July 2017

Implementing Indigenous Education Policy Directives in Ontario Public Schools: Experiences, Challenges and Successful Practices

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Abstract

The Ontario Ministry of Education has declared a commitment to Indigenous student success and has advanced a policy framework that articulates inclusion of Indigenous content in schooling curriculum (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). What are the perceptions among educators and parents regarding the implementation of policy directives, and what is seen to encourage or limit meaningful implementation? To answer these questions, this article draws on interviews with 100 Indigenous (mainly Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabe, and Métis) and non-Indigenous parents and educators from Ontario Canada. Policy directives are seen to benefit Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Interviews also reveal challenges to implementing Indigenous curricular policy, such as unawareness and intimidation among non-Indigenous educators regarding how to teach material. Policy implications are considered.

Implementing Indigenous Education Policy Directives in Ontario Public Schools: Experiences, Challenges, and Successful Practices

Educational disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada have been declared a great social policy challenge in Canada (Richards, 2008; Richards & Scott, 2009). A 2012 national survey reported that among Indigenous Peoples aged 18 to 44 who live off reserve 36% had not completed high school and only 39% had postsecondary credentials (Statistics Canada, 2013) compared to 11% and 64% of the non-Indigenous population, respectively (Bougie, Kelly-Scott, & Arriagada, 2013). Educational disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations are not exclusive to Canada: "In most countries, Indigenous children have low school enrollments, poor school performance, low literacy rates, high dropout rates, and lag behind other groups in terms of academic achievements nationally" (Champagne, 2009, p. 132). Research is needed to further understand the factors that limit and encourage Indigenous students' educational experiences.

The Council of Ministers of Education (2008) made a commitment to improve academic achievement and graduation rates among Indigenous students. In response, many Canadian provincial and territorial departments and ministries of education declared a formal commitment to support Indigenous students' success and implemented Indigenous education policies and agreements. Examples include British Columbia's *Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements* (Aboriginal Education Enhancements Branch, n.d.a, n.d.b), Manitoba's *First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (Aboriginal Education Directorate Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2016), and Alberta's *First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (Alberta Learning, 2002). Ontario is the focus of this study and has a policy: *The First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). Policy directives include integrating content that reflects Indigenous histories, cultures, and perspectives throughout the Ontario curriculum.

The purpose of this study is to examine educator and parent perceptions of Indigenous curricular policy directives in Ontario public schooling, as well as challenges that limit and strategies that encourage meaningful policy implementation.

Literature Review

The Royal Proclamation 1763 initially defined the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples wherein the Crown recognized the exclusive authority, termed sovereignty, of Indigenous governments (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Education is a treaty obligation (Assembly of First Nations, 1988) and control over education is a right of Indigenous Peoples protected within Canada's Constitution (see Section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982). However, in favour of European colonization, existing treaty commitments were displaced as the interests of European settlers in terms of land and resources were given priority (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996).

When Confederation was achieved and the British North America Act was passed in 1867, all aspects of Indian affairs became the responsibility of the Canadian federal government (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). In 1876, The Indian Act became the principal framework for federal jurisdiction over Status Indians (those with Registered Indian Status under The Indian Act) (Government of Canada, 1987; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). The Indian Act and

successive revisions constricted the rights and freedoms of Status Indians, depriving them of the right to their land, culture, self-governance, political voice, and involvement in the education of their children.

The Indian Act was amended in 1920 (Legacy of Hope, 2016; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015b). It became compulsory for Indian children between 7 and 15 years of age to attend residential schooling or their parents or guardians would face fines and imprisonment.

Residential schooling was a powerful mechanism used by European colonizers to assimilate Indigenous children to mainstream Canadian society (Chansonneuve, 2005; Legacy of Hope Foundation, 2014). Residential schools suppressed Indigenous languages and cultures, imposed Christian ideologies and belief systems, and inadequate standards for student health and safety, child labour, and physical and sexual abuse were common (Legacy of Hope Foundation, 2014; Miller, 1996; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2003). Residential schools wanted Indigenous children, "above all," to be like "the ideal middle-class Canadian child" (Hawthorn, Tremblay, & Bownick, 1967, p. 6) and teachers' role involved "helping children overcome their Indianness" (p. 121). Over 150,000 Indigenous children attended residential schools between 1831 and 1996 (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2012; Legacy of Hope Foundation, 2014; Miller, 1996; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015b, 2015c).

 In 1951, The Indian Act was revised and the residential school model was abandoned. Indigenous children were to be integrated into mainstream provincial schools. However, many schooling ideas and practices remained predicated on principles of oppression and assimilative control (Battiste & Henderson, 2009; Donald, 2009, 2012; McCarthy, 1990; Ormiston, 2002; St. Denis, 2011). Indigenous Peoples' perspectives on the school system have been negatively affected by residential school experiences, leading to intergenerational distrust of and discomfort with the Canadian education system (Milne, 2016; Perley, 1993; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015d; Wotherspoon, 2006, 2008; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2003).

In contrast to practices of the past, the Ontario Ministry of Education has declared a commitment to Indigenous student success and has advanced education policy frameworks that formally emphasize Indigenous inclusion and representation in schooling as a solution to alleviate educational disparities and to improve academic achievement among Indigenous students (see Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). Policy objectives include ensuring cultural sensitivity and understanding of Indigenous cultures, perspectives, and histories among school and school board staff. The Ontario Ministry of Education committed to support identity building for Indigenous students and to ensure all students in Ontario know and appreciate contemporary and traditional Indigenous cultures. Central to this article are policy directives that call for the integration of content that reflects Indigenous histories, cultures, and perspectives throughout the curriculum. Indigenous content has been incorporated into Ontario curriculum in kindergarten, social studies (Grades 1-6), history and geography (Grades 7 and 8), Canadian and world studies (Grades 9-12), mathematics (Grades 1-11), language (Grades 1-8), guidance and career education (Grades 9-12), and business studies (Grades 9-12) (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013a, 2013b).

Schooling environments that include Indigenous knowledge, perspectives, languages, traditions, and cultures are considered to positively influence the academic performance and outcomes of Indigenous students (Kanu, 2002, 2006, 2007; Klump & McNeir, 2005; Kostenko & Merrotsy, 2009; McKinley, Brayboy & Castagno, 2009; Whitley, 2014). Lipka and Adams (2004) found that the culture-based math curriculum increased mathematical thinking and performance among Yup'ik students from southwest Alaska. A study by Taylor and Wright (2003) found that receiving instruction in traditional Indigenous languages provided Inuit students in Nunavik "significant academic and linguistic advantages" (p.13). Powers (2006) found that culture-based programming in schools affected urban Indigenous students' educational outcomes, and there was a stronger association among students who most strongly identified with their culture (see also Powers, Potthoff, Bearinger & Resnick, 2003). Indigenous curricular content as well as traditional Indigenous methods of teaching and learning are also seen to contribute to Indigenous student self-confidence, self-esteem, and cultural identity (McDonald, 2011; Taylor & Wright, 2003). There is reason to believe, however, that due to various environmental pressures educator practices may be inconsistent with Indigenous curricular policies, preventing substantial change at the level of teaching and learning (Labaree, 2010; Wotherspoon, 2006, 2008).

Methods

This study draws on interviews with 100 participants (55 educators and 45 parents) within provincial off-reserve school boards in Southern Ontario. In this sample, 18 teachers and 18 parents identified as Indigenous. Among the 37 non-Indigenous educators, six had Indigenous education as an area of specialization. Three non-Indigenous parents had children who identify as Indigenous. Indigenous participants identified themselves as "Indigenous," "Aboriginal," "Haudenosaunee," "Anishinaabe," and "Métis". For the purposes of this article, the term Indigenous is used to refer to descendants of the original inhabitants of North America. Interviews were conducted from 2012 to 2014 during the months of July and August. This study received ethics clearance from University of Waterloo and University of Toronto research ethics boards. All names and identifying information have been changed to protect participant confidentiality.

I attended school organized parent information sessions and distributed recruitment flyers that invited parents to participate in an interview. At these times, I also distributed recruitment materials to teachers. All interviews were voluntary. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 3 hours in length and took place at the schools.

Parent and educator interview questions reflect three key themes. Questions explored how participants define:

a. Parent–school relationships,

b. The roles and expectations of educators and of parents, and

c. The perceived effectiveness of educational initiatives that aim to boost Indigenous student achievement by enhancing family inclusion within children's education and embedding Indigenous culture into student learning.

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Data was organized using *QSR NVivo 10* and analyzed to draw out patterns from concepts and insights. Data coding reflected three main cycles (Saldaña, 2013). First, attribute coding was used to code basic descriptive information (e.g., participant characteristics such as educator or parent). Second, structural coding was used to code materials based on questions outlined in the interview schedule. Third, eclectic coding was used next to refine, recode, and synthesize codes created to this point. I then organized and re-organized the data multiple times according to increasingly specific emerging themes and concepts.

Based on this strategy, I was able to move to a master code of Indigenous content in schooling, which was further sub-divided into responses related to processes of implementation. Three themes emerged across the data that informed the question of how Indigenous curricular policy directives are perceived and implemented. Broadly, statements described general experiences with the Indigenous-focused curriculum in classrooms and schools, as well as challenges and successful strategies associated with meaningful implementation.

To ensure the trustworthiness of research findings, I spent a total of 18 weeks at the school sites conducting observations and interviews. I also spoke informally with educators about preliminary findings while onsite and I incorporated questions based on preliminary findings into a number of the interviews. Participants had an opportunity to disagree or offer additional insight in support of my findings. These efforts facilitated a deeper understanding of schooling dynamics.

Findings

Perceptions of Policy Directives

Positive experiences among Indigenous communities. Indigenous interviewees shared the perspective, "it's important for us to rejuvenate our culture and our language" (Bella, Indigenous parent). Interviewees identified public schools as an ideal location for Indigenous cultural programming and educational initiatives. Ana is an Indigenous mother living in an urban setting. She feels she is "failing [her] kid" because she has been unable to provide her daughter cultural learning at home. When we spoke, Ana had recently enrolled her daughter into Indigenous programming for the first time; the program was offered through her daughter's school. Families may be limited in their ability to pass cultural knowledge on to their children (e.g., because they have limited knowledge and few community connections), and they may "have nowhere else to go but here" to learn about and preserve their cultures and traditions (Ava, Indigenous educator).

Alexa, an Indigenous parent, explained that Indigenous families have realized some benefits from Indigenous perspectives and cultural teachings being taught at school. She was thrilled that the Indigenous students were sharing what they had learned with their parents:

> I didn't get to learn any of this because of issues that my mom and her mom had to deal with when they were kids. So there's almost three decades of information that was lost. My kids are getting to learn more about it than I am, and they come home and tell me about it . . . So not only the kids are learning, the kids are also teaching the parents. (Alexa, Indigenous parent)

Others shared this perspective. Bella, an Indigenous parent, said, "I hardly have any language. My kid is starting to learn [in school]. He can count up to 35 in Cayuga; I can barely count to ten. He's teaching me." Fiona is a non-Indigenous mother whose husband and children identify as Indigenous. She enrolled her children into an Indigenous program offered by the school because "[she] can't teach [her] kids about who they are." The Indigenous program was helpful because her children shared what they learned with her, enabling them to "learn as a family."

Indigenous students may feel more comfortable and accepted in school when Indigenous Peoples, perspectives, and cultures are respectfully incorporated into teaching and learning. Caroline, an Indigenous educator, led Indigenous cultural programming at her school. She described an Indigenous boy who was distant at school, often sitting by himself and choosing not to engage with the other students. However, he became more engaged and felt more confident as a result of participating in the Indigenous focused program.

> Once he saw that the [non-Indigenous] kids had an interest in the things that we were talking about, the Talking Stick and the Corn Spirit, and I was bringing in some artifacts from home, that the kids were interested in that. Then I noticed he started wearing his necklace with his bear on it. And the kids were like, "Hey, what is that?" And then he said, "My uncle made it." So, little by little he's coming out of his shell and he's saying, "This is me, and I'm proud." (Caroline, Indigenous educator)

Interviewees described the positive experiences that Indigenous children had with the Indigenous-focused curriculum and school programs. They saw their culture celebrated as part of classroom learning, and they saw non-Indigenous students interested, excited, and engaged. According to interviewees, these experiences contributed to positive cultural identity among Indigenous students.

Many interviewees discussed the appropriateness of non-Indigenous educators teaching Indigenous-focused content. Indigenous interviewees were accepting of and open to non-Indigenous educators teaching about Indigenous Peoples, perspectives, and cultures. Importance was placed on the fact that material was taught in a respectful way, not on who was teaching it. Clara, an Indigenous educator, explained, "That's okay . . . they don't have to be Native to be able to share information that comes from that culture." She said, "There's a craving to know and understand more of Aboriginal culture and that's when it's time to teach and share that and explain." As she explained further:

> There's tons of non-Aboriginal people out there that just totally get it and understand, and it resonates with who they are as a human being because it feels right . . . Whether or not a person identifies or has knowledge of being First Nations, if it resonates with that person, that's okay for them to learn as much as they can and share it in a good way. You have to have people that can tell people it's okay; it's okay for you to know this and learn and understand it. But understanding it in a way that it's meant to be portrayed . . . whether they're Native or non-Native, it's about knowing and understanding and being able to share that with the people who want to learn. (Clara, Indigenous educator)

Educating non-Indigenous students. Indigenous and non-Indigenous interviewees saw embedding Indigenous cultural content in public schooling as "needed" in order to foster an understanding and awareness of Indigenous Peoples' worldviews, cultures, and histories among non-

Indigenous students in Canada. Andrew, an Indigenous parent and cultural consultant, explained that many non-Indigenous people are unaware of or misinformed about Indigenous issues. Andrew is often involved in cultural events and presentations in public schools; his experience has been that "9 out of 10 kids don't know what residential schools are." He said, "The biggest problem is that we're not educating the non-Aboriginal people about what happened."

A number of non-Indigenous parents believed that exposing their children to cultural diversity was part of their role as a parent. These parents saw Indigenous content in schooling as a means to help their children develop an "expanded worldview" (Patricia, non-Indigenous parent). Mya, a non-Indigenous parent, credited Indigenous content and programming in school with teaching her son to be more tolerant, empathetic, and respectful towards others.

> He's starting to realize that a lot of the ways that Aboriginals were treated historically has been not fair. I think it's helping his gradual development of empathy just to see the beauty of something and how it's so sad that we've done so much to stop that historically. (Mya, non-Indigenous parent)

Mya wants her son to understand "our role in the demise of the Native culture" because "we're not gonna prevent things like that in the future if we don't learn from our past mistakes." From another perspective, Arianna, a non-Indigenous mother, said it is "hugely important" for non-Indigenous children to learn about Indigenous Peoples in school. She said, "Given the horror that the Indigenous community has experienced, [she] really want[ed] [her] children to participate in all of the healing that has to happen." Further, non-Indigenous students shared what they learned about Indigenous Peoples with their parents, contributing to cultural awareness and understanding in the boarder community. Aaliyah, an Indigenous educator, said, "[They] have [non-Indigenous] parents that don't know about residential schools and [they] have students educating them; their kids are coming home and telling them about it."

Limiting and Encouraging Meaningful Implementation

Challenges that limit meaningful implementation. Indigenous curricular policy directives do not seem to have been implemented consistently or consistently implemented in a respectful and appropriate way. The majority of non-Indigenous educators interviewed were vaguely aware of the history of mistreatment and discrimination against Canada's Indigenous Peoples. A few described only recently learning about this. As one teacher stated, "I was so ignorant to it; why don't people know more? I can't believe that I didn't know" (Vivian, non-Indigenous teacher). There were similar levels of unawareness among non-Indigenous educator interviewees pertaining to knowledge and understanding of Indigenous cultures and worldviews which had a direct impact on their ability and willingness to implement Indigenous content in their teaching.

Many non-Indigenous educators remain uninformed about the Ontario Indigenous curriculum policy directives that were implemented in 2007. Referring to the official policy documents (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007), Elise, a non-Indigenous educator, claimed:

> The Ministry of Education came up with an Aboriginal curriculum. Nobody's ever opened it. Is it an Aboriginal curriculum? I'm not even sure what it's called. It's an actual separate curriculum

document. I've never actually even taken the initiative to use it and it was never pushed upon us to use that either. It's an Ontario curriculum document. So that's the sad part about it, right?

A number of other non-Indigenous educators interviewed shared her perspective.

Part of the reason that non-Indigenous educators are reluctant to incorporate Indigenous material in the classroom is because they are intimidated. Interviewees explained that educators are uncertain about what to teach and how, and they are unaware of how to access resources and utilize the Ontario Ministry of Education Indigenous-focused support documents.

> When other teachers talk about Indigenous stuff they have no idea where to get resources and who to talk to in their board about where they can find those resources. And even if they did, they're not sure how to implement it into their classroom. I've heard that so many times from teachers—The Ministry [of Education] has documents but they're so not friendly. It's like a teacher can't pick it up and go, "Oh, I get it." They need something that's tangible. (Jocelyn, Indigenous teacher)

Indigenous parents and educators recognized teachers' apprehension and described being "frustrated" either because non-Indigenous educators "fumble around, not knowing what to do" (Ryan, Indigenous teacher) or avoid Indigenous content altogether. As Jocelyn (Indigenous teacher) further explained:

> Teachers are still not touching it [content about Indigenous cultures and heritage]. I know because they tell me that . . . They just don't include it, so we still have children in this country going through the education system that don't have a clue. It's not just about educating our children; it's about creating a path that every child in Canada can have an understanding and perspective on the First People of this country.

Typical professional development raises awareness but does not necessarily change classroom practices. As one teacher pointed out, "Teachers have been to sensitivity training and PD [professional development] . . . but going to them and actually putting into practice what you've learned are two different things" (Caroline, Indigenous teacher). Further, Indigenous interviewees described feeling uncomfortable with ways that Indigenous Peoples are often portrayed at school: in stereotypical ways (e.g., "more primitive," wearing traditional dress), as being "extinct," and as being "people of the past." For example, Caitlyn is an Indigenous mother; she is also employed as a social worker by the school board. She explained that Indigenous cultures are often taught in the past tense and as if "obsolete."

> Oftentimes they present Aboriginal cultures as if they're something that's obsolete. Yes, it's happened in the past. But, "they used to go to powwows, they used to dance"—no, there's still a very active Aboriginal culture. (Caitlyn, Indigenous parent and social worker with the school board)

Sharing this perspective, Ryan, an Indigenous teacher, said, "As an Aboriginal person how are you supposed to progress when everybody thinks you don't exist because of what they're being taught or what they're reading in school?" Interviewees shared experiences where non-Indigenous teachers have misappropriated or incorrectly presented information about Indigenous Peoples and traditions to students. Non-Indigenous teachers commonly blend or lump traditions, practices, and ways of life from

a variety of different Indigenous groups into a single representation about Indigenous Peoples. This practice of making "blanket statements" or "Pan-Indianism" may be very offensive to some families.

Interviewees also expressed concerns that Indigenous language or cultural programs are not considered equal to other schooling programs. Paul identifies as Indigenous and is a high school teacher. He explained how Indigenous programs "aren't being recognized." Paul spoke about an Indigenous history course offered at his school. Students could enrol in the course and were expected to complete assigned work, but no course credit was associated.

> They can take it and do all that work but get no credit for it. Who's gonna take it? . . . You're already saying it has no value. You're doing systemic damage . . . Families and students aren't gonna treat it as an equal because it's not equal to begin with. (Paul, Indigenous teacher)

Paul also explained the drawbacks of schooling programs that are offered to Indigenous students only—these programs pull students out of class and "segregate" them. Paul advocated for inclusive programming where all Indigenous and non-Indigenous students learn about Indigenous culture and heritage together.

A strategy that encouraged meaningful implementation. One school board offered an educational program to students that focused on literacy learning though content based on Indigenous cultures, traditions, and teachings. The program ran for 3 weeks in the summer and targeted students in Grades 1, 2, and 3 (for detailed information about the program see Davies & Aurini, 2013; Davies, Aurini, Milne, & Jean-Pierre, 2015). Interviewees credited this initiative with enhancing the capacity of non-Indigenous educators to authentically embed Indigenous content into their teaching and for overcoming challenges noted above.

Interviewees identified key aspects of the program that were successful. First, the program maintained a model of learning integration. Program facilitators and educators authentically embedded Indigenous cultures, perspectives, and heritage into everyday learning, rather than into a theme or unit. Second, Indigenous educators and community members were directly involved in the development and creation of the program. Third, Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and teachers participated in the program. Fourth, mechanisms were put in place to support teaching staff that did not have an Indigenous background or an Indigenous educational background. Staff were provided with an in-service orientation day, as well as a mentor text designed specifically to organize and guide the program. The text included lessons and extension activities, big idea connections to existing curriculum, as well as background information and cultural context. Importantly, each school site had an "Indigenous coach" or Indigenous consultant on-site to support teachers as they integrated Indigenous cultural content into their classroom activities. Coaches were selected based on their intimate knowledge of Indigenous culture and history. This role involved working closely with teachers to support their learning about Indigenous culture and to ensure Indigenous content was authentically and appropriately embedded into the classroom.

Despite the fact that this kind of support was only available for the 3-week duration of the summer program, teachers described leaving the program feeling like they had the tools (such as resources to support learning and contacts including members of the Indigenous community who could provide

further guidance and information with schooling activities) to embed Indigenous content into their regular classroom teaching.

> As a result of my involvement with program planning, I had my students participate in an Aboriginal art unit. My students loved it and I already have it integrated into my planning for this school year. I now have more people to contact in the Aboriginal community that can come into my class and share their experiences and culture like Elders and music groups. Before this program, I would not have thought to contact anyone from the Aboriginal community. (Olivia, non-Indigenous teacher)

Non-Indigenous teachers described their experience with the summer program as eye opening, as many educators had little or no knowledge of Indigenous histories and cultures prior to the program. Many shared Olivia's perspective. Educators described now feeling more comfortable "jumping in" to the Indigenous schooling curriculum because they were able to ask questions and learn firsthand from experts. Bianca, a non-Indigenous educator, explained, "My comfort level has gone from a 2 to an 8! . . . This program certainly provided us with a wealth of knowledge and understanding of the Aboriginal culture!" Victoria, also a non-Indigenous educator, realized that she previously focused class instruction on "the injustices of their past rather than the positive aspects of the culture." Whereas now she intends to "focus more on integrating the more positive aspects of the culture like oral traditions, environmental stewardship, community teachings, and arts into the curriculum."

According to interviewees, what made the difference was the teacher support provided by the Indigenous coach. Having a knowledgeable expert on hand offering constant guidance created opportunities for teachers to learn about Indigenous cultures, worldviews, and heritage. It also allowed them to practice teaching Indigenous material in a "risk-free" environment. For Kaden, a non-Indigenous educator, having the Indigenous coach created an open environment for questions, explanations, and understanding, which led to "break[ing] down walls and mak[ing] teachers more comfortable." He believed the program provided a professional development experience for non-Indigenous educators that they would draw from throughout their careers.

Abby is an Indigenous educator and an Indigenous coach for the program. Similar to other coaches, she observed non-Indigenous educators gain more confidence in their ability to teach Indigenous content on their own during the course of the program.

> On the first day when they had to do it, they were a little apprehensive because they wanted to do it right . . . So I've been going into classes and doing the lessons. And little by little, I've been able to release a lot of that and they are taking more on . . . They started the Three Sisters [teaching] without me, which was nice, and I think they are more confident in what they're doing. (Abby, Indigenous educator)

Having the Indigenous coach gave non-Indigenous teachers what they needed: to acquire cultural sensitivity and understanding; to develop the capacity to authentically embed Indigenous cultural content into classroom instruction; and to gain confidence in their ability to continue embedding Indigenous content into their regular teaching practice during the school year. Non-Indigenous educators and students left the program with greater knowledge, awareness, and sensitivity regarding Indigenous cultures, histories, and perspectives.

Discussion

> The focus now has to turn to teaching the teachers how to teach Native curriculum. (Ryan, Indigenous teacher)

Through examining educator and parent perceptions of Indigenous curricular policy directives in Ontario public schools, key findings have emerged. First, participants in this study had positive experiences with Indigenous-focused schooling initiatives, and these initiatives were seen to benefit both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Schooling initiatives that include Indigenous knowledge, perspectives, and cultures are seen to have a positive impact on Indigenous students' educational experiences, Indigenous family and school relationships, and the creation of welcoming and meaningful schooling environments for Indigenous families (Kanu, 2002, 2006, 2007; Klump & McNeir, 2005; Kostenko & Merrotsy, 2009; Kovach, Carriere, Montgomery, Barrett, & Gilles, 2015; McKinley, Brayboy, & Castagno, 2009; Milne 2015, 2016; Whitley, 2014). For non-Indigenous students, Indigenous infused curriculum and schooling initiatives are seen as a mechanism to generate awareness of Indigenous cultures and perspectives, acceptance of cultural diversity, and to fight racism and prejudice (Direction Evidence and Policy Research Group, 2016; Okoye-Johnson, 2011; Segawa, 1994; UNESCO, 2003). Improved relationships between Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous Canadians may be a further benefit of non-Indigenous students learning about Indigenous Peoples.

Second, interviewees identified challenges to implementing Indigenous curricular policy. Findings suggest that there are large discrepancies between policy rhetoric and schooling reality (Labaree, 2010). Little understanding and knowledge of Indigenous Peoples and cultures, as well as the history of residential schooling, were common among the non-Indigenous educators interviewed. Educators may therefore teach Indigenous content incorrectly or avoid it altogether and, in the process, create barriers to Indigenous students, parents, and community members feeling comfortable in schools (Milne, 2015, 2016). Furthermore, non-Indigenous students may still go through their entire educational career without learning about Indigenous Peoples and the history and legacy of residential schooling in Canada. Wotherspoon (2006, 2008) also found that educators had varying responses to Indigenous oriented schooling reform. While some educators increased sensitivity to Indigenous students and wanted to implement change in curriculum content and instructional methods, other educators remained fixated on teaching their subject along a universal standard curriculum mandate and believed that all students should be treated the same (see also St. Denis, 2011).

The findings of this study suggest that Indigenous educational policy directives can benefit Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Therefore, it is recommended that curricula on Indigenous Peoples' cultures, traditions, perspectives, and histories be made a requirement for all students in primary and secondary schooling (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015a). In support of this effort, it is recommended that Indigenous curricular training is made a requirement for teaching certification and that professional development continues to be available. It is also recommended that mechanisms be put in place to ensure Indigenous content is being taught and is being taught in an authentic way.

Policy Recommendation

In line with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015a) Calls to Action, age-appropriate curriculum about Indigenous Peoples' cultures, traditions, perspectives, and histories (including residential schools or similar assimilative practices relevant to the schooling location), should be a requirement for all students in primary and secondary schooling. To support this effort, Indigenous curricular training should be made a requirement for teaching certification. Indigenous focused teacher training is needed during initial teacher education and through continued professional development opportunities. Further, mechanisms should be put in place to ensure Indigenous content *is* being embedded into schooling curriculum and that content *is* being taught in an authentic way.

This recommendation reflects existing Ontario education policy directives: "All students in Ontario will have knowledge and appreciation of contemporary and traditional First Nation, Métis, and Inuit traditions, cultures, and perspectives" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 7). However, based on my findings, implementation is inconsistent. In Ontario, 92% of provincially funded elementary and 96% of secondary schools have Indigenous students; yet, 51% of elementary and 41% of secondary schools offer no Indigenous education opportunities such as professional development for teachers or cultural support programs (Gallagher-Mackay, Kidder, & Methot, 2013). Training strategies have been implemented at the teacher candidate level (e.g., Mashford-Pringle & Nardozi, 2013), which should continue. However, based on my findings, strategies also need to be implemented in schools, on the ground, and with educators who are already teaching.

Informed by the effective schooling practices described above, I recommend that an "Indigenous itinerant teacher (IIT)" be implemented in elementary and secondary schools. The role of the IIT would parallel the role of literacy coaches, numeracy coaches, or English as a second language (ESL) teachers currently working within Ontario school boards in terms of providing teachers with guidance and coaching to learn how to effectively embed Indigenous content into their regular practice. The IIT would provide on the ground support for teachers as they navigate the curriculum and try to connect with Indigenous families and communities.

The IIT role could facilitate understanding and build teacher capacity. The significance and meaning of cultural concepts can be misunderstood by educators and therefore inappropriately conveyed to students during lessons. The IIT role would focus on building capacity in schools, vis-à-vis co-planning and co-teaching, modeling the curriculum, and coaching teachers on how to embed Indigenous perspectives and culture into lessons in a sensitive and authentic way. The IIT would ensure appropriate resources are available for educators (e.g., books, guest speakers and presenters from the local Indigenous community), answer questions, address misunderstandings, and ensure appropriate representation of Indigenous perspectives, cultures, and histories within classrooms and schools. The IIT would initiate and drive an Indigenous cultural awareness within the school (e.g., accessing books and materials that reflect the local Indigenous communities) and help teachers acquire the tools they need to integrate Indigenous culture into the existing classroom and school culture.

The IIT role has the potential to facilitate positive connections between the school and Indigenous families and communities to help support student's learning, as well as building on those relationships to include teaching and administrative school staff. For example, the IIT could work to establish

relationships with the Indigenous families in the school, inviting their participation in schooling and classroom activities. Part of the role of the IIT would also involve establishing connections between the school community and local Indigenous communities. For example, the IIT could create a roster of immediate and extended Indigenous family members in the school community and Indigenous community members willing to participate in school activities, cultural events and demonstrations, and/or to deliver culturally sensitive lessons or teachings.

I propose that implementing IIT in public schools would contribute to bridging policy rhetoric of cultural inclusion and schooling reality by providing the support needed to facilitate cultural awareness among non-Indigenous students and teachers, authentically embed Indigenous culture within school communities and teaching practices, and include Indigenous family and community in education.

Conclusion

The Ontario Ministry of Education has committed to Indigenous student success and has implemented initiatives to support student achievement, including embedding Indigenous content into the provincial curriculum. When implemented in a respectful and authentic way, findings suggest that incorporating Indigenous content into public schools has the potential to benefit Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students may not have opportunities to learn about Indigenous Peoples, perspectives, worldviews, cultures, and heritage outside of school. Among non-Indigenous students, Indigenous focused curricular initiatives contribute to increased awareness and understanding of Indigenous Peoples in the past and present, potentially leading to improved relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada. For Indigenous students, Indigenous parents may not have the personal ability or community connections to educate their children about their cultural backgrounds. Indigenous schooling initiatives may serve as an important resource for these families. The concept of "partial compensation" has been used to describe schools' ability to serve as "equalizers" by compensating for learning losses and different learning environments experienced outside of schools (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson 2001, 2007; Cooper, Nye, Charlton, Lindsay, & Greathouse, 1996; Davies & Aurini, 2013; Downey, von Hippel, & Broh, 2004). Schools may also have the potential to partially compensate in a different way by providing Indigenous focused learning opportunities that students may not have access to outside of schools.

Internationally, schooling policies, programs initiatives are being implemented to support academic achievement and outcomes among Indigenous students. Several countries have implemented regulations associated with culturally and linguistically appropriate education for Indigenous students (King & Schielmann, 2004). As noted by King and Schielmann (2004), Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, and Paraguay have constitutions that recognize their multicultural and multiethnic societies, and a few of these have established "intercultural bilingual education" (p. 22). The United States (United States Congress, 1990, 2006), Philippines (Congress of the Philippines, 1997), and Australia (Australian Government, 1989) have also implemented Indigenous educational reforms and legislation. In addition, Australia (Australian Education Council, 2015) and New Zealand (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2014; Pasifika Education, 2013) have implemented Indigenous education policies that articulate a commitment to the success of Indigenous students and culturally responsive education.

These efforts generate public awareness of school action, demonstrating that school systems are committing to the success of Indigenous students as well as demonstrating processes of change. However, it is also important to monitor processes of implementation. Research is needed to understand how Indigenous policy directives are being implemented at the various levels of school systems—school boards, schools, and classrooms—in order to understand how policies are being put into practice and potentially impacting student learning. The current article provides insight into how policy is being enacted in Ontario public schools. Questions remain: How are policies being interpreted and therefore implemented on the ground? What resources are needed to support meaningful and respectful implementation of Indigenous content into classrooms and schools? Additional research is needed to explore how Indigenous curricular policy directives are implemented in other locations and contexts in order to identify best practices.

Further, additional research is needed to examine how effective Indigenous focused curricular initiatives are and what is the best measure used to determine success or effectiveness. In their review of research literature on the influences of culture-based education on the academic performance of Indigenous students, Demmert and Towner's (2003) findings reaffirm the importance of including Indigenous languages and cultures in the education of Indigenous students. However, they point out that existing research tends to be qualitative and more quantitative research is needed. They also question whether it is "scientifically possible to show a direct connection between improved academic performance and culturally based education interventions" (p. 41).

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