

Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

Troubling Truth and Reconciliation in Canadian Education: Critical Perspectives

Edited by Sandra D. Styres & Arlo Kempf

University of Alberta, 2022, 328 pages

ISBN 978-1-77212-600-6 (paperback); ISBN 978-1-77212-618-1 (ePub)

Reviewed by:

David D. Varis, Assistant Professor

Faculty of Indigenous Knowledge, Education, Research, and Applied Studies /

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Prince Edward Island

I reviewed *Troubling Truth and Reconciliation in Canadian Education: Critical Perspectives* with the hope, in transitioning full-time into the academy, that I would be provided solutions to a well-known ‘reconciliation in education’ predicament. Seven years after the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s Final Report (2015), while the book through its many chapter contributors does not profess to provide definitive answers on reconciliation, the truths it does present, some troubling, some poignant, are real. In the introduction entitled, A Troubling Place to Start: Reconciliation in Collapse, Kempf et al get to the heart of the never-ending impasse, “We watch as many school boards and universities fumble awkwardly through land acknowledgements. Universities often assert commitments to “Indigenize the academy” ...and develop grammars of colonial benevolence while simultaneously holding firm on practices of colonial reproduction” (p. xix). So continues the difficult dialogue on how we, Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators, administrators, and staff, should and must work together to

bring about reconciliation at essential sites of learning. While Indigenous scholars are more than aware of what is required and how to proceed, there are ‘forces at play’ which become abundantly clear in this book.

Edited by Sandra D. Styres and Arlo Kempf, the fourteen chapters of *Troubling Truth and Reconciliation in Canadian Education: Critical Perspectives* bring critical insights into the reconciliation initiative. Many leading scholars have contributed to this work. I did not see a contribution by a senior administrator, and I would have welcomed a critical assessment on Canadian education as nothing is as important as educating on truth. This book is the latest contribution alongside works such as *Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit* (Battiste, 2013), *Colonized Classrooms: Racism, Trauma and Resistance in Post-Secondary Education* (Cote-Meek, 2014), and *Decolonizing and Indigenizing Education in Canada* (Cote-Meek and Moeke-Pickering, Eds., 2020) with countless other scholarly offerings about the efforts to reform, transform and reconcile Canadian education. It follows a ‘resurgence in settler awareness’ to advance reconciliation following the 2021 discovery of countless unmarked graves of children who were buried on the grounds of former Indian Residential Schools and a growing impatience with educational institutions to act responsibly to a national imperative.

The book is divided into two sections with each chapter about 15 pages in length. The first section, Theoretical Perspectives on (Ir)reconciliation, comprises seven chapters. This section introduces readers to a vision of a reconciled nation-to-nation relationship. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), affirmed rights of Indigenous peoples in Canada through the Constitution Act (1982), and education’s commitment to these rights accompanied by the aspirational work of reconciliation are fundamental to achieving this vision. The chapters are diverse, and span topics from discovering truth through moral and spiritual discourses in the reconciliatory journeys of schools, the complex web of education politics, historical and contemporary Indigenous-settler relations, justice and community reconciliation at contested sites, to visions for a reconstituted education system and curricula through reconciliation.

The second section, Reconceptualizing Reconciliation in Education, also comprising seven chapters, examines the practices and challenges of operationalizing reconciliation in education. The authors examine such topics as the meaning of relational ethics, the inherent tensions in taking up the call(s) to action, the roles of scholar, advocate, and ally, how Indigenous literatures bring forth voices from past, present, and future, experiences

and lessons learned in delivering a mandated Indigenous Content Requirement (ICR) course, and contemporary colonialism and reconciliation.

This book, honestly and unapologetically, delivers through various critical lenses a truthful portrayal of education in Canada. This compilation of outstanding reflective works by both long-standing and emergent researchers and scholars, whom our Indigenous communities admire for the role they play, is a necessary read for any new Indigenous scholar or those contemplating joining the academy. The seven chapters per section are analogous to the seven sacred teachings recognized in many Indigenous cultures across Turtle Island, and I took away seven important teachings from it: **Honesty** in confronting difficult and uncomfortable realities, **courage** to uphold land, citizenship and human rights so we may honour all our relations, **love** as the basis for positioning, resisting, reconciling and engaging an ethics of relationality, **humility** as settler teacher and ally to learn a better story for reconciliation in education, **wisdom** in talk and more talk in this journey of reconciliation, **respect** for Indigenous orality, and universally understood literatures, and **truth** through pedagogical opportunities and practices. The authors offer important teachings on empowerment, agency, and relationality as the basis for moving forward. These are more than intellectual discourses; there are real humans behind this national ‘project’, and each author brings to life the on-going struggle to counter colonial structures and practices (decolonizing) and foundational work for reconciliation by demonstrating that ‘diverse knowledges matter’ and making education and Indigenous scholarship inclusive, equitable, and welcomed (Indigenizing).

Troubling truth and reconciliation in our schools and universities, and in society, means a complete accounting of those influential ‘forces at play’. This work offers truths that are timely and needed. This critical ‘autopsy’ of Canadian education, must be understood from perspectives which are, on the one hand, brutally honest and troubling; yet hopeful and inspiring, on the other. There are well-defined opportunities that emerge from the reading of this book. While I suggest that new and prospective Indigenous scholars and allies could benefit from reading this text, the very individuals who must read it are those ultimately accountable on whether reconciliation in Canadian education fails or success. They include Ministers of Education, public school and post-secondary institution senior administrators, public school and post-secondary Boards, Deans and Principals, Union and Faculty Association representatives, and all non-Indigenous faculty and teachers. Further, students and public wishing to understand reconciliation in education will find this book an

honest appraisal of the current challenges and hopeful aspirations of those engaged in this work. The authors of *Troubling Truth and Reconciliation in Canadian Education: Critical Perspectives* have accomplished the goal of educating us while contributing to valuable knowledge regarding truth and reconciliation in Canadian education.

Msit No'kmaq ~ Wahkohtowin ~ All my Relations

References

- Battiste, M. (2013). *Decolonizing education: Nourishing the learning spirit*. UBC press.
- Cote-Meek, S. (2014). *Colonized classrooms: Racism, trauma and resistance in post-secondary education*. Fernwood Publishing.
- Cote-Meek, S., & Moeke-Pickering, T. (Eds.). (2020). *Decolonizing and indigenizing education in Canada*. Canadian Scholars' Press.
- Kempf, A., Styres, S. D., Brechill, L., & El-Sherif, L. (2022). A Troubling Place to Start. *Troubling Truth and Reconciliation in Canadian Education: Critical Perspectives*.
- Styres, S.D. & Kempf, A. (Eds.). (2022). *Troubling Truth and Reconciliation in Canadian Education: Critical Perspectives*. University of Alberta.
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action. Winnipeg: National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation. https://ehprnh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf
- United Nations (General Assembly). (2007). Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf