

# Truth and Reconciliation Through Education: Stories of Decolonizing Practices

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# BOOK REVIEW

## TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION THROUGH EDUCATION: STORIES OF DECOLONIZING PRACTICES

REVIEWED BY

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Poitras Pratt, Y., & Bodnaresko, S. (Eds.). (2023). *Truth and Reconciliation Through Education: Stories of Decolonizing Practices*. Brush Education Inc. Pages: 264 + xxiii. Price: CDN 39.95 (paper); CDN 29.99 (EPUB).

Since the Truth and Reconciliation Commission released its final report in 2015, universities across Canada have attempted to respond to the calls to action forwarded by the commissioners. Some of those calls name specific Indigenous course requirements for faculties such as journalism, law, medicine, and nursing. Other calls encourage post-secondary institutions to offer degree programs in Indigenous languages and to establish reconciliation as an ongoing research area. Many of those calls are “in progress” according to the CBC’s “Beyond 94” webpage, which keeps track of progress on the calls to action. While the degree to which “progress” has been made is dependent on the specific institution in question, it is hard to deny the attention devoted to truth and reconciliation in higher education in recent years.

This movement has facilitated the publication of many edited collections focused on reconciliation and related topics in education (e.g., Cote-Meek & Moeke-Pickering, 2020; Styres & Kempf, 2022). Among these, *Truth and Reconciliation Through Education: Stories of Decolonizing Practices*, the recently published collection edited by Yvonne Poitras Pratt and Sulyn Bodnaresko, stands out for two reasons: its focus around a particular program, and its assertion that truth and reconciliation can happen *through* education.

The book collects 23 essays by faculty members, students, and alumni of the “Indigenous Education: A Call to Action” master’s certificate program offered at the University of Calgary. The program comprises four courses—two

in the summer offered as an intensive residency, one in the fall, and one in the winter—that focus on doing the work of reconciliation in a wider community. After reading the text, one develops a robust sense of how these courses operate together to enact reconciliation through education. The summer residency has students reflect on their own positionalities (who they are and where they come from) as well as their explicit and implicit relationships with Indigenous peoples. The Fall and Winter courses function together toward the completion of a service-learning project, where each student actively works with members of a larger community on a specific reconciliation project. Although a summary of every chapter in the book exceeds the scope of this review, several examples of these service-learning projects are highlighted in the following section-level summary of the book.

The book opens with a teaching from kehteya Betty Letendre kichi acâhkos iskwew—sacred star woman (Elder Betty)—who has guided the program since its inception, and the book’s preface shares the story of how Elder Betty and Yvonne Poitras Pratt met. The introduction situates the text in relation to the program, much as I’ve done above. These opening pages do much to ground the book in specific relational contexts. They feel like an invitation to knowing the editors, their stories, and the program more intimately, and, in that way, they set the tone for the work to come.

The first of the book’s four main sections details the program from which the text emerges. Along with a structural overview, the opening chapters also describe some of the

program's core pedagogical principles and approaches to program development and evaluation. These early chapters prove essential to understanding the context of later entries, and they also offer practical answers to common questions, such as what reconciliation looks like in post-secondary. While programs of this nature must be informed by the local context and meaningful relationships between universities, local Indigenous communities, and instructors, the experience of reading about this program may spark inspiration for similar efforts at other universities.

The second section of the book shares stories from former students of the program. It is divided into two subsections. The first deals with stories of resurgence, from Indigenous students who have taken the program and, through it, reconnected with communities or learned new skills used to progress reconciliation in their communities. The second subsection contains student stories of service-learning projects that advanced reconciliation in K–12. In both subsections, the stories are compelling and thoughtful. Moreover, these stories all hold important details about the learning happening through the program—it is not just academic knowledge that is being offered, but the expectation to put that academic knowledge into practice toward broader social change.

The third section of the text is titled “Stories of Learning with Community,” and it again shares student accountings of their service-learning projects. The projects detailed in this section extend beyond the K–16 education system, with stories coming from an early learning classroom, an observatory, and the creation of original artwork in conversation with a specific Indigenous community. Importantly, all the authors of these chapters are careful and intentional in their attempts to work with Indigenous communities. Indeed, throughout the book the authors reiterate the importance of reflexivity in doing community-based work.

The fourth and final section of the text focuses on the idea of ethical allyship and chronicles efforts toward “decolonizing self” (Bair, 2023, p. 226). Authors in this section seem to understand that the work of reconciliation is not as simple as developing a strategic action plan and treating it like a checklist. The work requires commitment, time, and an openness to meaningful change at both systemic and personal levels. This final section emphasizes the personal dimension of change, describing the radical shifts in a person's worldview that can happen through service-learning. While many critical Indigenous thinkers advocate for wider systemic change rather than this decolonization of self (e.g., Tuck & Yang, 2012), it seems intuitive that in education one

flows from the other, and this section shows that clearly.

I think this book will be of considerable interest to three groups. First, those working on truth and reconciliation in post-secondary as instructors, faculty members, deans, and directors should all read this book. It is especially relevant to those who are thinking about, or in the process of, developing or implementing a similar program at their institution. The opportunity to learn from the experiences shared in this book ought not to be squandered. Second, I think graduate students in faculties of education, instructors in BEd programs, and pre-service teachers will all be interested in this text for the practical examples it offers of what reconciliation education can look like in the K–12 system. Finally, this book will be of great utility to *anyone* who has ever asked, “What does reconciliation look like in higher education?” This book paints a vivid picture of one answer to that question: Reconciliation can happen *through* education.

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