

# Digital Narratives as a Means of Shifting Settler-Teacher Horizons toward Reconciliation

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## Abstract

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's *Calls to Action* report (2015), in the section "Education for Reconciliation" (p. 7, #62–63), calls for the integration of Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into the curriculum and for better preparation of teachers to deliver Indigenous content. Settler-teachers, however, have not been adequately prepared for this mission, nor are they well-prepared to teach Indigenous students. This article discusses a project of dual purpose in support of reconciliation: to give Indigenous students the opportunity to represent their Land-based dogsledding experiences as iMovie digital narratives and to give settler-teacher candidates direct experience for relationship-building in an indigenized context of education. Drawing upon theories of settler-colonialism, decolonization, and reconciliation in education, the article illustrates the imperative of immersing settler-teachers into contexts where Indigenous students

self-representing their identities and Indigenous knowledge are at the centre of the curriculum.

*Keywords:* Indigenous education, digital storytelling, education-for-reconciliation, pre-service teacher education, settler-colonialism

## Résumé

Le rapport *Appel à l'action* (2015) de la Commission de vérité et réconciliation, dans la section « L'éducation pour la réconciliation » (p. 9, n<sup>os</sup> 62 -63) demande l'intégration des connaissances et des méthodes d'enseignement autochtones dans les salles de classe et une meilleure formation des enseignants sur la façon d'intégrer du contenu autochtone. Les enseignants qui sont des descendants de colons de peuplement ne sont toutefois pas préparés adéquatement pour cette mission ni pour enseigner à des élèves autochtones. Cet article discute d'un projet qui poursuit deux objectifs dans le cadre de la réconciliation : donner à des élèves autochtones la chance de présenter leur vécu par rapport au traîneau à chiens grâce au logiciel iMovie et offrir à des candidats à l'enseignement non autochtones l'occasion d'établir des liens dans un contexte éducatif autochtone. S'inspirant des théories du colonialisme de peuplement, de la décolonisation et de la réconciliation, l'article illustre l'impérieuse nécessité d'immerger les enseignants descendants de colons de peuplement dans des contextes où des élèves autochtones représentant leurs identités et leurs connaissances autochtones occupent la place centrale dans le programme.

*Mots-clés :* éducation autochtone, récits sous format numérique, éducation pour la réconciliation, la formation à l'enseignement, colonialisme de peuplement

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## Introduction

Within Canadian education systems, Indigenous<sup>1</sup> students and their families are regularly silenced, marginalized, or failed by institutions that reproduce settler–colonial relations<sup>2</sup> through Eurocentric curriculum, texts, and teaching methods (Battiste, 2013; Canadian Council on Learning, 2009; Richards & Scott, 2009). Most non-Indigenous settler-teachers have very limited knowledge of the history of Indigenous–non-Indigenous relations, treaty and traditional rights, Indigenous knowledge, and current issues impacting Indigenous communities (Godlewska, Moore, & Bednasek, 2010), especially Land-based and resource extraction issues (Korteweg & Russell, 2012). This entrenched ignorance of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) peoples in mainstream settler education is a critical issue that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) highlighted in its *Calls to Action* report (June 2015), in a special section on education entitled, “Education for Reconciliation” (p. 7, #62–63). The TRC calls for teachers to be supported to “integrate Indigenous Knowledge and teaching methods into classrooms” (62.ii) as well as promote “student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy and mutual respect” (63.iii). This support is particularly important for settler-teachers who are not adequately prepared for this mission, and it can be achieved by having teacher candidates engage in relationships with Indigenous students and their communities as sources of knowledge and contributors to an indigenized curriculum.

Settler-colonial ignorance in education is prevalent to such a degree that Godlewska, Moore, and Bednasek (2010) refer to it as “cultivated ignorance” or an ignorance that has been taught, learned, and embedded in the curriculum. Many settler-teachers are “perfect strangers” to their FNMI students (Dion, 2009), in that they do not know who their students are, claiming innocence while reproducing the mainstream of settler-colonialism in their teaching and curriculum (Madden, Higgins, & Korteweg, 2013; Iseke, 2009). As settler-teachers and teacher educators, we have had to challenge our own “cultivated ignorance” and come to terms with the ways in which our teaching practices in the past

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1 Several related terms describe Indigenous peoples as those who live on their ancestral lands, since time immemorial. “Aboriginal” is the Canadian government’s official term for Indigenous peoples in Canada, including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. In this article, we use these terms interchangeably.

2 Very generally, “settlers” are those people living in Canada who are not Indigenous to this land, or whose ancestors came from elsewhere.

have reproduced colonial myths in the classroom. Our own decolonizing journey is filled with moments of uncertain stumbling, conscious humility, and ongoing deep learning.

Many teacher education programs are now responding to these chronic problems by adding a mandatory course on Aboriginal education or leaving the choice of an Aboriginal education course as an elective add-on credit (see Nardozi, Restoule, Broad, Steele, & James, 2014). Another problem is requiring unprepared settler-teacher-educators to include Indigenous education as an additional or “integrated” component to their course syllabus, often in the subjects of history and social studies (den Heyer, 2009). What is clear is that most settler-teachers are ill-equipped before, during, and after their teacher training programs to recognize Indigenous cultural identity as the foundation for indigenizing curriculum and educating for Indigenous student resilience and greater academic engagement (Battiste, 2013; Tupper, 2011; Kanu, 2011; Riley & Ungerleider, 2012; Schick & St. Denis, 2005).

At the same time, Indigenous youth report being regularly misunderstood, stereotyped, and targeted by racism and ongoing settler-colonialism in schools, often leading to attrition and lower school performance (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009; Hare & Pidgeon, 2011). Concurrently, however, many students are still able to recognize that they draw strength from their communities, families, cultural traditions, and Indigenous knowledge to define who they are (Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, 2014; Hare & Pidgeon, 2011; Parent, 2011). As a result, Indigenous youth experience deep frustration trying to navigate mainstream, or settlerstream, schools while simultaneously struggling to communicate knowledge, perspectives, and cultural strengths within Eurocentric classrooms and curriculum (see Battiste, 2013).

Donald (2012) describes this divisional clash in education between Indigenous peoples and settler Canadians through the analogy of the colonial fort. Within the fort, settler Canadians are centred and normalized while Indigenous peoples and knowledge systems are marginalized to the periphery of settlerstream society, outside the fort’s palisade. As Donald states, “The overriding assumption at work in this logic is that Aboriginal peoples and Canadians inhabit separate realities. The intention is to deny relationality” (p. 91). The vast majority of Canadian settler-teachers live and think within the discursive walls of this metaphorical curricular fort, where they have little knowledge or experience to relate to Indigenous students and Indigenous ways of knowing. Donald

(2012) argues that defying colonial logics “requires ecological imagination, or the ability to see oneself related to and implicated in the lives of others” (p. 106).

Dion (2009) and Strong-Wilson (2007) have demonstrated how settler-teachers can reframe their relationship with Indigenous peoples and cultures in a more relational manner by emphasizing a shared narrative of humanity and braided history. This decolonizing process for relationality can encourage settler-teacher decolonization; however, there needs to be a tandem effort to indigenize the curriculum and liberate school space for what Tupper and Cappello (2008) term “un/usual narratives,” those perspectives and narratives of Indigenous communities that are normally absent from settlerstream education, or missing in “the ways...teachers enact curricular documents...in the tacit and overt reproduction of dominant cultural norms” (p. 567). A valuable approach to guiding teachers toward a relational ethicality (Donald, 2012; Wilson, 2008)—where they become more committed and supportive in building relationships with Indigenous students, communities, and cultures—is to engage Indigenous first-person narratives and representations as normalized (usual) teaching, rather than relying on distant (removed), third-party (abstracted), or textbook (settler-biased) non-Indigenous representations of FNMI peoples as curriculum. This is critical within teacher education in this era of the TRC’s calls for education-for-reconciliation, when many new settler-teachers still believe that they have had limited-to-no interactions with Indigenous students or remain ignorant of Indigenous peoples’ cultural identities, treaty and traditional rights, as well as Canada’s own history of colonization and residential schools.

Through the process of building relationships, settler-teachers can come to realize that their “horizon is not a rigid frontier, but something that moves with one and invites one to advance further” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 217). Similar to the work of Strong-Wilson (2007), we found that the process of coming-to-know the stories of Indigenous peoples prompted settler-teacher candidates to shift horizons in a way that simultaneously decolonized their perceptions and allowed them to believe that better relationality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians is possible and achievable in their own classrooms. As Tupper and Cappello (2008) explain, one possible mechanism for achieving this shift is the use of un/usual narratives that can “work to fill in the blanks left by dominant narratives, nuancing those privileged stories, raising questions about the claims to veracity and the tacit consent of an impartial approach to knowledge” (p. 570). We, as settler-teacher educators, agree and argue for the imperative of shifting settler-teachers

toward a pedagogy of reconciliation and put forward an approach of immersing settler-teacher candidates in Indigenous contexts of education where relationships are directly experienced with FNMI students who self-represent and determine the Indigenous knowledge of the curriculum.

### **Digital Storytelling as Relationship Building**

Engaging pre-service teachers through a collaborative project in which Indigenous students generate digital narratives provides one promising practice for incorporating unusual narratives into settlerstream education. Approaches such as student-generated digital stories can be especially powerful because they build on the capacities, interests, and resources of students. German (2013) argues that strength-based practices, which employ a narrative approach, can be particularly successful because “narratives are reflective of the culture’s social beliefs and, therefore, can represent and shape reality and the sense of identity.... Our experience of life is mediated through the stories that we tell, and that are told, about who we are” (p. 77).

Indigenous student-generated digital narratives that highlight students’ sensibilities (perspectives and voices) and capabilities (technological skills) can also offer the curricular means to express pride in students’ rich cultural and community backgrounds, allowing them to take control of how their own stories are represented. By extension, multimodal digital projects focusing on strength-based expressions of Indigenous student identity can become indigenizing tools for resilient education, allowing the development of stronger relationality between settler-teachers and Indigenous students.

Creating spaces in curriculum for student voice and responding in a receptive manner can aid settler-teachers in developing personal connections with Indigenous students and open opportunities for intercultural dialogue to inform their teaching and better meet the needs of Indigenous students. Godlewska and colleagues (2010) state, “Many Aboriginal people are desperately trying to communicate with Canadians. How do we open our minds to listen and learn” (p. 437)? In light of the TRC’s Calls to Action (2015), it is imperative that settler-teachers begin to recognize that many Indigenous students (and their families/communities) are trying to communicate Indigenous stories and knowledge systems that have always been contributing to Canadian society. The

question remains as to how teacher educators can best support new teachers to dismantle their colonial-fort logics (Donald, 2012) and to create curricular contexts and experience meaningful spaces where Indigenous students gain confidence that they will be heard and valued in schools. With these goals in mind, we designed a study of dual purpose: to give Indigenous students the opportunity to represent their Land-based knowledge as iMovie digital narratives, and to give settler-teacher candidates direct experience for relationship-building in an indigenized context where First Nation culture is centred and students determine the representations of the curriculum in their first-person voice. Through this design we sought to answer the specific research questions: How can settler-teachers use multimedia expression to shift their horizons in order to better understand and support the resilient identities and academic potential of Indigenous youth? And, what can these youth teach non-Indigenous educators about Indigenous identity and self-determination in schools and Canadian society in order to work toward transforming education?

## Project Design

In the design of the project, we sought to enable and capture two simultaneous and intertwined processes: (1) facilitating first-person digital multimodal expressions of identity and resilience by Indigenous students through the use of iMovie technology, and (2) understanding how settler-teacher-candidate perceptions of FNMI student identity can be informed by these narratives within new curricular spaces. We wove these research goals together through a digital iMovie project for Grade 11 Indigenous students to document their learning and understandings from a six-week Land-based dogsledding unit, facilitated and assisted by three settler-teacher candidates fulfilling their service learning or practicum requirement for a specialized BEd Honours course entitled *Indigenizing Perspectives and Practices in Education (IPPE)*.

With these goals at the forefront of the study's design, we combined two research methodologies: photovoice and teacher research. Photovoice methodology uses visual images as a catalyst for the sharing of first-person narratives. It was established by Wang and Burris (1997) and conceptualized as a means to ensure that researchers and participants work more collaboratively as partners. Photovoice facilitates the inclusion of participant voices in the design and focus of the research. Wang, Yi, Tao, and Carovano

(1998) explain that when participants are engaged in “sharing and talking about their photographs, they use the power of the visual image to communicate their life experiences, expertise and knowledge” (p. 1). Photovoice methodology is culturally responsive and flexible enough to contribute to our study’s first principle of decolonizing research (see Smith, 1999; Tuck & Yang, 2012). As Tuck and Yang (2012) caution, “decolonization is not a metaphor” (p.1). If we are to uphold this principle, we must be willing to acknowledge the uncomfortable truths of colonization and relinquish the power and control typically associated with the position of “researcher” by actively working to create a situation where Indigenous students are able to self-determine their own representations and ongoing participation in ways that may or may not adhere to our expectations. Photovoice enabled the study to be guided by representations authored by Indigenous student participants and the interpretations proceed *with* the participants, rather than *on* them (see SSHRC, 2015).

We employed iPad technology, specifically the iMovie app, as the photovoice medium, similar to the digital storytelling methods used by Couros and colleagues (2013) and Lundby (2009). This approach allowed students to embed photographic images, video, text, and audio components into their storytelling, creating a space where students were free to express their first-person narratives with the content that they controlled and in a manner that conveyed resilient identities, beginning with the very act of self-determining their narratives as curriculum.

The use of teacher research methodology was most appropriate to help us examine our own settler-teacher experiences as teacher-educators with the experiences of our teacher candidates working alongside us in the First Nation classroom. Klehr (2012) explains that “teacher inquiry diverges from most other forms of educational research in that teaching and researching are actively intertwined and conducted at the same time” (p. 123). Moreover, teacher research was able to speak to our dual identities as teacher-researchers, working to prepare teacher candidates for classroom practice, while researching our candidates and ourselves as settler-educators decolonizing pedagogy and shifting toward “education-for-reconciliation” (TRC, 2015).

Our study was a small-scale teacher education project that took place in an urban First Nation–majority high school with five students enrolled in an Ontario Grade 11 “healthy living” course. The study’s small sample size resulted from the course occurring during the second semester in a school with overall low enrolment. This group of students



was selected because their classroom teacher had already worked with Lisa Korteweg and settler-teacher candidates who had taken the BEd course *Indigenizing Perspectives and Practices in Education (IPPE)* to pilot and implement a Land-based unit of dogsledding in the fall semester. Furthermore, the class was chosen as part of an ongoing partnership with the school and in consultation with the principal who, in collaboration with the school board, approved all aspects of the study. During the winter semester and research study period, students were asked to consider identity or character, teamwork processes, leadership and personal development as the learning objectives for the dogsledding unit. The unit involved six day sessions in a rural dog yard where a dogsledding instructor (professional musher) provided technical instruction to the students as well as related cultural knowledge gained from Elders and Indigenous knowledge holders. An additional six sessions occurred in the classroom, when iPad technology was used as the writing tool for the students' culminating task, a digital-visual essay or iMovie in which the students narrated their reflections and newly gained knowledge from their dogsledding experiences. Classroom activities and assignments were co-designed with the classroom teacher at each stage and each week of the project. The Indigenous students were not required to participate in the study in order to experience the Land-based activities and all students were provided with alternative assignment formats if they did not wish to produce an iMovie.

Several teacher candidates participated in the larger dogsledding project while three settler-teacher candidates (Amy, Stacy, and Lesley)<sup>3</sup> were present in the classroom during the development of the Indigenous students' multimedia iPad projects. Initially these settler-teacher candidates were present only to support the Indigenous students; however, as a result of the small class size, an impromptu decision was made during the first classroom session that the settler-teacher candidates would also develop their own iMovies. These three teacher candidates eagerly participated in the study because they were required to complete 36 hours of service learning in Indigenous contexts of education as part of their enrollment in the specialized IPPE course, though participation in the study was not mandatory for these hours. Participation in this research project was primarily understood as valuable by these teacher candidates for fulfilling the service learning hours; however, they often described how lucky they considered themselves to have

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3 All participant names used in this article are pseudonyms.

the extra opportunity to work in an Indigenous majority context of education where they could engage in direct relationship-building with First Nation students.

## Data Collection and Analysis Methods

Data collection of the teacher candidates was ongoing in the form of field note observations, recorded during sessions at the high school, as well as elicited during the individual open-ended interviews (three interviews in total). We asked the teacher-candidates to discuss their developing understandings of Indigenous students' strength-based identities, ways to engage these identities in the classroom, and the effectiveness of the iMovie activities to give teacher candidates a greater understanding of the students' Indigenous knowledge and cultural resilience as curriculum.

Data collected from the Indigenous students included their completed digital narratives, their comments during the six sessions as well as their contributions to a sharing circle that was conducted at the closing of the dogsledding unit, after the celebratory screening of all the digital iMovies. One student chose not to complete a digital iMovie, while another student only partially finished her iMovie due to personal circumstances.

All sources of data were analyzed using Atlas.Ti qualitative software and coded for the following emergent themes: (1) Indigenous student self-representation, (2) demonstration of knowledge, (3) record of personal strength, (4) collaboration, and (5) reciprocal authentic relationship. Each of these themes revealed information central to understanding the main purpose of this study: building relationships with Indigenous students and shifting the understandings of settler-teacher candidates through first-person multi-modal representations of Indigenous cultural identity. We refer to these themes as five relational *bridges* because they provide insights into how and why digital technologies implemented in the classroom can work toward the goal of decolonizing settlerstream education, disrupting and shifting settler-teacher perceptions, and bridging the divides between settler education and Indigenous students' cultures, worldviews, and identities.

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## Findings: Five Relational Bridges

### Bridge 1: Student Self-Representation

As the data were examined and analyzed, one of the key findings was how the digital narratives allowed Indigenous student participants to be in control of their own self-representations, an essential disruption to settlerstream curriculum that frequently misrepresents and/or stereotypes Indigenous peoples through inappropriate media or non-Indigenous authored texts (Iseke, 2009). The digital narratives authored by the Indigenous students revealed how responsive and flexible digital technologies are as tools for putting the multimodal means and authorial control of self- and cultural representations into the hands of the youth. For example, some of the Indigenous students chose to use audio recordings as voice-overs to share the majority of information in their iMovies, while others chose to primarily use written text. Some of the students incorporated personal images of themselves, not only dogsledding but also doing other Land activities from their home (remote) First Nation communities, such as camping. Some students used general images from the dogsledding, while others preferred stock images saved off the Internet to represent activities they enjoy.

During the end-of-project sharing circle, the Indigenous students clearly articulated an understanding that the features and flexibility of iMovie enhanced their ability to represent themselves and their perspectives more accurately and fully as school projects. When asked if there was an aspect of her movie that she was particularly proud of, Tara responded, “That I had enough courage to talk on there.” Although gaining the courage to record her voice was difficult, Tara recognized that in the end, it enhanced her project, adding clarity and strength of personalization to her narrative.

Dave reflected, “I liked the iPads because it’s better than the alternative...just writing a bunch. Making videos is just...it’s a lot better for people who are watching or reading it. It’s just easier to get a point across I guess. I liked it.” In this statement, Dave demonstrates that he found the digital technologies easier and more accessible a medium to convey his knowledge and perspective compared to conventional classroom methods such as written papers or hardcopy projects. Tara concurred stating that she preferred

iMovies to written assignments because “you can get a visual thought of what they are trying to show you, instead of just writing.”

When asked to reflect on the students’ work in the completed iMovies, the settler-teacher candidates expressed a strong sense of new understandings of the unique personalities of the students. For example, Lesley stated, “I really noticed how much the students’ personalities stood out. Each video was very different and held a lot of the author’s flare.” Amy also felt the projects reflected the personalities of the students, elaborating that the flexibility of the iMovie program encouraged and promoted students to represent themselves in a way that was true to their lived experiences and perspectives: “I found that this project gave me a chance to get to know the quieter students. Ones who aren’t necessarily speaking up and answering questions...the iPad project gave them a chance to have a voice and it gave them a chance to succeed.”

After analyzing all the data, our main finding was that Indigenous students seized a great deal of control over how much personal information they chose to share in the digital narratives as curriculum. Some students used the creation of their iMovies as an opportunity to share personal images and stories, but this was always optional and in the control of the students as they were given the choice to participate (or not) in multiple ways and on multiple occasions. Consent was an ongoing process and sharing was controlled by the discretion of the students. Keeping information private is as much an assertion of one’s control over self-representation as is the choice to share personalized information. This choice is especially important for Indigenous peoples who have been historically misrepresented by the dominant settler culture, including stereotypical or inaccurate portrayals in textbooks or curricular texts (Dion, 2000, 2009). Findlay (2000) adds that we must work against “the growing industry of speaking for the Indigene, explaining Aboriginal people to themselves, to governments, to the general public” (p. x). In some instances, the degree of control that the students maintained over their self-representation actually posed challenges within the classroom setting, including one student who chose not to complete the project. For example, Stacy (settler-teacher candidate) described and discussed an iMovie class where Evan (a student who repeated his dislike of iMovies) actually deleted his iMovie project. Stacy found it very challenging to understand this difficult impasse because she felt that Evan had self-sabotaged an important opportunity for his education rather than reframe his act of project deletion as strength by self-determination or by refusal or resistance to school-imposed learning.

## **Bridge 2: Demonstration of Knowledge**

Another successful aspect of the iMovie project for the majority of the Indigenous students was their ability to meet curriculum expectations through their own narratives. Multimodal digital narratives can successfully document student knowledge and capture learning in more ways than text on pages. This is an important curricular advantage for Indigenous students because standard methods of assessment have proven woefully inadequate in capturing Indigenous strengths and understandings of curriculum (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009; Richards & Scott, 2009).

All of the settler-teacher candidates expressed a strong belief that iMovies were excellent vehicles for improving teacher understandings of what the students had learned and accomplished during the dogsledding unit. Ben, who was involved in the project at the dog yard, but not in the classroom iMovies, stated:

When we were teaching the whole time at the dog yard, no one was walking around with a notepad and a pen and paper and stuff so I didn't know what was being retained [by the students].... I knew what was being talked about and what was being taught but I didn't know what was actually going home with the students.... Seeing those [iMovie] videos, the things that we were trying to teach, you could clearly see were part of that video making.... I think it [the iMovie] has captured everything we were trying to do.

This statement clearly illustrates the power of digital narratives for revealing the students' gained knowledge of dogsledding and deepening the hands-on learning in significant ways that the teachers had not observed or realized.

## **Bridge 3: Record of Personal Strengths**

iMovies are not only flexible enough as a medium to record a student's skills and understandings in a particular instructional area, but they can also deepen the learning experience by permitting students to acknowledge their abilities and document their own personal strengths (German, 2013), including their cultural identities. In the design of the digital narratives curriculum, students were prompted to consider their own personal characteristics that assisted them in their success during the dogsledding unit. Tara used her iMovie to describe personal strengths that allowed her to not only excel during the

dogsledding unit but also helped in her everyday life. For example, at one point in her iMovie, Tara stated that some of the skills needed to drive a dogsled such as confidence, patience, determination, and good communication were also important for her personal well-being with friends and family. These messages of strength were communicated effectively to the point that they were noticeable to their peers. For example, after viewing each other's finished iMovies, Evan stated, "Dave can be pretty confident [in his voice] whereas I thought he was always quiet."

When the settler-teacher candidates reflected on watching the Indigenous students' videos, they described how these narratives revealed or highlighted students' strengths. For example, Lesley stated, "Watching Dave's video in particular, I really noticed how good his speaking skills are." And Amy discussed how digital narratives provide insights that could help a teacher draw upon students' strengths for curriculum connections: "You're learning more about their [the students'] skills and their strengths and things that are important to them which you can then use in future lessons. It really gave you a chance to learn more about that [whole] student."

Ben, another settler-teacher candidate who had assisted in the dog yard, actually viewed the completed iMovies during his formal BEd practicum at the high school and shared his impression that "those videos were some of the best products of work I've seen since I've been at the school...the videos, all of them, were spectacular."

Amy reflected on the entire process of creating and viewing the digital narratives as prompting the students to reflect on, express, and share their own strengths in a safe school environment. She also explained that viewing the digital narratives completed by their peers assisted all the students to recognize and articulate strengths of their classmates. She explained,

I thought it was a meaningful experience for me and the students.... I just think it's important that the students know who they are and that they get to share it with each other...a chance for them to be proud of where they come from, proud of who they are, and let other students kind of respect that [pride].

### **Bridge 4: A Collaborative Process**

The iMovie technology encouraged and facilitated collaborative communication between participants—the Indigenous students, settler-teacher candidates, researchers, and instructors—as every participant was creating their own narrative. In observations of the classroom dynamics during the iPad sessions, a series of technical and hands-on collaborations between the settler-teacher candidates and the Indigenous youth emerged as a critically important process for everyone’s creativity and self-expression.

The settler-teacher candidates identified the opportunity to directly collaborate with the students as enhancing their ability to engage with youth authentically and meaningfully. Amy explained: “It was easy to engage with them [during the iPad sessions] because we were both working on a common goal.... Like if I didn’t know what to talk about, I could always talk about what they were doing on the iPad.” Ben reflected on his experience working with the Indigenous students and the iPads in the dog yard that fostered a new engagement and authenticity, disrupting a normative power structure typically found in settlerstream or Eurocentric teaching environments:

He [the Indigenous student] was teaching me things on the iPad, right? I didn’t know how to do some of the things on the iPad. So immediately he [student] was actually given a chance to step up and be the leader over myself [the non-Indigenous teacher], which was awesome.

During her iMovie making experiences, Amy also found that collaborating with Indigenous students challenged the power structures of a typical classroom, helping her to feel more connected with the youth she was working alongside.

We could work together. Tara, for example, who knew the inside and out of the [iMovie] program, she was able to teach me things.... I wasn’t a teacher peering over them and making sure everything was getting done.... I was both the teacher and the student in that sense.... Like it’s more of a community. We’re all working together on the same kind of project and sharing with each other, more of a connectedness rather than me just being disconnected and watching.... By having an iPad to work on as well brought me to their level. It showed that I wasn’t better than the students and that we could work on them together.... I was working WITH them, not just giving them work to do. I became part of the project.

From their lived experiences, the settler-teacher candidates gave powerful testament to the ways in which the iPad project disrupted power hierarchies in the curriculum and decentred settler-teacher authority in the classroom.

### **Bridge 5: Reciprocation and Authentic Relationship**

In this final data section, we examine the relationships that were fostered and deepened during the iPad project, paying special attention to the role of reciprocation—the mutual give-and-take between settler-educators and Indigenous students. Reflecting on the time spent during the iMovie project, settler-teacher candidates highlighted the importance of building authentic relationships with the Indigenous youth, even though initially, these settler-teacher candidates reported struggling with this interpersonal dynamic. Both Stacy and Amy identified challenges when first learning to relate to and build relationships with the students. Amy reflected:

I enjoyed working with them [the Indigenous students]. I feel like my biggest challenge was I didn't, at first, know how to interact with them. I think I went in there expecting them [the Indigenous students] to be really guarded, therefore, I was maybe a little guarded, and I didn't really know how to break that barrier down.

Amy then went on to explain how she was able to move past this difficulty:

The challenges in the iPad project seemed to lie in me, rather than in the students: I needed to overcome being shy. I needed to overcome stereotypes. As much as I'd love to say I'm a person free of stereotypes, I'm not. Nobody is! This setting [Indigenous-centric] was something I was not used to and I think the biggest challenge was overcoming my own fears, concerns, and biases. Things came easy in the project once I accepted my challenges and personal flaws. I was able to relate more to the students.... I really enjoyed listening to their stories and hearing about their families and hobbies.

The settler-teacher candidates discovered it was important for them to learn about the youth, but also for the youth to learn about who they were, as settler-teachers. They explained that the iPads helped facilitate the mutual sharing of life stories and images of



loved ones, friends, and places important to each participant, promoting a holistic community in the classroom. Amy reflected on sharing her own personal life stories with the Indigenous youth:

It gave them [the students] a chance to know who I was and I wasn't just some [non-Indigenous] stranger coming into their class anymore. They could kind of learn a little bit about me. It goes both ways. I learned more about them and I became more comfortable with them, but vice-versa, they need to become more comfortable with me too.

## **Disrupting the Colonial Logics of Settler-Teacher Education by Bridging Relationality**

To interpret the relational bridges revealed in our research project, we once again return to Donald's (2012) colonial fort model that describes and symbolizes the historic and contemporary ways in which Indigenous peoples continue to be marginalized and excluded from settlerstream Canadian society. In schools, marginalization is embodied as a classroom and curricular system that exerts neo-colonial pull and pressure in order that non-settler "outsiders must be either incorporated—brought inside to become like the insiders—or excluded in order for progress and development to take place in the necessary ways" (Donald, 2012, p. 101).

Typically in settlerstream education, measures such as standardized testing, benchmarks, and exemplars help determine how far students are located from the normalized centre of curriculum. These Eurocentric measures promote the view that Indigenous students are working at a significant deficit or gap (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009; Richards & Scott, 2009; Statistics Canada, 2011) and in response, educators and administrators look for strategies and programs that will *squeeze* Indigenous students back between the walls of the colonial fort, integrating or assimilating them into settlerstream curriculum, making them resemble their "more successful" settler peers. When this curricular approach is assumed, those in the settlerstream can remain comfortable and secure within their centred location of privilege and their cognitive horizons can rest at a well-established and pleasant distance from the marginalized outsiders. To work

against these colonial exclusions, Donald (2012) urges educators and academics to take up a paradigm of *ethical relationality*: an approach to developing policies and curriculum that recognize the foundational relationship of Canada, Indigenous, and non-Indigenous peoples, and exploring the histories of these relationships and forging new ones in order to allow all treaty peoples to walk forward with a shared future. As Donald himself states, “We need to find ways of dismantling the fort, which will naturally shift the horizon of those on the outside and inside of the model” (p. 93).

In our project, we began with Donald’s curricular model of the settler-teacher candidates located inside the metaphorical fort walls with their ways of knowing—marinated in Eurocentric knowledge systems privileged over centuries, often unknowingly perpetuating, normative standards of settler education (Battiste, 2005). The Indigenous student participants, even in this First Nation majority school, were often symbolically located outside the walls of the settlerstream fort, due to the requirement of following ministry-certified curriculum that does not readily recognize Indigenous ways of knowing.

Our project, however, disrupted and changed the dynamics of this fort model as the digital narratives of the iMovies became a type of un/usual narrative (Tupper & Cappello, 2008) or a set of bridges along which curricular dialogue was facilitated, shaped, and encouraged into a more holistic exchange of knowledge and cultural identities. By creating spaces for FNMI youth to share their viewpoints through their own narratives, their Indigenous cultural perspectives were framed or amplified in a way that made them more accessible or understandable for settler-teachers. The white settler-educators of this study (including ourselves as settler-teacher-researchers) were better situated to more humbly listen to and more fully engage in the perspectives and strengths of the Indigenous students. Through the processes of the iMovie-making, the cognitive horizons of settler educators were pushed outwards, away from the colonial fort walls of curriculum, toward engaging the rich cultural knowledge and recognizing the resiliency possessed by the Indigenous students. Indeed, our own horizons as settler-researchers also shifted as we came to realize the importance of having settler-teacher candidates collaborate with rather than simply assist or “teach” Indigenous youth, and that relationality cannot be nurtured abstractly in a university classroom setting; it must be experienced first-hand.

These relational bridges allowed all of the settler-participants to explore what Ermine (2007) refers to as ethical space,

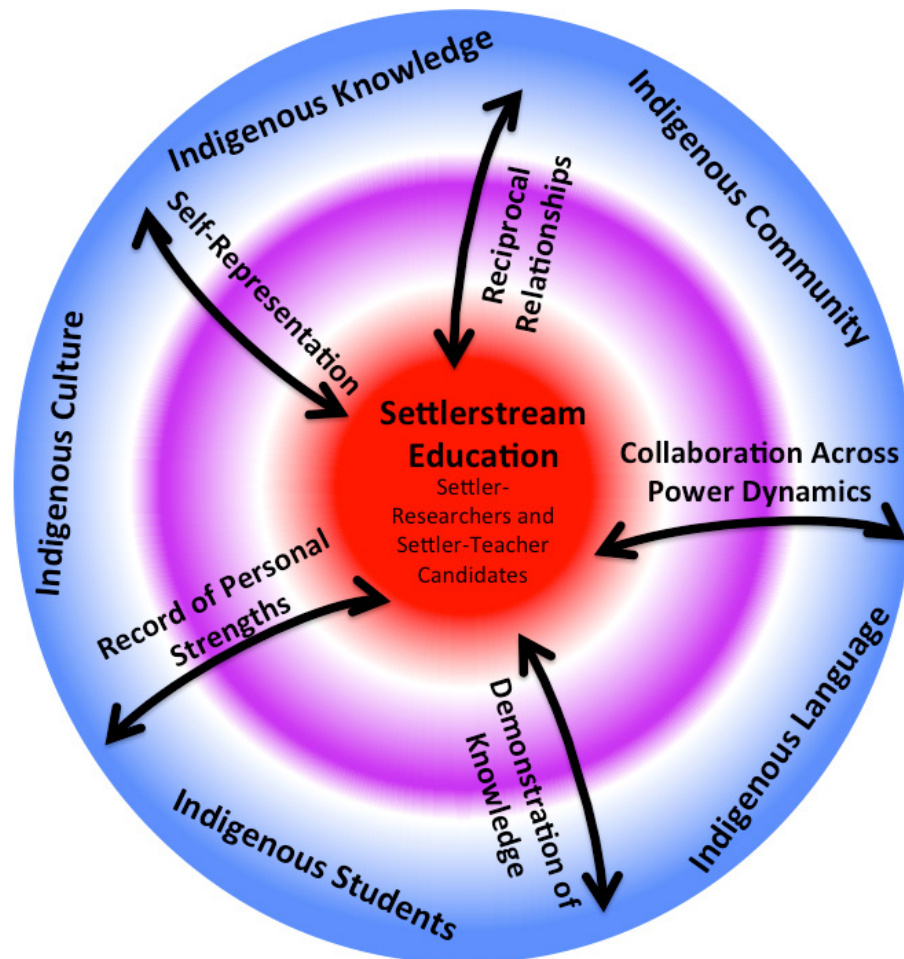
...produced by contrasting perspectives of the world, [and] entertains the notion of a meeting place, or initial thinking about a neutral zone between entities or cultures. The space offers a venue to step out of our allegiances, to detach from the cages of our mental worlds and assume a position where human-to-human dialogue can occur. (p. 202)

By considering ethical space, we were prompted to reexamine the data's shape and movement to develop the bridges model (Figure 1), a visual graphic that represents the processes observed in and reflected back through the words and digital narratives of the study's participants. In our model, settlerstream education is centred in the fort walls while the Indigenous students can be found starting the curricular encounter marginalized to the outskirts of the model. The space between the centre and the margins represents Ermine's (2007) ethical space. The bridges of the Indigenous students' self-representations reveal success in how the youth used digital narratives as tools to re/frame and bring forward their perspectives in the curriculum. The bridges are represented by bidirectional arrows that indicate all participants (Indigenous students, settler-teacher candidates, settler-researchers) are continually moving and shifting in their understandings.

For almost all the Indigenous students, digital narratives were viewed as the means to demonstrate and enhance their self-expression in a curricular, school-based context. Students Tara and Dave both commented on how the multimodal nature of iMovies made it easier for them to communicate their message to audiences. Consistent with the findings of Wexler, Eglinton, and Gubrium (2014), digital storytelling by Aboriginal youth enabled non-Aboriginal viewers to better understand the perspectives and experiences of Indigenous youth. While the digital narratives in our project were focused on a specialized Land-based dogsledding unit, similar digitized representation processes could be applied to other curriculum to promote decolonizing and indigenizing goals.

Before beginning this dogsledding and iPad project, the settler-teacher candidates had been unsure about how to relate to Indigenous youth. Much of this disconnection was based on stereotypes and biased myths from settler peers as well as anxiety of neocolonial teaching after contending with decolonizing theories in their specialized BEd course (IPPE). For example, Amy had expected the Indigenous students to be reserved and shy, especially around settler-teachers; however, she quickly remarked on how important it

was to collaborate with the students on a common goal, the iPad production of iMovies, to remove the tensions or lessen her own anxious awkwardness in this teaching encounter.



*Figure 1.* The visual model developed to illustrate how digital narratives became the means to disrupt settler-colonial logics in curriculum while building relational bridges

In the relaxed and open environment of iPad workshop classes, the settler-teacher candidates and Indigenous youth were able to use the iMovie app as a tool for sharing life stories. We discovered that relationality was tied to bidirectional sharing, from student to teacher and from teacher to student, and that it was important for settler-teachers

to communicate to Indigenous students who they are, where they are from, where they have been and how they are invested in the success of Indigenous youth. In this context, the commonly held frontier-logic that “Aboriginal people and Canadians inhabit separate realities” (Donald, 2012, p. 92) was revealed to the settler-teacher candidates as a myth. We recognized that, in order for this to happen, it is critically important for settler-teacher-educators to stop reproducing teaching practices as passive consumption of an imaginary Indigenous (student) identity, clinging to a settler “perfect stranger” stance (Dion, 2009) and remaining at a non-existent “neutral” (disembodied) professional distance in the classroom.

As settler-teacher-educators and researchers, this project has served to give us hope for enacting and embodying new curricular space and identities, where settler-teachers can experience decolonizing or disrupting assumed pedagogical practices while indigenizing their teaching based on the reciprocation of sharing life stories (lived knowledge) and listening deeply to the voices and Indigenous knowledge strengths of their FNMI students. These processes—decolonizing or destabilizing settlerstream curriculum while indigenizing approaches to building relationships and knowledge—can help unsettle settler-teachers to pay closer attention to the resilient identities and unique sources of knowledge that Indigenous students bring to the classroom. In this era of the TRC, all of Canada needs these two tandem forces—decolonizing and indigenizing—in order to move forward in nourishing the learning spirit (Battiste, 2013) and improving the Indigenous-settler relationship in order to expand all of our horizons toward education-for-reconciliation.

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