development of the Common Curriculum Framework for Aboriginal Language and Culture Programs in the western provinces, in general provincial, federal, and territorial governments have not committed the necessary resources to accomplish the task. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2016)

In my opinion, first, resources in schools need to be made available to be inclusive of Indigenous learners before research around inclusion should be conducted, lessening the risk of harm. Again, this research should be done with the intent of focusing on students in schools as a whole to change mindsets and decolonize the system, not merely focusing on Indigenous students. According to Wright Cardinal’s thesis, *Beyond the Sixties Scoop: Reclaiming Indigenous identity, reconnection to place, and reframing understandings of being Indigenous*:

education programs with a decolonizing aim can be catalyst experiences for Indigenous students who are seeking to reclaim their identities. Critical to successful programming of this kind is acknowledging white privilege that pervades society and the historical trauma of Indigenous students. The majority of Indigenous families across Canada have been impacted by the child welfare system and the Indian Residential Schools, in addition to other policies and projects that undermine Indigenous lives. To have a mindful practice, educators need to be aware of their own positionality, the devastating experiences of Indigenous students and their families, and the understanding that experiences of Indigenous families have been diluted to past wrongs, when in fact, Indigenous people face ongoing colonial violence in a state that does not want to take responsibility for actions such as the Sixties Scoop. (2017)

Equality in providing supports for Indigenous students was also addressed by the Committee that there is a “pattern of Aboriginal people having to take the government to court to argue for a basic Aboriginal right to equal education. Unfortunately, Aboriginal children and communities often pay the price for the delay” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2016). The federal and provincial governments do not have an understanding of monetary responsibility for Indigenous students with special needs. This lack of understanding has prevented Indigenous students living on reserve from accessing special education resources and supports within their community, as well as within the public system. The report written by the Committee does not address this lack of understanding beyond citing a court case between the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation and the department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada. According to the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation, “In a preliminary decision, the Canadian Human Rights Commission sided with the First Nation” (“About the Case”, n.d.). To date, the lack of understanding is not effective in providing inclusive education access to Indigenous learners with special needs.

In order for Indigenous students to be best served in schools, the Committee summarized that there is a “need for a complete restructuring based on principles of self-government, a culturally relevant curriculum, stable funding, and honouring of the treaties. Aboriginal peoples themselves must lead and control the process of change” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2016). Providing opportunities and requiring help from First Nations communities will allow for positive experiences between Indigenous peoples and the current school system. By involving Indigenous peoples in the process of changing the school system, the worth and influence of those most affected can provide learning opportunities for their descendants and other students. While some of the requirements have been implemented in some schools in British Columbia, not all schools, and not all provinces and territories have been working toward this shift in mindset and practice. Until this occurs, inclusion will not occur, nor will research be helpful in guiding more changes to the school system.

**Infancy**

Research and inclusion is in a state of infancy of Indigenous learners in the Canadian school system. Ontario’s Education Ministry “has established a baseline from the 2011–12 year from which it will be able to more accurately measure whether outcomes for Aboriginal students improve” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2016). This initial data being gathered and tracked from 2011 demonstrates infancy in collecting data regarding Indigenous students and their programming. This type of data is important because it comes from the Ministry and is not gathered from the students, but rather the school system. There is a difference in research conducted by researchers for the purpose of drawing conclusions and making recommendations versus data collection where there is no contact between the collector and the subject. While the intent of the Ministry’s data collection is reported to be used for determining individual student success data, the recommendations and conclusions drawn are likely to be problematic to the education of Indigenous students if the Ministry chooses to use the data to make assumptions of all Indigenous students. If the Ministry were to use this data to develop, change, or adapt programming with the intention of seeing all Indigenous students experience success in school, it would be wrong. This intention is problematic because it creates a divide among students, based on race, which goes against the heart of inclusive education. There is an infancy in collecting data on Indigenous students in schools across Canada, so to use a small section of data to inform programming would be problematic. In addition, if Ministries in other provinces choose to use Ontario’s data, it may negatively influence how the education system changes in those other provinces. According to the Committee’s document:

This baseline data is critical for measuring successes and failures as Ontario continues to work with Aboriginal communities to improve the quality of education provided to Aboriginal students in the provincial schools and serves as a good model for other provinces and territories. (2016)

I am surprised that the Committee mentioned using Ontario’s data collection, and would have much rather seen the committee call other provinces and territories to action to conduct their own information gathering as Indigenous communities vary in need significantly across Canada.

Education as a whole experiences infancy in integrating Indigenous understandings and resources into the curriculum. Most curricula in Canada is written from a colonized perspective but is still being used in schools. This is due to the length of time curriculum goes from creation to acceptance in schools. In addition, it takes a considerable amount of time for textbooks to be rewritten, published, and replaced. According to Wright Cardinal, “there is a growing awareness of the diversity of Indigenous nations, as well as, the shared values of Indigenous knowledge systems, and thoughtful research to be included in education practices” (2017). Often, Indigenous perspectives are not included in curriculum changes, nor in textbook writing. There is a lack of understanding on the part of educators of the complexities of historical trauma, as indicated by Wright Cardinal, “[teachers] must begin to understand and acknowledge through their pedagogy that Aboriginal students come to the classrooms burdened by racialized constructions and likely live in a state of ongoing colonial violence” (2017). One way Wright Cardinal suggests to increase teacher efficacy in this area is to teach pre-service teachers about the Sixties Scoop alongside residential schools (2017).

Indigenous Peoples in Canada experience an infancy of trust in the education system in Canada. In the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s report, the Committee indicated that the implementation of the *First Nations Control of the First Nations Education Act* was put on hold because “The legacy of the residential schools and the years of underfunded education have given many Aboriginal parents and leaders considerable opportunity to question the commitment and sincerity of any and all government proposals” (2016). To research inclusion from the perspective of Indigenous students at this time would be wrong because the legacy of residential schools is still prevalent and at the fore-front of the minds of those affected. The *Call to Action* document outlines ways the Canadian Government and its citizens can decolonize their understanding of Canadian history without causing harm.

**Conclusion**

To survey, interview, and study the perspectives of descendants of those who attended residential schools about inclusion would yield poor results and likely cause unnecessary harm. First, trust must be gained, which can only happen over time. Canada’s provinces and territories must address many of the gaps in their curriculum and close the education gap between Indigenous students and non-Indigenous students. Ontario’s Ministry of Education, and those on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Committee have stated that there is a discrepancy between the access to education of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. With more time, and as trust is gained back, only then can inclusion research be conducted fairly and reliably. However, for ethics-based reasons, Indigenous students should not be isolated, interviewed, or studied for the purpose of inclusion based research at this time.

In conclusion, while the intention of conducting research in the area of inclusion education surrounding Indigenous students comes from an open mindset, it is simply too early to engage in research with Indigenous individuals. Ethically, understanding the gravity of the effect of the residential school system on descendants of residential school survivors is of the utmost importance and every measure should be taken to protect those individuals. As researchers are continually learning about the effects of residential schools on the Indigenous community as a whole, it is too early to engage in research regarding inclusion in education. The *Call to Action* document indicates that more Indigenous ways of knowing are embedded in the curriculum and is necessary in existing educational school systems. Involving First Nations communities in the education of their children is one way to foster positive relationships between the school community and the Indigenous community. Finally, understanding and trust in both Indigenous communities and school communities are still developing. Relationships need time to develop and mature from a state of infancy; it is possible that those relationships between communities have not been fostered adequately. With more time and care it is possible to include and consider Indigenous perspectives on inclusion in schools and to engage with the community in research, but not at this time.

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