

Journeying the Path to Reconciliation with Reflective Leadership

By Anna Villalta, CASSA

In answering the Truth and Reconciliation Calls, educational leaders are central to shaping a more inclusive and equitable educational environment. The path to reconciliation in education is a transformative endeavor, seeking to establish a respectful, inclusive, and equitable learning environment for Indigenous students. At the same time, it nurtures understanding and empathy among all learners regarding Indigenous histories and cultures. At the helm of this transformative voyage, system leaders hold a profound responsibility that calls for ongoing introspection and a commitment to continuous reflection. Within this journey, system leaders play a pivotal role, entrusted with the profound responsibility of nurturing reconciliation, and healing. Certainly, this journey is anything but stagnant; it's an ongoing odyssey that calls for continual introspection, reflection, and unwavering dedication to equity. This article embarks on a thought-provoking journey, shedding light on the pivotal role of reflective practice as the guiding North Star for system leaders on their path to reconciliation.

At the heart of reconciliation is the recognition of historical injustices that have deeply scarred Indigenous communities, injustices rooted in the dark chapters of colonization, and discriminatory policies that continue to affect their communities. Though present-day educational leaders may not have been responsible for these injustices, they all share the responsibility for the enduring legacy these actions have left behind. Understanding this legacy, and comprehending its far-reaching impact on our society today, is the vital first step toward healing and addressing the systemic inequities that persist within our educational system. Engaging in reflective practice enhances one's self-awareness, gaining a deeper understanding of one's thoughts, emotions, and actions by reflecting on experiences critically, developing compassion, and cultivating a deep understanding that extends beyond one's cultural background. It helps identify and address challenges by considering different perspectives, leading to better decision-making.

The power of self-reflection is a vital force, emphasizing the critical importance of embracing the rich tapestry of interconnected identities within our educational landscape. As leaders, it is our responsibility to embark on a meaningful journey toward reconciliation with an open heart and mind, with a vision of transforming our educational domain into a realm characterized by justice and promise. This endeavor enriches the lives of everyone involved and offers a compelling invitation to system leaders to explore the multifaceted dimensions of leadership, including growth and stronger partnerships with individuals of diverse or marginalized identities.

Equity-focused leaders distinguish themselves by their deep self-awareness, which they then translate into concrete actions. They acknowledge that despite the best intentions, unconscious biases may permeate our organizations. With humility and courage, these leaders challenge the status quo, confront their personal limitations, and champion the implementation of policies, processes, and structures that challenge entrenched organizational attitudes and practices.

To initiate the path toward becoming identity-conscious leaders, our journey begins with self-reflection and an exploration of our



Indigenous reflective journey in art. Photo courtesy of Anna Villalta.

identity, understanding how our individual identities colour our perceptions. Leaders should recognize the significant impact of their personal perspectives, which are shaped by factors such as personal experiences, race, socio-economic status, age, religious and cultural beliefs, ethnicity, and gender. Engaging in critical self-reflection is a fundamental aspect of these efforts, especially when it comes to understanding our roles within the intricate power structures of the education system. This process entails a reflective analysis of how colonialism continues to impact practices and policies within the school system, crucial for fostering understanding, challenging oppressive systems, and advocating for Indigenous communities while strengthening community resilience.

This journey also necessitates introspection and the recognition of our biases, where we ask ourselves open-ended questions, delve into our emotions, and seek to understand how our privilege influences our choices as leaders. It calls for a critical evaluation of whether our values align with our actions. But our mission doesn't end there.

It extends to active efforts aimed at dismantling systemic biases fostering open dialogue, building trust, and shifting perspectives. By creating a culture rooted in empathy, conflict resolution, and community-building, we incorporate restorative practices and encourage those we lead to be more compassionate and intentionally engage in similar acts. In this endeavor, we contribute to the development of a more equitable and reconciled community that welcomes all students, regardless of their Indigenous or non-Indigenous backgrounds. Our shared goal is to

illuminate a path toward a more promising, equitable educational future.

As leaders embark on this journey, these thoughtfully crafted questions may guide and prompt self-awareness, cultivating a new leadership perspective and contributing to a more equitable and reconciled educational environment.

- How do your personal identities and experiences shape your leadership and interactions?
- How can you actively engage in critical self-reflection to better understand your

own position within the power structures of education and address any racial inequalities that may exist?

- What were your earliest messages about Indigenous people (from experiences, school, or other) and how might they inform or impact your interactions with their community?
- What steps can you take to raise awareness of historical injustices experienced by Indigenous communities and their continuing impact on education? What available resources or partnerships can you connect with to ensure that Indigenous knowledge and pedagogies from their perspective are brought into classrooms?
- In what ways do your biases, whether conscious or subconscious, affect your decision-making and leadership practices?
- How can you establish a safe and inclusive space for open dialogue and reflection on reconciliation within your educational community?
- What measures can you put in place to challenge and change organizational attitudes, practices, or policies that perpetuate systemic biases? How are barriers to equitable education impacting students or staff?
- How can you use your position and privilege as an educational leader to actively contribute to efforts of reconciliation daily?

In closing, the transformative power of reflective practice transcends mere awareness. In this quest for understanding, healing, and reconciliation, reflective leadership emerges as a guiding beacon. As we foster an identity-conscious perspective, we empower ourselves as courageous leaders to embark on a journey that reshapes the very landscape of our educational system into one with the promise of a more just and reconciled society: One that opens its doors to students of all identities and illuminates the path toward a brighter, more promising future. ○

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