3 practices promote intercultural understanding in Canada

BY DENISE HEPPNER

From 2008 to 2014, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada documented the stories of thousands of Indigenous residential school survivors. Released in 2015, the final report included 94 Calls to Action: instructions to guide governments, communities, and faith groups towards reconciliation.

Several of these Calls to Action are related to education, including asking that teachers engage in professional learning on how to integrate Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into classrooms and building student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

In Saskatchewan, teachers are guided by educational policy that envisions placing Indigenous knowledge systems, cultures, and languages at the

foundation of our structures, policies, and curricula to create a system that is equitable and inclusive, benefiting all learners (Government of Saskatchewan, 2018).

Educators see the importance of this vision and genuinely work toward this goal. However, non-Indigenous teachers remain uncertain about how to do this within their classrooms. Some comments from a recent professional learning opportunity for educators are revealing: "As someone who is not Indigenous, I don't feel like I can teach the content fairly. I'm not educated enough — how can I educate our youth? I'm trying!" "I don't know how to do it!" "I don't understand!"

Saskatchewan teachers are not alone. Research shows that teachers across Canada feel unprepared to incorporate Indigenous content and perspectives into the classroom (Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2015). The challenge is that when people feel uncomfortable and intimidated, they may choose not to engage in it at all. As a result, Indigenous children don't see themselves reflected in their classrooms, and non-Indigenous children don't learn about this land's first — and continuing — inhabitants.

This is vulnerable work, requiring both personal and professional learning. What follows are three transformative concepts — two from Indigenous cultures — that I, as a non-Indigenous educator, found useful in my own learning as well as guiding the learning of teachers and school-based leaders. These concepts created a shift in thinking and practice.

1.

WAYFINDING

Wayfinding refers to the various ways in which people orient themselves in physical space and how they navigate from place to place. This term has been expanded to encompass the idea that we can adopt the spirit of wayfinding as we navigate cultures that are not our own.

Disorientation is a common occurrence as we enter unfamiliar locations or experiences. It can be uncomfortable and even scary as we might feel lost during such moments. There might be mistakes, confrontations, apologies, clarifications, and reorientations, but navigating the journey of getting lost and finding our way is a process.

Wayfinding encourages continuous reorientation for effective teaching and a deeper connection with students. Being lost involves struggle and growth. It "is not a location; it is a transformation" (Gonzales, 2003), one that assists us in finding our way.

Modeling this stance while leading professional learning has led to deep conversations around feeling lost, vulnerability, and a growth mindset. Embracing challenges and taking risks in adopting a growth mindset is inherently messy.

The twists and turns of this nonlinear learning process contribute to personal development. To thrive, one must get comfortable with being uncomfortable, as discomfort signals the expansion of one's knowledge boundaries, fostering innovation and self-improvement.

After exploring the concept of wayfinding, teachers have reported feeling a notable shift in that they are willing to consider taking more risks and adopting an inquiry stance alongside their students. This transformation is marked by an increasing understanding that as teachers it's OK to admit when we don't know or might be wrong.

For example, one teacher assumed the role of learner alongside her students when an Indigenous Knowledge Keeper led the class through stretching and fleshing a moose hide. She said,

"Knowing the journey and honoring this sacrifice of this animal, tracing the veins with my finger, has stirred something deep. I am so excited to continue this journey and learn alongside some inspiring and humble humans."

A collaborative learning environment that allows vulnerability and humility contributes to a more enriching learning environment, enhances teacher-student relationships, and fosters a culture of adaptability and lifelong learning.

2.

TWO-EYED SEEING

Mi'kmaq Elder Albert Marshall coined the term *two-eyed seeing* as a model for education and a guiding principle for cross-cultural collaboration. "Two-eyed seeing is to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous ways of knowing, and from the other eye with the strengths of Western ways of knowing, and to use both of these eyes together" for the benefit of all (Hatcher & Bartlett, 2010).

In working with Indigenous educators, I have learned that two-eyed seeing is a type of cultural humility. By engaging in the process of self-reflection, I humbly acknowledged myself as a learner when it came to understanding the experiences of my Indigenous colleagues. In recognizing personal and systemic biases and strengths, we can move toward an educational system that honors the diverse teaching and knowledge foundations of both Western and Indigenous societies.

Two-eyed seeing asks that Western and Indigenous ways of knowing work together as eyes do in binocular vision, but, depending on the situation, we can choose to call on the strengths of one or the other. This requires an understanding of the core differences between worldviews to achieve respectful relationships and cultural harmony.

Marshall explains, "We need teachers who can weave back and forth between the knowledges" (Hatcher & Bartlett, 2010), and that successful cultural border crossing requires flexibility, critical thinking, and self-reflection.

Intercultural understanding and cultural competence begin with each of us. As a non-Indigenous educator, I must make a conscious decision to do what is necessary to obtain multiple perspectives, persevering through a sometimes disconcerting feeling of two-eyed seeing.

During a recent K-12 professional learning event on culturally responsive pedagogy for integrating Indigenous perspectives into classroom practice in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, teachers explored the concept of knowledge coexistence.

The goal is not to replace their Western thought or inherent culture but instead to create a learning environment in which both Indigenous and Western perspectives can exist in mutually respectful and inclusive relationships, where both are honored and valued in the classroom.

The educators were relieved that no one was asking them to rewrite their entire curriculum. Instead, they were encouraged to develop a habit of mind where the integration of Indigenous perspectives became a consistent part of their planning, resource collection, and teaching.

3.

CULTURAL INTERFACE

Australia's Indigenous scholar, Martin Nakata (2007), established the concept of the cultural interface, where two knowledge systems converge. According to the Regional Aboriginal Education Team (2024), at the surface levels of academic knowledge, there are only differences across cultures; however, common ground and innovation are found at higher levels of knowledge, not the *content* for example, but the *process* of learning.

The findings from my doctoral research in this area reveal that Indigenous pedagogies work in a complementary way with Western teaching methods. For example, scaffolded literacy instruction, beginning with teacher modeling with a gradual shift to student self-directed learning, overlaps with Indigenous ways of learning involving a balance of social support and autonomy.

The Regional Aboriginal Education Team (2024) highlights the reconciling potential of the cultural interface and envisions it as a calm, safe space for bringing teachers into cross-cultural conversations and understandings. When engaging in professional learning about the overlap between some Western and Indigenous pedagogies, many educators feel reassured: "I'm not doing it all wrong — I'm already using some of these teaching strategies!"

A useful starting point for educational reform is recognizing the similarities between Indigenous and Western systems of knowledge, rather than focusing on their differences (Battiste, 2002). Educators can start with what they know and are comfortable with and add new pedagogies as they incorporate them into their understanding and teaching repertoire.

For example, oral storytelling forms the foundation for much traditional Indigenous teaching and learning. One teacher said he embeds story into each unit as a source of knowledge and understanding and has extended this to his math class using Math Catcher, an initiative through Simon Fraser University that uses Indigenous imagery and storytelling to engage students in math and science (Simon Fraser University, n.d.).

ALIGNED WITH STANDARDS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Applying the three transformative concepts of wayfinding, two-eyed seeing, and the cultural interface in professional learning aligns with the

Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022).

The Equity Practices standard is reflected when educators understand and activate students' historical, cultural, and societal contexts and embrace those assets through instruction.

The Equity Drivers standard guides educators to create more equitable learning environments when building knowledge "about how to demonstrate understanding and affirm each person's identity and contribution." This standard supports reflection on how learners' backgrounds and experiences impact teaching, learning, and culture.

Educators address the Equity Foundations standard when establishing expectations for equity and create structures to ensure equitable access to learning. Integrating Western and Indigenous cultural ways of knowing contributes to these equity-affirming educational practices.

Wayfinding, two-eyed seeing, and cultural interface encourage identification and examination of our own biases and beliefs. They are a means to explore and understand students' historical and cultural contexts and assist us in creating structures to ensure equitable access to learning for all of our students.

Teachers' daily work of translating these concepts into their practices with students benefits all learners and contributes to nourishing an education system that includes intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect. Much can be gained through integrating intercultural understanding into our schools and, even more importantly, into the hearts and minds of all those who live on this land.

REFERENCES

Battiste, M. (2002). *Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy in First Nations education: A literature review with recommendations*. National Working Group on Education and the Minister of Indian Affairs, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada.

Canadian Teachers' Federation. (2015). *CTF survey on teachers' perspectives on Aboriginal education in public schools in Canada: Summary report*. Author.

Gonzales, L. (2003). *Deep survival: Who lives, who dies, and why*. Norton.

Government of Saskatchewan. (2018). *Inspiring success: First Nations and Metis PreK-12 education policy framework*. www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/education-and-learning/first-nations-and-metis-education#inspiring-success

Hatcher, A. & Bartlett, C. (2010, May). Two-eyed seeing: Building cultural bridges for Aboriginal students. *Canadian Teacher Magazine*, 14-17.

Learning Forward. (2022). *Standards for Professional Learning*. Author.

Nakata, M. (2007). The cultural interface. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education, 36*, Supplement, 7-14.

Regional Aboriginal Education Team. (2024). *Interface theory*. www.8ways.online/interface-theory

Simon Fraser University. (n.d.). *Math catcher: About*. www.sfu.ca/mathcatcher/about.html

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action*. trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf

•

Denise Heppner (Denise.heppner@stf.sk.ca) is associate director of professional learning for the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation.