

Fostering Meaningful School Engagement Among Indigenous Students

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Abstract

Students can play a significant role in school decision-making; education practice and reform; reimagining teaching and learning; democratizing education; and schooling improvement. Sociology of education and youth literature demonstrates a strong connection between student engagement in schooling and student academic achievement as well as a sense of belonging to a school community. These insights have particular relevance for Indigenous students in kindergarten to grade 12 schools. Canadian education policy and practice, reinforced by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, have prioritized the need to support Indigenous students while including Indigenous perspectives and experiences in curriculum. We report on a community-based participatory research project to engage and empower Indigenous students connected to one Alberta elementary and junior high school as leaders and education partners. The project focuses on amplifying the student voices through photovoice and is guided by the question: How can schools foster meaningful student engagement and partnership? It draws from work on a photovoice project with two cohorts of students. Students revealed through their photovoice work several components important to their education and schooling, including opportunities for learning about Indigenous cultures, traditions, languages, and spirituality; relationships and connections; environmental protection and conservation; and being heard and respected.

Introduction

Canadian educational jurisdictions have accelerated activities to support Indigenous students and include Indigenous¹ perspectives and experiences in education in response to Calls to Action posed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2015 (TRC, 2015). Many reconciliation-related policies and practices are aligned with a broader educational emphasis on empowering youth and community members in processes of educational reform and delivery (Government of Alberta, 2022b; Government of Canada, 2020, 2022; Milne & Wotherspoon, 2022, 2023). There is growing recognition, across national and regional contexts, that, as key education stakeholders, students can play a significant role in school decision-making, education practice and reform, reimagining teaching and learning, democratizing education, and schooling improvement (Cook-Sather, 2020; Gonzalez et al., 2017; Graham et al., 2018). There are mutual benefits associated with opening spaces for student expression and participation in educational decision-making. School personnel and educational researchers have observed that by engaging students as actors, rather than simply

passive receptors of learning processes, there is potential to inform instruction, enhance overall educational experiences, strengthen student-teacher relationships, and cultivate confidence and leadership skills (Conner, 2022; Mayes et al., 2019; Mitra, 2018). Student engagement in schooling also holds promise to enhance students' academic achievement and sense of belonging to a school community (Kahne et al., 2022; Lei et al., 2018; Willms, 2003).

These factors suggest complementarity with initiatives to ensure that schools are more welcoming places dedicated to improve educational engagement and outcomes among Indigenous students. Measures to incorporate student voices and experiences centrally within learning processes are critical for fostering effective learning among Indigenous students (Toulouse, 2016). These involve "relational reform," which fosters mutual respect, trust, and dignity, to enrich schooling experiences by enabling students to draw upon their diverse experiences, perspectives, and capacities (Smyth, 2006; Willie, 2000). At the same time, such educational reforms can potentially stand in tension with one another, and pose dangers, especially for students whose

¹"Indigenous" is used to refer to descendants of the original inhabitants of North America.

social and cultural resources stand in contrast to those deemed essential within school systems. This article explores these relationships with reference to a community-based participatory research project aimed to engage and empower Indigenous students as leaders and education partners in Alberta. The project focused on amplifying student voices through photovoice, an approach that uses photos paired with titles and captions to document the strengths and concerns of a community, create awareness about important issues, and promote change (Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997).

Student Voice and Empowerment

While educators and educational researchers have long acknowledged the value of providing spaces for students to exercise their views about schooling, a more sustained focus on acknowledging students' voices began to emerge in Canada and other nations in the 1990s, given impetus by principles endorsed in 1989 within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Bourque & O'Neill, 2021; Cook-Sather, 2014; Mayes et al., 2019). Guided by rights-based discourses, concepts of "student voice/participation, representation," or adult-student partnerships, have been employed in diverse circumstances, ranging from opportunities for students to express their views about school-related matters to a more specific focus on fostering active engagement, or even leadership roles, for students in decision-making about education policy and practice (Conner, 2022; Cook-Sather, 2006, 2014; Mitra, 2018). These notions have encouraged schools to look beyond conventional student councils to provide opportunities for students to participate more centrally in school decision-making.

Student voice is recognized formally in most cases through the creation of new representative groups or structures. Ontario and Alberta were two of the first Canadian provinces to adopt formal measures to promote and acknowledge student input into educational policy and practice, creating province-wide student advisory councils under the auspices of the Ministers of Education. While these kinds of initiatives provide some opportunities for high-level input (within schools, districts, or system-wide levels) by select student representatives, they carry potential dangers. Vehicles to promote student voice, and the discourses employed to justify them, typically focus on formal types of participation that offer tokenistic or symbolic representation rather than

substantive or more meaningful engagement (Cook-Sather, 2014; Mitra, 2018). Ana and Hammett (2023) contend that notions of student voice have come to represent a new orthodoxy that is more likely to flatten and depoliticize rather than engage honestly with student perspectives.

Two major lines of critique draw attention to the infusion of social inequalities and power relations in discourses and practices associated with student voice. The first, informed by Bernstein's (2000) analysis of class inequalities and linguistic practices in school classrooms, highlights dangers of exclusion and selectivity associated with both formal structures in which students can participate and informal ways in which students may engage with or be silenced or disempowered within school and classroom-related activities. It is crucial to address questions about which voices are heard, how they are understood and responded to, and by whom (Cooke-Sather, 2014). Personal and cultural resources are important, including the confidence to take a stance or find means of expression that resonates with adults, thereby benefitting some students while others may be pushed outside of dialogues in which their voices might make a difference (Arnot & Reay, 2007).

A second set of warnings are issued in critical literature informed by Foucauldian analysis of the role of surveillance in exercising discipline and governmentality through individuals and across populations. By placing emphasis on means for the expression of students' voices which are then heard and interpreted (selectively) by educators and other authorities, education systems are expanding their gaze into the lives and thoughts of students in a manner comparable to other spreading forms of surveillance as society is transformed by new technologies as well as concerns over security (Mayes, 2020). Student voice is channeled in this way, as one more technique, or technology, that contributes to shaping and classifying individuals as 'responsible consumers' or 'enterprising subjects' aligned with demands associated with neoliberalism and entrepreneurialism (Bragg, 2007; Raby, 2014).

Minoritized students, especially, may be disempowered or displaced by formal mechanisms that tend to foster expression by more privileged students while exposing themselves to circumstances and authorities who often represent forces that are dominant over and hostile to them. In many cases, Indigenous and other minoritized students are alienated from schooling because they have limited opportunities to 'insert themselves'

into what is experienced and represented in classrooms and what happens in their lives and experiences outside of school.

These alternative theoretically informed critiques of many conventional and emerging approaches to foster student engagement point to a fundamental question that guides the research presented in this paper, concerning the matter of how schools may be able to foster meaningful student engagement and partnership. In order to address this question, it is crucial to move beyond broad or abstracted notions of both participation and students in order to understand what participation and engagement mean for particular students within specific school contexts. In these regards, our analysis is informed by critical analysis of Indigenous-settler relations and a focus on Indigenous resilience and empowerment. This framework makes it possible to situate the perspectives of Indigenous students within the dynamics and tensions associated with initiatives to advance reconciliation between Indigenous and settler populations within a settler colonial context.

Theoretical Framework: Repositioning Indigenous Student Voice in a Settler Colonial Context

Pathways to reconciliation include aims to improve educational support for and outcomes of Indigenous students across Canada, in part by incorporating Indigenous perspectives and experiences into classroom activities (TRC, 2015; Wotherspoon & Milne, 2020). The federal government's adoption of commitments to reconciliation, framed as a renewal of relationships between government and Indigenous peoples built on the recognition of rights and mutual respect and partnership (Government of Canada, 2018), has guided parallel actions in provincial and territorial jurisdictions.

Despite the progressive aims associated with these initiatives, they remain open to contestation as a result of contradictions associated with Canada's status as a settler colonial society. Settler colonialism is distinguished by the reality that the nation, along with the institutional and knowledge systems essential for its ongoing existence, depends upon the sustained displacement of Indigenous peoples from the land, thereby also alienating Indigenous peoples from knowledge systems and social relationships grounded in their longstanding relations with those lands (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Veracini, 2011). In Canada, Indigenous rights are recognized formally, within the constitution and related legislation and agreements, as well

as in the declaration of a "nation-to-nation" acknowledgement of at least some degree of Indigenous sovereignty (Government of Canada, 2018). These contradictions and tensions play out in several ways, including contestation over the meaning and nature of reconciliation, ongoing political and legal challenges related to Indigenous claims, and the capacity of Indigenous peoples to exercise their rights both as full citizens and as First Peoples (Henderson, 2013; Palmater, 2011).

The Calls to Action, or recommendations, that accompanied the TRC's final report in 2015 hastened reconciliation-related activity in education and other realms. The report highlighted the trauma and violence experienced both directly and in their aftermath by several generations of Indigenous children separated from their families to attend residential schools which operated to destroy Indigenous peoples' connections with their heritage (TRC, 2015). Although the last residential school closed in 1996, many school survivors continue to bear the scars of their encounters. The intergenerational impact of the residential schooling system—reinforced by ongoing racism and discrimination in schools, the child welfare system, the criminal justice system, and other spheres—continues to shape the experiences of many Indigenous people (Arriagada, 2015; Clarysse & Moore, 2019; Milne & Wotherspoon, 2020; O'Donnell & Arriagada, 2019).

Despite Canadian policies and practices oriented to assimilate and eliminate Indigenous peoples (TRC, 2015), the development of strategies for Indigenous people to exert their positions to gain meaningful places as individuals and as collective forces has both nurtured and been sustained by Indigenous resilience. Resilience is typically understood with reference to individual factors, framed in terms of psychological or health/wellness-related factors, but an understanding of wider contextual dimensions is also important. Indigenous perspectives regarding resilience draw attention to the importance of individual characteristics (such as self-concept, coping mechanisms, and self-empowerment) but they also place high degrees of significance on social, collective, and relational characteristics in which cultural identity, connections with community and family, sharing, and mutual support are crucial (Toombs et al., 2016; Usher et al., 2021). These relationships, fundamental to Indigenous identity, are grounded in relationships with the land (McGuire, 2010). In contrast to western epistemologies and models of education which

prioritize forms of knowledge and ways of thinking and assessment that tend to be abstract, fragmented, and individualized, Indigenous perspectives—while highly diverse—emphasize relationships and connections rooted in place, understood in terms of physical locations on the land but also with respect to social, cultural, spiritual, and other dimensions (Battiste, 2013; Cajete, 2019). Locating persons and knowledge in place is a fundamental starting point for understanding our connections and relationships with other persons and other dimensions of the world. This approach and acknowledgment compel us to approach our engagement with and responsibilities to other persons and other entities (living and non-living alike) through an ethics of respect (Ermine, 2007; Styres & Kempf, 2023).

Reconciliation demands that Indigenous peoples and their perspectives are at the center of actions and commitments to transform educational relationships. Their voices and actions, drawing on experiences of oppression and personal and collective strengths, are essential to guide educational change in directions that will enhance their children's education. As part of this process, it is important to explore the extent to which Indigenous students are not simply objects of educational practice and reform, but also subjects whose voices and actions can make a difference.

Context and Methods

Alberta is home to 15.7% of all Indigenous people in Canada, with Indigenous people representing 6.8% of the province's total population (Government of Alberta, 2023a). One-third (33.7%) of the province's Indigenous population reside in the city where this project was conducted (Government of Alberta, 2023a). Alberta, which had more residential schools than any other province or territory (Government of Canada, 2015), encounters ongoing concerns related to racism and discrimination (Government of Alberta, 2022a). The province was one of the first Canadian jurisdictions to implement a comprehensive framework to support Indigenous education (Alberta Learning, 2002; Wotherspoon & Milne, 2020) and has continued to reaffirm its commitment to the framework's objectives (Government of Alberta, 2014, 2023b).

Alberta's educator professional practice standards include guidelines to engage students as "partners in education" (Government of Alberta, 2020a, p. 3) and create "opportunities for students to participate in leadership activities and

to exercise their voice in school leadership and decision making" (Government of Alberta, 2020b, p. 5). The province's education ministry promotes further commitment to student engagement, stressing, "The Alberta government believes that student voice plays a critical role in shaping every level of the education system and the educational experience" (Government of Alberta, 2019, p. 1). The predominant vehicle to address these aims has been the establishment of a provincial Minister's Youth Council in 2008, now consisting of forty student representatives aged fourteen to nineteen, complemented in some cases by district councils. The provincial engagement strategy highlights three core outcomes in conjunction with this activity: student "input on provincial programs and initiatives," opportunities for students "to be actively involved in giving their perspectives on education initiatives," and opportunities for "student leaders and adult champions...[to] have the skills to effectively and actively engage with one another to shape the education system" (Government of Alberta, 2019, p. 1). While this framework opens possibilities for student participation in educational planning and decision-making, it places student engagement outside of the main decision-making structures that guide the province's education system, with few assurances that student perspectives are heeded.

In this context, the authors have been interested in the experiences, actions, and perspectives of Indigenous students and their family and community members as they navigate a school system committed to educational reforms to support these students and to engage students and community members within educational planning and curricular matters. Indigenous students connected to one Alberta urban elementary/junior high public school were engaged in this project. This school is an Indigenous program of choice that serves a population of over 450 students, of whom 99% self-identify as Indigenous. The school has an Indigenous language and culture program as well as on-site Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers.

Past research activities have created conditions where Indigenous individuals can be cautious, distrusting, and suspicious of research (Guillemin et al., 2016; MacDonald et al., 2014; Mosby, 2013; Pacheco et al., 2013). To address these concerns, we engaged in a community-based participatory research project that drew on photovoice and survey methods and incorporated engagement, participation, and respectful

consultation with Indigenous school and family members in research processes. The project was undertaken in partnership with staff and students at the participating school and guidance from the school's parent council and the school division. Community-based participatory research aligns with Indigenous, decolonizing, and reconciliation research approaches to research with Indigenous peoples (Anderson & Cidro, 2019; Dawson et al., 2017; Howard, 2017; Simonds & Christopher, 2013; Vukic et al., 2016) as a means to foster partnerships, collaboration, and trust (Christopher et al., 2008; Laveaux & Christopher, 2009; Snijder et al., 2020).

Photovoice research methods can also foster trust, cultural responsiveness, and meaningful engagement, and balance power relationships in research processes when working with Indigenous communities (Bennett et al., 2019; Edwards et al., 2022; Mark & Boulton, 2017; Tremblay et al., 2018). Photovoice uses photography to empower individuals to document, reflect, and share their perspectives and lived experiences and become actively involved in processes that affect them. Photovoice projects aim "(1) to enable people to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns, (2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues through large and small group discussion of photographs, and (3) to reach policymakers" (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 369). Individuals express their thoughts and feelings through pictures paired with titles and captions and, in the process, promote social change (Fountain et al., 2021; Strack et al., 2022; Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997; Wang, 1999). Using this method, students captured and documented what was important to them about their education. The project created an opportunity for student voices to be heard in the context of schooling and offered a meaningful opportunity to strengthen students' engagement in schooling processes.

We are longstanding non-Indigenous allies. Our connection to the participating school began when the first author (EM) met a school staff member through their common work to support Indigenous students and was then invited to participate in events at the school. Subsequently, EM volunteered weekly at the school for one academic year. Over time, she established genuine relationships with school community members and was invited by school administrators to work on a project related to fostering student engagement. EM concluded her role as a volunteer and began to work on the research project. The second

author (TW) joined the project and, together, the authors co-designed project activities that sought to engage and empower students at the school as leaders and education partners using photovoice methods, with school administrators, staff, and members of the school's parent council to ensure that processes would be meaningful and respectful while addressing areas of need for the school community. The project received ethics approval from MacEwan University and the participating school division. Pseudonyms are used in place of participant names.

Procedures

The photovoice component of this project took the form of a photovoice class option that the first author co-taught on Thursday mornings with a teacher at the school from January to March 2020 (until schooling was disrupted due to COVID, cohort one) and from October 2021 to June 2022 (cohort two). Eligibility criteria to participate included self-identifying as Indigenous and, at the time of the study, being enrolled in grades 6, 7, and 8 at the participating school. To recruit participants in both cohorts, an invitation flyer and consent form was sent home with all students in grades 6, 7, and 8; students who returned a consent form signed by themselves and their parents were invited to participate.

Twenty-one students participated in cohort one and 20 in cohort two. Cohort two students completed a survey, but those in cohort one did not due to the COVID interruptions. Project activities for students in both cohorts involved:

1. engaging in group discussions about photovoice methods followed by what was important to students about their schooling, learning, and/or education as well as about their connection to schooling and/or education;
2. learning about photography, including photography skills and training, taking and discussing photos, and, with support from Indigenous Knowledge Keepers, what kinds of things were appropriate to take photos of and how this can be done in a respectful way (e.g., medicines);
3. taking photos and recording ideas and experiences in their journals in response to the guiding question: "What is most important to you about your education?" Based on consultation with school staff and school parent council members, students took photos inside and outside of the school

building and during field trips to local natural areas;

4. choosing photos (two photos for each student in cohort one for 42 photos total; six photos for each student in cohort two for 94 total photos) that best signified what was important to them about their education. Students gave each selected photo a title and wrote accompanying captions that reflected the feelings, perspectives, and stories captured. Drawing on the SHOWeD framework (Liebenberg, 2018; Wang, 1999; Wang et al., 2000), students were asked several questions to guide the process of selecting, titling, and captioning their photos: “What do you See here? What is really Happening here? How does this relate to Our lives? Why does this situation Exist? What can we Do about it?” (Wang, 1999, p. 188; Wang et al., 2000, p.84).
5. one-on-one and group discussions, guided by these questions, as we viewed and discussed the photos with the students, to understand the content and meaning of the photos and the messages being conveyed and gain a deeper understanding of how schools can foster meaningful student engagement and partnership. Through these discussions, which engaged students in collaborative analysis processes, four key themes emerged: (a) Indigenous cultures, traditions, languages, and spirituality, (b) relationships, (c) environmental protection and conservation, and (d) being heard and respected. We took field notes to document what was said during our visits to the school and discussions with students and school staff;
6. completing a survey (by students in cohort two, n=14) to offer a more in-depth understanding of participant experiences and perspectives². Students were asked questions in the survey about what is most important to them about their schooling and education, what education means to them, whether they feel heard at school, and their views on the photovoice project.

Data for analysis included photographs, titles, and captions as well as survey responses and field notes. Themes identified by students guided the following stages of analysis. Specifically, we used a deductive approach, using these themes as pre-defined codes to systematically analyze the data. These codes, along with notes taken during

discussions with students, were used to create a codebook to inform the analysis process and contextualize the themes. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns in the data (Saldaña, 2021). Statements from the data were grouped under relevant codes and then reorganized and refined multiple times to ensure an accurate representation of students’ perspectives and experiences. We also discussed the themes and our interpretations and conclusions with the students and school staff as a form of informal member checking to gain further insight and ensure accuracy. The designated themes frame the findings presented in the next section.

Findings

The impact of residential schooling featured prominently in students’ contributions. Many students observed, in response to survey items concerning the importance of schooling, that few or none of their family members had graduated from high school, and they wanted to be the first one to do so. Ava commented, “Education means a lot to me. I want to be the first one in my family to graduate.” Hannah stated, “None of my family members made it pass high school. They were involved with drugs, alcohol, mental illness but I want to graduate. I don’t want to be a drop out but school is so tiring but that is life.” Others valued the capacity to learn: “I value my education more than I value anything. Being able to learn really gives me a purpose” (Jeremy); “Education is sometimes important to me. Not just learning about simple subjects but being educated about others because it makes me want to expand my options” (Jake). Several wished to do well in schooling to help secure future employment and financial stability: “So I can get a good job” (Ann), “Just work to get a good future and job” (Jake), “To get a degree for the future and means to have a future” (Ethan), “Having a successful life, if you try hard in school,” and “I want to get a good job, so I can make good money and move out” (Brynn).

Asking students what they feel is most important to them about their education provided a foundation to advance understanding of how to foster meaningful student engagement and partnership in education. Students felt they were able to engage in school in meaningful ways when their schooling involved four key components: the importance of being able to learn about and engage with Indigenous cultures and traditions,

²School staff felt that a survey would be the most appropriate way for students to share their insights and perspectives.

as well as language and spirituality; the centrality of relationships with family members and other Indigenous persons in supporting students' education; relationships with nature and obligations to protect and conserve the environment; and having their voices heard and respected.

Indigenous Cultures, Traditions, Languages, and Spirituality

There was a clear connection between schooling engagement and having opportunities to learn about and participate in Indigenous cultural traditions and practices throughout the school day and as part of their learning (e.g., engaging in ceremony at school, learning on the land). In response to the survey question asking what was important to them about their education, students mentioned "culture" (Ann) and participating in traditional ceremonies: "I smudge and do my work" (Amelia). In the photovoice work, most photos captured images of Indigenous cultural objects (e.g., a tipi, ribbon skirt, eagle staff, dream catcher), cultural traditions and practices (e.g., using medicines such as sage and sweet grass, making a drum), artwork, and images of Cree syllabics (a system used to write Cree dialects). Denise noted in a photo caption, "In my culture the eagle (kihew) is the sacred symbol of power, and trees symbolize the afterlife."

Several captions highlighted the significance

of spirituality: "Our faith helps me to be brave" (Carla), "Talking to the Creator makes me feel fearless" (Theo), "Faith is part of who we are" (Jordan), and "Sweet grass, we use this to pray" (Ann). Photovoice work also highlighted traditions, including dance—"Dancing is our culture" (Ann)—and methods for butchering a deer, involving prayer and showing appreciation and respect for the animal who gave their life for food: "We have many traditions. These traditions follow us today. Today we learned tradition that many generations before us learned and taught. It is an honour to participate in these traditions. I like how traditions like this are still being taught and learned" (Marie). Students valued learning about cultural practices and traditions at school, giving them the opportunity to help to preserve and re-teach these traditions. As David noted, "At my school we learn about culture, so I can learn and pass it on."

The photovoice work also captured and reflected many images of tipis: "The tipi is a part of my Rez and the picture reminds me of my family and cultural home" (Philip); "In this photo I portray a home to all my ancestors. I want people to look at this photo and feel a sense of familiarity. When I look at this photo, I think of my family and I hope the viewer feels the same" (Sean). Contributions from two students, Shirley and Luna, illustrate this theme.



The Tipi People. This is a picture that represents my culture and my school. I came to school to learn about my culture and how meaningful my culture is. My culture taught me how to show respect. I learned how much meaning my life and my culture has. (Shirley)



Something Beautiful. I took this photo because it made me think about how humans can create so many beautiful things like books and beaded feathers and bracelets and more. This photo also made me think about how here at [school] I learned to bead. I am glad that I came to [school] because now I can learn more about my culture and I learned how to make something so beautiful. (Luna)

Relationships

Students placed a high value on strong relationships with family members attending the school who offer support, as well as Indigenous liaison workers, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, Indigenous language teachers, or other people who care about them at school, fostering a

sense of belonging, connection, and schooling engagement. Whereas Indigenous students in many communities in Alberta and elsewhere feel unwelcome or disengaged at their schools (Prete, 2021; Rollo, 2023), students participants emphasized the benefits of mutual support: “I liked that we got to go on field trips and hanging out with my cousins and friends” (Amelia) and “I liked it because I got to hang out with my friends”



Playing in the Snow. I have two sisters at my school and we have fun in the snow. We go to school together and I see them in the halls and I see them at recess. (Ella).



Life’s Journey. To find a person that makes you laugh heals you without knowing. You respect each other. To have a best friend is life. (Aurora)

(Brynn). Many photos and captions reflected friends, siblings, and cousins doing things together at school.

Several other students depicted relationships in their photos and captions: “This school has been home to my relations for generations and it’s going to be for many more” (Paul); “Cherish the time that you have with your loved ones. You never really know what life has in store for you” (Jeremy); “As we walk through life our friends make us brave” (Carla), “In this school we are all family” (David), “To be brave, it helps to have a friend” (Autumn), and “I feel trapped inside. My family lets me be free” (Sam).

Environmental Protection and Conservation

Students expressed feeling peace and calm from being outside, in nature, and on the land, and responsibility to care for the land and protect and preserve natural resources for future generations, expressing disappointment with pollution and littering. In the survey, Natalie noted that it was important for education to enable students “To take a better and more beautiful view in the world.” The theme of environmental preservation was evident in the photovoice work, as illustrated by two of Iris’s photos and captions. One caption stated, “The trees are important to us because trees give us oxygen. I hope we will be alive in the future if people keep cutting trees down. If people keep doing that, people will be really sad and the earth will be gone” (Iris). A second photo from Iris focused on the importance of water, as illustrated below.



The Spirit of Water. The reason I picked this picture was because water was here for thousands of years and before people were not mistreating and throwing garbage in the water and putting oil in the water and killing fish. (Iris)

Alexis also selected photos that reflected the theme of protecting and respecting nature. One caption noted, “The voices of nature teach me lessons. The forest is full of life; slow down, honour, and appreciate what you hear” (Alexis). Her other photovoice entry is illustrated below.



Perseverance. Respecting our first teachers. This tree has been here before me and will stand strong after me as long as we take care of Mother Earth. (Alexis)

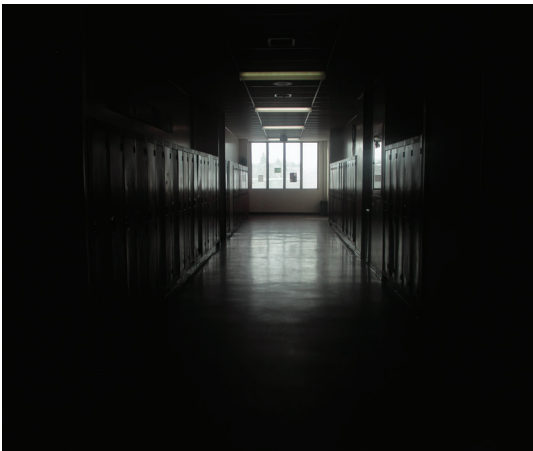
Students captured the importance of being proactive in caring for the land and nature: “The way we think and act is destroying this. We must be brave and speak up if we want to change things” (Jordan); “Our land is our home. Reminds me of how brave we need to be to protect our first Mother” (Ethan); “Trees have feelings too and humans need to understand them” (Ava); “We are all strong, just like the trees” (David), “I must speak for the trees because we forgot to listen” (Jordan); “We should value our land more” (Mary). Others stressed the importance of taking time to appreciate and learn from nature: “Nature is an amazing, beautiful thing. We normally take nature for granted, but if we take a minute and observe, we will see the story it tells” (Aurora).

Being Heard and Respected

A common theme expressed by students in the survey and in discussions with the authors concerned not being involved at school and not feeling as though their voices are being heard. Expressions of vulnerability, uncertainty, and instability also came through in the student photovoice work. Jeremy noted in the survey that “Currently, I’m not so much involved” in schooling; when asked about feeling heard at school, he commented “No, not really.” For Denise, though: “Education means a lot to me because I have little control in my life. It is nice to be in control

of my life sometimes, and that's what school is to me." However, while she felt empowered to get an education and complete high school, she observed, in common with many other students, that, "I am not good at sharing my voice through my own mouth"; "Sometimes I felt like I wasn't heard" (Amelia); "I use my voice sometimes" (Alexis); "What I think about sharing my voice is that my voice is not loud. No, I do not feel like I am heard at school" (Theo); "I think I could of had a louder voice and say what I needed to say without being shy about it" (Natalie).

Students also spoke about personal challenges they were experiencing outside of school, within their personal lives, that impacted their schooling. This included the responsibility to care for younger siblings, caregivers experiencing mental health issues and addictions, financial and housing instability, and not having enough food or being hungry. Marie's work, illustrated below, reveals feelings of worry and stress, as well as resilience and perseverance.



The Passage. The path of life could be scary and dark but you have to keep going and walking. When you get to an age it gets hard but you have to keep going forward to get to the light at the end. We all have light at the end of our paths, we just have to reach it.

Resilience and a desire to be seen, respected, and heard in their lives and at school was a theme expressed by many students in our discussions and in photo captions. Caption statements included, "Trees live through anything. So do I" (Paul); "Never again will our language or culture be silenced" (Ann); "We've been through so much, but are still here and stronger than ever" (Aurora). Others revealed: "Sometimes it's hard to be yourself because it takes bravery to be your true

self" (Aurora); "When times get hard you gotta get back up again" (Evelyn); "Respecting our healing is respecting our culture" (Denise). Several photos contained images associated with advocacy and awareness about missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, which has gained attention due to a national inquiry by the Government of Canada and the release of an associated final report about violence against Indigenous women in Canada and its impact (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019). "We honour the life we lost and to make sure people stop stealing Indigenous women," reads Rocky's photo caption, while Denise lamented her "stolen sisters":



My stolen sisters. Missing murdered Indigenous women is something that needs to be recognized. Remember and represent missing murdered Indigenous women because they can't. NO MORE STOLEN SISTERS!

Students expressed appreciation for participating in the photovoice project to share their voices: "I liked being able to scream, my voice at people through pictures" (Denise); "I love sharing my voice through pictures" (Jake); "Sharing your voice, you can learn a lot about yourself" (Austin); "I really like the photovoice project" (Theo); "It feels good to let people know how I feel about my stuff" (Brynn). Clearly, the work and voices shared through this project demonstrated clearly that schools have work to do to advance meaningful student engagement and partnership; photovoice methods may be a helpful strategy to utilize in this journey.

Discussion

This study adds to the literature examining the experiences and perspectives of Indigenous students and their family and community members as they navigate a school system committed to reconciliation and initiatives to support and engage

Indigenous students (Milne & Wotherspoon, 2022, 2023; Sianturi et al., 2022; Wotherspoon & Milne, 2024). Photovoice methods facilitated a better understanding of what is important to students about their education and highlighted ways to foster more meaningful student engagement and partnership.

The school where the study was conducted, more than most Canadian classrooms, was characterized by a high degree of engagement with Indigenous perspectives, supported by Indigenous personnel and cultural resources. These features stood out as elements that the students regarded as valuable for their learning and lives, pointing to factors that are central to Indigenous values and ways of knowing, as well as to other aspects that represented their experiences as Indigenous people within a settler society. The students' contributions drew attention to the kinds of relationships and cultural supports that they felt schools needed to foster in order to demonstrate meaningful commitment to students' capacity to engage and thrive as Indigenous people, but they also pointed to forms of displacement and powerlessness that represented their place within a settler colonial society.

Cultural support and resilience featured prominently in the students' photos and comments. Foremost among these themes were their emphases on opportunities for learning about Indigenous cultures and traditions, and their focus on relationships and environmental protection. Their understanding of the world embodied an "ethics of respect" represented in perspectives of Indigenous Elders and epistemologies (Ermine, 2007; Battiste, 2013; Styres & Kempf, 2023), highlighting their connections with and responsibilities to one another and to the land. Linkages with, and mutual support among, family and community were especially important. Students desired solid foundations for their own resilience, reinforced through cultural resilience, which requires ongoing validation and support. A focus on building and strengthening relationships enables students to engage with their schooling and with other persons involved in their schooling from a place of recognition of who they are and an understanding of how they are situated in the world.

Students who participated in our study were in a school where staff offered relief from harsh realities experienced in a settler colonial society, but they were keenly aware of what these represented in their everyday encounters outside

of schooling. Racism, systemic violence, and being silenced featured prominently in their photos and commentaries. Many students drew attention to home lives and struggles of family members affected by residential schooling or other social circumstances associated with the displacement from family and cultural roots. Their accounts pointed to ambivalent stances: some participants expressed gratitude for having opportunities which were denied to other family members and previous generations, while others highlighted ongoing violence, pointing especially to the persistent failure to address the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls and other systemic injustices. They also made clear that many circumstances in their lives at home and other life spheres had an impact on their schooling and that their learning and educational outcomes were influenced by the degree to which school personnel acknowledged these issues and supported students to balance out-of-school and school life.

Students also highlighted the importance of being heard and respected, both at school and in their everyday lives. They spoke appreciatively of having opportunities to be recognized and treated respectfully in their schools, especially by Indigenous staff and liaison personnel, but more commonly they suggested that they lacked either spaces or confidence to assert their voices at school. Several observed that the photovoice project provided them with the chance to speak about their lives and express views in a way that they felt was missing in their schools and other venues. Their accounts provided evidence that at least some schools have moved to address the gap between home and school life, but the differences between these worlds, and the reliance on performance-driven standards as opposed to holistic support for students, pose risks of perpetuating feelings of being disconnected from schooling by many Indigenous students (Milne & Wotherspoon, 2023; Mullen, 2020).

While many of our findings are encouraging, pointing to practices that could benefit Indigenous students and others if they were adopted (e.g., learning Indigenous languages), evidence suggests that the adoption of similar practices remains limited and uneven across Alberta's school system (Prete, 2021; Wotherspoon & Milne, 2024). Throughout Canada, but especially in Alberta and other Prairie provinces, widespread support for the idea of reconciliation and some of the actions necessary to accomplish it conceal a wide range

of contrary views that too much is being done in the direction of special treatment for Indigenous people (EnviroNics Institute, 2019; Wotherspoon & Milne, 2021, 2023), embodying what Tuck and Yang (2012) characterize as “settler moves to innocence.” Covert and direct forms of racism are revealed in resistance to many activities being implemented to support Indigenous students widely expressed by the province’s residents, including teachers (Mullen, 2020; Prete, 2021; Wotherspoon & Milne, 2021, 2023). The creation of spaces within schooling contexts to recognize and acknowledge Indigenous students and their family and community members holds promise to counter negative stereotypes and misrepresentations about them among settlers, but this will not occur without fundamental changes in educational relationships and structures.

Limitations and Considerations for Future Research

The findings echo themes that are prevalent across much of the broader literature on Indigenous student experiences, including the importance of connecting schools with their homes and communities through validation of their perspectives, appropriate forms of cultural supports, and nurturing of respectful relationships among people and non-human phenomena, as well as the harmful consequences of educational practices that did not acknowledge or reinforce these factors (Battiste, 2013; Cajete, 2019; Prete, 2021; Rollo, 2023). It is important to pay special attention to those dimensions that were most highly valued by the students who participated in our photovoice project while recognizing that their experiences may not be shared by many Indigenous students who attend schools that are not so fully guided by Indigenous perspectives and personnel. The findings are limited insofar as they reflect the perspectives of a small number of participants in three middle school grades in one school. There is considerable potential to connect these findings to similar work that could be conducted with other students in these grades and at other grade levels within Alberta schools as well as in other jurisdictions both within Canada and in other settler colonial societies. There is a burgeoning literature that is exploring promising initiatives related to the incorporation of Indigenous perspectives and cultural supports at different grade levels in schools in Canada, Australia, and other settler colonies (e.g., Deer & Heringer, 2023; Fricker et al., 2023; Highfield et al., 2023). This work is promising insofar as it

proves insights into mapping the way forward for transforming educational thinking and practice grounded in Indigenous community perspectives. However, it also suggests the persistence of a deep gulf between what needs to be done and what is actually happening across many school and community contexts.

Conclusion

Photovoice projects have amplified youth voices in various contexts, including Indigenous communities, to co-create knowledge with youth, capture and share their experiences, and create opportunities for their voices to be heard among diverse audiences (Edwards et al., 2022; Tremblay et al., 2018). Our photovoice project yielded key outcomes, notably gaining and sharing knowledge, student empowerment, and documenting strengths and issues that are important to students. Overall, student participants felt that opportunities for learning about their cultures and traditions, environmental conservation, personal relationships at school, and being heard and respected in schooling contexts were important components of their education and schooling. Challenges remain, however, in moving these insights from local to more central sites, to address concerns about how key messages from photovoice projects have been disseminated among policy and decision-makers, and how these projects have supported meaningful social and policy change and community-centered outcomes (Golden, 2020; Liebenberg, 2018; Wang & Burris, 1997). Participants drew attention to questions of which voices are heard and how they are they understood, interpreted, and responded to—and by whom—when it comes to efforts to empower and amplify their voices in educational contexts (Cooke-Sather, 2014). Although much work is needed to advance reconciliation in educational contexts and have students genuinely contribute to school leadership and decision-making, photovoice methods can be one useful strategy to create opportunities for students to exercise their voice and advance discussion and knowledge about issues important to them.

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