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\*Corresponding author: Grant Charles,  
Division of Adolescent Health and  
Medicine, Department of Pediatrics,  
University of British Columbia,  
Vancouver, BC, Canada  
E-mail: [grant.charles@ubc.ca](mailto:grant.charles@ubc.ca)

Reviewing editor:  
Susan Cox, University of British  
Columbia, Canada

Additional information is available at  
the end of the article

## CULTURE, MEDIA & FILM | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Toward a creative-critical approach to narratives of student-to-student abuse in Canada's Indian Residential School System

Grant Charles<sup>1\*</sup> and Glen Lowry<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** There is a dearth of research on student-to-student abuse in Canada's Indian Residential School System despite the fact that the legacy of this violence continues to negatively impact Indigenous communities. This paper proposes an approach to dealing with this difficult subject matter by using creative practice as a means of working collectively with community leaders, scholars, artists and students to develop shared understandings of the abuse and its continued legacy. This paper outlines the rationale for work in this area and the beginnings of the development of hybrid Indigenous and non-Indigenous methodology that brings survivors' stories to audiences through a series of collectively authored theatrical performances that promote understanding and dialog. This paper is of interest to scholars, artists, playwrights, community leaders, and front line social workers who are working to bridge academic research and community engagement, particularly as it relates to artistic practice.

**Subjects:** Social Work; Creative Arts & Expressive Therapies; Theatre & Performance Studies

**Keywords:** creative practice; Indian residential schools; peer-to-peer abuse; creative-critical approach

### 1. Introduction

In a 1992 statement to the Canadian Minister of Justice, Kim Campbell, Grand Chief Edward John likened "The effect of the Indian Residential School System" to "a disease ripping through our communities" (qtd in Milloy, 1999, p. 295). Taking up John's language, historian John Milloy contends that "this was not a rhetorical flourish: it was literally true" (p. 295). According to Milloy, the disease

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Grant Charles, PhD, is an associate professor in the School of Social Work and Affiliate Associate Professor with the Division of Adolescent Health and Medicine in the Department of Pediatrics at the University of British Columbia. He also holds an adjunct appointment with the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria.

Glen Lowry, PhD, is a professor and associate dean of Outreach and Innovation in the Faculty of Art at OCAD University. He is also an Affiliate Professor in the Faculty of Creative and Critical Studies at the University of British Columbia.

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

It is difficult to discuss issues of trauma and abuse especially if the incidents involved the historical harming of children and youth. Our article provides an overview of issues related to the abuse of Indigenous young people in Canada's Indian Residential School System. We explore why it is important to discuss these issues as well as proposing how this dialog can be used to promote cross cultural understanding. We outline how our team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, students and artists will be developing interactive theatrical performances to promote conversation and understanding.

of residential schools attacked and continues to attack the culture, spirituality, and health of many Indigenous communities and families in Canada:

the residential school experience in the north and in the south, like smallpox and tuberculosis in earlier decades, had decimated and continued to decimate communities. The schools were, with the agents and agencies of economic and political marginalization, part of the contagion of colonization. In their direct attack on language and spirituality, the schools had been a particularly virulent strain of that imperial epidemic sapping the children's bodies and beings. (Milloy, 1999, p. 295)

This attack on "children's bodies and beings" has given rise to a prolonged history of cultural genocide that must be addressed using concerted effort across sectors and social contexts. To this end, our emerging research project seeks to address and engage the legacies of the Indian Residential School System in relation to the subject of student-to-student violence. With the express goal of ameliorating the ravages of the contagion described by John and Milloy, our interdisciplinary team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars and artists seeks to investigate the inherent connections linking cultural production and research resulting in interactive theater productions.

Our research sets out to build a methodological approach that is capable of respectfully addressing the complex relationships suturing arts-based research to healing and social transformation. Seeking to substantively further reconciliation among Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada, this work recognizes direct links between Canada's Indian Residential School System, particularly the intergenerational effects of sexual abuse and lateral violence (Bombay, Matheson, & Anisman, 2014), and the health and well-being of Indigenous children and families. Our work brings creative practitioners (writers and artists) together with social scientists and students to develop a hybrid methodology that draws on links between cultural production and practical knowledge as well as Indigenous and non-Indigenous approaches. By broadening the capacity of our interdisciplinary team to bridge arts-based practice and scholarly research, we will develop an integrated approach to knowledge production and mobilization and in so doing provide the means to address difficult subject matter (student-to-student abuse) and affect positive social engagements (community-based healing).

To the extent that the subject of student-to-student abuse has yet to receive the attention it requires (Bombay et al., 2014; Charles, 2015; Charles & DeGagné, 2013), there is a need to create opportunities for discussion of a painful part of Canadian history and its aftermath in a manner that promotes active understanding, reconciliation and action. We situate our work alongside the Calls to Action released by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRCC) in June 2015. The TRCC's Final Report offers a partial, but no less vital blueprint to rethinking the role of culture in the production of knowledge. As the culmination of more than thirty years of activism, research and political leadership by First Nations, Metis and Inuit peoples, as evidenced by such as *Calder v. British Columbia*, the Constitution Act, 1982 (especially Section 35), the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, the Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, as well as by the efforts of national organizations such as the Native Indian Brotherhood/Assembly of First Nations, the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (AHF), and the National Aboriginal Health Organization, the TRCC's Calls to Action speak to growing awareness of links between the form and content of social justice thinking—the sites and impact of research, teaching and learning.

The Calls to Action are provocations that are designed to instill a sense of urgency in promoting understanding and reconciliation between and amongst Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities across Canada. While the Calls themselves tend to be vague, they highlight the need for First Nations, Metis, Inuit and non-Indigenous people to work together to effect meaningful change. The goals and methodology described in this paper enter the spaces extended by the TRCC and its ability to focus the attention of church and community leaders, politicians, bureaucrats, educators, researchers, cultural producers and others interested in furthering reconciliation in Canada. By

focusing on the under examined phenomena of student-to-student violence, our work hopes to provide insights and understanding about the nature of Canada's brutal residential school system and the continued impacts of its legacy in Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities throughout the country. Borrowing from the work of James Clifford (2013), our research attempts to provide depth to debates about colonialism and its malignant effects. This is a present-tense concern. As Clifford (2013) writes, "The challenge for ethnographer ([Raymond]) William's 'historical' realism is more than the task of creating multi-scaled, nonreductive accounts of changing social, cultural and economic formations. It also grapples with questions of pragmatic, sometimes utopic possibility" (p. 29). He argues that "Realism must be attuned to what is emerging, what exceeds the familiar" (Clifford, 2013, p. 29). By focusing on student-to-student abuse as a cultural phenomenon and approaching it through creative practice and collaboration, we seek to bridge the gap between scholarship and community as a means to promote reconciliation. Our research and methodology are designed to bridge understanding and social process in useful and pragmatic ways.

## 2. Context

The AHF was an independent Indigenous non-profit organization established in 1998. It was charged with encouraging and supporting community-based healing initiatives to deal with the legacy of the Indian Residential School System through research and funding contributions (see Spear, 2014). One of the last tasks started by the Foundation, prior to it being shut down by the Canadian government under Prime Minister Harper as part of its attack on national Indigenous capacity building organizations, was the holding of a three-day gathering of a small group of twenty elders, survivors, advocates, and researchers in Winnipeg in 2012 to discuss the issue of student-to-student abuse in the Indian Residential School System. This ground-breaking gathering was called at the request of survivors who felt the time had come to acknowledge and discuss that the widespread abuse that had taken place in the Schools did not just involve adult-to-child abuse but also child-to-child abuse. That this peer-to-peer abuse occurred was not a surprise to those who had an understanding of child abuse within historical institutions (see Charles, 2015), however it was not a widely accepted component of the narratives on the Indian Residential School System (Charles & DeGagné, 2013).

The topic has been long been considered taboo because the abusers and the abused often lived or currently live side by side as adults in their communities. It is also thought that in a number of cases individuals were both victims and perpetrators. Open acknowledgment had the potential to turn neighbors and family members against each other. It has taken a long time and a great deal of personal risk for people to talk about their abuse by staff in the schools. As Milloy (1999) suggests, it took many years and concerted efforts by survivors and their advocates to get the government to recognize sexual abuse as a general, defining aspect of residential schools. It is therefore not surprising that the topic of student-to-student abuse has yet to be studied in the depth it requires. The situation is exacerbated by the difficult nature of the subject matter. Discussing student-to-student abuse is a great deal riskier and potentially more threatening and damaging as it speaks to harm that occurred not by an adult oppressor but by peers who were in similar circumstances. Despite these challenges, people at the gathering spent three difficult days having frank and open discussions.

The participants at the gathering had the opportunity to share what they knew, attempt to explain what had happened and why and decide upon future action. By the end of the third day, it was acknowledged by the group that there was a great deal not known about the issue. There was consensus that addressing the issue of student-to-student abuse was critical as part of the healing process and that it needs to be brought into the light. Four of the people present at the gathering, each members of the current project team, were charged with three key tasks:

- (1) To develop a model to help people understand how the young people who had much in common could turn against each other;

- (2) to begin to examine how this dynamic contributes to historical and current lateral violence in Indigenous communities and;
- (3) to create a process whereby these issues could be discussed in and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities with a goal of contributing to cross-cultural understanding and reconciliation.

The first two tasks have been completed (Bombay et al., 2014; Charles & DeGagné, 2013). The third and most difficult task is being taken up under the auspices of the current project. This work has received federal funding through the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council to begin the process of working toward the development of a mechanism for cross-cultural understanding and reconciliation.

It is widely accepted that the Indian Residential School System served as the primary mechanism by which the Canadian government sought to oppress Indigenous people throughout the country. There was rampant physical, sexual, emotional, and spiritual abuse within the schools over extended periods of time. The AHF (Castellano, Archibald, & DeGagné, 2008; Mathur, Dewar, & DeGagné, 2011; Rogers, DeGagné, Dewar, & Lowry, 2013; Younging, Dewar, & DeGagné, 2011) and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission [TRC], (2015) have widely reported and well documented these stories in recent years. Alongside a growing body of literature, including important literary texts that deal explicitly with residential schools by Indigenous writers by Celia Haig-Brown (1988), Basil Johnston (1988), Isabelle Knockwood (1992), Thompson Highway (1998), Kevin Loring (2010), Richard Wagamese (2012) and there are also narratives by survivors which detail the prevalence of sexual violence and the devastating effects on individuals and their communities. The sharing of residential school experiences by survivors and their families along with the acknowledgment of the abuse by the federal government and the various religious denominations who ran the schools has contributed to the beginning of a healing process within Indigenous communities. However, despite their significance and influence, the stories that have been shared to date are reflective of only a part of what happened in the schools. What remains missing and is just now beginning to come to light is the abuse that took place between students in the schools. The exact rate of abuse is unknown and will likely never be determined but the fact that this abuse took place should not come as a surprise given the inhumane conditions and oppressive dynamics at play in the schools (Charles & DeGagné, 2013). While almost unimaginable to those of us who have not been in similar circumstances, the Indian Residential School System created near perfect environments for the turning of young people against each other in their struggle for survival.

It is critical to acknowledge that student-to-student abuse occurred not because of anything “bad” about the young people who hurt their peers but rather emerged out of the abnormal environments found in the Indian Residential School System. The schools were full of young people torn from their cultures and their spiritual foundations who had been removed from their homes and families and communities and forced to live in oppressive alien environments where they were subjected to regular harsh and frequently abusive behavior. This phenomenon needs to be better understood so as to contribute to the story of the Indian Residential School System and promote further healing. However, as mentioned little is known and less is understood about this form of abuse in the schools. As such we have had to borrow from a broader literature to begin to develop an understanding of the dynamics within the residential schools that contributed to the creation of conditions within which the student-to-student abuse occurred.

We do know that whenever groups of children are placed together in group living situations there is a strong possibility that some of these young people may abuse peers (Barter, 1997, 1999; Gallagher, 1999; Green & Masson, 2002; Kendrick, 1998; Morris, Wheatley, & Lees, 1994; Parkin & Green, 1997; Spencer & Knudsen, 1992). It appears that there are two primary processes operating within residential environments which contribute to the increased likelihood that some young people may abuse their peers. The first involves a de-culturation of individuals and the loss of self. The

second process is the modeling by staff and other adults of abusive and oppressive behaviors. The phrase “total institution” has been coined to describe an environment wherein it is demanded and expected that residents totally submit themselves to the people in charge (Goffman, 1961). The goal of a total institution is the creation within residents of a new world view dictated by the people in authority. This appears to have occurred within the schools (Charles & DeGagné, 2013).

The first process, de-culturation, occurs through the dehumanization of the residents in a total institution through any number of purposeful activities which serve to physically, socially, psychologically and spiritually disconnect the individuals from the world they lived in before they were admitted to the institution (Goffman, 1961). Physical and psychological barriers are created between how a person previously saw themselves and a new developing sense of them self. This begins by physically removing them from their home and communities and placing them in geographically isolated institutions often significant distances from where they lived. The process continues through the use of admission procedures that often include delousing, the replacement of familiar clothing with uniforms, the removal of any items or artifacts that are associated with the person’s previous sense of self-identification and the replacement of their name with a number. These were common occurrences within the residential schools (Charles & DeGagné, 2013).

In addition, the person is forced to eat food which is alien to them and to sleep in unfamiliar communal living arrangements (Goffman, 1961). The individual is also made to adhere to an unprecedented regimentation and control of their life which often includes dictating when they can talk and who they can talk to and when they can go to the bathroom. These processes serve as the means by which residents are physically and psychologically systematically stripped of a sense of who they were and how they traditionally interact with the world. Rather than being focused on their traditional sense of self and their sense of a future they are forced to being in the moment simply to survive. It is in this way the people become disconnected from their traditional sense of morality. Rather than thriving their goal simply becomes survival.

The development of this form of survival submission is promoted through the use of techniques that are intended to ultimately break the spirit of the residents (Charles & DeGagné, 2013). This process often involves the use of severe punishments meant to serve as a way of humbling and oppressing the residents (Goffman, 1961). This can take the form of bullying, emotional abuse or the use of seemingly random and unexpected beatings that are unrelated or out of proportion to anything the residents have done. This creates a sense within people that their physical integrity will not be protected as the environment is unpredictable and dangerous. These feelings of powerlessness and submission are further promoted by forcing residents to watch people they know be severely punished while ensuring that they cannot take any action to protect them. All of this further contributes to the loss of their previous sense of self and any impression that the people have any control or mastery over their environment. These processes were all commonly used in the schools (Charles & DeGagné, 2013).

The imposition of isolation and the use of harsh and unpredictable punishments further serves to disrupt normal relationships between residents (Goffman, 1961). It is next to impossible for people to support each other in adverse situations in total institutions because there is a purposeful pitting of residents against each other. People turn inward in order to take care of themselves and, as such, trust between people vanishes. Loyalty may occur between people but in dyads and triads. Residents fear the punishment that may occur if the authorities find out about any transgressions that they have committed and people soon learn that the more people who know a secret the less likely the secret will remain one. This dynamic of fear and mistrust contributes to the creation of barriers between residents who might otherwise in less oppressive environments be of support to each other. All of this leads to a survival self-focus. Others are seen only as a threat and the enemy which in turn leads to the dehumanizing of the other people in the minds of residents. This creates a survival morality that lays the foundation for student-to-student abuse.

The process of de-culturation also leads to a dehumanization of the self. This disconnects the residents from any strengths they may have had before admission to the school through their family and community relationships and the teachings of their elders. It was not unusual for residents to become active although unknowing players in their own dehumanization by becoming angry at the family members who didn't rescue them from the schools rather than at their oppressors. This anger further served to isolate them from the people whom would have been most likely to have supported them.

The modeling of abusive and oppressive behaviors by staff is the second part of the process of creating the conditions for peer-to-peer abuse (Barter, 1999; Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Hazlerr, Carney, Green, Powell, & Jolly, 1997; Jones, Bombieri, Livingstone, & Manstead, 2012; Morris et al., 1994; Parkin & Green, 1997; Richard, Schneider, & Mallet, 2011). Observing how powerful adults in their lives behave is one of the primary ways young people learn how to interact with their world. If the adults commit and condone acts of oppression and violence then young people learn that these types of behavior are permissible (Goldstein, 1986; Hazlerr et al., 1997; Monks et al., 2009; Morris et al., 1994). Young people in total institutions who are isolated from positive adult role models, such as family members and elders, who could moderate the influence of oppressive adults, are even more likely to internalize a world view that accepts violence as a "normal" way of interacting with others. Although not everyone who is exposed to violence and oppression will become violent and oppressive it appears to increase the likelihood of it happening (Bender, 2010; Dussich & Maekoya, 2007; Moffitt & Caspi, 2001) as we know that aggression begets aggression (Jones et al., 2012). This modeling of oppression was all the more powerful in the Indian Residential School System not just because of the harsh punishments given but also as a result of the widespread sexual and physical abuse many residents suffered at the hands of staff. Abuse was so pervasive in the schools that abusive behavior became normalized (Schaeffer, Leventhal, & Asnes, 2011). The residents were taught and learned to accept aggression as a legitimate way to interact with their peers (Monks et al., 2009). The modeling of violent, abusive behaviors by staff in an oppressive and dehumanizing total institution promoted the development of similar behaviors in some of the residents (Charles & DeGagné, 2013). Other residents had their susceptibility increased to becoming victims of abuse not just from the adults but also from other residents through the process of the loss of self which when combined with harsh treatment created a defenselessness, hopelessness and passivity (Gallagher, 1999; Grauerholz, 2000; Green & Masson, 2002; Lalor & McElvaney, 2010).

Many of the residents who left the schools upon "graduation" had been stripped of any sense of who they were. They had also lost the opportunity to develop the expected strength they could have had by being members of vibrant, strong cultures. Any previous sense of who they were had been replaced by feelings of self and cultural loathing. They had also been taught that the best way to interact with others was through aggressive and abusive relationships or through submission. Once they left the schools the young people took their vulnerability to abuse and their susceptibility to aggressive behaviors home with them where they began to replicate in their own communities the same kinds of relationships they had in the residential schools. There are many tales of resistance and resilience amongst young people at the schools and later as adults in their communities although it is also evident that many young people were severely traumatized by their experiences in the schools (Rogers et al., 2013).

Many of the young people who internalized their abusive experiences in the schools contributed to the development of intergenerational abuse and lateral violence within their families and communities. When the returning residents interacted with their younger peers and siblings and eventually with their own children who would attend the schools they were strongly influenced in their relationships by their own internalized sense of vulnerability and/or aggression. As a result, large numbers of young people began to experience harsh or abusive relationships even before attending the schools. This made them even more vulnerable to the dehumanizing behavior and forces of oppression once they attended the schools. They had been in many cases "primed" to a higher likelihood of being abused as well as to being aggressive or abusive to other residents. Over time this cumulative

intergenerational cycle of abuse fed upon itself and resulted in chronic and widespread forms of lateral violence whereby the people who had been oppressed turned against each other using verbal and physical abuse to strike out against each other. One manifestation of this lateral violence was when students turned against each other in the Indian Residential School System. This has had long lasting consequences that are still being experienced by Indigenous peoples. This cycle, one that we wish to learn how to break, is the focus of the project being described in this paper.

### 3. Methodology

Our research about student-to-student abuse in the Indian Residential School System is rooted in witnessing and a responsibility for understanding and sharing knowledge about the effects of this form of abuse. It involves the analysis of 472 existing survivor transcripts recorded by the AHF. The survivors gave permission prior to the interviews for their words to be used to help others understand what had happened in their lives. Subsequently, the four project team members who were at the Winnipeg gathering were personally charged with ensuring that the difficult knowledge of this form of lateral violence is well understood and cautiously and respectfully mobilized. Given the highly sensitive nature of the topic all identifying information has been removed from the transcripts. To further protect the identity of the survivors, composite stories will be developed from the themes identified during the analysis of the transcripts so that nothing can be directly linked to any one transcript. By linking Indigenous social science and performance arts students with an experienced team of researchers and community leaders, we will develop shared interpretations and *in situ* performances of this vital cultural knowledge.

A yet undetermined number of performances will be staged at partner university campuses and in a number of community locations. This will include theater and potential other types of performances. The settings will be chosen in consultation with local Indigenous communities and organizations. Respecting Indigenous knowledge stewardship (in relation to the data and analysis) and intergenerational exchange (Clark et al., 2010; Wilson, 2008), our collective work hinges on finding ways to get people “all looking the same way”. This project’s hybrid, mixed methodology is designed to increase understanding of how to move forward an agenda of reconciliation by bringing creative-practitioners (writers and performers) along with academic researchers into dialog with community members. Indigenous student performing artists supported by highly experienced creative practitioners will present to audiences a series of performances using the composite stories of the experiences of the survivors which will in turn be used as beginning points for dialog between the audience, the performers and the rest of team on issues related to the impact of the abuse, lateral violence and reconciliation. The creative artists will be identified by the project team members who have deep contacts in the Indigenous performance community.

Indigenous undergraduate and graduate student researchers and actors hired from a range of disciplines from the project partner universities will be engaged in this process from the beginning so that they can develop research and creative practice expertise that can be passed on to their communities. Casting younger actors in the role of the school students will allow audiences to hear the words of the survivors through the mouths of people who are close to the age at which the individuals experienced peer violence.

There will be a wide variation in the training, expertise and experiences of members of the project team. This will mean that a great deal of attention and time will need to be allocated to the dynamics of the research and the performances given the collective nature of the endeavor. It will be critical to the success of the project that we move forward together as a team while also honoring what each member will bring to the project.

Given the stories of trauma that will be at the core of the research and performances, it is important that the proper levels of support be offered both through the research and script development phases of the project as well as during the performances themselves. It will be made clear with students before they are hired that the project involves difficult content that may be upsetting to

people. However, that is the nature of this type of research and performance. Emotional, psychological and spiritual support will be provided to all of the team members by elders and senior members of the project team throughout the process to assist them with any struggles they may have as a result of the content area. Prior to commencing the reading and the analysis, team members will also receive specific training on the possible personal costs associated with bearing witness to accounts of human suffering (Naef, 2006; Salgado, 2017).

People need to make informed decisions about their participation but cannot be protected from the content (de Waal, 2015; Duggan, 2007). Audience members will also be informed of the potentially upsetting content prior to the commencement of each performance. Support will be provided at the performances to audience members if required by senior members of the project team who have expertise in this area. This may include connecting people with other additional supports if needed. The specific types of support will be geared to the needs of and location of the audiences. Indeed, it is the unsettling nature of the topic area that makes it suited for a creative performance approach to reconciliation of this nature (Eriksson, 2011).

Theater has been chosen because it has been shown to be a vehicle that can address difficult topics through a process of distancing during the performances (de Waal, 2015; Duggan, 2007). Distance in this sense involves developing a political and social awareness of the issues at play through a process of activating reflection amongst participants. This process is facilitated by bringing the narrative to a halt at various points during the performance at which time a bi-directional discussion will occur between the performers, the audience and, in this case, the researchers (Eriksson, 2011). This process allows for the group construction of knowledge (Heathcote & Herbert, 1985). We believe is a critical step in the development not just of understanding but also the movement to action that is needed in the reconciliation process.

The performances are to be seen as an avenue to promote an understanding of the abuse and the continuing consequences of it in Indigenous communities and through them to the larger society. The performances will give voice to a topic area that has not been widely discussed in Indigenous or non-Indigenous people. The performances in this sense lay the foundation for reconciliation not just between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people but also between Indigenous people.

This process of reconciliation as it applies to this project will result from the staging of the performances in an interactive way that will involve dialog between the researchers, performers and the audience. This dialog will involve a discussion of the content and the subsequent reactions to the performances. As importantly the audience will be asked to identify ways in which the knowledge acquired from the experience of being at the performances can contribute to the process of reconciliation. The dialogs and audience recommendations will be recorded. The collective will decide during the script development phase whether the dialog will use a standard discussion or a talk back in-role format as described by Prendergast (2010).

The dialog will be subsequently analyzed to further our understanding of how the impact of the stories and how what people have experienced can be used for promoting reconciliation within Indigenous communities and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. The project will also offer an excellent opportunity to work through the relationships between social scientific data collections, social impact and collective meaning making.

Respecting the value of non-academic, Indigenous knowledge holders and the multiple stakeholders brought together around this extensive archive, our project functions through an understanding of data/narratives as cultural objects that are already invested with social value and complex systems of ownership. This is not a cross-cultural study. It does not feature non-Indigenous academics unilaterally developing an Indigenous focus. Instead, it is the extension of a protracted sharing of ideas and information, knowledge that was generated outside academic contexts and which must remain accessible to Indigenous communities. Tahltan performance artist Peter Morin



reminds us that this type of commitment “requires vigilance, vigilance against the silencing of Indigenous voice. It requires self-awareness (2016, p. 12).” As Morin and others suggest, this “self-awareness” is deeply embedded in social context: “The difficult task is finding actions to activate this space where Indigenous knowledge meets settler ways of being. They are bodies of knowledge that mingle and impact each other (p. 71)”. Thus, our hybrid, practice-based methodology is designed from a decolonizing perspective (Hall et al., 2015; Latulippe, 2015) that is vigilant to hegemonic institutionalization and seeks to make space for dialog and embodied understandings of student-to-student abuse

Margaret Kovach (2010) suggests that in order to right colonial history in Canada, academics need to carefully consider ways to trouble the relationship between culture and research. We propose an event-based approach (Morin, 2016) that relies heavily on witnessing Indigenous knowledge and knowledge keepers and involves honoring relationships and maintaining a link between oral testimony to written document. As suggested, witnessing goes beyond passive listening to call forth active social engagements. By Indigenizing research protocols and academic contexts (Findlay, 2000; Gaertner, 2016; Kovach, 2010; Mihesuah & Wilson, 2004), our research seeks to provide opportunities for Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to engage collaboratively in a decolonizing project (Davis, 2010; Lutz, 2008; Regan, 2010) by providing team members an opportunity to work in a non-hierarchical collective environment that factors active engagement and discussion between Indigenous and non-Indigenous community members and members of the team. The collective nature of the project will serve to destabilize the traditional academic development and distribution of new knowledge by challenging the traditional institution power structure evident in many research projects. Given that we are challenging mainstream views on the nature of the abuse within the residential schools as being only between adults in positions of authority and students, it makes sense that we should also challenge how power is distributed in mainstream research.

A key component of the project is the use of storytelling and creative practice processes that are respectful of individuals and communities. This is a critical foundation within an Indigenous research framework (Archibald, 1997). Because of their emphasis upon relationship, connection and community capacity building, art-based methods are particularly promising in relation to Indigenous healing, reconciliation, and the impacts of intergenerational violence. Recent studies of the intersections of scholarly research and creative performance within theater studies and education provide a useful basis with which to outline an approach to bridging data analysis and creative practice (Belliveau, 2015; Lea, 2012; Lea, Belliveau, Wager, & Beck, 2011). Lea (2012) suggests that, rather than using the typical Western model that focuses on the efforts of an individual author to incorporate research data into a single script, another approach is to work as a collective that allows for a group to collaboratively interpret data and co-author performance. This is an important distinction and the nature of this project makes the collective approach preferable. The social significance of our data-set and direct relevance to Indigenous communities make us cautious about individual authorship and we prefer instead to work toward shared interpretation. Our focus on dialog and community health and capacity lends itself to creative-practice that are aligned with this collective approach (Parsons & Boydell, 2012).

It is not possible to currently describe the final hybrid methodology that we will use as the development of it will be dependent upon the collective work of the team as the project moves forward. However, it will involve an attempt to blend Indigenous story-telling (Archibald, 1997) and non-Indigenous narrative approaches (Leggo, 2008). There is a similarity between Indigenous story-telling and Non-Indigenous narrative approaches in that both are meant to capture the essence of a human happening as described by the people who are involved in the experience (Archibald, 1997; Sandelowski, 1991). Both serve to encourage people to develop a common understanding of a human experience. However, Indigenous story-telling is more than a methodology in that it is always more than a personal narrative and serves to “bind communities together spiritually and relationally” (Sium & Ritskes, 2013, p. v). This difference may make it difficult to blend the two approaches. It may be that as we try to bring these two approaches together it may be best for us to initially use

a parallel process where the data from the transcripts is analyzed and developed into performance scripts independently using an Indigenous and a non-Indigenous methodology and then comparing the results of the analysis. If the results are similar then we will collectively work as the full collective to develop the scripts. If they differ then we will develop parallel scripts and stage two sets of performances to see how each contributes to the furthering of understanding and discussion. It may be that the scripts generated by parallel processes may resonate with different audiences. In either case the final methodology used by the team will contribute to our understanding of the differences and similarities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of understanding.

Our hybrid approach will provide findings germane to discussions about ending lateral violence in Canada and potentially in many other countries. It will also enhance this study's knowledge translation and mobilization capacities by providing innovative opportunities for community involvement and engagements. In this sense, this study is clearly situated in the burgeoning field of creative practice-led research that brings together academic practitioners from the fields of theater, contemporary art and literary practice (Belliveau, 2015; Kester, 2004, 2011; Lacy, 1995; Lea, 2012; Purves, 2005; Thompson, 2012). More than this we will look at how art-based methods might move beyond knowledge translation and simply supporting the prioritization of academic research. By bringing student performance artists and creative practitioners who may have little or no research expertise into the project and involving them in discussion around data coding and analysis, we seek to develop an emergent, qualitative approach and to build research capacity amongst Indigenous students, artists and ultimately community members. Rather than seeing culture and creative practice as extrinsic to scholarly investigation, the team is committed to working across both disciplinary and social divisions to challenge the conventions of social science research and academic scholarship. It will add to an emergent literature around creative-practice research and methodologies particularly in relation to responding to the legacies of residential schools (Dewar & Goto, 2012; Wilson, 2008).

#### 4. Discussion

This program of research by a team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars and Indigenous students, collaborators and artists will help address a significant gap in our knowledge about the impact of the residential schools upon individuals, families and communities across multiple generations. This will be the first in-depth analysis of survivor accounts regarding student-to-student abuse. As such, the program of research will enhance knowledge and theories about how this type of abuse has contributed to the development of lateral violence in communities. We will also study the processes by which communities engage with difficult knowledge: the history and continued impact of lateral violence. To this end, the project will increase understanding of how creative practice can be integrated in scholarly investigation, especially in the context of Indigenous justice and reconciliation. Creative practice is an underexplored method of reconciliation facilitation. New understanding in this area can be used in the manner it was developed as well as a foundational stepping-stone for further innovation in this area.

Likewise, the findings of this research will also help us understand how creative practices (e.g. theater and storytelling) can contribute to the health and well-being of survivors, intergenerational survivors and Indigenous communities as a whole. While this project is specific to a particular form of trauma, we believe the findings on the use of creative practice will be of use to a broader audience in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities when dealing with other forms of traumatization and other types of hard-to-discuss topics. Findings will enhance understanding of how cross-disciplinary collaboration can contribute to the development of reconciliation dialog and point to cross-disciplinary collaboration as a process capable of reaching across institutional and social contexts to engage broad groups of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. This research will also be helpful to the development of processes for other areas of intra and intercultural understanding.

We believe this project will help to enhance public discourse about the historical and ongoing impact of the residential schools. This will add to the understandings of Indigenous and

non-Indigenous people about the dynamics of the schools and resulting impact upon Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in ways that contribute to on-going reconciliation. We hope that the application of the research findings by practitioners will contribute to the development of innovative healing and capacity-building approaches to lateral violence for the benefit of individuals, families, and communities.

## 5. Conclusion

There remain significant Indian Residential School stories that have not been heard, let alone discussed. This is not surprising given the difficulty of sharing stories that challenge the simplistic interpretations we often make of complex situations. Despite knowing that people in oppressive environments often turn against each other both as an expression of their own pain and as a means of survival, this component of the Indian Residential School System experience requires widespread attention, and more to the point, careful consideration. The subject matter that forms the basis of our research requires complex narratives that move beyond pitting an archetypal villain against helpless victims. Needed are nuanced tellings (and listenings)—witnessing—capable of responding to the ritualized, government-funded and church-supported violence that became characteristic of Canada’s Indian Residential School System. These shared narratives, if handled well, might begin to address the fluid, evolving nature of the trauma and resistance that continues to play out across the life course of so many people in and around Indigenous communities. Healing and reconciliation will not truly take hold until we, the vexed cross-cultural subject, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, are able to find the time and place to share heart-rending narratives and for the broader story of residential schools to be told and heard. This will require difficult discussions and a willingness to accept what happened on grounded human basis rather than a binary idealization of what happens when humans oppress humans.

We believe that creative practice—innovative approaches to storytelling and to social engagement—might provide a platform from which launch the level and quality of dialog that will be needed to bridge the generational and cultural divides that can separate people when we discuss topics that are difficult to accept and understand. By acknowledging the difficulty of discussing what most of us would rather ignore and through a process of respecting Indigenous knowledge stewardship our collective work hinges on finding ways through intergenerational and intergenerational exchange to get people “all looking the same way” thus creating a collaborative process of reconciliation that is more than just words and moves people to action. These stories shared and given voice *in situ*, we hope, will help work toward a cure for the “disease” Grand Chief Edward John saw “ripping through [his] communities.”

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### Author details

Grant Charles<sup>1</sup>

E-mail: [grant.charles@ubc.ca](mailto:grant.charles@ubc.ca)

ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6781-3140>

Glen Lowry<sup>2</sup>

E-mail: [glen.lowry@gmail.com](mailto:glen.lowry@gmail.com)

<sup>1</sup> Division of Adolescent Health and Medicine, Department of Pediatrics, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada.

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Art, OCAD University, Toronto, ON, Canada.

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