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A Framework to Support Improvements to First Nation Education

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Abstract

During the 2022 Head and Heart Indigenous Research Fellowship at Western University, as part of the five-part Leadership Framework Series aimed at supporting lifelong learning among eight participating Nations (Anishinaabek and Haudenosaunee), my team and I were able to develop valuable findings. I have used the 6 R's framework in this research output to summarize these findings. These 6 R's represent Respect, Refusal, Relationality, Relevance, Responsibility, and Reciprocity. The 6 R's closely tie aspects like effective leadership, robust policies, and culture to the progress of First Nations education. This project's principal conclusion is that a parity plus funding model with full local control are central to the efforts aimed at improving all aspects of First Nation education. Ultimately, this research output brings forward the important role that leadership plays in First Nation education advancement.

Keywords: First Nations education, Head and Heart, framework

A Framework to Support Improvements to First Nation Education

Within the 2022 Head and Heart Indigenous Research Fellowship at Western University, alongside mentors Dr. Brent Debassige and First Nations with Schools Collective (FNWSC) Structural Readiness Coordinator Leslee White-Eye, we worked together to offer a five-part Leadership Framework Series within the First Nations Community of Inquiry and Praxis (FNCIP) online webinar sessions. According to the FNCIP online OWL project site, the “FNCIP aims to conduct inquiries and praxis that originate out of interest and relevance to its members, and to the FNWSC’s mandate in supporting lifelong learning that is Indigenous-centered and grounded in Indigenous philosophies of knowing, being and doing. Through regularly scheduled inquiry-based discussions, FNCIP members principally participate in the co-production of knowledge and a community-minded approach that serves as an educational advisory group on topics of significance to the FNWSC” (Owl Site, FNCIP, 2020). In my role, I provided administrative and analytical support and participated in discussions that involved expert leaders in First Nations education, where rich information was generated. Based upon my understanding as an Indigenous student who experienced both elementary level education within both the public domain and with First Nation schools, together with information I deduced from discussions held by the FNCIP and findings of the FNWSC public records, I have generated key principles that must be observed for success within Indigenous education that are informed by the six R’s framework. See a listing below:

1. Respect

A parity plus funding model is necessary to influence and improve all aspects of First Nation education (Sekaly, 2021). In November 2017, Debassige drafted an unpublished report to the FNWSC where he outlined a parity of wealth funding approach for First Nations education. Debassige posits "parity" as equivalent to the provincial systems' overall wealth in this model. Outlining overall wealth requires a comprehensive and inclusive accounting of the entire system and the sum of the formal and informal associated aspects (e.g., anything of value). Parity should account for a system with a nearly 200-year head start and a staggering comprehensive wealth" (Debassige, 2017, para. 4). Moreover, in consultation with FNWSC First Nations education leaders, Debassige's report outlines the concept 'plus' to have distinct significance and should include:

- Comprehensive funding for local First Nation languages and cultures;
- Compensation for a historically underfunded system;
- Infrastructure and capital funding (e.g., focused on supporting culturally and ecologically responsive design that is consistent with First Nations worldviews);
- Contingency allowance for impacts resulting from extraordinary events and Indigenous social movements (e.g., Ipperwash crisis; Oka crisis; First Nations struggles for clean drinking water; Wet'suwet'en water protectors/land protectors defending their rights; missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls);
- Funding for First Nations collaborations and collectives; and
- Distinct Indigenous-centered research and development funding.

2. Refusal

All learners should reject the assumption that education can only occur within a ‘formal’ format because informal learning opportunities, such as First Nations land-based education

and First Nations languages, are expansive sources of knowledge and play pivotal roles in teaching and learning environments. This means that First Nation language learning should not be considered a second language program, as in the provincial system, but should be central to all interdisciplinary learning.

3. Relationality

Learning is deepened when people learn to see and understand with their heart, informed by the wisdom and traditions of Indigenous Ancestors who have gone before us. Such critical awareness helps individuals understand the difference between stereotypes and facts, especially in relation to misconceptions about First Nation people's history and ways of life. It is in this truth-based approach that education leaders experience greater success when engaging with community members.

4. Relevance

Learning must be comprehensive, culturally responsive and accommodate Indigenous spiritual ways of knowing, such as dreams, visions, ceremonies, and dances.

5. Responsibility

"On a daily basis, First Nations lifelong learning and education directors do everything possible to run superb systems despite inadequate funds and resources under the Government of Canada's First Nation policy. Meanwhile, FNWSC keeps the overarching goal of First Nations Control of First Nations Education on the table by commissioning research, hosting meetings and collaborating with experts in lawmaking, human rights and curriculum development" (FNWSC, who we are, para 3).

6. Reciprocity

Canada has treaty obligations, and First Nations are entitled to a modern world-class education system built on a foundation that includes First Nations' languages and cultures. For effective, sustainable, and well-structured First Nations education systems to be fully realized, "Canada's distinct relationship with First Nations must include full local control of First Nations education by First Nations peoples in a properly funded system" (Debassige, 2021, para 20).

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