

An occupational therapy program lays a foundation for Indigenous partnerships and topics

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The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) outlines calls to action for health care professionals and educational programs to engage in reconciliation and to meet the needs of Indigenous communities. The three salient calls for an occupational therapy program are the recruitment and admissions of the inclusion of Indigenous healing practices within the curriculum (#22), recruitment and retention of Indigenous applications (#23), and the acquisition of a critical understanding of rights and anti-oppressive practices (#24) (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

In 2017, McGill University's Occupational Therapy Curriculum Committee prioritized the determination of current evidence and competencies to provide recommendations for developing Indigenous partnerships and topics within the program. This paper's first author, Hiba Zafran, led a mixed-methods appraisal of capacity. This work included consulting relevant communities and building partnerships, reviewing the literature, and mapping local resources. From this work, a report was created about current curricular content and gaps, alignment and concerns in pedagogies, faculty development initiatives, and reflections on informal and hidden curricula to identify recommendations that could lay a foundation for a culturally safe program. As we implement curricular content in 2018–2019, we continue to grapple with the fact that responding to the TRC is so much more than the inclusion of Indigenous health as a topic.

Recent work examining the efforts of Canadian universities has identified three approaches to meeting the TRC calls to action: (1) Indigenous inclusion, based on broad equity principles to simply increase the number of Indigenous students, faculty members, and topics; (2) reconciliation indigenization, focused on establishing power-sharing relationships and acting on shared interests between Indigenous communities and Canadian universities; and (3) decolonization of education, critically reorienting academic processes and structures to truly learn from and with Indigenous paradigms in line with treaty rights (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018). Inclusion, when not done in a critically conscious manner, runs the risk of becoming a metaphor for inviting and hosting guests at one's home, with invitations being conditional on guests behaving in ways that the host sanctions (Ahmed, 2012). Reconciliation, and the process to achieve it, is going to mean something different dependent on one's positionality and the perceived stakes.

An occupational therapy program must navigate ethical decisions around processes and outcomes for moving beyond inclusion to connect with Indigenous communities and co-create what engaging in reconciliation could mean, and how it deepens occupational justice. With this in mind, our report included seven recommendations based on a critical thematic analysis of the perspectives and experiences of the participants and partners in the process of appraisal. These recommendations are contextualized and justified by policies and various forms of evidence, and are drawn from the range of inclusion, reconciliation, and decolonization principles. Examples of proposed actions for each recommendation are described as follows:

1) Identify and implement curricular content that is socially accountable and promotes justice

"We are concerned that our professional silence makes us complicit in upholding colonial structures and relationships ... that perpetuate the marginalization and oppression of Indigenous [P]eoples." (Restall, Gerlach, Valavaara, & Phenix, 2016, p. 264)

To be able to address health inequities in Indigenous populations, student occupational therapists require a core knowledge of colonial history and the current structures that maintain inequities. If we are to implement content that promotes students' abilities in this area, we must foster a critical socio-historical analysis of occupational models and issues. This content needs to legitimize a "two-eyed seeing" approach, which Mi'kmaq Elders Albert and Murdena Marshall of Cape Breton University defined as referring to a collaborative approach to problem solving that draws on both Indigenous and Western knowledge (CIHR, 2014).

2) Cultivate the guiding principles of cultural safety within the curriculum and school

"Strong communities are born out of individuals being their best selves." (Simpson, 2014, para. 14)

Cultural safety requires going beyond an understanding of Indigenous colonial histories and moving towards questioning one's own power and positionalities within current structures that maintain inequities (Gerlach, 2012). Setting cross-curricular learning objectives and evaluation approaches for critical reflexivity, cultural safety, and political reasoning is a central task that draws on multiple frameworks, notably anti-oppression (Hojjati et al., 2018).

3) Prioritize hiring and working with Indigenous Knowledge Keepers, educators and health care professionals

“I’m doing this work off the side of my desk.” ~ Statement reiterated by Indigenous educators, occupational therapists, and scholars to the first author

As other occupational therapy programs develop their own content, there needs to be dedicated resources for the development of Indigenous partnerships and topics, as well as for hiring Indigenous educators and Elders in an equitable manner.

4) Promote pedagogies that support storytelling, Indigenous ways of knowing, and transformative learning

“I had to shift the way I think ... I had to stop looking for problems ... I should be looking for stories and to build relationships, otherwise why would they tell me anything?” (amalgam of McGill student occupational therapist quotations following fieldwork in Cree territories)

We need to incorporate pedagogies aligned with Indigenous ways of knowing, prioritizing knowledge creation and sharing that relies on personal experience, on interconnectedness with nature, and on storytelling that is mindful of context, ritual, and ceremony (Battiste, 2012). Knowledge transmission occurs within a framework of values that honour reciprocity, generosity, gratitude, and community in learning (Cajete, 1994). Therefore, the process of learning enacts the content and objectives of learning, with experimental pedagogies that go beyond the cognitive-rational mind to holistic learning (Andreotti, Ahenakew, & Cooper, 2011), and leading to a fundamental shift towards relationship-centred, story- and land-based learning.

5) Enhance faculty members’ critical consciousness in teaching and research

“Until we begin to examine our own culture, we won’t get far with cultural safety.” (McGill occupational therapy faculty member; quotation provided with permission)

The vulnerability of questioning each one’s worldview may come with the fear of losing one’s ground. This fear might be in relation to the critique of occupational therapy philosophies,

or to the reworking of pedagogies or even personal value systems. It is easy to get defensive or resistant (DiAngelo, 2011). As educators, we need to feel safe enough—to have the time, supports, and prioritization by leadership—in order to both learn about and engage with Indigenous communities.

6) Ensure that admissions are equitable and accessible for prospective Indigenous learners

Call to Action 23i: Increase the number of Aboriginal professionals working in the health-care field. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada)

Equity in recruitment and admissions is a priority in order to increase the number of Indigenous health care professionals. Since 2016, McGill University’s Occupational Therapy program has had two seats designated for Indigenous students with a prior undergraduate degree, yet these seats are not consistently filled. This strategy of designating seats may not be the optimal entry point to support the recruitment of Indigenous-identified students in our context. Socially responsive processes for recruitment and admissions are necessary.

7) Commit to socially accountable and reciprocal partnerships with Indigenous stakeholders, communities, and organizations

“Let Teionkwaienawa:kon ‘working together’ be our guiding principle.” Quebec Indigenous Mentorship Network (QIMN, 2019)

Given the historical and ongoing traumas and mistrust between Indigenous communities and academic and health care institutions, reconciliation cannot happen without building long-term relationships characterized by commitment, respect, and reciprocity. The long view is needed to engage with Indigenous communities in a culturally sensitive, reciprocal, and ethical manner.

By critically engaging in reconciliation efforts and learning with the Cree, Kanien’kehà:ka, Inuit, Algonquin, Anishinabeg, Mi’kmaq, and other First Peoples in Quebec, McGill University’s Occupational Therapy program hopes to become a model of how cultural safety and occupational rights and justice are taught to future practitioners, as well as how these values can be enacted within a program.

About the authors

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The authors work at McGill University, which is located on the unceded lands cared for by the Kanien’kehà:ka and have long served as a site of meeting and exchange amongst Indigenous Peoples, including the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and Anishinabeg nations.

In line with the ethos of collective and accessible knowledge, the complete report is available for consultation by contacting: hiba.zafran@mcgill.ca.

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