

**“Within one generation”:
What helps or hinders closing achievement gaps in literacy**
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Canada’s residential school system for Aboriginal children was created for the purpose of separating Aboriginal children from their families, indoctrinate children into a new culture—the culture of the dominant Euro-Christian Canadian society. For over 100 years many generations of children from the same communities and families endured the experience of these ‘schools’. That experience ultimately led to the largest class-action lawsuit in Canada’s history.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada had a mandate to hear the truth from survivors of residential schools and to begin to lay the foundation for the important question of reconciliation:

Getting to the truth was hard, but getting to reconciliation will be harder. It requires that the paternalistic and racist foundations of the residential school system be rejected as the basis for an ongoing relationship. Reconciliation requires that a new vision, based on a commitment to mutual respect, be developed...Reconciliation is not an Aboriginal problem; it is a Canadian one. Virtually all aspects of Canadian society may need to be reconsidered. (TRC, 2015b).

As a trained teacher, former School Principal and now District Principal for Aboriginal Education in the interior of British Columbia, Canada, my goal is this hard one: to see reconciliation happen for Indigenous learners in the region where I work and in all schools. This indeed is the vision: to change way we educate our children and ourselves (TRC 2015b).

The purpose of this research is to take action towards the needed change. Specifically the TRC’s Calls to Action (2015a) identify change in Indigenous learners’ outcomes:

10. We call on the federal government to draft new Aboriginal education legislation with the full participation and informed consent of Aboriginal peoples. The new legislation would include a commitment to sufficient funding and would incorporate the following principles:
- I. Providing sufficient funding to close identified education achievement gaps within one generation.
 - II. Improving education attainment levels and success rates.
 - III. Developing culturally appropriate curricula (TRC, 2015a).

This research will look at what helps or hinders a School District in the Interior of British Columbia to close the achievement gaps in literacy. The potential for change is large as the School District has 32 elementary schools, 1 middle school, 10 secondary schools, 1 Kindergarten to Grade 12 school, 2 alternate

education programs and 1 distance education school. 2765 Indigenous students attend education institutions in the School District, with most (89 per cent) living off-reserve. Setting aside limitations in setting targets that compare population groups (rather than standards), the initial data analysis suggests that closing literacy achievement gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in this School District is closer than first thought:

- 11 more indigenous students assessed as 'exceeding' in reading
- 21 more indigenous students assessed as 'meeting' in reading
- 1 more indigenous student assessed as 'exceeding' in writing
- 152 more indigenous students assessed as 'meeting' in writing.

This research will explore teaching and learning practices that help/hinder Indigenous student success in literacy, as measured by an ability to meet and/or exceed non-indigenous literacy achievement levels. The research questions include:

- What teaching practices in Interior British Columbia elementary and high school contexts help or hinder Indigenous learner success in literacy?
- What changes does research in this area suggest are needed to teaching practices in order to best support Indigenous students to close (and exceed) literacy achievement gaps?

A related question is:

- What does “achievement” mean in elementary and high school education – from learner, educator and community perspectives?

This research will use qualitative research methods within Indigenous research methodologies that focus on Indigenous strengths, not deficit; potential not pathology (Smith, 2002; Airini et al, 2010). Specifically I will use an Indigenous approach to the Critical Incident technique (Flanagan, 1954, Airini et al, 2010) to examine a number of local issues pertinent to the existing literacy achievement gap in the school district. Such narrative forms of inquiry have been shown to be effective in helping Indigenous participants, “talk their truths” (Bishop, 1998), and to share stories as a means to assist others (Kovach, 2010). In this way the analysis of the critical incident narratives will help highlight how teaching practices can affect needed changes in literacy outcomes. Research by local Indigenous scholars who have used Indigenous methodologies will also be examined to determine if they are congruent to the research questions and findings.

References

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