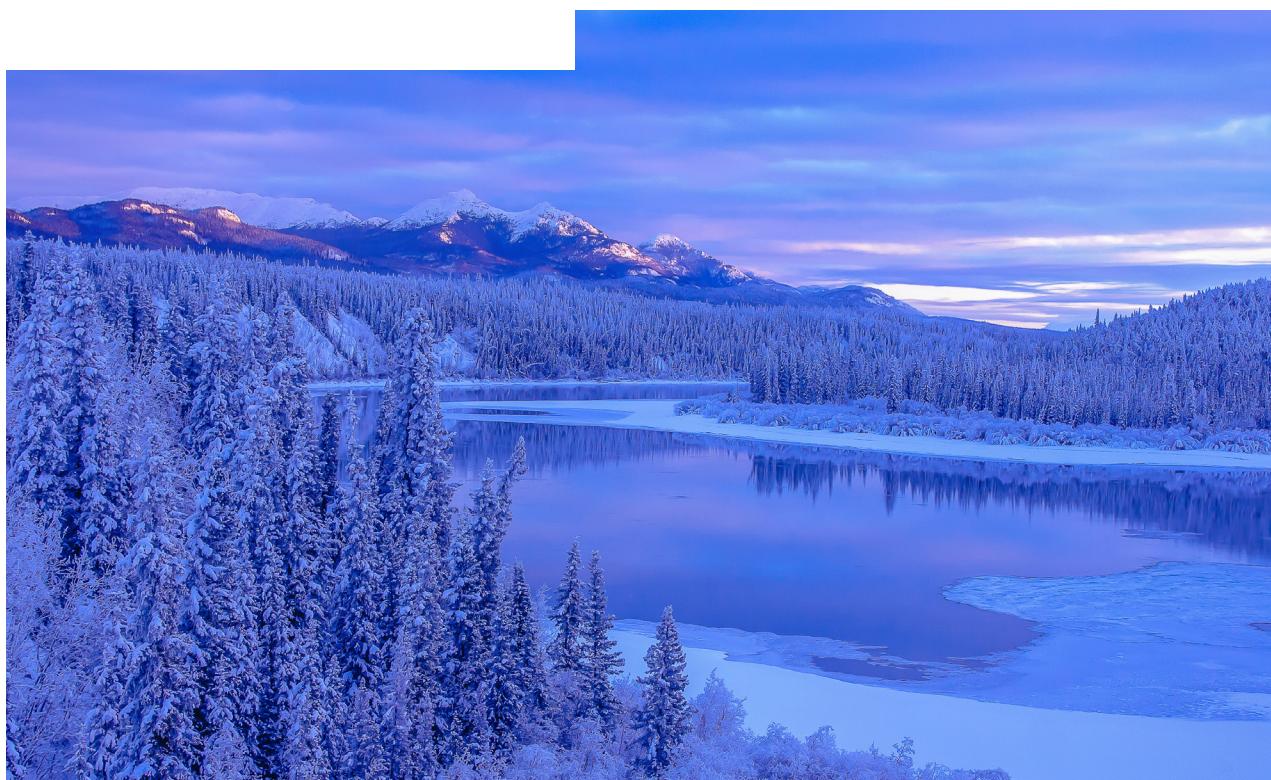


# Julianna Scramstad

Learning to Listen: On Racism and  
Power in Yukon Education



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The Gordon Foundation undertakes research, leadership development and public dialogue so that public policies in Canada reflect a commitment to collaborative stewardship of our freshwater resources and to a people-driven, equitable and evolving North. Our mission is to promote innovative public policies for the North and in fresh water management based on our values of independent thought, protecting the environment, and full participation of indigenous people in the decisions that affect their well-being. Over the past quarter century The Gordon Foundation has invested over \$37 million in a wide variety of northern community initiatives and freshwater protection initiatives.



The Jane Glassco Northern Fellowship is a policy and leadership development program that recognizes leadership potential among northern Canadians who want to address the emerging policy challenges facing the North. The 18-month program is built around four regional gatherings and offers skills training, mentorship and networking opportunities. Through self-directed learning, group work and the collective sharing of knowledge, Fellows will foster a deeper understanding of important contemporary northern issues, and develop the skills and confidence to better articulate and share their ideas and policy research publicly. The Fellowship is intended for northerners between 25 and 35 years of age, who want to build a strong North that benefits all northerners. Through the Fellowship, we hope to foster a bond among the Fellows that will endure throughout their professional lives and support a pan-northern network.



**Julianna Scramstad** was born in Whitehorse, Yukon, on land that has been cared for by the Ta'an Kwäch'än and the Kwanlin Dün for generations. Certified as a teacher and trained in sociology and women's studies, she is a dedicated feminist and activist. As a volunteer, she has worked on political campaigns, civic engagement projects, feminist and anti-racist organizing, and school governance.

Julianna spent several formative years working on the prevention of violence against women at the Victoria Faulkner Women's Centre in Whitehorse, where she collaborated on shifting prevention efforts toward building a consent culture. She then grew hopeful that teaching and school curriculum might be key to fundamental social change and left the Yukon to study education. She spent a year teaching in a small Algonquin community.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, thank you to Samantha Dawson for naming the streaming and systemic racism of her own Yukon education experience, and for calling for teachers to learn about colonization and decolonization. Your words informed this work.

I would like to thank the many people who spoke to me about education in the Yukon, including Tosh Southwick, Nicole Cross, Melanie Bennett, Rose Sellars, Ken Hodgins, Robin Bradasch and those who spoke to me anonymously. My hope is that this work honours your voices and your time. Thank you for all the work you do toward greater justice, safety, and wholeness for Yukon First Nation students.

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Finally, love and thanks to the OSG and all my fellow fellows.

I was born in the Yukon, and went to school on Kwanlin Dün and Ta'an Kwäch'än territory. I finished school without knowing the history or political present of this land. I didn't know how I, a white settler, was connected with First Nation peers through treaty relationship and shared responsibilities.

As I was training to be a teacher at a southern university, I struggled with the way we were historicizing residential schools without uprooting (or even acknowledging) what continues to be a colonial education system. Interactive exercises and assignments about residential school told a story of pain and trauma that managed to obscure the resistance, existence and joy of present-tense Indigenous people. Even in my First Nation, Inuit and Métis elective, we didn't even begin to talk about ongoing political inequities.

These silences leave important truths out of the room, and amount to a deep failure of relationship. Ongoing colonial power inequities are replicated by these silences, and they violate the wholeness of each of us. Public school is where we learn how to be together.

After my eight months of teacher training, I had the basic qualifications to be certified as a Yukon teacher. Often, new teachers can be hired into rural Yukon communities. However, I did not feel I had been equipped with the requisite skills or knowledge to play anything but a colonizing role.

## PROBLEM

I set out to explore what I thought was a sufficiently narrow problem: frequently, new teachers work in rural Yukon communities briefly. Yukon government staffing protocol implicitly encourages a stay of only three years in rural Yukon communities. I saw the use of the communities to train new teachers as compromising relationships and teaching quality for rural and Indigenous students.

Interviews I conducted confirmed that new teachers were often “just paying off loans”<sup>1</sup> or using the communities as “training grounds.”<sup>2</sup> As I spoke to Yukon teachers, they questioned the goal of working on retention in rural communities. Teachers leave for a variety of reasons – family reunification, high school for their children, escaping isolation, pursuing new opportunities – and they should have the freedom to relocate. Research also indicates that from small northern communities “attrition is inevitable.”<sup>3</sup>

I switched gears, and started exploring how to recruit and support teachers who, when placed in a community, can follow the community's lead and who can disrupt colonial violence. Potential solutions included stronger induction and mentorship, growing the First Nation Programs and Partnerships unit inside the government of Yukon, or changing certification standards to require more northern and First Nations knowledge. Ultimately, though, the problem is that the power in each of these scenarios was still squarely held by Yukon Government.

<sup>1</sup> Discussion with the author, June 4, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with the author, February 10, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Dawn F. Burleigh, “Perspectives on Teachers' Work in One Ontario Remote First Nation Community” (PhD thesis, The University of Western Ontario, 2016), accessed September 9, 2018, 53, <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5360&context=etd>.



## BACKGROUND

Church-run, government-funded residential schools attended by Yukon First Nation students ran until 1975.<sup>4</sup> As we know, children were removed from their families “not to educate them, but primarily to break their link to their culture and identity”<sup>5</sup> as part of an overarching settler colonial effort to remove Indigenous people from the land.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Sara Jane Essau from Moosehide is quoted as saying to the Bishop in charge of the Chouutla School in Carcross that “when they have been too long at school they won’t have anything to do with us; they want to be with white people; they grow away from us.”<sup>7</sup>

There is a long history of resistance to colonial education efforts by Yukon First Nations people. Both students and families resisted residential school. Parents refused to send their children, people like Sara Jane Essau communicated their concern, and children ran away. In 1973, the Council for Yukon Indians published *Together Today for Our Children Tomorrow*, naming inequity in dealings with white people, problematizing the erasure of pre-contact histories and knowledge, and calling for local control of schools:

**EVEN THE NEW CHANGES THEY ARE SUGGESTING WILL BE OF LITTLE USE, UNLESS THESE CHANGES ARE MADE BY THE INDIAN PEOPLE THEMSELVES. IT WILL BE THE SAME PROGRAM WITH THE SAME RESULTS – AN ALMOST ONE HUNDRED PERCENT DROP-OUT RATE.<sup>8</sup>**

TOGETHER TODAY FOR OUR CHILDREN TOMORROW

4 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Canada’s Residential Schools: the Inuit and Northern Experience*, v.2 (2015), accessed December 4, 2019, [http://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Final%20Reports/Volume\\_2\\_Inuit\\_and\\_Northern\\_English\\_Web.pdf](http://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Final%20Reports/Volume_2_Inuit_and_Northern_English_Web.pdf)

5 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *What We Have Learned: Principles of Truth and Reconciliation*, 2015, accessed December 8, 2019, [http://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Final%20Reports/Principles\\_English\\_Web.pdf](http://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Final%20Reports/Principles_English_Web.pdf), 6.

6 Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigenization, Education and Society* 1, no.1 (September 2012), accessed December 8, 2019, <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/18630/15554>, 9.

7 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Canada’s Residential Schools: the Inuit and Northern Experience*, 65.

8 Council for Yukon Indians, *Together Today for Our Children Tomorrow*, 1973, accessed December 8, 2019, [http://www.eco.gov.yk.ca/pdf/together\\_today\\_for\\_our\\_children\\_tomorrow.pdf](http://www.eco.gov.yk.ca/pdf/together_today_for_our_children_tomorrow.pdf), 20.

In 1973, Yukon First Nations said “We demand the right to plan our future.”<sup>9</sup> Forty-six years later, there is a Yukon graduation rate of only 49% for First Nation students, as compared to 81% for non-First Nation students.<sup>10</sup>

Yukon Government currently administers education in the Yukon for both First Nation and non-First Nation students. The General Tuition Agreement of 1964 transferred responsibility for First Nation education from the federal government to the territory.<sup>11</sup> The stated intent of this agreement was to ensure “the same educational opportunities and instruction” across the Yukon.<sup>12</sup> There was no consultation with Yukon First Nations about this transfer.<sup>13</sup>

These are some of the features of how Yukon Education recruits, trains, certifies and supports teachers currently:

## **RECRUITMENT**

Yukon Government currently recruits teachers through an online database. It also hosts a website cheerfully outlining the advantages of teaching in the Yukon: “Yukon Education is seeking teachers who wish to live in the unparalleled beauty of Canada's northwest.”<sup>14</sup> Job postings usually contain a line requiring that applicants have “Knowledge of and sensitivity to the culture and aspirations of Yukon First Nations and a

culturally diverse student population.”<sup>15</sup> Several First Nations have negotiated more involvement. In one community, several employees of the First Nation sit on the hiring committee, as is now protocol there.<sup>16</sup>

## **INDUCTION**

Induction includes mentorship, training, supportive leadership and time set aside for collaboration or planning. Yukon First Nation New Teacher Orientation is currently an optional, two-day workshop that teachers can access before they start the school year.<sup>17</sup> In August 2016, 46 new teachers participated. This workshop was created by Yukon Government's First Nation Programs and Partnerships (FNPP) together with the Yukon First Nation Curriculum Working Group. The orientation takes place on the land, and consists of the Blanket Exercise, which is a participatory exercise detailing the history of Yukon-specific colonial violence, and some coaching on what to expect in their new positions.<sup>18</sup> Some First Nations communities hold their own orientation sessions. Yukon teachers are compelled to take Yukon First Nations 101, offered by Yukon College.<sup>19</sup> There is also a handbook created by First Nations Programs and Partnerships, containing information on local languages and traditional territories, working with elders, building relationships with community, connecting to curriculum and introducing FNPP staff.<sup>20</sup>

9 Council for Yukon Indians, 24.

10 Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2019 June Report of the Auditor General of Canada to the Yukon Legislative Assembly: *Kinderergarten Through Grade 12 Education in Yukon—Department of Education*, 2019, accessed December 8, 2019, [https://www.oag-bvg.gc.ca/internet/English/yuk\\_201906\\_e\\_43400.html#](https://www.oag-bvg.gc.ca/internet/English/yuk_201906_e_43400.html#).

11 Discussion with the author, September 16, 2019; Ken Hodgins, Digital discussion with the author, June 2019; Tony Penikett, email to the author, June 28, 2019; Discussion with the author, July 17, 2019; Discussion with the author, February 11, 2019.

12 Education Reform Project, *Yukon Education Reform Project Final Report*, 2007, accessed December 8, 2019, [http://www.education.gov.yk.ca/pdf/publications/ed\\_reform\\_report.pdf](http://www.education.gov.yk.ca/pdf/publications/ed_reform_report.pdf), B.4.

13 Discussion with the author, September 16, 2019; Yukon First Nations Education Directorate, Yukon First Nation Control of First Nation Education: The Epic Journey, last modified September 16, 2019, accessed October 14, 2019, no longer online; Hodgins.

14 Yukon Education, *Yukon Education*, accessed December 8, 2019, <https://yukoneducation.simplication.com/WLSBLogin.aspx>.

15 Yukon Education, “19 T185a - ST ELIAS COMMUNITY SCHOOL - .90 FTE - Temporary - Math 8, Math 9, Physical Education 1, Distance Learning,” *Apply to Education*, posted January 8, 2020, accessed January 26, 2020, [https://yukoneducation.simplication.com/Applicant/AttJobPosting.aspx?JOB\\_POSTING\\_ID=8a299885-fbed-47d7-bcf0-99f9a0757249](https://yukoneducation.simplication.com/Applicant/AttJobPosting.aspx?JOB_POSTING_ID=8a299885-fbed-47d7-bcf0-99f9a0757249).

16 Interview with the author, February 12, 2019.

17 Discussion with the author, June 4, 2019.

18 Discussion with the author, February 11, 2019.

19 Discussion with the author, February 11, 2019.

20 First Nations Programs and Partnerships, *Yukon First Nations Resources for Teachers 2019/2020*, accessed January 26, 2020,

## CERTIFICATION

To be certified as a teacher in the Yukon, teachers can either have trained at the Yukon Native Teacher Education Program or have a teaching certificate from another Canadian jurisdiction. Teachers are to be “of good moral character” and a “fit and proper person to teach school students.”<sup>21</sup> They have to provide teaching evaluations, references, and be in good standing with their certification body.

## CURRICULUM

Current curriculum is largely imported from British Columbia. Yukon residential school content is integrated into Social Studies 10, and there are also grade 5 units on First Nation Governance and Citizenship, Ancestral Technology 10, and several English First Peoples high school courses imported from BC.<sup>22</sup>

There are currently two First Nations curriculum consultants in Yukon Government, working



<sup>21</sup> Yukon Government, *Yukon teacher certification*, last modified November 10, 2016, accessed December 8, 2019, <http://www.education.govyk.ca/teacher-certification.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Government of Yukon, *How First Nations perspectives are incorporated into schools*, accessed December 8, 2019, <https://yukon.ca/en/first-nations-perspectives>

within the First Nation Programs and Partnerships Unit.<sup>23</sup> The Unit is tasked with First Nation language enhancement; creating resource materials and local curriculum; professional development; and relationship building with First Nation stakeholders. It is also dedicated to “improving the academic results of First Nations students in the K-12 system.”<sup>24</sup> The curriculum consultants are in charge of both rural and urban needs, providing support to teachers in 26 different schools. This same team is in charge of any new First Nation curriculum projects, including ensuring that Yukon First Nation ways of knowing and doing are reflected in the new BC curriculum.

## **CULTURAL INCLUSION STANDARDS**

In 2016, all 14 First Nations at the Yukon First Nation Education Summit created a set of Cultural Inclusion Standards. These standards speak to the “cultural wealth, unique worldviews and ways of understanding and learning that have long been undermined by a colonial system [...] which today manifests in deep social problems and lower success rates among First Nation students.”<sup>25</sup> They include working on access to Indigenous language and knowledge, building relationships and addressing systemic racism via “cultural validation.”<sup>26</sup> These Cultural Inclusion

Standards are embedded in the School Growth Planning Process, and principals are expected to report on them.<sup>27</sup>

This is not an exhaustive list of efforts made by Yukon Education to respond to calls made by Yukon First Nations to meet the needs of Yukon First Nation students. Yukon Education’s efforts illustrate their tendency to leave colonial power imbalances largely intact, while making small accommodations. For instance, Yukon government (with varying amounts of community input) might hire a certified teacher from the south to teach BC curriculum, but request that they take an optional two-day orientation on Yukon First Nations or ask about cultural sensitivity in the interview.

In a \$193 million total Education budget in 2018-19, Yukon Government explicitly earmarked \$5.9 million for Indigenous initiatives - native language teachers and First Nations Programs and Partnerships.<sup>28</sup> Nearly one-third of Yukon students are First Nations.<sup>29</sup> Spending per Yukon student in 2018-19 was \$20,081, which compares to British Columbia’s \$10,309 per student that same year.<sup>30</sup> Despite this spending, successive reports from the Auditor General have pointed out ongoing deep inequalities between First Nation and non-First Nation students.<sup>31</sup>

23 Yukon, *Introducing the First Nations Programs & Partnerships Staff*, last modified January 21, 2019, accessed January 27, 2020, <http://lss.yukonschools.ca/fnpp1.html>

24 Government of Yukon, Department of Education, First Nations Programs & Partnerships, *Yukon First Nations Resources for Teachers 2018/19*, accessed December 8, 2019, [http://lss.yukonschools.ca/uploads/4/5/5/0/45508033/3\\_nto\\_2018-2019\\_booklet\\_final.pdf](http://lss.yukonschools.ca/uploads/4/5/5/0/45508033/3_nto_2018-2019_booklet_final.pdf), 6.

25 Council of Yukon First Nations, First Nation Education Commission, *Cultural Inclusion Standards in All Schools*, 2016, accessed October 27, 2019, [http://www.education.govyk.ca/pdf/schools/Cultural\\_Inclusion\\_Standards\\_in\\_all\\_Schools.pdf](http://www.education.govyk.ca/pdf/schools/Cultural_Inclusion_Standards_in_all_Schools.pdf), 2.

26 Council of Yukon First Nations, First Nation Education Commission, 3.

27 Discussion with the author, September 16, 2019.

28 Yukon, 2019-20 *Operation and maintenance and capital estimates: Education*, 8-1, accessed January 27, 2020, <https://yukon.ca/sites/yukon.ca/files/fin/fin-budget-2019-20-main-estimates-education.pdf>; Yukon, 2018-19 Department of Education Statistics, updated December 13, 2019, accessed January 27, 2020, <https://yukon.ca/sites/yukon.ca/files/edu-2018-19-department-of-education-statistics.pdf>

29 Yukon, *Department of Education Annual Report 2018*, accessed January 27, 2020, <https://yukon.ca/sites/yukon.ca/files/edu/edu-annual-report-2018.pdf>

30 Yukon, 2018-19 *Department of Education Statistics*; British Columbia, *2018/19 Public School Per Student FTE Operating Costs*, accessed January 26, 2020, [https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/administration/kindergarten-to-grade-12/independent-schools/public\\_per\\_fte\\_costs\\_18-19\\_recalc\\_for\\_sopsoc.pdf](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/administration/kindergarten-to-grade-12/independent-schools/public_per_fte_costs_18-19_recalc_for_sopsoc.pdf)

31 Office of the Auditor General of Canada.

It may be difficult to understand why Yukon First Nations don't have power over education without understanding settler colonialism's logic: in order to claim the land, settler colonialism relies on racist ideology.<sup>32</sup> Indigenous people have to be systematically framed as inferior so that settlers can legitimize our settlement. Colonialism uses numerous forms of violence, such as destruction of language and culture, in an ongoing way.<sup>33</sup> Residential school is an obvious example of that violence. As Cheryl Ward writes in her dissertation about teaching race, "education is central to the reproduction of oppressive social structures."<sup>34</sup> Education plays a role in maintaining unequal power beyond school walls, reproducing inequalities like in income and incarceration rates.<sup>35</sup>

Schools were born in settler colonialism. As Erica Meiners argues: "Empire-building had always required control of institutional education."<sup>36</sup> Having never made a significant and conscious departure from colonial ways of educating, K-12 schools continue to feature western European views of people and our relationships to one another and the earth.<sup>37</sup> In the Yukon, these systems "continue to this day [to] disenfranchise Yukon First Nations."<sup>38</sup>

In the Yukon, 11 of 14 First Nations have settled land claims and self-government agreements.<sup>39</sup> These are agreements between the settler colonial governments of the Yukon and Canada and each of the First Nations. The self-government agreements allow for First Nations to take over and independently run programs and services such as education.<sup>40</sup> Through negotiations around what will be taken over, an agreement can be struck.

Several First Nations do have education agreements with the territory. These allow for initiatives such as culture camps, shared authority over hiring and training, and a Cultural Educator position.<sup>41</sup> These agreements can involve a transfer of money, power and authority. For now, money, power and authority are still centred in the hands of Yukon Education. Only one agreement had some money attached.<sup>42</sup>

32 Sheila Cote-Meek, *Cultural Safety in the Classroom: Addressing Anti-Indigenous Racism in Education Settings*, (presentation for the Indigenous Cultural Safety Collaborative Learning Series, January 25, 2018), accessed December 8, 2019, <http://www.icscollaborative.com/webinars/cultural-safety-in-the-classroom-addressing-anti-indigenous-racism-in-education-settings>

33 Cote-Meek.

34 Cheryl R. Ward, "Teaching about Race and Racism in the Classroom: Managing the Indigenous Elephant in the Room" (PhD dissertation, Simon Fraser University, 2018), accessed October 13, 2019, <https://summit.sfu.ca/item/18705>.

35 Yukon Government, "Corrections Statistics," last modified September 4, 2018, accessed January 26, 2020, <http://www.justice.gov.yk.ca/prog/cor/CorrectionsStatistics.html>; Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, *Poverty or Prosperity: Indigenous Children in Canada*, last modified June 2013, accessed January 26, 2020, [https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2013/06/Poverty\\_or\\_Prosperty\\_Indigenous\\_Children.pdf](https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2013/06/Poverty_or_Prosperty_Indigenous_Children.pdf).

36 Erica Meiners, *Right to be Hostile: Schools, Prisons, and the Making of Public Enemies* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 46.

37 Leigh Patel, *Cultural Safety in the Classroom: Addressing Anti-Indigenous Racism in Education Settings*, (presentation for the Indigenous Cultural Safety Collaborative Learning Series, January 25, 2018), accessed December 8, 2019, <http://www.icscollaborative.com/webinars/cultural-safety-in-the-classroom-addressing-anti-indigenous-racism-in-education-settings>.

38 Brian Lewthwaite and Mark Connell, "The Role of Teacher Education in Decolonizing Education in Canada's North: A Yukon Teacher Education Case Study," *Education in the North* 25, no.1-2 (2018), 10.

39 "Our Agreements," *Mapping the Way*, accessed January 26, 2020, <https://mappingtheway.ca/our-agreements>

40 *The Kwanlin Dun First Nation Self-Government Agreement*, KDFN-Canada-Yukon, 2005, accessed January 26, 2020, <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1298901032405/1542817159784>.

41 Government of Yukon, *How First Nations perspectives are incorporated into schools; Government of Yukon, Education Agreement signed between Government of Yukon and Kwanlin Dün First Nation*, last modified July 9, 2019, accessed December 29, 2019, <https://yukon.ca/en/news/education-agreement-signed-between-government-yukon-and-kwanlin-dun-first-nation>.

42 Discussion with the author, September 16, 2019.

## OPTIONS

The following are three options to address the unequal power between Yukon Education and Yukon First Nations:

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**1.** Yukon Education relinquishes power and control over Yukon First Nation<sup>43</sup> Education to Yukon First Nations and applies an “Indigenous-informed anti-racism”<sup>44</sup> lens to all of its activities going forward.

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**2.** Yukon Education and Yukon First Nations co-develop a Yukon curriculum.<sup>45</sup>

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**3.** Yukon Education maintains the status quo by continuing to modify curriculum, programs, and professional development to create greater cultural inclusion.

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<sup>43</sup> Discussion with the author, September 16, 2019.

<sup>44</sup> Ward, 94.

<sup>45</sup> Melaina Sheldon, discussion with the author, May 7, 2019.

# Option 1: Relinquish Control and Apply an Indigenous-informed Anti-Racist Lens

In the spirit of recognizing and shifting ongoing power imbalances and honouring government-to-government obligations, Yukon Education recognizes rightful authority, listens to the wishes of Yukon First Nation leadership, and when asked, transfers power and money over to Yukon First Nations to control Yukon First Nation education. As of June, there were reports that Yukon Government continues to come to negotiating tables assuming its jurisdiction over education of Yukon First Nation students.<sup>46</sup>

Relinquishing control over education means ceding all of the pieces: staff recruitment, professional development, certification, location of schools and length of school years, curriculum, etc. With resources and control, First Nations can then choose whether and how to engage with mainstream school systems.<sup>47</sup>

As Ken Hodgins notes:

“Canada has passed the burden of being colonizer and Yukon has embraced and exploited it fully. Imposition and preservation of power imbalance is the essential ingredient to an ongoing colonial relationship and Yukon has masterfully sustained this in education [...] for the sake of controlling and exploiting the money.”<sup>48</sup>

In relinquishing control, Yukon Education need not lose sight of the call into ongoing relationship signified by land claims. We share this land, and relinquishing control does not mean we stop having responsibilities to live in respectful relations with one another. Building a team of anti-racist mentors empowered to activate an anti-racist lens in all realms of Yukon Education could help ensure these responsibilities are met.

An Indigenous-informed anti-racist lens is distinct from cultural approaches that have largely been employed by Yukon Education to date. At its best, culturally-responsive education infuses management, operations, curricula, programs and pedagogies.<sup>49</sup> Cultural approaches honour strengths, by focusing largely on cultural knowledge, land-based education, language, bringing in elders and recognizing kinship systems.<sup>50</sup>

46 CBC News, “First Nations fed up with Yukon education system, after auditor general's report,” *CBC News*, June 20, 2019, accessed December 29, 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/yukon-first-nations-education-auditor-general-1.5184081>

47 Hodgins.

48 Hodgins.

49 Brian Lewthwaite, Thomas Owen, Ashley Doiron, Barbara McMillan, and Robert Renaud, “Our stories about teaching and learning: a pedagogy of consequences for Yukon First Nation settings,” *Interchange* 44, no.1-2 (2013), 105-128.

50 Verna St. Denis, “Critical Race Theory and its Implication for Indigenous Cultural Safety”, *Indigenous Cultural Safety Collaborative Learning Series*, last modified April 27, 2017, accessed January 25, 2020, <http://www.icscollaborative.com/webinars/critical-race-theory-and-its-implication-for-indigenous-cultural-safety>.

Verna St. Denis, a Cree and Métis scholar and educator, observes that in culturally responsive education, Indigenous people are understood as knowledge-holders with distinct cultures, social organization and histories.<sup>51</sup> While affirming of Indigenous people, this approach asks nothing of settlers. White people are cast as innocent, which leaves overarching structures, and the myths supporting these hierarchies, largely intact.

An anti-racism lens understands that racism is learned by default within a system that privileges whiteness. Being “not racist” is not enough: Anti-racism is *action* toward unlearning that deeply rooted hierarchy in each of us and in the systems in which we are complicit. Racism continues to morph to sustain itself and the colonial project it supports, adapting to seem neutral. Racialized settlers are themselves “marginalized by a white settler nationalist project,” while “as citizens they are nonetheless invited to take part in ongoing colonialism.”<sup>52</sup> Indigenous-informed anti-racism is clear that advantages gained by all settlers through colonialism were neither legitimate nor earned.<sup>53</sup> It helps us see and name the power that underlies social and political inequalities that schools help perpetuate.<sup>54</sup>

Distinct from a culture-only approach, anti-racist education explores the political context of marginalization and clarifies that unequal relationships are a social construct, rather than inherent.<sup>55</sup> It makes white supremacy explicit and demands a complicated, intersectional understanding of Indigenous people. Rather than staying at the level of the individual, anti-racism requires a social and political analysis.<sup>56</sup>

Anti-racist education also asks significantly more from white people than culturally-responsive education. It names power, privilege, and the myth of meritocracy and asks for accountability for our complicity in maintaining unjust relations. White people have failed to honour agreements and we have stolen land and children.<sup>57</sup> These practices are embedded in our systems, including education. Anti-racism requires an honest reckoning with histories and presents, and our complicity in maintaining violent systems.

Culture and language are deeply important for healing individuals, connecting families and building and strengthening nations. First Nation culture and language need to be part of mainstream schools. However, in order to move beyond the default colonial approach

51 St. Denis.

52 Bonita Lawrence and Enakshi Dua, “Decolonizing Antiracism,” *Social Justice* 32, no. 4 (2005), 120-143, quoted in Ward (2018).

53 St. Denis.

54 Ward.

55 St. Denis.

56 St. Denis.

57 St. Denis.

“

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to schools, Yukon Education needs to turn an anti-racist lens on itself. There is legislation and policy to support this.

The Safe and Caring Schools Policy, signed September of 2018, requires that the Department:

Provide opportunities for all staff to acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to develop and maintain academic excellence in a safe learning and teaching environment.<sup>58</sup>

Teachers are to support students in meeting “their full potential and develop[ing] self-worth.”<sup>59</sup> The policy requires respect and fair treatment across a number of human-rights protected grounds, including race. In an environment of white supremacy, we each absorb racism. Anti-racism can help the Department to address systemic violence, create safety and support teachers in welcoming whole students into their classrooms.<sup>60</sup>

The Vancouver School Board has had an anti-racism and diversity mentor<sup>61</sup> and Ontario’s Anti-Racism Directorate was designed “to identify, address and prevent systemic racism in government policy, legislation, programs and services.”<sup>62</sup> The York Regional School Board recently trained more than 12,000 staff in the origins and prevention of anti-black racism.<sup>63</sup> Applying anti-racism to institutions is not without precedent.

## Option 2: Co-Created Curriculum

A co-managed, made-in-the-Yukon curriculum would teach all students about the lands we live on, our relationships to each other, and would ensure First Nation students can walk confidently in both worlds.<sup>64</sup> This could be funded with reconciliation money<sup>65</sup> and ensure that curriculum creators, Yukon First Nation and non-, were working from the community up, equally and well resourced and on equal footing.

Building Yukon curriculum anew would demand an anti-racist lens be applied to mainstream education, decentering Western ways and making space and time for a shared curriculum. It would require the training and recruitment of teachers who would be prepared to teach local Yukon curriculum in ways that connect to land and relationship.

This option has the advantage of requiring a number of other pieces be addressed: teachers would need to be recruited for their knowledge of Yukon curriculum, they would need to be adequately supported to transition into this curriculum, and the creation would require genuinely equitable relationships be established. It is the kind of massive undertaking that has the potential to uproot mainstream ways of knowing and doing to the degree that is necessary.

58 Yukon, *Safe and Caring Schools Policy*, effective date September 1, 2018, accessed January 26, 2020, [http://www.education.gov.yk.ca/pdf/policies/safe\\_caring\\_schools.pdf](http://www.education.gov.yk.ca/pdf/policies/safe_caring_schools.pdf), 3.

59 Yukon, *Safe and Caring Schools Policy*, 3.

60 Sheldon.

61 Katie Hyslop, “How a Black Student Paid the Price for Racism at a Vancouver School,” *The Tyee*, September 11, 2019, accessed January 25, 2020, <https://thetyee.ca/News/2019/09/11/Vancouver-School-Racist-Video/>

62 Ontario, *Anti-Racism Directorate*, last modified October 22, 2019, accessed January 25, 2020, <https://www.ontario.ca/page/anti-racism-directorate>.

63 Dina Al-Shibeeb, “Over 12,000 York Region school board staff receive anti-Black racism training,” *Aurora Banner*, October 25, 2019, accessed January 26, 2020,

<https://www.yorkregion.com/news-story/9662113-over-12-000-york-region-school-board-staff-receive-anti-black-racism-training/>

64 Sheldon.

65 Tony Penikett, in discussion with the author, August 17, 2019.

**However, there are a number of cautions regarding this option:**

- 1.** Curriculum is merely a tool.<sup>66</sup> In the absence of training, resources and genuine willingness to transition toward using this tool, old ways remain intact.
- 2.** The Yukon is currently in the process of transitioning to a new BC curriculum, and working hard to update it with Yukon First Nation ways of doing.<sup>67</sup>

The timing is not ideal to implement a new curriculum project.

- 3.** Yukon First Nations were involved in the decision to transition toward this new BC curriculum, and a Yukon curriculum was an option that was rejected at that time.<sup>68</sup>



<sup>66</sup> Discussion with the author, September 16, 2019.

<sup>67</sup> Nicole Cross, in discussion with the author, September 24, 2019; Discussion with the author, September 16, 2019.

<sup>68</sup> Tosh Southwick, email to the author, September 18, 2019.



## Option 3: Maintaining the Status Quo

Recurring reports from the Auditor General of Canada indicate that the under-resourced efforts of Yukon Education are insufficient to reduce significant gaps in achievement between First Nation and non-First Nation students.

As noted earlier, there are now years of data documenting these achievement gaps. Around half of Yukon First Nation students graduate, as compared with four-fifths of non-Indigenous students.<sup>69</sup> They are between 17 and 34 percentage points behind non-First Nation students in standardized literacy and numeracy tests. When a problem is widespread and ongoing, it points to systemic issues.

Yukon Government has been working on addressing achievement gaps in a variety of ways. In June, Bob Dickson, chair of the Chiefs Committee on Education (CCOE) said "We're still at the table going through the same situation, where nothing's changed — and now it's time for a change."<sup>70</sup>

### RECOMMENDATION

I recommend Option 1: Relinquish Control and Apply an Indigenous-informed Anti-Racist Lens.

The Yukon Education system's authority over Yukon First Nation Education relies on a hand-off of funding and control from the federal government — one that came with little accountability.<sup>71</sup> When Yukon First Nations ask for control, Yukon Education needs to get out of the way of Yukon First Nation control over education of their citizens.<sup>72</sup>

69 Office of the Auditor General of Canada.

70 CBC News, "First Nations fed up with Yukon education system, after auditor general's report," *CBC News*, June 20, 2019, accessed January 26, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/yukon-first-nations-education-auditor-general-1.5184081>

71 Discussion with the author, July 17, 2019.

72 Hodgins.

The settlement of land claims marks a moment of opportunity and a call to relationship. During so many of the conversations I had in creating this paper, people mentioned the necessity of building relationships between teachers, students, and communities.<sup>73</sup>

Handing over education is a way to demonstrate respectful relations at a macro level. In taking this step toward rebalancing power, it could be tempting to turn away from these relationships and to continue in silos. However, land claims and the new BC curriculum provide a moment, an opportunity to stop historicizing colonialism and instead turn to face it in ourselves. As Tosh Southwick, Associate Vice-President of Indigenous Engagement and Reconciliation at Yukon College, wrote in an email, “Power shifts are at the core of true reconciliation.”<sup>74</sup> Yukon First Nations have been doing a lot of healing work on themselves and in their communities. When our systems cause harm, it is incumbent on settler citizens and educators to heal ourselves and to build just systems.

Anti-racism is a tool that gets at a key feature of colonial school systems: the deliberate dehumanizing of Indigenous people. Cultural approaches are deeply needed. But the work of non-Indigenous people does not end there: it is also the job of educators to turn a lens on ourselves, to examine our own biases and stereotypes and how those shape the systems in which education takes place and that continue to commit violence against First Nation students. Residential schools are historicized as though students

“  
Power shifts  
are at the  
core of true  
reconciliation”

TOSH SOUTHWICK

aren't still being sent to Whitehorse from rural communities to finish high school, and as though they aren't losing connection with their home communities in the process.<sup>75</sup>

This school system is a system born of racism. Naming it anti-Indigenous racism is a way to name the power imbalance inherent in Yukon Education's control over education and in the often-unquestioned centering of Western ways of knowing. This is an effort similar to decolonization, but as Tuck and Yang wrote, “decolonization is not a metaphor,” but about “the repatriation of Indigenous land and life.”<sup>76</sup> Moving toward equitable outcomes demands justice, and that is First Nation control over First Nation education. We have laid the groundwork in the Yukon for this to be a reality.

73 Discussion with the author, June 4, 2019; Cross; Interview with the author, February 10, 2019; Interview with the author, February 12, 2019.

74 Southwick.

75 Discussion with the author, September 16, 2019.

76 Tuck and Yang, 1; Tuck and Yang, 21.



## SUPPORT

There is legislative support for an approach that aims to remedy unequal power and colonial violence. The Yukon's Education Act commits as a fundamental goal "to develop self-worth through a positive educational environment."<sup>77</sup> The Act claims to honour human rights and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Addressing systemic racism is also a key component of the Cultural Inclusion Standards, created by all 14 Yukon First Nations.

There are numerous calls for anti-racism education in both the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action<sup>78</sup> and the Calls for Justice of the National Inquiry into Missing

Indigenous Women and Girls.<sup>79</sup> This moment of facing injustice and moving toward reconciliation is prime for non-Indigenous people to engage in the work of anti-racism. It is also a moment in which we are learning to talk about racism in this country.

Some students and parents may be interested in building schools that are honest, non-violent, and that aim to embrace the wholeness of each student. In speaking of wholeness, I am imagining students existing in confidence, with an unquestioned valuing of who they are and where they are from.<sup>80</sup> Tarana Burke, activist and founder of the #MeToo anti-sexual violence movement, speaks to the way violence creates trauma, which in turn "halts possibility."<sup>81</sup>

<sup>77</sup> *Education Act*, R.S.Y. 2002, c.61, s.4(b).

<sup>78</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action*, 2015, accessed January 26, 2020, [http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls\\_to\\_Action\\_English2.pdf](http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf)

<sup>79</sup> National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, "Calls for Justice" in *Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*, 2019, accessed January 26, 2020, [https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Final\\_Report\\_Vol\\_1b.pdf](https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Final_Report_Vol_1b.pdf)

<sup>80</sup> Sheldon.

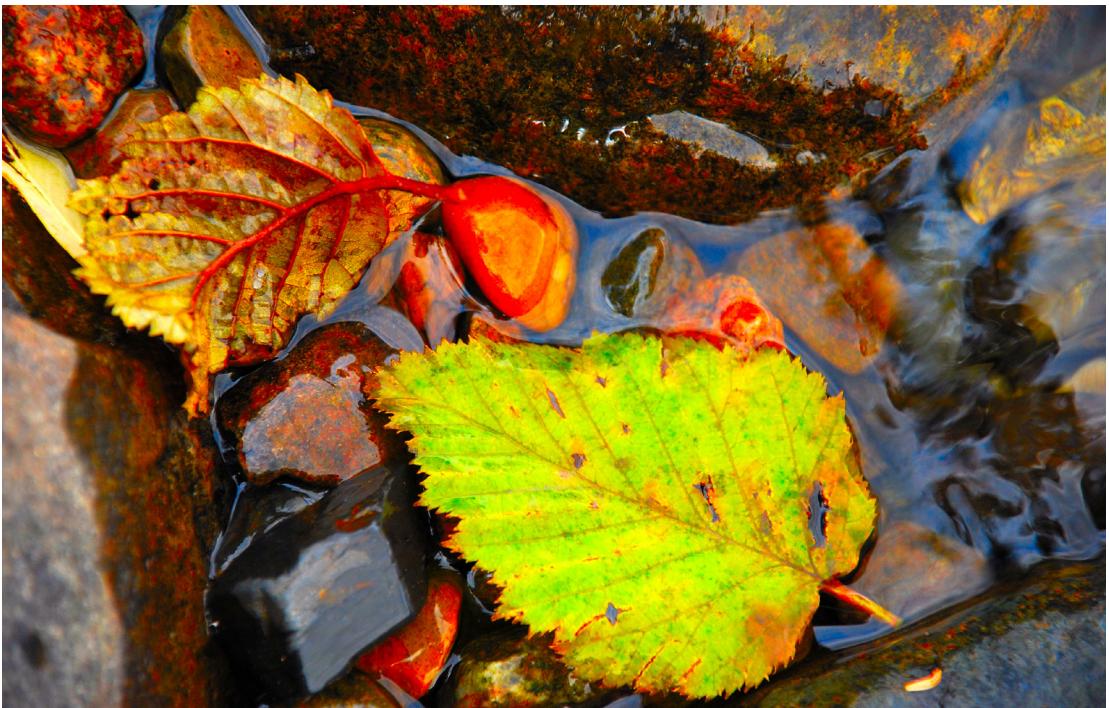
<sup>81</sup> Tarana Burke, "Me too is a movement, not a moment," *TEDWomen*, 2018, accessed January 26, 2020, [https://www.ted.com/talks/tarana\\_burke\\_me\\_too\\_is\\_a\\_movement\\_not\\_a\\_moment/transcript?blog#t-692600](https://www.ted.com/talks/tarana_burke_me_too_is_a_movement_not_a_moment/transcript?blog#t-692600)

In a bold reimagining of possibility, she argues that “unequivocally, every human being has the right to walk through this life with their full humanity intact.”<sup>82</sup> Schools that are shaped by colonial violence “halt possibility.” Aiming to see and name how that happens, and creating spaces that are safer for everyone, has the potential to support the full humanity of each student.

Anti-racist work will also face opposition. Some non-First Nation teachers are already afraid of the change being asked of them by the new BC curriculum.<sup>83</sup> Non-First Nation teachers may hesitate to address topics that are unfamiliar to them, afraid of getting it wrong. However, the new curriculum and the uncertainty of teachers is also a moment of opportunity, an opening to add anti-racism to their cultural learning and to move through discomfort <sup>84</sup> toward significant learning.

This learning is challenging for people who have not had to engage with racism before. Most people are not explicitly educated about racism, as its continued invisibility in the white consciousness benefits the existing power structure.<sup>85</sup> When confronted with this learning, readers and learners may respond with denial, defensiveness, or “settler fragility.”<sup>86</sup>

Anti-racism is a pedagogy designed to disrupt. In order to implement it, there will need to be strong leadership equipped with an anti-racist, “colonial-informed lens.”<sup>87</sup> Elected leaders will need to be firm in implementing this as a crucial reconciliation effort, and they will need to convince leaders across the department of education, school administrators, and teachers. Anti-racist mentors will need to hold real authority.



82 Burke.

83 Cross.

84 Discussion with the author, February 11, 2019.

85 Ward.

86 Ward, 65.

87 Ward, 115.

## IMPLEMENTATION

In order to implement this policy recommendation, the following steps must be taken by Yukon Education:

### **STEP ONE**

When requested, relinquish control over First Nation education.

### **STEP TWO**

Build a team of anti-racist mentors empowered to activate an anti-racist lens in all realms of Yukon Education.

The team of anti-racist mentors would be available to field concerns about racism in schools, to provide workshops for teachers and administrators, and to track and offer corrective advice to leaders regarding systemic concerns.

#### **THEY COULD CONSIDER OPTIONS SUCH AS:**

1. Requiring knowledge of Yukon First Nations, colonial histories and presents, and anti-racist pedagogies for the certification of Yukon teachers.
2. Embedding substantive anti-racism in long-range plans and school growth plans.
3. Ensuring there is sufficient staff in the First Nations Programs and Partnerships department.<sup>88</sup>
4. Running anti-racism courses for Department of Education staff, students, and school councils, based on the premise that white supremacy is learned and maintained unless actively disrupted.
5. Supporting mini-assemblies by grade where students engage with race and learn to name and disrupt racism as part of building safe and caring schools, based on meetings currently held to ensure inclusion for 2SLGBTQ students.<sup>89</sup>
6. Revamping Professional Development so that it is multi-day, includes follow-up mentorship, and takes place on the land.<sup>90</sup> Continuing to include teaching about colonial histories and presents demands teacher learners sit in their discomfort and examine their complicity. Land-based learning explicitly de-centres Western ways of knowing and builds local relationships and connection to the land.
7. Considering the school-to-prison pipeline and the overrepresentation of First Nation people in prisons, track school discipline by race and address inequalities.

88 Cross; Discussion with the author, June 4, 2019.

89 Cross.

90 Cross.

## Learning to Listen: On Racism and Power in Yukon Education

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