ACTIVE RESEARCH IN THE AGE OF RECONCILIATION: A RELATIONSHIP-BASED APPROACH FOR NON-INDIGENOUS RESEARCHERS

Robert Carreau and Daniel B. Robinson
St. Francis Xavier University

ABSTRACT
This article recounts a five-year journey connecting Acadian and Mi’kmaw schools in Nova Scotia, Canada. We trace the unfolding of relationships between minority school students and administrators through both natural and semi-structured dialogues. We believe this work contributes to the emerging field of research called for by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, TRC (2015) “to advance understanding of reconciliation” (p. 331). Drawing upon Battiste (2000), our research design represents a journey in the four directions of the Medicine Wheel. This journey is superimposed on an action research cycle. Three primary recommendations are offered for future research, whether it is collaborative, community-based, or for independent academic requirements.

KEYWORDS: Action research, Indigenous, Aboriginal, Reconciliation.

The 63rd call to action in the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, TRC (2015) is for the Council of Ministers of Education of Canada to “maintain an annual commitment to Aboriginal education issues, including…building student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect” (p. 331). This call to action is moot unless there are pathways for interaction among Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. This research explored the extent to which new dialogues between Mi’kmaw and Acadian schools are possible and mutually educative. Such dialogues were interrupted 250
years ago by the Acadian deportation and subsequent divide-and-conquer policies of British colonial governments and have, for the most part, never been rekindled.

The parallels between Indigenous epistemologies and the principles of action research have long been recognized (see Chilisa, 2012; McTaggart, 1991). Indeed, such recognition has been found within this very journal, most recently by Peterson, Horton, and Restoule (2016). Increasingly aware of such parallels ourselves, we recently undertook our own effort to more fully, and authentically, engage in action research while also purposely and purposefully maintaining a focus upon respecting Indigenous teachings and epistemologies. Our path was not straightforward and, as might be expected, the research was not straight either. Rather, our path was often irregular and indirect, and the research was clearly cyclical.

This article recounts a five-year journey connecting Acadian and Mi’kmaw schools in Nova Scotia, Canada. We trace the unfolding of relationships and dialogues between minority school students and administrators that occurred through both natural and semi-structured dialogues. We believe that this work contributes to the emerging field of research called for by the TRC (2015) “to advance understanding of reconciliation” (p. 331). Drawing upon Battiste (2000), our research design represents a journey in the four directions of the Medicine Wheel (see Figure 1). This journey is superimposed on an action research cycle (Zuber-Skerritt & Fletcher, 2007) as a guide to the phases of the research project.

It is important here to acknowledge our limited ability to understand the complexities of the Medicine Wheel and its teachings for different Indigenous peoples across North America. This acknowledgement, we hope, provides us some degree of license to engage in important conversations as settlers-as-allies, while also ever-remembering our own place as outsiders. We recognize both our ignorance here and our shared desire to listen to and learn from Indigenous insiders who are willing to teach us about the Medicine Wheel and its lessons.

Through this article and the action research that it recounts, we hope to present (i) respectful appreciation to/for those involved, (ii) academic rigour to the field of border-crossing (through) action research, and (iii) courage and insight to other researchers who continue to work with us on the borders as we collectively accept our responsibility to decolonize and reconcile our schools, societies, and selves in this post-TRC era.
Our Positionality and Roles

We do not pretend to write from a Mi’kmaw perspective, nor do we seek to represent the Mi’kmaw experience with any special expertise. However, being outsiders is far from a dead end. As Haig-Brown (2008) noted, cross-cultural dialogue is the only way forward: “dismissive critique based in cries of essentialism has allowed scholars immersed in Western/Euro-Canadian (and American) discourses to continue to relegate Indigenous thought to some marginal space while colonial relations proceed apace and unexamined” (p. 16). This research tells our own story of reaching out to Indigenous communities.

The insider-outsider binary of Indigeneity versus colonialism provides a powerful lens through which Smith (1999, 2005a) has elucidated the regrettable history of Eurocentric ideologies and practices in “researching the Native” (Smith, 2005b, p. 85). Smith’s contributions to decolonizing methodologies are beyond measure, and have truly been a turning point in many fields of research with Indigenous communities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Getty, 2010; Grande, 2008; Hodge & Lester, 2006). However, her us-versus-them rhetoric is likely not sustainable in the long term as both sides of the binary give way to hybrid and fragmented perspectives (Benhabib, 2002; Hall, 2006, 2009; Haw, 1996; Taylor, 1994), and the dividing horizon that Smith envisioned between them “recedes each time one approaches it” (Benhabib, 2002, p. 5). “Instead of a narrative of decline,” wrote Giroux (2009), “educators need to combine a discourse of critique and resistance with a discourse

![Figure 1. Battiste's Medicine Wheel model of research with Indigenous communities (as cited in Moseley, 2012).](image)
of possibility and hope” (p. 250). We believe that action research can contribute to this discourse of possibility and hope.

Justice Murray Sinclair (2014), Chair of the TRC, encouraged patience and long-term vision, coupled with personal dialogues as we rebuild trust between Canada’s Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. This research makes space for such dialogues, giving students and educators who may not otherwise cross paths the opportunity to envision what reconciliation at the personal and community level might look like.

Before carrying on, it is essential to also clarify and qualify our own roles. The first author, Robert Carreau, completed the entirety of this research as part of his doctoral dissertation. The second author, Daniel B. Robinson, played a supervisory role for Robert in this endeavor. His contributions were related, primarily, to shaping the research design and supporting data analysis and discussion. Together, Robert and Daniel wrote this article. Given these different roles (particularly Robert’s role as a principal investigator), note the following conventions for pronoun use within the remainder of this article: “we” or “us” refer to Robert and Daniel; “I” or “me” refers to Robert only.

RESEARCH (CO-) DESIGN

This journey began with a personal comment from Mi’kmaq school Principal Marjorie Pierro: “Come to our schools; it’s impossible to understand what we do from a distance.” Spoken during my first meeting with Mi’kmaw Kina’matnewey (MK) principals for a previous research project, the invitation both flattered and humbled me as I felt equal parts honoured to be welcomed so openly and embarrassed to have given the impression that I intended to dial in my research from a distance. I proceeded to develop my research design around school visits above all else, and learned a great deal in a short time about the educational realities and personalities in each community. With mutual learning and my work with fellow administrators in mind, I came up with a simple research question: What can Acadian and Mi’kmaq schools learn from each other, and how can leaders from both systems facilitate that learning? I liked the symmetry and simplicity of this question, and was excited by the possibilities for both school systems. I also felt that I already had plenty to say on the subject. First, though, I needed a clearer research design.

After much deliberation, I chose action research as a primary design, in order to explore my research question while remaining firmly grounded in my own professional context. Action research has been cyclical by definition since its introduction by Lewin (1946), and is often portrayed as a spiral to show its progressive nature (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Zuber-Skerritt and Fletcher’s (2007) dissertation-specific action research thesis model introduces the recursive notion of embedded micro-cycles within a larger macro-cycle, allowing for flexibility and learning through repetition within the act phase while maintaining a finite scope to completion of the degree requirements as two (or more) large plan-act-observe-reflect loops (see Figure 2).
To acknowledge the importance of grounding the process in anti-racist and anti-colonial discourse, I merged this design with Battiste’s (2000) Medicine Wheel model, resulting in a single large cycle representing the entire process. By slightly rearranging the layout of Kemmis and McTaggart’s (1988) plan-act-observe-reflect diagram, these four moments of action research can be aligned with the four directions of the Medicine Wheel. As in Figure 2, smaller cycles are embedded, except now they appear within each phase rather than only in the act phase (see Figure 3).

Aligning the four directions of the Medicine Wheel with the four moments of action research is by no means an authoritative characterization of either; rather it is humbly presented here as a reminder of the spiral nature of both action research (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Lewin, 1946) and Indigenous discourses (Bishop, 1999; Mkabela, 2005). This dissertation research included the completion of one full macro-cycle, reflecting its fixed and finite institutional exigencies. However, each micro-cycle was repeated multiple times as feedback and interactions with participants and academic advisors continuously

*Figure 2. Cyclical action research thesis model proposed by Zuber-Skerritt and Fletcher (2007).*
produced new learning, and as adjustments were made along the way. The Medicine Wheel has been referenced in action research before (see Getty, 2010; Hogue, 2012; Kitchen & Raynor, 2013), but not (to our knowledge) blended with a Western academic research framework as it has here.

![Figure 3. Cyclical model merging action research phases with the Medicine Wheel, showing the micro- and macro-cycles that guided this research from the initial proposal writing to the dissertation defense.](image)

**Ethical Considerations**

Once research ethics approval was granted for this project, permission to enter the sites was requested from the band Education Directors from MK and the local school board, as well as from the principals of the schools involved. ‘Invitation to participate’ letters were sent to teachers, parents, and students explaining the project. Administrators and students signed consent forms if they chose to be part of the research study. Video cameras and
tablets were used to record audio and video from student dialogues, whereas notes, journaling, and email correspondence were used to record the administrators' dialogues. Parts of these dialogues have been transcribed and condensed for thematic analysis. Throughout the project, both the data and its analysis were member checked (Guba, 1981) for reliability, validity, and perception accuracy. Additionally, participants were invited to clarify, elaborate, and/or withdraw their contributions at any time.

Pseudonyms have been used throughout this document for students, teachers, and educational directors, whether they were signatory participants or not. However, as stated in the letter of Invitation to Participate, it may be possible to identify participants given the relatively small populations of the communities and schools involved. Given this and the expressed permission of the two Mi’kmaq principals, real names have been used for Ida Denny and Marjorie Pierro. Indigenous scholars (Chilisa, 2012, Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008) have questioned the appropriateness of mandatory anonymity in research with Indigenous peoples. By including their real identities we hope to celebrate and give due credit to the thoughtfulness and wisdom in their contributions to this project.

**Our Four Directions of Action Research**

Beginning in the West (planning and relationship building) with a strong stance against the systemic racism and centuries-old policies that have isolated Mi’kmaw and Acadian communities in the far reaches of the province, our project continues clockwise to the North (data collection), East (data analysis), and South (writing). This perspective embraces Kemmis and McTaggart’s (1991) four moments of action research (i.e., plan, act, observe, reflect) as both a parallel cycle for the entire project and a micro-cycle within each quadrant. The tension between institutional academic requirements and the collective interpersonal nature of the dialogical process is resolved similarly to Zuber-Skerritt and Fletcher’s (2007) approach—by identifying the West and South as primarily individual phases and the North and East as primarily collaborative ones.

In light of the above considerations, this research began with the assumption that a wealth of minority education expertise exists in both Mi’kmaw and Acadian schools, there is almost no interaction between the two systems, and opening spaces for dialogues between them can inform and enrich the practices at both. Looking forward, it seeks to occupy the epistemic gaps left behind when Acadian and Aboriginal classrooms were scattered and re-built upon British models of schooling (Hamilton, 1986; Plank, 2001) in the 19th and 20th centuries. Moreover, it assumes that dialogue can begin to bridge those gaps.

**The Medicine Wheel and Action Research**

Battiste’s (2000) interpretation of the Medicine Wheel as a pathway to decolonization (Figure 1) guided the planning of this research. Battiste recommends beginning in the West, or in the autumn, symbolizing the threatened Mi’kmaw language and culture. There is no one correct interpretation of the Medicine Wheel of course; Mi’kmaw Elder Albert Marshall (2005) notes that there are, in fact, an infinite number of lessons to be learned.
from the Medicine Wheel. Battiste’s decision to begin in the West reminds us that the wheel represents a cycle without beginning or end. In Battiste’s view of research with Indigenous peoples (cited in Moseley, 2012), a strong anti-racist discourse is needed as a precursor to the journey North, through the winter season, during which survival will be challenged but long nights together will offer ample opportunity to recognize and reject the legacy of colonialism and to dream (through dialogue between Mi’kmaw and Acadian schools, in this case) of a better future. The East represents the coming of spring with its promise and vitality, fresh beginnings, spiritual healing, and honouring Indigenous ways of knowing and well-being (the interpretation and sharing of results took place at this stage). Finally, the South represents full summer fruition, the final aim of the project (writing in this case): relationships are rebalanced and we acknowledge the teachings and traditions that brought us through the process, with no particular endpoint.

**West: Planning and Relationship Building**

Chilisa (2012) suggests that “a researcher who wishes the researched to participate in the identification of the issue of study, the research design, analysis, and reporting...should have a strategy for building a partnership with the researched community” (p. 299). We agree with Chilisa, but rather than building partnerships in order to conduct action research, this project reversed the order—conducting action research in order to build partnerships. The opening of space for partnerships (between Mi’kmaw and Acadian schools and school leaders, myself included) was an end in itself. Any agenda for further study, or for exploring possibilities enabled by these partnerships, was unforeseeable beforehand.

Citing relationships as the primary motivation, guide, method, findings, and legacy of this research is not to overstate their intimacy or magnitude, nor is it to suggest that they are permanent. Indigenous lawyer and scholar Henderson (2000) reminds us, “to see things as permanent is to be confused about everything; an alternative to that understanding is the need to create temporary harmonies through alliances and relationships among all forms and forces” (p. 265). The relationships built through this research have already extended outside the scope of its objectives, from impromptu phone calls, house visits, and conversations in the street to my part-time work as an instructor in the graduate program at St. Francis Xavier University. However, to place additional time scales and expectations on these relationships would be to miss the point that they are meaningful, open-ended, and authentic trialectic spaces (Dei & McDermott, 2014) that would not have otherwise existed. Certainly, this importance upon relationships lends action research to working alongside Indigenous peoples—or lends working alongside Indigenous people to action research. The point is this: the level of intimacy and magnitude of relationships that are required/enabled when one works alongside Indigenous peoples is a strength that needs to be acknowledged and embraced by those doing this sort of border crossing.

**Statement of research questions and objectives.** This research attempted to answer the following questions:

1. What are the obstacles to increased dialogue between Acadian and Mi’kmaw schools?
2. How do administrators and grade 11 and 12 students from Acadian and Mi'kmaw schools interact during school visits designed to generate dialogue?

The administrators and students were at once the designers, the actors, the subjects of the research, the lenses through which its results were interpreted, and the vehicles through which its findings have been (and will continue to be) disseminated.

In order to answer the research question, the following four objectives were undertaken:

1. Initiate and document a dialogue between two Mi'kmaw school principals and an Acadian school vice-principal (myself) on the opportunities for strengthened collaboration between the three schools in particular and the province’s two minority-language education systems more generally.

2. Initiate and document a dialogue between Mi'kmaw and Acadian high school students through reciprocal school visits.

3. Explore the dynamics of power, identity, and relationships throughout the phases of the project, from planning to writing.

4. Make recommendations for further dialogues and partnerships which could enrich the educational experience in both systems, as well as for future research involving dialogue between these and other minority schools.

So as to more clearly elucidate how this doctoral research was positioned as an action research venture, consider the following: dialogue between Acadian and Mi’kmaw schools has been noticeably absent for the entire time these two school systems have existed in Nova Scotia. Given that both these systems are meant for students whose ancestors suffered the immediate consequences of colonization—and that the TRC offers educational suggestions for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples—establishing a pathway for such conversations is suitable, if not desirable. Moreover, the establishment of such pathways is not to only enable conversation (though, that alone, would be meaningful). Rather, because both of these systems continue to share educational and community goals related to culturally relevant programming and cultural revitalization, conversations between them allow them to learn from (and teach) one another.

**North: Data Collection**

North represented the sampling and data collection for this project. In addition to the immediate networking benefits to students and staff, both the student and administrator dialogues were designed to plant the seeds for future research within both Acadian and Mi’kmaw communities. Beyond that, we tried not to over-predict the outcomes. Smith, Bratini, Chambers, Jensen and Romero (2010) caution that “university-based researchers must interrogate and resist their impulses to hasten, manage, or otherwise control the always evolving, frequently surprising process of participatory action research” (p. 422).

In speaking of logistical issues and obstacles, we (as non-Indigenous researchers) wish to highlight the importance of taking no for an answer in working with Indigenous communities. Data not collected do not appear here of course, but constitute key learnings
through this research nonetheless. A ‘failed’ research project undertaken by Hodge and Lester (2006), in which the community said no to the research, teaches a very powerful lesson: it challenges us to question our priorities and expectations, and to redefine notions of success and failure in research. What does failure really look like in research with Indigenous communities? How does it reflect on the researcher? Is it an acceptable outcome? What if one’s entire career consisted of well planned, respectfully consulted, collaborative research initiatives, which built lasting relationships and research capacity, but failed to meet their stated objectives for funding and/or academic credit? Conversely, what about a string of successful peer-reviewed publications, earning academic accolades and promotions, but with no significant benefit to Indigenous communities? How do the pressures of academia (including graduate degree requirements, publishing pressures, and funding-related expectations) intersect with the best practices and pacing requirements of collaborative research with Indigenous communities? How does the inclusion of human relationships problematize the acceptance of failure as a possibility in the research process? These tensions remained at the heart of this research throughout all phases of action research, and their impacts might be categorized and elaborated through the lens of Kirkness and Barnhardt’s (1991) four Rs: respect, relevance, responsibility, and reciprocity.

The process that unfolded included several actions. The first student exchange involved five to seven students from the Acadian school visiting with a similar-sized group from the Mi’kmaw school in December for one-on-one semi-structured interviews involving nine open-ended questions. These ranged from relatively inert questions designed to elicit everyday themes (e.g., “What is your school’s policy on cell phones?”) to more pointed questions designed to elicit both parallels (e.g., “What has influenced you to remain at your minority school rather than transferring to the local English-language school?”) and differences (e.g., “How can we address racist attitudes such as those seen in online comments?”) in students’ lived educational experiences. Students from opposite schools were paired and given a video camera or tablet. They recorded their conversations.

The student dialogues during this visit were more successful than I had ever hoped, with plenty of animated chatter and laughter in the room for almost an hour before I began to notice students looking at me, or the clock. I tried to intervene as little as possible in the dialogues themselves, but circulated to speak with the students as they appeared to be finished. There was positive feedback from all of them, and following a group photo they all seemed reluctant to part ways. Someone mentioned that a game of dodgeball was happening in the gym, and I agreed that the visiting students could stay and play. This turned out to be a good conclusion to the visit, and was brought up again at the following visit as a highlight for the students.

This second visit (five months later) was less intimidating for me, partly because of the success of the first one, and partly perhaps because it was in my own school. Perhaps due to my increased sense of confidence on this second visit, and also in the interest of preferring student dialogue over my own, I was quicker to move through my introduction and to divide the students into partners. For many possible reasons, including this shorter
introduction, the choice of partners, the incentive of video games once the dialogues were complete, the questions being too similar to those of the first visit, or otherwise simply not as thought-provoking, responses and dialogues were generally shorter (a combined total of only 51 minutes of condensed responses for the nine questions, compared to 82 minutes for the first visit). Being unable to pinpoint the reason, I include this fact for reflection only; further research may shed more light on the factors encouraging dialogue for student activities such as this.

As observed during the first visit, students were reluctant to part ways after the group photo following the dialogues. They moved to the student council room for approximately 40 minutes of free time, socializing, and playing video games. They left at the end of the school day, most of them suggesting to me and to each other that we should find ways to reconvene in the future.

The administrator exchanges were similarly personal and tentative. I set out for Cape Breton with a plan to meet with Marjorie in the morning and Ida in the afternoon. I had no schedule other than that, so both visits could take as much time as the two participants wished. I felt nervous about the personal element of these meetings and wondered how to find the necessary balance between relational accountability and academic rigour. I knew I could not simply show up with a clipboard and voice recorder and begin asking questions, yet from a strictly informational point of view that would be the most expedient way to collect data. I was cognizant of Ojibwa researcher Jane Martin’s advice (as cited in Wilson, 2008) in interviewing Elders:

> Sometimes (voice recorders and note-taking) are obtrusive and invasive, so you have to rely on your memory, and you have to rely on the things that are coming through you at the time, and the words that the Elder is saying. And from there, extrapolate...that is conversation. That is a valid tool. Because it is contextual. It helps build relationships” (p. 113).

I knew that the relationships already built would be the best results of this research, and that the dialogues of the day would be keystones in those relationships. However, I was still unclear on how I would share these results in meaningful ways with others (participants and their communities, my research committee, and professional or academic colleagues who might want to learn from or build on my work). I had a nagging feeling that the relationship-building phase was somehow over, having been just a preliminary stage-setting exercise in order to gain access to ‘real’ data. Fortunately, I knew this was not true, since there was no data outside of these relationships. As outlined above in the section entitled West: Planning and Relationship Building, the relationships were the data.

The fact bears repeating: in this (and any) project seeking to explore partnerships, relationships were and are the data. The primary implication is that all relationships are valuable in them, and cannot be seen as stepping stones, inroads, or data collection strategies. This is true not only because purely pragmatic approaches to relationship building are superficial at best and disingenuous at worst, but also because they miss the
true learning and lifelong gift of real relationships, legacies much more lasting and powerful than any project data could ever be. This is all easier said than done. On the one hand, there is an undeniable pragmatic component to any relationship established in the context of research, however meaningful and personal the contexts and dialogues may be. This can add an awkward sense of ‘ulterior motive’ to any conversation and a further challenge to making real connections between researcher and participants. The academic pressure to report on results only compounds this challenge. However, none of this should be taken as a discouragement to engage in meaningful work across cultures and school systems. One does not need to look far in Canada to see that what is needed are stronger relationships and mutual trust, not more excuses for inaction.

In the end, we said and did what felt right and natural in our conversations, leaving the voice recorder off and taking only simple notes with participants’ permission, focusing above all on the real face-to-face interaction after so many email and telephone messages. Our ‘30-minute’ conversation took almost three hours, blending stories and ideas from our personal, professional, and academic lives as we tried to make sense of the common ground between us and the potential for mutual learning.

Wayne joined us for most of the morning at Marjorie’s invitation, which turned out to be a great balance, preventing it from becoming a one-sided interview-type dialogue and resulting in a real conversation. Conscious of the time and hoping to try and touch on as many interesting topics as possible, I tried to cover the sample questions that I had prepared beforehand. We digressed on many tangents relating to school and family life of course, and Marjorie expressed her appreciation that I included my wife and children in the conversation several times without realizing it. She said it showed that I had my priorities in order as far as she was concerned, rather than putting too much emphasis on my research or my career. However, we both laughed that even as we tried to de-emphasize the importance of the interview questions on my clipboard, I was unconsciously using the word “anyway…” whenever I would turn our attention to the next question on my list. We laughed at how this word could be seen as de-valuing the laughter and stories that we had just shared, and I vowed to strike it from my vocabulary. It was funny how difficult it was not to use the word for the rest of the morning, as she could see it was on my mind at certain points as I tried to make the best of our short time together. More than once there was only silence as I surreptitiously glanced back at my list of questions and could feel her gaze; “I’m not going to say it,” I would insist.

The morning ended with her and Wayne teaching me a new word, “Nmültes,” meaning “see you again.” This was much better than goodbye, and was all I had hoped for in the first place. I continued to Eskasoni and had a similar experience with Ida, although it was the very end of a busy school day and both of us were tired. Once again our conversation was interwoven with stories of family and school life, and once again it took much longer than anticipated. “What happened to 30 minutes?” she joked in the parking lot as we wearily went our separate ways two hours later. Altogether it was a powerful and humbling experience for me to spend the day with these two master educators. With my laptop on the passenger seat, I recorded my thoughts on the four-hour drive home, exploring the two
conversations of the day in no particular order as they occurred to me, and making verbal notes to myself for follow-up later on.

**East: Data Analysis**

East contained the data analysis phase, and the recognition of a key tension at the heart of this research. This tension, which might most easily (though not perfectly) have been characterized as Indigenous versus Western epistemologies, manifested itself on multiple levels. The most significant of these was the pull between the requirements of the Academe and the reality of the people involved. This was epitomized in a conversation with a leader from one Mi’kmaq community who was pleased to meet me and discuss partnerships between our schools, inviting me to visit, “unless of course you’re doing your PhD.” The tension was reconcilable on most levels, and as a researcher interested in partnerships and border-crossing it was an honour to engage in this act of reconciliation as both a learning process and an act of resistance against stagnant cultural hegemonies. However, there were three levels on which the tension proved irreconcilable: individual versus collaborative research, negative versus positive connotations of research and its protocols, and rushed agendas versus naturally paced relationships. These are elaborated below through the lens of Kirkness and Barnhardt’s (1991) four Rs:

*Individual versus collaborative research (responsibility and reciprocity).* This relates to the definition of doctoral research as independent study (IDAC, 2012) versus the increasing call by Indigenous researchers and allies for collaborative research ‘with’ Indigenous peoples (Battiste, 2013; Bishop, 1994; Chilisa, 2012; Grande, 2008; Hampton, 1995; Kovach, 2009; Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008). True reciprocity is impossible in doctoral research since, by definition, the responsibility for the dissertation lies ultimately (if not exclusively) with the candidate.

*Negative versus positive connotations of research and its protocols (relevance).* This relates to the need to maintain academic research requirements at the forefront (consent forms, invitation letters, clipboards, interviews, recording devices, etc.) versus the desire to shed the negative connotations of doctoral research—as a ‘dirty word’ in some Indigenous communities (Smith, 1999) and as a source of disdain or even resentment from teaching colleagues (Brown, 2012). The pursuit of a PhD in the P-12 schooling context is now often seen irrelevant at best (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2007), or elitist at worst (Brown, 2012). In order to ensure that participants, colleagues, and superiors saw the relevance of this research, I found it necessary to consistently downplay its association with my doctorate. Not only did this conflict with the hours and years of work that I was doing to meet rigorous academic program requirements, it also conflicted with the ethical obligation to codify all relationships formed through the study in fine print and signatures, as well as the moral obligation to acknowledge (explicitly or otherwise) that this was at its core a personal endeavour of mine, with tangible financial and career advancement benefits for me alone. Set against a backdrop of continued imbalanced relationships between Indigenous and Settler peoples and my limited (albeit emerging) relationship with Mi’kmaw communities, my position as non-Aboriginal researcher was even more precarious.
Rushed agendas versus naturally paced relationships (respect). This relates to time constraints (arising from academic limitations [IDAC, 2012], the desire to finish the doctoral component of the research in order to relieve the tensions described above, and the requirement to work in order to make a living while doing doctoral research) versus the need to respect the natural pace of planning, relationship building, and the time constraints of others, particularly busy Indigenous school administrators (Blakesley, 2010; Holiday, 2006; Kamara, 2009; Nee-Benham, Maenette, & Cooper, 1998; Tompkins, 1998, 2006).

These three levels of tension emerged through the research process and could have been chosen as inductive analytical themes (Boyatzis, 1998; Smith et al., 2002). Instead, they infused and enriched the deductive thematic analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2008). This allowed for better continuity between the proposal, ethics applications, and dissertation, as well as illuminating the learning process by discussing what was learned through the lens established at the beginning of the research rather than defining a new lens in retrospect.

Condensed versions of the student and administrator dialogues were then analyzed under the headings of six pre-determined themes according to the research objectives: (i) mutual learning, (ii) leaders’ roles in facilitating that learning, (iii) power, (iv) identity, (v) relationships, and (vi) recommendations for future dialogues and partnerships.

South: Writing
South described the challenges and considerations guiding the writing process itself. Herr and Anderson’s (2014) notion of validity in action research was examined in order to assess the quality of this research through five lenses (dialogic, democratic, process, outcome, and catalytic) and publication possibilities were discussed.

Although relationships and real-world connections were at the heart of this research, the dissertation is its most tangible and easily shareable legacy. Every participant came away with a different impression of the experience, and there will be many subtle ways in which it “lives fruitfully and creatively in future experiences” (Dewey, 1938, p. 28). Still, there is only one final draft of the dissertation, and as its author I had the responsibility to ensure that the myriad perspectives were represented in it. The four action research moments—plan, act, observe, and reflect—were manifested in the multiple phases of discussion (e.g., what do participants want to see in the final product?), drafting, feedback, and revision.

We had three hopes in setting this research down in words: 1) that all readers maintain an awareness of the writing process as they interpret this final product; 2) that participants feel justly represented; and 3) that the academic community sees concrete value in this work. As the final and concrete representation of a long and complex border-crossing endeavour involving many people and events, this writing process has been risky. It has been as tentative and uncertain as the events that it seeks to characterize, and for every word that appears in the final edit, two were likely deleted. The process is easily hidden by
the product. The hours of reflection, hesitancy, and doubt are not apparent in a fixed final draft that has been polished and revised, dwelled on and edited, bound, defended, and released as the account of what took place.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS
Notwithstanding the multi-cyclical nature of this action research initiative (see Figure 3), we know that this research has only allowed for a single plan-act-observe-reflect cycle. We identified an issue, planned, acted upon it, and reflected upon that action. Certainly, this article has detailed the lived and learned experience of one cycle of action research (and the Medicine Wheel).

Discussions have occurred, and they have helped address the issue we identified. These conversations have been mutually educative—for both Acadian and Mi’kmaq administrators and students. But, there is clearly more work to do. Our hope is that others (e.g., school administrators) who started these conversations will see the value to be had in those conversations and will, consequently, revisit and refocus their efforts. There is much to be learned and done here—both school systems and their administrators and students can benefit from continuing what has been started.

Acadian and Mi’kmaw schools in Nova Scotia are uniquely positioned to see themselves reflected in this research, to draw parallels, and to glean specific insight for their practice. They are inherently connected to it through their common fundamental focus on minority language and culture in the dominant context of English-speaking Nova Scotia. This general applicability is tempered, however, by the essential relationality that was necessarily embedded in every step of this research. Our primary recommendation for further action research in this and similar contexts is, therefore, to begin as we did in the West, confronting racism and building authentic individual relationships. Francophone and First Nations schools already see their historical alliances and commonalities; this is not new. In the post-TRC era we are also seeing leaps and bounds of progress on recognizing differences, as well as the notion of Reconciliation as an opportunity to call out and resist systemic racism, white privilege, neocolonial attitudes, and deficit thinking. These are not new either. This research suggests that no progress on any of the above can be made among anonymous individuals or between governments and communities. The colonization and genocide committed against the Indigenous peoples in this part of the world were made possible by removing the human element from individual relationships. To move forward, we must put it back.

Finally, we also offer, three general primary recommendations for future practice and inquiry, whether it is collaborative, community-based, or for independent academic requirements. The first is that privilege must be recognized more explicitly at all levels. This means adopting a clear anti-racist stance throughout education systems. This cannot simply be done by hoping that it is borne out in classroom teaching or through cultural inclusion efforts. Rather, it must be embedded in strategic planning and policy documents, professional development activities, curricula, and teacher education programs. The
second is that schools and boards should actively promote course-based intercultural dialogues. By recognizing and valuing the numerous curricular connections (presently over 100 specific P-12 curriculum outcomes across all subject areas in Nova Scotia are related to cultural diversity), real connections among students from different cultural contexts can be seen as an integral component of a 21st century education, rather than another contributor to ‘initiative overload’. Governments and First Nations can easily facilitate these initiatives, as seen in Quebec’s Harmony Project (Listuguj Mi’gnaq Government, 2014). Third, each researcher and practitioner must not only reflect deeply on his/her own identity before attempting to understand others, but must also be prepared for that identity to be revealed back to him/her in new ways as he/she builds relationships on the path to learning. This applies equally to students, teachers, administrators, politicians, and community members. Relationships are not built between large abstract groups, but between individuals. From a recorded afternoon conversation between students to a major economic consultation, individuals seeking to build trust and understanding through dialogue must always be prepared to celebrate the visceral humanity of real relationships.

This work is not about solving problems. It is about crossing borders, discarding fossilized attitudes, challenging dominant narratives, opening spaces for dialogue, building relationships, dismantling colonialism, and beginning the journey to reconciliation. We are hopeful that others, particularly Settler scholars, might see some new pathways here and that such sight might encourage them to also engage in this sort of relationship-based action research. More importantly, we are hopeful that Aboriginal scholars will see some familiar pathways here and that they will recognize our own genuine efforts towards reconciliation.

References


**Biographical note:**

Dr. **Robert Carreau** is a Lecturer in the Faculty of Education at St. Francis Xavier University.

Dr. **Daniel B. Robinson** is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at St. Francis Xavier University.