



Just Because We're Small Doesn't Mean We Can't Stand Tall: A Child and Youth Rights Movement

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Abstract *In this article, the authors share their research on a curriculum for social justice, truth, and then reconciliation as put forth by the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society (Caring Society). The Caring Society is a non-profit organization that advocates for equity and social justice for First Nations children and creates social justice educational materials for Canadian learners. The authors provide an overview of the Caring Society campaigns and educational research. More specifically, they discuss how the Caring Society is creating educational resources that center a child and youth-driven civil rights movement across the school curriculum. Such curricular and pedagogical approaches focus on truth and then reconciliation, Indigenous sovereignty, and position a social justice pedagogy. They then discuss some of the ways we might advocate relational forms of citizenship that seek to honour the truth, and then reconciliation education.*

Keywords truth and reconciliation; child and youth activism; First Nations rights; social justice research; moral courage; curriculum; citizenship education

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Children at the “Back of the Bus”¹: A Child and Youth Civil Rights Movement

On November 26, 2008, Shannen Koostachin, then 13, stood before an audience of students, academics, educators, and activists at the University of Toronto, in Ontario, Canada and said:

I would like to talk to you about what it is like to be a child who has never seen a real school. I want to tell you what it is like to never have the chance to be excited about being educated. It is hard to feel proud when your classrooms are cold and mice run over our lunches. It's hard to feel you can have a chance to grow up to be somebody important... That's why some of our students begin to give up in grade 4 or 5. They just stop going to school. Imagine a child who feels they have no future, even at that young age. (Boileau, 2020)

Shannen Koostachin was from Attawapiskat First Nation, a Cree community at the mouth of the Attawapiskat River, on the shores of James Bay in Treaty 9. These lands have been home to the Mushkegowuk Cree for thousands of years, where generations of Mushkegowuk children were educated on the land and by their kin prior to their forced removal by the Canadian state to Indian Residential Schools (General, 2012). In 1976, a new school opened in Attawapiskat, though three years later its grounds were contaminated due to a massive diesel leak that resulted in years of health problems for educators and students (Angus, 2015). The school was finally closed in 2000, at which time the federal government installed portable trailers on the playground of the contaminated grounds of the school. These portables were described as a “temporary school” until a new one could be built. The portables soon became decrepit, with intermittent heat, warped doors, mice infestations, and frozen pipes during the winter (Wilson, 2011). After nine long years of waiting for their new school, Shannen documented the condition of her “temporary” school in Attawapiskat. Shannen, other students, and the wider community were dismayed and enraged by the federal government's failure to build a new school.

¹ This quote is from Chelsea Edwards, a 14-year-old student at the school in Attawapiskat. Chelsea said, “perhaps you have heard of how Rosa Parks helped start the civil rights movement. Well, we are the children who have been sitting at the back of the school bus our whole lives. And we don't want to stay there anymore” (Angus, 2015, p. 1).

Shannen's leadership resulted in the support of thousands of First Nations, Inuit, Métis,² and non-Indigenous students and teachers who joined the movement for equitable education for First Nation communities. The students and their teachers put public pressure on the Canadian Federal government by writing letters to elected officials that called for the building of proper schools and education for First Nations students. Shannen's activism culminated in her nomination for the International Children's Peace Prize in 2008 (Caring Society, 2022). Her actions called on the Federal and Provincial governments to live up to the promises they made when signing their citizenship and relational commitments to Treaty 9.

Shannen's Legacy: "Get up, pick up your books, and keep walking in your moccasins"

In 2010, Shannen tragically died in a car accident, a month before her 16th birthday (Wilson, 2011). The children she inspired, in collaboration with her family and community, created the "Shannen's Dream" campaign. They vowed to continue her work so that all First Nations children are guaranteed their rights to equitable access to education in safe and comfortable schools. On June 12, 2012, the day Shannen would have graduated from high school, construction on a new school in Attawapiskat began. Although the school opened in 2014, many other First Nations remain without proper schools. Consequently, Shannen's Dream continues (Blackstock, 2019). In turn, Shannen remains an important role model for children and young people and continues to inspire them to "get up, pick up your books, and keep walking in your moccasins" (Caring Society, 2022). Her activism and demands for justice and equity are now recognized as "the largest youth-driven movement in Canadian history" (Angus, 2015, p. 2). Indeed, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis and non-Indigenous youth, as Tupper's (2014) research makes clear, have been and continue to be committed to enacting social change that goes beyond the citizenship framework put forth in many classrooms and curricula. In what follows, we trouble certain framings of the Ontario Citizenship Education Framework. We posit that the Shannen's Dream

² The Canadian constitution recognizes three distinct groups of Indigenous peoples: First Nations, Inuit, and Métis. There are 634 First Nation communities across Canada, speaking more than 50 languages. The Inuit have eight different ethnic groups, five languages, and live across four northern regions that make up their homelands, Inuit Nunangat. The Métis Nation originated in Red River territory in Western Canada and describes a specific group of people who are of mixed European and Indigenous descent. The official language of the Métis Nation is Michif, which has at least six geographical dialects. We intentionally use the term "First Nations, Inuit, and Métis" to describe people who are Indigenous to what is now called Canada, and specific names of communities when possible.

campaign, and others since, can facilitate civic engagement that centres ethical relations, moral courage, and social justice education.

Shannen Koostachin's legacy has grown to include other social justice campaigns put forth specifically for children and youth by The First Nations Child and Family Caring Society (Caring Society). As a national non-profit organization, the Caring Society aims to ensure First Nations children and their families have culturally based and equitable opportunities to grow up safely at home, be healthy, get a good education, and be proud of who they are (Caring Society, 2020a).³ The Caring Society is located on Algonquin territories that some of us now call Ottawa, Canada. Led by Dr. Cindy Blackstock, the Caring Society seeks to provide reconciliation-based education, research, and support that promotes the safety and wellbeing of First Nations children, young people, families, and Nations. A recognized leader in child and youth activism and reconciliation education, the Caring Society continues to support the professional learning of educators and students across Canada through three main social justice-based reconciliation campaigns: Shannen's Dream (equity for First Nations education), Jordan's Principle (equitable access to government services),⁴ and I am a Witness (equitable First Nations child welfare).⁵

An Unprecedented Opportunity: Just Because We're Small

Although many different individuals, communities, and organizations across Canada and around the world support the Caring Society campaigns, it is predominately elementary school teachers and students who have taken up the work. Since 2009, students, and their teachers, continue to play an integral part toward enacting some of the *94 Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action* across Canada. In fact, their voices and advocacy have consistently captured media attention and are featured in three documentaries by acclaimed Abenaki documentary film maker Alanis Obomsawin of the National Film

³ Although the Caring Society actively addresses issues that impact all Indigenous Peoples in Canada, including Inuit and Métis, they specifically advocate for the rights of First Nations children living on reserve.

⁴ [Jordan's Principle](#) (First Nations Child & Family Caring Society, n.d.a) is a legal rule named after Jordan River Anderson, a five-year-old boy from Norway House Cree Nation. Jordan was born in 1999 with complex medical needs and died in the hospital in 2005, never having spent a day in his family home due to payment disputes within and between the federal and provincial governments over who would pay for his homecare services. *Jordan's Principle* aims to make sure First Nations children can access all public services in a way that is reflective of their distinct cultural needs, takes full account of the historical disadvantage linked to colonization, and without experiencing any service denials, delays, or disruptions because they are First Nations.

⁵ [I am a Witness](#) (First Nations Child & Family Caring Society, n.d.b) invites people to learn about the case before the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal on discrimination in First Nations children's services. The campaign relies on public education and free will in that it uploads all the legal submissions online for people to read and invites people to take action.

Board of Canada, namely *Hi-Ho Mistahey!*, *We can't make the same mistake twice* and *Jordan River Anderson, The Messenger*.

Moreover, students have organized public education and engagement events, interacted with politicians and community leaders, produced public service announcements, attended court proceedings at the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal, Federal Court, and the Federal Court of Appeal, and marched in solidarity calling for equity for First Nations children countless times. They have sat in the galleries of the House of Commons in Parliament to witness the passing of historic First Nations children's equity motions regarding Shannen's Dream and Jordan's Principle. Students have and continue to write to politicians to hold them accountable for the lack of action on the same motions, reminding them that Canadians are bearing witness and demanding change.

Such youth-driven social justice civil rights movements do not necessarily align with forms of democratic citizenship imagined by a Canadian colonial government and envisioned in provincial and territorial curricula (Angus, 2015; Blackstock et al., 2018; Tupper 2014). Thousands of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis and non-Indigenous children and youth have participated in these campaigns. Their activism has offered a unique opportunity to advance knowledge about the impacts of reconciliation-based education for children and conduct evidence-based research to assess how we can best move forward (Blackstock et al., 2018). In 2018, our team received multi-year funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) to study social justice and truth and reconciliation in Canadian classrooms.

We authors, are members of a larger research team,⁶ and teacher educators at the Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa. We both have long-standing relationships with the Caring Society. We are also settlers who live, work, teach, and profit on the unsundered, ancestral territories of the Algonquin Nation. We acknowledge that our choice to question our privilege and positionalities as Canadian citizens, settler scholars, and educators remains a privilege in itself. I, Nicholas Ng-A-Fook, am a first-generation Hakka-Guyanese-Irish-Scottish immigrant from Guyana and Scotland, entitled to the settler colonial rights of being a dual Canadian and United Kingdom transnational settler citizen. My (Lisa Howell's) family immigrated to Ontario and Saskatchewan from Northern Europe, my paternal great-

⁶ Our interdisciplinary team, consisting of scholars and practitioners in education, social work, pediatrics and law, have expertise in the following areas: pedagogy and curriculum development; reconciliation education; Indigenous elementary and social justice education and policy; teacher education; child rights, development and protection; First Nations research ethics and ontology; participatory action research and grounded theory; and the Touchstones of Hope reconciliation framework. Our team includes Dr. Cindy Blackstock, Dr. Sue Bennet, Dr. Melisa Brittain, Sylvia Smith, Charlene Bearhead, Janet Porter, Gail Stromquist, Dr. Lynette Shultz, and Dr. Teresa Libesman. We also acknowledge the staff, past and present, at the Caring Society and thank them for their ongoing support and collaboration.

grandmother being a British Home Child. Subsequently, both of us attended and have been educated within the francophone Catholic (Nicholas) and Anglophone public (Lisa) schooling systems that sought to ensure we would become “good” francophone and anglophone settler Canadian citizens (Ng-A-Fook, 2009). Part of our approach to social justice education research demands us to recursively question how our livelihoods as Canadian citizens and teacher educators continue to disrupt and reproduce the individual, systemic, and societal inequities created through the formation of a settler colonial nation-state. Before we move on to describing the conceptualization of our research study, it is necessary to provide a context for why Shannen Koostachin and other children and youth had to stand up for their rights and those of others in Canada.

The Context for our Research Study: Successive Denials of the Rights of Children

Canada is obligated by the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2008), and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms to ensure the full enjoyment of rights for all children in Canada. However, successive Canadian governments have consistently denied First Nations children and youth their civil rights in relation to accessing public services, living their traditional culture(s), and participation in matters affecting them (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2008, 2011; Blackstock, 2016; Haldane et al., 2012; Standing Committee on Public Accounts, 2009; UNCRC, 1989, 2003, 2012; First Nations Child and Family Caring Society et al. v Attorney General of Canada, 2016 CHRT 2, 2017 CHRT 35). Such violations of children’s rights persist even though the Canadian government has been presented with the necessary evidence and responsive solutions to fix the ongoing systemic inequities (Blackstock, 2011; Blackstock et al., 2006). Indeed, the federal government has actively resisted implementing the 2016 ruling of the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal (CHRT) on First Nations children’s services, including Jordan’s Principle (2016 CHRT 2). The Tribunal ordered the Canadian government to cease its systemic racial discrimination against First Nations children in terms of their inequitable access to public services both on and off their reserves. Such failure to implement the order has prompted the CHRT to issue multiple non-compliance orders. Moreover, the CHRT stressed that the ongoing non-compliance has led to unnecessary First Nations family separations and the deaths of children (2017 CHRT 35).

In August of 2017, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (UNCERD) called on Canada to comply with the tribunal’s decision by ensuring that “all children, on and off reserve, have access to all services available to other children in Canada, without discrimination” (UNCERD, 2017, p. 8). The current situation in Canada has led to the

displacement of thousands of First Nations children from their families and communities. In fact, there are more children in government care today than during the Residential Schooling system era. Before the Canadian government eventually complied in 2021, the CHRT issued nine non-compliance orders while First Nations children across Canada continued to wait. “A slumbering public is,” as King and Blackstock (2017) warn us, “systemic discrimination’s best friend” (para. 6). We suggest that teacher education has a key role in creating, supporting, and sustaining a Canadian public that acknowledges and respects the human rights of First Nations children, supports child and youth activism, and is committed to anti-racist work.

Truth and Reconciliation Educational Research: An Emerging Field

Although the focus of this article is on social justice action research conducted in Canada, we acknowledge that our study is part of an emerging international field of Truth and Reconciliation Education Studies (Australia, South Africa, New Zealand, Rwanda, and other countries), which we have taken up in other publications (Howell & Ng-A-Fook, 2022, 2023). This emerging field of study seeks to respond to the *Calls to Action* put forth by intergenerational survivors of the Residential Schooling system, the TRC Final Report, and to systemic past and present policies of settler colonial violence (Howell & Ng-A-Fook, 2023). In response to such calls, there is a growing body of educational research that seeks to reconceptualize and unsettle how historical truths “ought” to be taught in response to such intergenerational systemic and individual harms (Howell et al., 2021; Jurgens, 2020; Madden, 2019; Wallace-Casey, 2022). We contend that the emerging field of truth and reconciliation educational research, in which we situate ourselves, is integral to understanding and advancing curriculum, pedagogy, and engagement in the work of truth and reconciliation, work that we are implicated in as teachers, teacher educators, and Canadian citizens.

With these historical, educational, and research contexts in mind, we put forth a conceptual overview of a social justice study taking place at the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa, in Ontario, and in collaboration with McGill University, in Montreal, Québec. Our study examines teacher’s perceptions and experiences of education for reconciliation and social justice in elementary classrooms, and the unprecedented participation of children and youth in these civil rights campaigns in Canada. As this is the first of several future articles on this research study, our focus in this article is to establish the importance and context of the research concerns, and to provide a situated overview of the Caring Society, their ontological and pedagogical philosophies and values, and their social justice activism and work in education. Furthermore, we believe that it is necessary to examine how current curriculum frames

citizenship and reconciliation, and, in turn, we look at the Ontario Ministry of Education's (OME) 2018 elementary Social Studies (K-8) document, as this is where our research is situated. We ask if curriculum expectations and the framework of citizenship reflect education for truth and then reconciliation put forth by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Such social justice actions call on us to restore "respectful relations" across the different treaty and unceded territories that comprise Canada (TRC, 2015b, p. 1). Our research indicates that the social justice campaigns put forth by the Caring Society are, in many ways, creating the necessary curricular and pedagogical opportunities for teachers to re-story our relations in their classroom communities.

"Education is the Key": Calling for A New Social Contract

In June of 2015, the TRC released their *Final Report* and *94 Calls to Action* to address the systemic discrimination embedded in colonial policies in Canada. Emphasizing education as key to creating a deep and lasting reconciliation movement, the TRC (2015b), in collaboration with Residential School Survivors, called on ministries of education to develop and implement "age-appropriate educational materials" for kindergarten to grade 12 students while "identifying teacher training needs" and fostering "respectful learning environments" (pp. 289-290). Since 2015, provincial and territorial ministries of education, teachers, and teacher education programs have made great strides toward designing and implementing reconciliation-based curriculum, courses, and materials (Howell, 2017; Smith, 2017). However, there has been very little educational research on the impacts of teacher and student learning, and engagement with, the TRC (2015c) *Calls to Action* in relation to whether current resources and practices facilitate the respectful and transformational learning environments required to "restore mutual respect between peoples and nations" (TRC, 2015b, p. 1; Milne, 2017). The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has called for a "new social contract for education to repair injustices while transforming the future" (UNESCO, 2021, p. 2). Moreover, the document calls on us to "to create futures that are shared and interdependent" (p. 3). And yet UNESCO (2021) warns:

At present the ways we organize education across the world do not do enough to ensure just and peaceful societies, a healthy planet, and shared progress that benefits all. In fact, some of our difficulties stem from how we educate. A new social contract for education needs to allow us to think differently about learning and the relationships between students, teachers, knowledge, and the world. (p. 3)

As educational researchers, teacher educators, and teachers how might we begin to think differently in relation to our enactments of teacher education,

curriculum, and pedagogy as truth, and then reconciliation? We suggest that the social justice campaigns that the Caring Society invites teachers and students to join offer curricular and pedagogical opportunities for responding to the UNESCO calls for equity and justice and some of the *94 Calls to Action* put forth by the TRC. To do so, our research team is currently collaborating with teachers across Canada to create a relational professional learning community that strives to support teachers and students in their learning and action, and to uplift the youth-driven movement toward equity and justice.

Professional Learning Communities: Participatory Social Justice Research with Teachers

As mentioned previously, our research project involves an interdisciplinary team. This team approach contributes to a reconciliation framework that respects First Nations onto-cosmological-epistemology and relational ethicality, emphasizes collaboration, and takes a collective inquiry approach to a shared responsibility (Blackstock, 2011). Our study sought to understand how educators use the Caring Society's reconciliation-based campaigns in their elementary classrooms and the impacts those campaigns have for teachers and students in relation to reconciliation and social justice. Drawing on some of the different methodological principles of participatory action research (PAR), our study sought to create meaningful opportunities for teachers to collaborate and contribute to the different phases of the study (Egan et al., 2004; Elliot & Lazenbatt, 2005; Reid et al., 2006; Riecken et al., 2006; Rutman et al., 2005). Our research team endeavours to uphold an ethos of relationality throughout the study (Cahill, 2007; Gilligan, 1982). For example, as educational researchers, we formed trusting relationships with members of the pilot group over the year we worked with them by reaching out several times throughout the year, and offering support at all stages. We invited them to events within the university community, including talks, workshops, and sharing circles. Thus, in seeking to address the TRC *Calls to Action* in the transformational spirit that they were intended, our research team aspired to work *with* teachers towards "building student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect" while "sharing information and best practices" on truth and reconciliation education (TRC, 2015b, pp. 238-239).

Our study sought to sustain a relational ethos of PAR in several ways. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by researchers with teachers in the fall of 2019, and participants were offered the opportunity to read and amend their transcript prior to it being finalized. Researchers then identified themes using thematic analysis and checked those themes with participants. Based on the research findings, we have published several educational resources in collaboration with the Caring Society, including a curriculum

based on the Touchstones of Hope,⁷ as well as three learning guides centred on the campaigns (I am a Witness, Jordan's Principle, and Shannen's Dream). We are also in the process of creating several short videos for educators featuring topics such as, but not limited to, teaching truth and then reconciliation, courageous leadership, and teaching children about leaders such as Shannen Koostachin and Jordan River Anderson. Furthermore, The Spirit Bear Virtual School was conceptualised in January 2021 as a space for teachers to participate in professional learning webinars and access our research informed educational resources (The official launch of the Spirit Bear School will occur in August 2023 at the second annual Spirit Bear Retreat at the University of Ottawa). The group of teacher participants who piloted these resources in their classrooms shared their experiences, offered feedback, and continue to inform the development of resources. Our pedagogical hope continues to be that these curricular and pedagogical resources will support teachers toward enacting truth and then reconciliation education relationally with elementary classroom communities on a much larger national scale.

As this is the first of a series of articles on our research, we will take the time below to introduce the Caring Society in terms of their values, guiding philosophies, and social justice educational campaigns.

Situating A Caring Society: A Historical Overview

In 1998, a gathering of First Nations children's service providers held on the Squamish First Nation recommended the establishment of a national non-political First Nations organization to serve as an information hub and to address longstanding inequities in public services that hampered the redress of the multi-generational impacts of colonialism experienced by First Nations families. A group of First Nations leaders were appointed to draft the organization's values and bylaws, which were adopted a year later at the second national gathering on Kingsclear First Nation. The organization, called the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society (Caring Society) operated on a volunteer basis until 2002 when it opened its first office in Ottawa.

The Caring Society is a short walk from the settler colonial Parliament of Canada. In an office space full of teddy bears and children's letters and drawings, Cindy Blackstock and her staff provide reconciliation-based public education, research, and support to promote the safety and wellbeing of First Nations children, young people, families and Nations (Caring Society, 2020a). While the Caring Society does engage in public interest litigation

⁷ [Touchstones of Hope](#) (First Nations Child and Family Caring Society, n.d.c) is a reconciliation framework that draws on five principles: Self-determination, non-discrimination, culture and language, and four processes: Truth-telling, acknowledging, restoring, and relating (see Auger, 2012; Blackstock et al., 2006).

versus the federal government to compel it to address discriminatory First Nations children's services, it also engages the public (particularly teachers and children) through educational initiatives, public policy campaigns, and quality resources to support communities using a truth and reconciliation education framework that brings Canadians together. Moreover, the Caring Society actively advocates for systemic and sustainable change in government policies that impact the lives of First Nations children and families through their comprehensive [Spirit Bear Plan](#) (First Nations Child and Family Caring Society, n.d.d). [Spirit Bear](#) (First Nations Child and Family Caring Society, n.d.e), who joined the Caring Society in 2008, is a mem"bear" of the Carrier Sekani Tribal Council. He represents the 165,000 First Nations children impacted by the ongoing First Nations children's services case at the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal (CHRT), which we will describe in detail in a subsequent section of this article. [Spirit Bear's website](#) (First Nations Child and Family Caring Society, n.d.f) features Spirit Bear books, learning guides, educational calendars, and films. Through Spirit Bear, the Caring Society promotes culturally based equity for First Nations children, youth, and their families so that they can "grow up safely in their homes, be healthy, fulfill their dreams, celebrate their language and culture and be proud of who they are" (Caring Society, 2020a, para. 2). Spirit Bear is the voice, and the spirit of the campaigns, reminding us that the campaigns are about children.

Caring Society Philosophies and Core Values: First Nations Ontological Perspectives

The Caring Society's social justice educational campaigns encourage Canadians citizens to critically analyze and reimagine the historic and contemporary relationship between First Nations peoples and Canadians. The campaigns are used in classrooms to understand relations between First Nations and the Canadian government, as well as past and current consequences of refusing to implement equitable policies. The campaigns, therefore, seek to nurture critical thinking skills, and foster citizenship and social justice through peaceful, respectful actions, such as letter writing and public education (Howell & Brittain, 2022). Importantly, the campaigns are not about non-Indigenous children on a "mission" to "save" First Nations children (McGillis & Khorana, 1997; Steffler, 2009). Instead, they employ a social justice approach by inviting students to inquire how historic and contemporary injustices continue to oppress and marginalize First Nation children, families, and communities. They call on students to bear witness, learn, and take action as responsible citizens (Howell & Ng-A-Fook, 2022).

The Caring Society campaigns are grounded in the processes and principles of the Touchstones of Hope (Caring Society, 2020b; Auger, 2012; Blackstock et al., 2006). This grassroots truth and reconciliation education framework

was co-developed at an event hosted by the Caring Society, the National Indian Child Welfare Association, the Child Welfare League of America, and the Centre for Excellence for Child Welfare in 2005. Informed by different international Indigenous truth and reconciliation experts from the Netherlands, Australia, and South Africa, this gathering brought together over 250 First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples and non-Indigenous allies from Canada and the United States. At the gathering, delegates developed five principles or “touchstones,” being self-determination, culture and language, structural interventions, holistic approach, and non-discrimination (Caring Society, 2020b; Auger, 2012; Blackstock et al., 2006). These five principles are situated within the four phases of truth and reconciliation education, which includes truth-telling, acknowledging, restoring, and relating (Blackstock et al., 2006). The Touchstones of Hope principles and processes align with findings from Brooke Madden’s (2015) analysis of 23 studies of teacher educators’ perspectives on Indigenous education. Madden’s (2015) findings suggest that teacher candidates are more likely to be engaged in Indigenous education when the following four pedagogical processes are used: (1) learning from Indigenous traditional models of teaching, (2) pedagogy for decolonizing, (3) Indigenous and anti-racist education, and (4) Indigenous and place-based education.

At the heart of the Touchstone’s process is the opportunity for the reclamation of First Nations peoples’ dreams for their children and Nations, and to develop community-based action plans to achieve them, which often include ways non-Indigenous allies can contribute (Blackstock et al., 2006). Touchstones are recognized as a “best practice” by the TRC (2015a, pp. 56-57),⁸ as well as several First Nations, provincial governments, and the United Nations (Quinn & Saini, 2012; Auger, 2012). The Touchstones framework draws on and enacts multiple forms of knowledge and knowledge expression, including cultural knowledge to understand and respond to the ongoing international impacts of Canada’s settler colonial history and cultural legacy (MacDonald, 2013; Miller, 2006). This is a key distinction between the Caring Society’s curricular resources and the current Ontario Social Studies curriculum. The Caring Society campaigns, based on Touchstones of Hope, honour First Nations’ diverse episto-cosmological-ontological relational worldviews, whereas the Ontario curriculum is informed and formed by settler colonial perspectives, which we will address in a later section.

Dreaming is central to the Touchstones framework. Creating opportunities for different children to dream is vital toward reimagining our past, present, and future relations as Indigenous and Canadian citizens. It calls for children’s “meaningful and empowered participation” in all decisions that

⁸ Although the TRC (2015a) calls Touchstones a “best practice,” we choose to conceptualize it as a “promising practice” for teacher education and future professional learning, in that we implicitly acknowledge that the practices may be of value in our context, but not by any means a universal standard.

relate to them (UNCRC, 2012, p. 8). The Touchstones of Hope encourages respectful, non-violent collaboration and work with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples through the Caring Society's different campaigns. Thus, the Touchstones framework puts forth curricular and pedagogical opportunities for teachers to facilitate respectful and meaningful relationships between First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples and Canadians whilst avoiding a pan-Indigenous approach (Caring Society, 2020b; Auger, 2012; Blackstock et al., 2006). This reflects the Caring Society's commitment to teacher and student participation, social justice, and relationships.

The Caring Society's vision seeks to ensure that "First Nations children and their families have culturally based and equitable opportunities to grow up safely at home, be healthy, get a good education and be proud of who they are" (Caring Society, 2020a). To do so, they have created, supported, and sustained intentional partnerships with First Nations communities and partners. The Caring Society mobilizes its different campaigns and research findings through open sharing platforms such as direct public education, their website, Twitter, Facebook and an open-access academic journal. They provide high-quality resources to families and teachers that are free and easy to read in both official languages, as well as ongoing translation to many Indigenous languages.

In the following section, we examine how the Caring Society's values are embedded in their different campaigns, and in their professional learning engagement with teachers and students. We suggest that their vision and values seek to uphold a form of truth and reconciliation education not currently reflected in the OME Social Studies (K-8) elementary curricula (2018). By focusing on acknowledging the rights of the child, truth-telling, restoring, and relating, the Caring Society campaigns provoke teachers to consider reconciliation, social justice, and the ethics of relationality in relation to the OME Social Studies framework of citizenship. Moreover, the campaigns support UNESCO's (2021) call for a new social contract that calls on citizens to reimagine our future relations together.

Moral Courage: Standing up with Dignity to "do" what is Right, not to "be" Right

The campaigns that the Caring Society have created are situated in relation to the tenets of moral courage and social justice. Moral courage is defined as taking action to defend human rights when there is a prospect of personal or professional adversity (Kidder, 2003). Rather than position the campaigns in a settler conception of democratic Canadian citizenship that centres colonial institutions and values, the Caring Society invites children and youth to learn about issues of inequity and discrimination from a place of compassion, courage, and human rights (Smith, 2017; Tupper 2019). Here, Blackstock (2019) reminds us:

There's moral courage, but there's also moral courage with dignity. Anyone can be courageous. It's something different to take a stand in a way that uplifts the dignity of the people you are privileged to be working with. What I mean is it's not enough to just be courageous. You must always act with dignity – it's your minimum requirement to match the dignity of those you work with. (para. 5)

Moral courage draws on the universal human values of love, kindness, honesty, respect, fairness, and responsibility (Kidder, 2005). The Caring Society's vision, social justice educational campaigns, and different curricular resources are aligned with those values through their uplifting work with children and youth. For example, the Caring Society invites children and youth to design, plan, and host events; to participate in decision-making through a children and youth advisory circle; to be part of an academic journal by way of writings, drawings, and the opportunity to peer-review submissions; and to witness proceedings at federal court and the CHRT. In uplifting both the children and youth they work with, and the children and youth they advocate for, the Caring Society enacts their values in a way that is both powerful and palpable for teachers and students.

Blackstock (2019) calls on us to teach and learn moral courage and social justice “across all sectors of education, along with a set of tools and requirements to ensure progress is made respectfully and with dignity” (para. 7). To this end, the Caring Society has created a framework for engaging in truth, and then reconciliation, with children and youth. Through the principles of truth-telling, acknowledging, relating, and restoring, the movement encourages:

...grassroots approaches to caring for First Nations children, respectful collaboration and work with First Nations peoples and young people participating in reconciliation initiatives, allowing for respectful and meaningful relationships between First Nations and non-Indigenous peoples to occur. (Caring Society, 2020b)

By focusing on education that recognizes the ongoing intergenerational implications of historical harms as a pedagogical transition toward social justice reconcilia(c)tions, rather than the teaching of certain global citizenship competence-based outcomes, the Caring Society supports teacher and student learning toward restoring dignity and compassion for all First Nations and non-Indigenous children in Canada.

Unsettling an Ontario Social Studies Curriculum: Where's the Social Justice?

The current Ontario Social Studies curriculum was published in 2018 after a lengthy revision process to respond to the Truth and Reconciliation

Commission's (TRC) *Calls to Action* numbers 62 and 63.⁹ The OME, then led by the governing Liberals, collaborated with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis teachers, community members, and organizations to include Indigenous perspectives, cultures, histories, and contemporary realities, including those related to the Residential School System and treaties (OME, 2018). On June 29, 2018, the Progressive Conservative Party defeated the Liberals and Doug Ford became Premier of Ontario. Immediately thereafter, Ford cancelled the curriculum rewriting sessions that were scheduled to take place in July, citing austerity measures (Desmarais, 2018). The two-week long session was to focus on including Indigenous cultural practices and history in social studies and geography courses in elementary and high schools. The First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Association of Ontario wrote to then Education Minister Lisa Thompson, stating that the cancellation “flies in the face of the partnerships that this province is striving to maintain with Indigenous peoples” (Desmarais, 2018, para. 3).

While some First Nations, Inuit and Métis content and historical truths are now embedded within the provincial curriculum, we suggest that the transformational pedagogies and approaches imagined by the TRC are not. Currently, though the “active participation” element of the citizenship framework mentions reconciliation in its description, the word reconciliation itself is found only eight times throughout the entire social studies curricula. The terms “reconcile,” “redress” and “activism” are absent. Social justice is mentioned only in the front matter and in the glossary. Moreover, while the curriculum mentions the word “inter/action” many times, students *examine* actions taken by others and plan actions they *might* take themselves. They are rarely asked to *enact* any concrete social justice actions.

The Ontario Citizenship Education Framework: Uplifting the Notion of the Global Canadian

The Citizenship Education Framework is referred to as “one of the tools and strategies to help achieve the vision of the program” (OME, 2018, p. 7). This model for citizenship includes structures, active participation, identity, and attributes. Furthermore, citizenship education is noted as:

...an important facet of students' overall education. In every grade and course in the social studies, history, and geography curriculum, students are given opportunities to learn about what it means to be a responsible, active citizen in the community of the classroom and the diverse communities to which they

⁹ *Calls to Action* 62 and 63 explicitly refer to education. Specifically, they call on Ministries of Education and post-secondary institutions across Canada to develop, implement, and support curriculum and pedagogy in Indigenous knowledges, treaties, residential schools, and the historical and contemporary contributions of Indigenous peoples in all grade levels (see TRC, 2015b, pp. 234-242).

belong within and outside the school. It is important for students to understand that they belong to many communities and that, ultimately, they are all citizens of the global community. (p. 8)

The last two decades have seen citizenship education in Canada evolve from “once-a-month multicultural fairs and celebrations to acknowledge the virtuous acts of certain students” (Philpott & Dagenais, 2011, p. 4), toward a focus on global citizenship centered on fostering understanding of global issues through critical thinking and social justice (Andreotti, 2006). However, such framings of global citizenship continue to be situated within the knowledge systems of settler colonial understandings of nationhood and citizenship. Instead, we ask, what does it mean to be a citizen of a Canada that recognizes existing treaty relations and First Nations, Inuit, and Métis sovereignty?

As a settler colonial provincial state actor, Ontario promotes ideals and attributes of citizenship that are rooted in grand narratives of peace-making, multiculturalism, and diversity, which in turn, for the most part, continue to exclude First Nations, Inuit, and Métis knowledges and conceptions of sovereignty (Brant-Birioukov et al., 2020; Stanley, 2000). Moreover, while the curriculum posits to develop inclusive forms of citizenship, such types of citizenship are premised on Commonwealth settler colonial democratic ideals and rights (Tupper, 2012, 2019). Such ideals and rights often take legal and educational precedence in relation to First Nations’ rights and sovereignty. Ontario courts, for example, continue to uphold injunctions that give the provincial police powers to force Indigenous land defenders off their traditional, unceded territories (Robinson & Shaker, 2020). During the winter of 2020, the Mohawks of Tyendinaga erected blockades on the railway tracks that pass through their territory in support and solidarity of the Wet’suwet’en land protectors. The Ontario government and its policing system did not portray the Mohawk land protectors as active citizens participating in democracy, but rather as *protestors* who “crippled passenger and freight train traffic... slowing down the economy” (Tunney, 2020, para. 3). Furthermore, the land that the railway tracks run through is not referred to as unsundered land, but instead as part of the Canadian National Railway, considered by many to be the legacy of Canada’s First Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald.

Here Donald (2009) reminds us that such “reductive Canadian national narrative weighs heavily on the consciousness of Aboriginal peoples and Canadians, and continues to influence the ways in which we speak to each other about history, identity, citizenship and the future” (p. 3). Instead, Donald urges us to be critical of such kinds of settler colonial forms of citizenship the curriculum calls on us to become.

Citizenship, Truth and Reconciliation, and the Spirit Bear Curriculum

We contend that citizenship education has limitations, and certainly omissions, within the current Ontario Social studies curriculum and elsewhere. Here, Smith (2020) warns “theorization and scholarship is largely predicated on a normalized and unquestioned Western inheritance, the result of which is the expression of pedagogical method that reinscribes Western ways of knowing” (p. 21). We acknowledge that there are teachers who are committed to using citizenship education in ways that honour truth and reconciliation. We propose that teachers might draw on the Caring Society’s Touchstones of Hope, and the forthcoming Spirit Bear Virtual School resources and curricula, to engage students in a form of citizenship based on First Nations sovereignty and rights, social justice, reconciliation, and the ethical dimension of relationality (Howell & Ng-A-Fook, 2022). In the section below, we offer curricular links to the Caring Society campaigns and the OME (2018) Social Studies (K-8) curriculum.

Our work as teacher educators and educational researchers has affirmed that the Caring Society’s campaigns can be integrated into Social Studies and History curricula across Canada, and easily integrated across the school curriculum. For instance, the vision of the OME (2018) Social Studies curriculum seeks to:

...enable students to become responsible, active citizens within the diverse communities to which they belong. As well as becoming critically thoughtful and informed citizens who value an inclusive society, students will have the skills they need to solve problems and communicate ideas and decisions about significant developments, events, and issues. (p. 6)

This is certainly an admirable vision, and one that would no doubt contribute to a province and a country of thoughtful, engaged, compassionate, and active citizens. Within and throughout the curriculum, overall expectations endeavour to develop this vision, by asking students to apply, inquire, and contextualise their understandings of people, communities, land, and their interrelationships now and over time. In Grade 2, for example, students are asked to “compare selected communities from around the world, including their own community, in terms of the lifestyles of people in those communities and some ways in which the people meet their needs” (OME, 2018, p. 81). Suggested questions for this specific expectation include:

Why might some children in central Africa or in the Amazon region of South America never have played a video game or watched TV? In what other ways is their lifestyle different from that of children in Canada? (OME, 2018, p. 81)

The language and assumptions embedded in these questions remain problematic for teachers and students. They generalise the experiences of central African, Amazonian, and Canadian children and do not contribute to

students' learning about difference within and across cultures or national citizenship affiliations. It also assumes that the lifestyles of children living within the settler colonial national borders of Canada are the same. Here, students could learn about Shannen's Dream as part of understanding the crosscutting inequalities in federally funded public services available to First Nation communities both on and off reserve. Or, they might learn about how some Inuit communities are taking and calling for action in relation to food insecurity (ITK, 2021). This broadening of curricular expectations draws attention to and responds to the calls from the TRC (2015c), which calls on us to integrate Indigenous ways of knowing that seek to "teach about reconciliation from a social justice perspective that builds capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect" (p. 6). Although learning about treaty-making is embedded throughout the curriculum document, it is informational in nature, and lacks the important connections among the broken treaty agreements, treaty rights, citizenship, and the inequities and injustices many First Nations communities continue to experience today. In fact, the Caring Society's campaigns are direct responses to the intergenerational injustices related to the ongoing failure of governments to adhere to their treaty obligations and relationships (Mikisew Cree v. Canada, 2005; R. v. Marshall, 1999; R. v. Morris, 2006; Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. v. Canada, 2012; Ross River Dena Council v. Yukon, 2012).

Thus, the Caring Society campaigns and respective educational resources play an important role toward broadening the curriculum and responding to the *Calls to Action*, and in turn, helping students in becoming citizens involved in social justice. In Grade 4, students in Ontario are asked to "compare a few early societies, including at least one First Nation and one Inuit society, in terms of their relationship with the environment and describe some key similarities and differences in environmental practices between these societies and present-day Canada" (OME, 2018, p. 101). Students can learn about how many First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities believe that humanity is part of the land, rather than being apart from it, challenging concepts of a homogenous "present-day Canada" and developing diverse perspectives. Finally, the existing Ontario curriculum asks Grade 6 students to:

...identify and describe fundamental elements of Canadian identities, including inclusiveness; respect for human rights; respect for diversity; multiculturalism; parliamentary democracy; constitutional monarchy; bilingualism; the recognition of three founding nations; universal health care; recognition of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit as Indigenous peoples and original inhabitants of what is now Canada; the importance of treaties and treaty rights. (p. 131)

Here, the concept of "Canadian identities" could be reimagined and challenged by introducing the story of Jordan River Anderson, and the current case before the [Canadian Human Rights Tribunal](#) (First Nations Child and

Family Caring Society, n.d.g). In these examples, students critically reflect on our accepted identities versus the actions of our government. Moreover, by engaging in the Caring Society's campaigns, students not only examine the ethical dimension of citizenship, including concepts of "truth," "redress," and "reconciliation," they are called to take social justice actions to uphold their responsibilities and relations as the intergenerational inheritors of treaty citizenship.

We are Small, and We do Stand Tall: Moving Toward Moral Courage Futurities

As stated previously, moral courage is the ability to stand up for the "right thing" or do the right thing when some negative repercussion for the right-doer is anticipated in relation to human rights (Kidder, 2003). We began this article with the story of Shannen Koostachin, the youth from Attawapiskat First Nation, who stood up for her rights and spurred a youth-driven movement that is still active across Canada due to ongoing inequities. Shannen's moral courage was contagious and inspired thousands of Canadian children, youth, and educators to take action against discrimination with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples and communities. "Ethically engaged citizenship," as Tupper (2014) reminds us, "means a commitment to social change through being in relation to each other" (p. 91). The recent UNESCO report calling for the urgent reparation of injustices and a new social contract for education asks all citizens to have the moral courage to call on our governments and fellow citizens to be accountable to the obligations they and several of us have promised to uphold. We posit that the enactment of this social justice contract for education must be relational. Moreover, it must honour place-specific knowledges and protocols, otherwise it risks joining those that have historically failed to live up to their obligations, promises, and intentions.

In this article, we have described how the Caring Society engages in moral courage through policy advocacy, litigation, and the unwavering support of First Nations children and families. Moreover, through their curriculum of social justice, relational citizenship, and First Nations self-determination, the Caring Society has an important and imperative role in attending to reimagining the type of citizenship the Ontario Social Studies curriculum has put forth. Indeed, teachers who participated in our research have explained that the work they do with the Caring Society far exceeds provincial curricular goals and objectives:

Kids aren't doing something because they're worried about getting a mark, they're not doing something, because they're going to please their parent or their teacher or the principal, they're doing something because they think it's right. And all of a sudden, their whole being shows up in class, all of a sudden, my relationship

with them is different. It's no longer the 'I have power over you,' it's 'we're in a stream together toward something we're connected,' and also, the feeling of being connected with other schools on something, getting out of our boxes is so amazingly strong. All of us as teachers, this is what we hope for right?¹⁰

The teachers in our study, some of whom are inevitably tasked with teaching the social studies curriculum of Ontario, remind us that moral courage in education is not only possible, but also has the potential to advance reconciliation, as a new social contract for education, here in Canada. In our future publications, we will share the experiences and perspectives of educators who participated in our study. These are teachers who are doing the work of truth and reconciliation education in their elementary classrooms, standing beside their students as they stand up tall, even if they are small.

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¹⁰ This is a quotation from the interview transcript of a teacher. As mentioned, teachers' lived experiences of the campaigns will be the focus of a subsequent article.

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