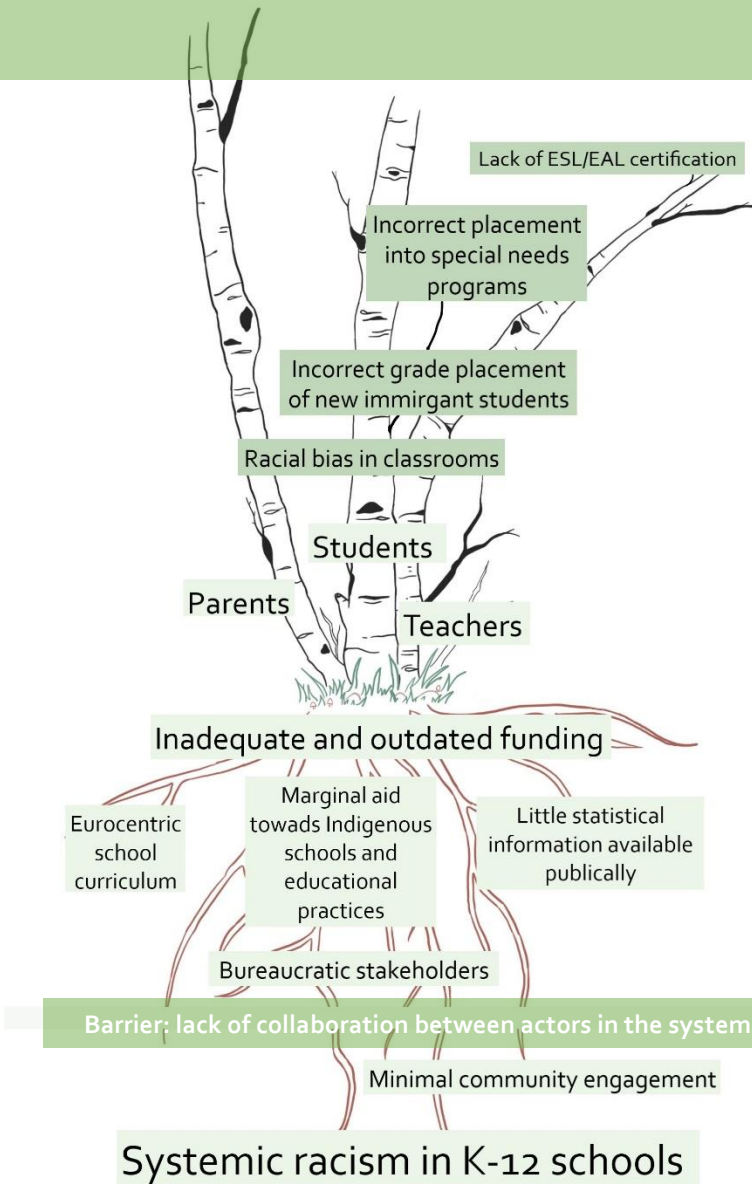


Uprooting systemic racism in the K-12 school system



Systemic racism can be understood as a tree:

Graduation
discrepancies, higher rates of mental illness, and restrictive employment opportunities among immigrant and Indigenous students is maintained by government funding, school curriculum, and underdeveloped anti-racism policy.

Incomplete public information is a systemic issue.

It is a blank spot in the system.

It is barrier which prevents the public from fully understanding the system and enacting meaningful and effective change.



4 Elements of Indigenous leadership

1

HA

The breath of life that connects us to all living things

Sacredness of Relations



Place

The inherent connection we have to our micro and macro systems

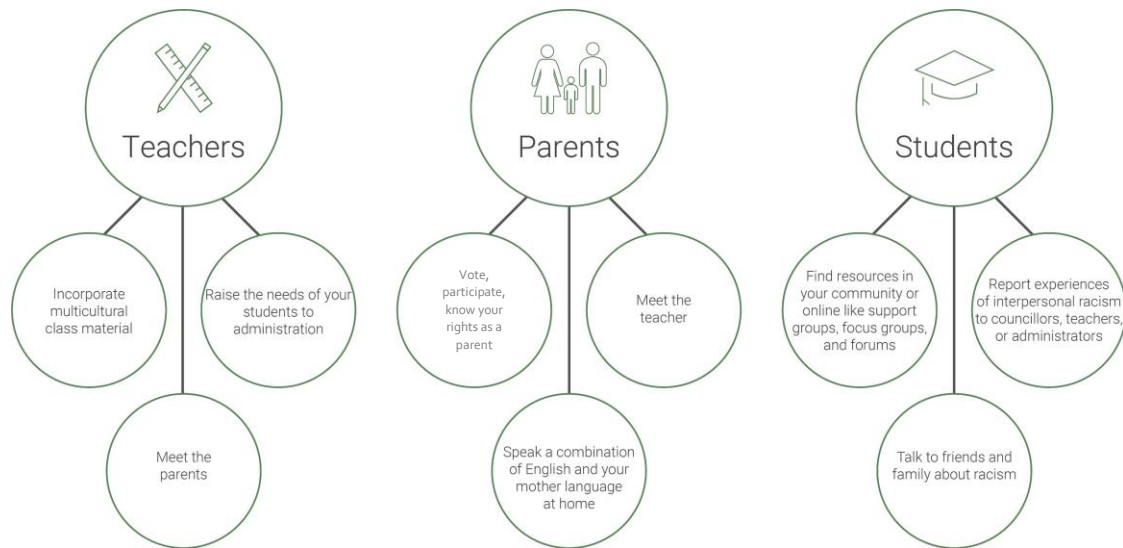
Individual Generosity & Collective Action

The 4 elements of Indigenous leadership are like the 4 walls of a greenhouse which cultivate **quality education**.

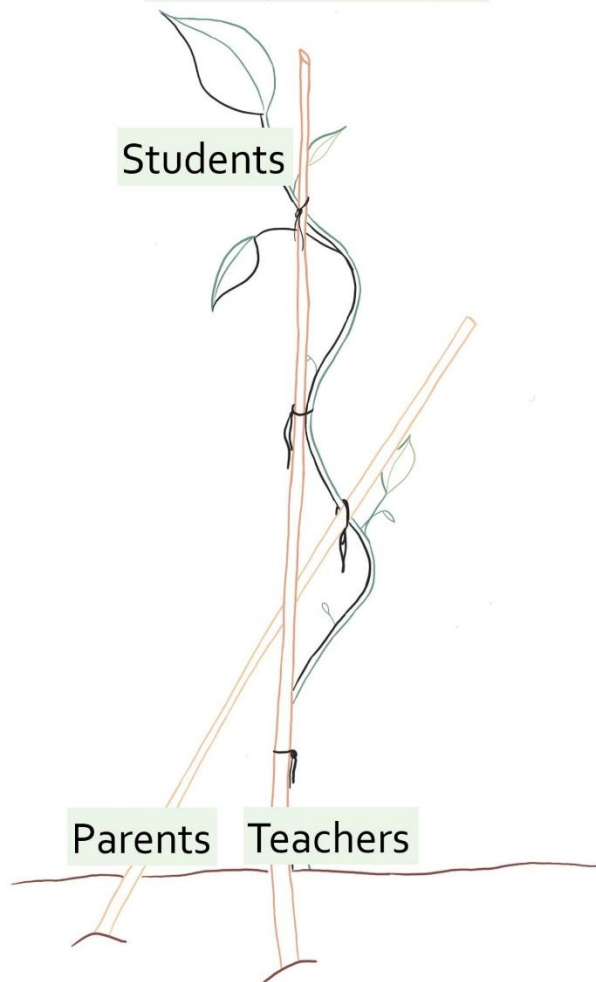


Simple ways to challenge

systemic racism & the effects of systemic racism



Quality Education



The **relationship** between students, teachers, and parents is central to foster quality education.

○ Parents and teachers are a support system. **How tightly linked are those supports to students?**



○ Students, parents, & teachers need a robust channel of collaboration.



Institute for
Community Prosperity

The logo for Catalyst, featuring the word "CATALYST" in a bold, blue, sans-serif font, with the tagline "A FELLOWSHIP FOR EMERGING CHANGEMAKERS" in a smaller font below it. The logo is set against a light blue, textured background.

CATALYST
A FELLOWSHIP FOR EMERGING CHANGEMAKERS

For full information please refer to report: "A Birch Tree: The Element of Closeness and Community in Uprooting Systemic Racism" (2020) written by Olivia Brodowski.

¹ Kenny, Carolyn, and Tina Fraser Ngaroimata, eds. *Living Indigenous Leadership: Native Narratives on Building Strong Communities*. UBC Press, 2012.

APRIL 2020

A Birch Tree: The Element of Closeness and Community in Uprooting Systemic Racism

Written By: Olivia Brodowski

Faculty Mentor: Karim Dharamsi, PhD

Community Partner: The Coalition for Equal Access to Education

Mount Royal University is situated in an ancient and storied place within the hereditary lands of the Niitsitapi (Blackfoot), Îyârhe Nakoda, Tsuut'ina and Métis Nations. It is a land steeped in ceremony and history that, until recently, was used and occupied exclusively by peoples indigenous to this place.

“for asinykwe”

*she never asked for any recognition, because she wasn't doing it
to be recognized. She did it because it filled her up.
she just carefully planted those seeds.
she just kept picking up those pieces.
she just kept visiting those old ones.
she just kept speaking her language and visiting her mother.
she just kept on lighting that seventh fire every time it went out.
she just kept making things a little bit better, until they were.¹*

~Leanne Simpson



¹ Daniel Heath, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, 180–81.

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The Mucciacito Family

Introduction: The Fellowship

In early October of 2019, a group of 10 undergraduate students met in a tipi to inaugurate the Fellowship at Mount Royal University. My colleagues and I listened closely to the stories of Elder Clarence Wolfleg as snow pelted the animal hide of the tipi and our breaths clouded in front of us. The Catalyst Fellowship is a program run through the Institute for Community Prosperity which matches students at the undergraduate level to work alongside a community organization that is addressing a systemic issue in Calgary and the surrounding area. I was matched with the Coalition for Equal Access to Education on a topic related to systemic racism in education.

Introduction: The Community Partner

The Coalition for Equal Access to Education is an organization in Calgary that works with students, teachers, school boards, and government stakeholders to encourage civic engagement addressing various barriers to quality education. In their report titled, *Immigrant Children in Focus: A Map of Needs, Strategies, and Resources*, the Coalition identifies various barriers ranging from limited access to English language support in classrooms, to the “socio-psychological wellbeing” that is dependent on age appropriate grade placement.² The project that the coalition is currently working on relates to systemic racism experienced by racialized youth in the K-12 school system. Through a series of interviews and focus groups with racialized youth, parents of racialized youth, and school workers the Coalition is identifying correlative and possible causal relationships between interpersonal racism in schools and broader, systemic racism. The research topic that the coalition first brought to me aimed to identify any blind spots in the existing research regarding systemic racism in the K-12 school system.

² Hieu V. Ngo, “Immigrant Children in Focus: A Map of Needs, Strategies, and Resources” (Coalition for Equal Access to Education, 2004), 114, <https://eslaction.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Immigrant-children-and-youth-in-focus.pdf>.

Decolonization and Community:

A guiding principal of the Fellowship is to practice reconciliation through increased understanding of Indigenous teachings and approaches. Daniel Heath Justice, a professor at the University of British Columbia and member of the Cherokee nation, discusses the value of decolonization in his book titled: *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*. Justice writes that discussing decolonization, reflecting upon decolonization, and practising decolonization is a way of “hold[ing] each other to account as we hold each other up.”³ Decolonization holds accountable the colonial institutions and systems which perpetuate disenfranchisement. Thus, decolonization can be a tool of analysis and deconstruction of disenfranchising systems of all kinds. American-Canadian, Indigenous writer and academic, Thomas King famously wrote: “The truth about stories is that’s all we are.”⁴ And so, to maintain genuine integrity regarding challenging systemic racism in the school system it is fundamental to create space for stories from all different backgrounds. Indigenous stories too often are ignored or dismissed; and so, this analysis will give spotlight to Indigenous stories, practices, and scholarship.

³ Justice Daniel Heath, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, Indigenous Studies Series (Wilfred Laurier University Press, n.d.), xxi.

⁴ Daniel Heath, 34.

Editors, Carolyn Kenny and Tina Ngaroimata Fraser discuss Indigenous modes of leadership, community, and methods of Indigenizing education in their book titled *Living Indigenous Leadership: Native Narratives on Building Strong Communities*. In their chapter titled “Transformation and Indigenous Interconnections: Indigeneity, Leadership, and Higher Education,” Kenny and Fraser introduce “four key elements of educational leadership from the Hawaiian Indigenous perspective.”⁵ The four elements include:

the concept of *ha*, the breath of life that connects us to all living things, past and present. It reminds us that we are not alone as we lead. The second is the concept of place, the inherent connections we have as Indigenous peoples to our micro and macro systems. The third element is the sacredness of relations, and the fourth is the idea of individual generosity and collective action.⁶

To this, I used these four key elements, *ha*, place, sacredness of relations, and individuality and collectivity as a touchstone for this project. This analysis will look for answers to the question: how might we effectively engage the general community with the issues related to systemic racism through Indigenous perspectives and teachings? Furthermore, this analysis will argue that uprooting systemic racism in the education system is dependent upon building authentic relationships between the actors in the system.

Racism and incidence of systemic racism will interpolate you, will call you into the world only to cast you out.

⁵ Carolyn Kenny and Tina Fraser Ngaroimata, eds., *Living Indigenous Leadership: Native Narratives on Building Strong Communities* (UBC Press, 2012), 141.

⁶ Kenny and Fraser Ngaroimata, 141.

Process of Analysis

The main method that I used to gather information is a network analysis. The different ways that I interacted with the network include:

- Engaged with public school teachers, university students and faculty, and research participants
- Conducted a literature review on community engagement, community capacity building, decolonization within the school system, and studies on multicultural education
- Reviewed policy
- Practised relationship and system mapping

Furthermore, I reflect on how my analysis either supports, challenges, or contradicts the four elements of Indigenous leadership. While each of these bodies of actors, each piece of literature, and each component of the educational system are distinct, they are all intertwined in an intricate design of chutes and ladders.

Like a single birch tree in a dense forest: the upper canopy and the thousands of leaves are seemingly isolated, separated, and outsiders from the ferns in the under growth, from the weeds, mushrooms, and mossy rocks, from their roots. Trace each bundle of leaves back to their origin, down each stem and each branch, down the base of the trunk, deep under grass, mud, and sediments, and those core roots are uncovered and unrooted.

Similarly to the Indigenous element of *ha*— all living things are connected—even the youngest buds at the tip-top of the canopy can be traced back to the deepest roots. This paper will demonstrate that a fundamental blind spot in the uprooting of systemic racism in the K-12 school system is the lack of building and maintaining linkages between each component of the system. Keeping the most vital components of the system isolated from each other—the separation between the actors in the system—serves as an invisible barrier.

Place and Inherent Connections to Micro and Macro Systems: Systemic Racism, Indigeneity, and Education

Schools and the broader school system are the main place of focus for this project. One way that racism is structured into the educational system is through the low priority of provincial funding for English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction. How much governments fund a service is indicative of their commitment to that service. Currently, the *Funding Manual for School Authorities 2019/20 School Year* issued by the government of Alberta mandates that students will receive up to five years of provincially funded ESL instruction; after which, the educational board will have to support the student directly.⁷ Research done out of Cambridge university shows that “immigrants (students with two to five years of education in their mother tongue in their country of origin) need five to seven years just to catch up in their new language—English.”⁸ The cap on provincial funding of ESL programs in the K-12 school system puts “barriers in front of some students”⁹ says Gordon Dirks, previous Calgary Board of Education Chair.

Verna St. Denis, a Cree and Metis professor at the University of Saskatchewan uproots how the high school curriculum exemplifies systemic racism. In her article titled, “Silencing Aboriginal Curricular Content and Perspectives Through Multiculturalism: ‘There Are Other Children Here,’” St. Denis argues that “public education [is] a neutral multicultural space, but [it] also effectively tempers Aboriginal educational initiatives” in response to the proposed combination of social studies, history, and native studies “content which could easily result in the erasure of native studies.”¹⁰ Denis raises the sound concern that without Indigenous *specific*

⁷ Government of Alberta, “Funding Manual for School Authorities 2019/20 School Year” (Alberta Education Strategic Financial Services Sector, 2019), 29, <https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/8f3b4972-4c47-4009-a090-5b470e68d633/resource/0d0d30db-3577-48bb-9f22-740a05dcfd90/download/edc-funding-manual-2019-2020.pdf>.

⁸ “Funding Cap for ESL Must Go, Says Calgary Board,” Alberta Teachers Association, accessed March 22, 2020, <https://www.teachers.ab.ca/News%20Room/ata%20news/Volume%2039/Number%2017/In%20the%20News/Pages/Funding%20cap%20for%20ESL%20must%20go.aspx>.

⁹ “Funding Cap for ESL Must Go, Says Calgary Board.”

¹⁰ Verna St Denis, “Silencing Aboriginal Curricular Content and Perspectives Through Multiculturalism: ‘There Are Other Children Here,’” *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 33, no. 4 (September 1, 2011): 306, 306, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714413.2011.597638>.

learning aims and curriculum, Indigenous history and cultural studies may be secondary behind hegemonic, Eurocentric course content.

What we say defines our world; what we don't say defines our world. Education: what we read—but more importantly—what we write, forges those definitions.

A fact sheet compiled in 2012 by the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) provides the following statistics regarding the First Nations K-12 school system which provides examples of institutionalized, systemic racism:

- “Approximately 92% of First Nations schools partially integrate cultural teachings into the curriculum, **while 26% of schools have cultural teachings fully integrated** into the curriculum.”¹¹
- “First Nations schools are funded under an outdated Band of Operated Funding Formula (BOFF) created in 1987. BOFF does not include essential education components such as technology, First Nations language immersions, sports and recreation, student data management systems or libraries.”¹²

Since the compilation of this report the AFN reached an agreement with First Nations and Indigenous Services Canada which provides Indigenous groups “with the flexibility to distribute education funding within their region as they see fit.”¹³ That funding, however, remains strictly limited under the BOFF.

The opposition to Indigenous-specific course curriculum is a continuation of the denial and erasure of the historic genocide against Indigenous peoples and of the injustices of the Indian Act. Outdated funding formulas maintain colonial erasures of

¹¹ Chiefs Assembly on Education, “A Portrait of First Nations and Education,” Palais de Congres de Gatineau (Gatineau, Quebec, October 1, 2012), 1, https://www.afn.ca/uploads/files/events/fact_sheet-ccoe-3.pdf.

¹² Chiefs Assembly on Education, 4.

¹³ Sid Lee, “AFN Bulletin on Regional Education Agreements for First Nations Education K-12, September 2018,” *Assembly of First Nations* (blog), September 25, 2018, <https://www.afn.ca/first-nations-education-regional-education-agreements-k-12/>.

Indigenous language and cultures. Education can erase; education can reveal. The school system is a primary space to initiate and practise decolonization in all sectors. The Calgary Board of Education has enacted a three-year development plan which involves the incorporation of “culturally responsive instructional design and assessment by honouring Indigenous knowledge systems, languages and histories.”¹⁴ However, despite these strategies and plans, little proactive promotion has been enacted. The Canadian school system should be held to the highest degree of inclusivity that echoes the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s call to develop “a joint strategy to eliminate educational and employment gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians.”¹⁵ To this, without the serious inclusion of Indigenous voices, perspectives, and values the conversation regarding systemic racism in education is incomplete and, in fact, is a perpetuation of a form of systemic racism.

Indigenous teachings suggest that each individual occupies a crucial role in the mechanics of a system. However, the educational system is heavily institutionalized, rendering students, parents, and teachers with little say in the course curriculum and funding formulas. Why is Shakespeare the *only* canonized author in the entirety of high school curriculum in Alberta across all subjects? It can be argued that Shakespearean drama stimulates conversation regarding antisemitism, gender inequality, and colonialism. However, such themes and conversations are not specific to Shakespeare and can be introduced through a multiplicity of postcolonial writers including Chimamanda Adichie, Salman Rushdie, and Chinua Achebe to name a few. How might conversations in schools change if poems written by Indigenous writers such as Leanne Simpson were taught in high school rather than poems written by Shakespeare?

¹⁴ “Search : Three Year Plan,” Calgary Board of Education, accessed March 13, 2020, <https://cbe.ab.ca>.

¹⁵ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, “Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action,” 2012, 1–2, www.trc.ca.

Sacredness of Relations

To inform my thinking for this analysis I attended a focus group which consisted of an intimate group of youth who shared stories of their experiences of racism in schools. I was immensely moved by the strong stories and personalities in the room. After the focus group concluded a few of the participants mingled, continued the conversation, and even formed a book club. Our first book club meeting is at the end of this week.

Another element of educational leadership is the sacredness of relationships. Especially with regards to the relationships that are made when enacting system-level change, authentic and proactive relationships is one way to stay on target with long-term change. Community based research is an explicit way of creating and developing linkages within a community as well as between secluded communities and outsiders. Researchers from University of Alberta's International Institute for Qualitative Methodology support that the culturally responsive focus group "validates and empowers participants and their collective experiences within the research process."¹⁶ To this, facilitating and participating in focus groups is a mechanism for building trusting relationships within communities. It is vital that those relationships are more than just smoke and mirrors.

Culturally responsive focus groups can gather "data with greater richness and depth,"¹⁷ which constructs honest, affirmative, and vulnerable spaces. It is important to maintain the trust that is developed between participant and researcher after the conclusion of the focus group. Focus groups develop linkages within the community and between the community and the researcher because not only are the participants expressing and reflecting on their experiences, but the researcher also is "reflexive about [their]... own personal story and how it impacts the research experience."¹⁸

¹⁶ Katrina L. Rodriguez et al., "Culturally Responsive Focus Groups: Reframing the Research Experience to Focus on Participants," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 10, no. 4 (December 1, 2011): 405, <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940691101000407>.

¹⁷ Rodriguez et al., 409.

¹⁸ Rodriguez et al., 404.

Facilitating culturally responsive focus groups without any direct follow-up or debrief is like planting a seed in fertile soil and then never watering it. The nurturing, or *watering* of the relationships that are initiated through focus groups and other modes of community-based research is a long-term commitment and is dependent on the capacity of the organization or research group.

One barrier that I identified is the definitive participant categories which composed the focus groups. Participant categories such as youth, parent, or school-worker simulate the division of actors in the real school system. Youth experiencing racism in schools may not have a trusting relationship with school workers or do not trust that approaching school workers will have any positive benefit towards reprimanding or stopping the acts of racism. Students may feel that approaching a school worker— be it teacher, councillor, or principal—will result in the situation being escalated. Similarly, racialized youth may not feel comfortable approaching their parents because they do not want to create additional burdens within their household. Moreover, often parents and school workers do not have an efficacious and productive relationship or channel of communication. One barrier towards uprooting systemic racism is the definitive boundaries between the main actors in the system; racialized youth, parents of racialized youth, and school workers are acting independently in the system. A leverage point to change the system is the breakdown of these definitive boundaries.

There's something to be said about being welcomed and longed for by others who you would also welcome and long for.

Focus groups which blend these categories including students, parents, and school workers all in attendance is a way to demolish that barrier. However, it is challenging to facilitate a trustworthy space where all participants have an equal voice and feel confident to share their experiences. Establishing a trustworthy relationship among members of the racialized community and between the community and the researcher is a steppingstone towards breaking down the barrier

that divides the categories of actors in the system. Transient community-based research fails to challenge the isolating boundaries in the school system. To this, it is vital to maintain relationships even after the formal research is finished. Focus groups can be held, and conversations can be encouraged without the collection of official qualitative data. Systemic racism cannot be uprooted on the shoulders of any *one* body of actors. It is the close effort of strong stories and personalities which will result in system-level change. The importance—the sacredness—of relations cannot be undermined.

Individual Generosity and Collective Action

The final element of Indigenous educational leadership is individual generosity and collective action. One hypothesis that arose over the course of this analysis is that community engagement is a learned and practised skill. Musicians, athletes, and physicians have devoted countless hours of training and research into their fields of expertise. Similarly, confidence and comfort within a community must be practised and learned. How can community engagement be taught to a broad audience in ways that is more meaningful than an infomercial or weekly newsletter? Justice discusses various factors that contribute to the building and maintaining of positive relationships and communities. He writes that “[i]magination and curiosity are essential to the empathy required for healthy, respectful, and sustainable relationships.”¹⁹ I conclude that art and other creative practices are a way to spark imagination and curiosity, teach community engagement, and thus, spark sustainable community engagement and collective action.

Leah Decter, an intermedia artist based in Winnipeg, recreates and decorates objects that are iconic in Canadian history—Hudson’s Bay blankets, canoes, and beadwork jewelry, for example—as a form of uprooting colonial discourses and legacies. In an interview with the Queen’s Journal, Decter explains she “hope[s] to

¹⁹ Justice Daniel Heath, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, Indigenous Studies Series (Wilfred Laurier University Press, n.d.), 77.

communicate in ways that encourage, move or incite people to pause and question ways of being, relating, and thinking.”²⁰



21



22

The interactivity of Decter’s artwork invites and unites individuals to participate in the continuing conversation of equality, reconciliation, and decolonization. *How might we effectively engage the community with the issues related to systemic racism through Indigenous perspectives and teachings?* By relating hard conversations—such as those related to systemic racism—to the universality and digestibility of art and creativity. Individual generosity and collective action as an element of educational leadership can be practised through individual steps of artistic expression. These steps can develop a collective identity—a community.

Conclusion

The combined inclusivity of all actors—students, teachers, teacher’s assistants, school councillors, administrators, city councillors, school ward representatives, advocacy groups, policy makers, and members of government—is paramount in the understanding and uprooting of systemic racism in the education

²⁰ “Decolonizing Culture through the Arts,” *The Journal*, accessed March 12, 2020, <https://www.queensjournal.ca/story/2017-02-02/arts/decolonizing-culture-through-the-arts/>.

²¹ Leah Decter, *Sewing Actions: Anna Leonowens Gallery*, 2016 2010, Hudsons Bay blankets, waxed thread, thread, yarn, beads, 12’x15’, 2016 2010, <https://leahdecter.com/official-denial-trade-value-in-progress>.

²² Leah Decter, *Mackenzie Art Gallery 2015*, Photo Credit: Don Hall, Courtesy of the Mackenzie Art Gallery, 2016 2010, Hudsons Bay blankets, waxed thread, thread, yarn, beads, 12’x15’, 2016 2010, <https://leahdecter.com/official-denial-trade-value-in-progress>.

system. I conclude that one way to encourage and teach proactive collective action from an array of different actors is through art and creativity. Empirical evidence in favour of deviant art as a universal tool of engagement finds that the “shivers down the spine” reaction to performance art such as music, theatre, and dance “can motivate the exploration of one’s environment and the learning of new knowledge, skills and experiences.”²³

The endeavour of overcoming systemic racism may seem like an unimaginable obstacle which is cemented in time immemorial. The Indigenous element of *ha*, our connections to each other, to our community, and to art, stands truer and deeper than marginalization and inequality.

²³ Eftychia Stamkou, Gerben A. van Kleef, and Astrid C. Homan, “The Art of Influence: When and Why Deviant Artists Gain Impact,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 115, no. 2 (August 2018): 277, <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000131>.

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