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## “The Stranger and the Ancient Race”: Collective Responsibility in Educational Research

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## **“The Stranger and the Ancient Race”: Collective Responsibility in Educational Research**

### **Cover Page Footnote**

I (the author) would like to acknowledge and pay respect to the many Indigenous Elders, teachers, students, and community members from Treaty 6 and Treaty 10 Territories (traditional homelands of our First Nation, Métis, and Dene ancestors) who have so generously and with such grace shared their cultural processes and knowledge with me.

**“The Stranger and the Ancient Race”: Collective Responsibility in Educational Research**

Ancestors

Theirs were the voices of this land

They spoke in ancient tongue

They often spoke and were not heard

As if no meaning to their word

Where was justice way back then?

The heart beat faint

The spirit wept

We come full circle in this place

The stranger and the ancient race

Healing now

The heartbeat strong

The spirit sings

(Elder Jean Crane, 2014, p. 16)

Respecting Indigenous protocol, I will briefly introduce myself in order to situate myself in relation to my readers. I am a woman who was born in Saskatchewan, Canada and adopted into a family of European ancestry when I was seven days old. My adoptive mother left England to come to Saskatchewan in 1969 to work as a medical doctor during a shortage. To this writing, I bring my background as a scholar of Educational Psychology/Special Education, as well as my background in elementary/secondary school teaching (in Canada, and the Bahamas) and at the post-secondary level teaching pre-service/in-service educators in the area of Special Education. I

also bring my experiences as a non-Indigenous educator teaching in a remote northern Dene Nation in a western province in Canada.

During my time living in the north and working as a teacher and Director of Special Education, I witnessed first-hand how Indigenous populations were impacted by the Canadian education justice system. After moving south for medical reasons a special part of my heart remained with my Indigenous friends in the north. Upon pursuing my PhD, I was inspired by the voices of Indigenous teachers, parents and students who call for culturally responsive pedagogy, effective evidence-based teaching strategies, and appropriate assessment practices (Berryman et al., 2014; St. Denis, 2010). I felt that efforts to redress the legacy of residential schools could not ignore the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's<sup>1</sup> (TRC, 2015) Calls to Action to "...Improving education attainment levels and success rate...[and] Developing culturally appropriate curricula" (p. 2). However, taking up these Calls to Action (and working towards implementation) indeed necessitates complex conversations and collective responsiveness to past, present, and future challenges; including, as is the topic of this paper, within educational research.

Chief Barry Ahenakew was quoted in Christensen (2000) as stating, "Education is our buffalo. It is our new means of survival" (p. xi). This phrase has been used by Indigenous people to indicate the importance of education to their communities (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2008). However, Mombourquette and Bruised Head (2014) asked a significant question: "What should that buffalo look like?" (p. 107). A considerable amount of research calls for culturally responsive pedagogy and meaningful learning activities (e.g., Antone, 2003; Ball, 2010;

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<sup>1</sup> From 2008-2014 the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada documented the stories of thousands of residential school survivors. Released in June 2015, the final report included 94 Calls to Action: instructions to guide governments, communities, and faith groups towards reconciliation. The Calls to Action can be found at [http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls\\_to\\_Action\\_English2.pdf](http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf)

Berryman et al., 2014; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; St. Denis, 2010), but there are few research examples exploring what that actually looks like in the classroom.

Indigenous teachers interviewed by St. Denis (2010) expressed a need for Aboriginal curriculum and resources so that “we don’t flounder around” (p. 38). Cree scholar, Kovach (2009) discussed the importance of Aboriginal curriculum development stating that, “Curriculum makes space like nothing else I know in education. It can be a mighty tool of social justice for the marginalized” (p. 6). St. Denis’ (2010) participants also noted that, “in general, little is understood about what Aboriginal content and perspectives are, and how they can be effectively integrated” (p. 35). Wotherspoon (2008) found that teachers need adequate support when responding to curricular change; and that both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers “welcomed curricula demands though they were uncertain about the strategies best able to accommodate such demands” (p. 401). The participants in St. Denis’ (2010) study specified that an important step would be “to listen to and act upon the professional knowledge and experience of Aboriginal teachers” (p. 66). Thus, research is needed to record the voices of Indigenous teachers as they describe what the buffalo looks like in terms of effective curriculum and pedagogy for Aboriginal students. Sharing the findings of such research would honor Indigenous “values of respect, kindness, and giving back to the community” (Kovach, 2009, p. 140) so that it “can assist others” (Kovach, 2009, p. 11).

Ojibway scholar Struthers (2001) noted that historically non-Indigenous research in Indigenous communities was not “managed in a germane manner” (p. 127). According to Tuhiwai Smith (1999), “the word itself, ‘research,’ is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world’s vocabulary” (p. 1). However, Tuhiwai Smith’s (1999) writing on decolonizing methodologies maintained that decolonization “does not mean and has not meant a

total rejection of all theory or research or Western knowledge” (p. 39). Rather, “decolonizing methodologies draw from existing knowledge, working the cultural interface between Western and Aboriginal knowledges” (Bainbridge et al., 2013, p. 276). By working collaboratively with Indigenous teachers, non-Indigenous educational researchers must enter an *ethical space of engagement*:

The ‘ethical space’ is formed when two societies, with disparate worldviews, are poised to engage each other...The new partnership model of the ethical space, in a cooperative spirit between Indigenous peoples and Western institutions, will create new currents of thought...and overrun the archaic ways of interaction (Ermine, 2007, p. 193-194).

Styres, Zinga, Bennett and Bomberry (2010) noted that pursuing such a space is difficult, but of significant value:

Ethical space is sacred, spiritual, engaging, ambiguous, and challenging. It will simultaneously bring us to our knees in humility and raise us up to new heights of understanding and awareness in creating collaborative knowledge systems no longer based on colonialist notions of domination, power, control, and usury, but rather on mutuality, egalitarianism, shared knowledge, and a new way of relating (p. 645-646).

In focusing on collaboration between both Indigenous and non-Indigenous funds of knowledge we can move towards “finding an equitable balance and braiding together the knowledges” (Styres & Zinga, 2013b, p. 290) in order to find strength-based solutions. As non-Indigenous educational researchers working in Indigenous contexts we must recognize that we are outside of the Aboriginal colonized experience. Styres and Zinga (2013) recommend that “researchers willingly and humbly place themselves in the role of non-expert and allow the community to be the experts” (p. 302). We must seek to be an “allied other” (Denzin, 2007, p.

457), valuing Indigenous knowledge systems and “playing a facilitating role in linking these systems with scientific knowledge” (Bainbridge et al., 2013, p. 278).

Indigenous scholar Battiste (2007) noted that a critical aspect of research with Aboriginal people is maintaining a high level of ethical responsibility in ensuring that Indigenous knowledges and people are not exploited. The Aboriginal Capacity and Research Development Environment programs established within many Canadian provinces proposed the incorporation of Kirkness and Barnhardt’s (1991) four ‘R’s – Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, and Responsibility – for developing academic initiatives with Indigenous people (Ball & Janyst, 2008). The emphasis is on the need for research that, “*respects* them for who they are, that is *relevant* to their view of the world, that offers *reciprocity* in their relationships with others, and that helps them exercise *responsibility* over their own lives” (Kirkness & Barhardt, 1991, p. 1). Styres and Zinga (2013) included an additional ‘R’, that of ‘Relationship’; “Relationships are fundamental because respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility are grounded in an understanding and acknowledgment of interconnected relationships and are expressed through those relationships” (p. 293). Additionally, Styres (2008) advocated exploring one’s own research intentions using Bishop and Glynn’s (1999) power-sharing model which examines the research/er on five points: Initiation (e.g., whose interests is the research promoting?), benefits (e.g., who gains directly from the research?), representation (e.g., whose reality/stories are privileged in the research?), legitimization (e.g., whose reality/experiences/stories are legitimized by the research?), and accountability (e.g., to whom is the researcher accountable?).

In interpreting and applying the ethics framework for work in Indigenous contexts the Government of Canada (2015), via their tri-council (CIHR, SSHRC, NSERC)<sup>2</sup> research policy, outlined that, “research should be relevant to community needs and priorities” (Mutual Benefits in Research, para. 1); and to “have the potential to produce valued outcomes from the perspective of the community and its members” (Mutual Benefits in Research, para. 2). The tri-council policy further delineates *reciprocity* (mutuality of knowledge giving and receiving, emphasis placed on a co-creation model), *community* (places, land-based communities, thematic communities, communities of practice), and *respect/relevance/contribution* (identify/respect relevant community research protocol/goals/contributions) within the *Key Concepts for the Merit Review of Aboriginal Research* (Government of Canada, 2016). Educational researchers must respectfully work with Indigenous teachers, and their communities, to co-produce knowledge that is culturally relevant and pertinent to community needs and priorities. Co-creation of knowledge will occur “within traditional knowledge systems; collaboratively rebuilding or revitalizing processes that have been displaced or replaced; and/or codeveloping new processes, based on the community’s expressed interest” (Government of Canada, 2016, Key Concepts for the Merit Review of Aboriginal Research, para. 4).

Mellor and Corrigan (2004) noted that there has been “a relative silencing of Indigenous voice in the research literature” (p. 49). Due to colonial history, including unethical research, it is understandable that First Nation communities are hesitant to engage in it. A recent conversation with an individual on a Treaty Education Council revealed the extent of reluctance, well-founded indeed, with the result being no access (personal communication, June 13, 2018). However, in

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<sup>2</sup> The tri-council refers to the Government of Canada’s three federal research funding agencies: Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), and the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC).



order to implement the Calls to Action, effectively braid together Indigenous and non-Indigenous funds of knowledge, and ensure Indigenous voices are heard, educational research is needed. It is essential that the research be guided by the words of the Elders who say, “that if it comes from the heart and is done in a good way, our work will count” (Kovach, 2009, p. 8).

There are many interwoven and complex issues which contribute to the “identified educational achievement gaps” (TRC, 2015, p. 2) between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students such as colonization, forced assimilation, loss of traditional language, removal from the family and placement in residential schools (Battiste, 2013). However, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples<sup>3</sup> (1996) revealed that, “despite the painful experiences Aboriginal people carry with them from formal education systems, they still see education as the hope for the future, and they are determined to see education fulfill its promise” (p. 434). It is imperative that we take up the TRC’s (2015) Calls to Action, recognizing the complexity of the process of implementation and effectively, respectfully engage and move forward. Cree researcher, Kovach (2005) noted that research involves a collective responsibility and accountability: “we can only go so far before we see a face – our Elder cleaning fish, our sister living on the edge in East Vancouver...our little ones in foster care - and hear a voice whispering, ‘Are you helping us?’” (p. 31). It is my desire as a non-Indigenous teacher and educational researcher, an ‘allied other’, to genuinely respond: “Yes! Please tell me how! I’m listening!”

...We come full circle in this place

The stranger and the ancient race

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<sup>3</sup> Established in 1991, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) was a commission of inquiry which investigated the relationship between Indigenous Peoples, the Government of Canada, and Canadian society. The final report, published in 1996, set out a 20-year agenda for implementing recommended changes to the problems that have challenged these relationships. The RCAP can be found at <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/aboriginal-heritage/royal-commission-aboriginal-peoples/Pages/final-report.aspx>

Healing now

The heartbeat strong

The spirit sings

(Elder Jean Crane, 2014, p. 16)

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