

# RESEARCH REPORT

March 2022

Just because we're small  
Doesn't mean we can't stand tall

## Reconciliation Education in the Elementary Classroom

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“Caring is not enough. It doesn’t do anything to make things right.  
It’s a starting point. The real test is what you do.”

—*Cindy Blackstock*

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## SECTION 1 | INTRODUCTION

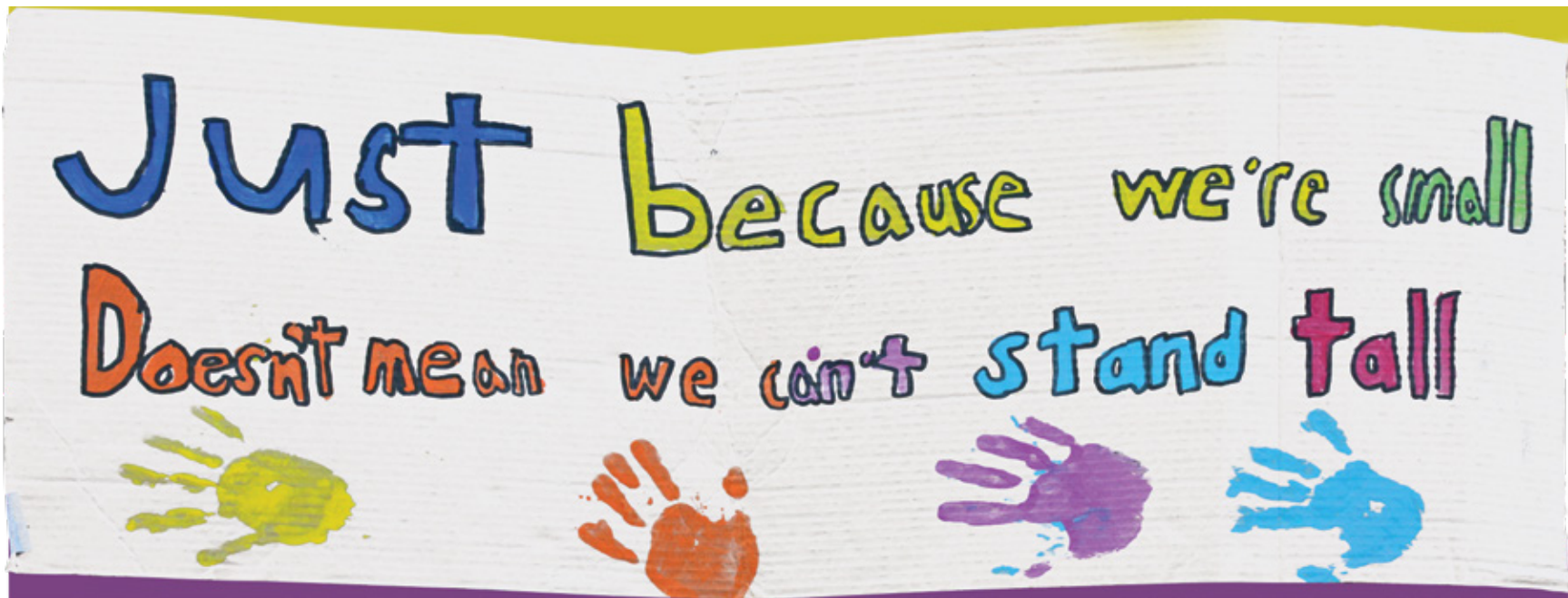


*Students on Parliament Hill at Have a Heart Day.*

### **A Snowy Day on Parliament Hill**

On February 14, 2012, the section of Wellington Street directly in front of Parliament Hill was filled with yellow school buses that stopped to let off the children and their teachers who were aboard. As the bus doors opened, children of all ages and backgrounds hopped off onto the snowy sidewalks, carrying colourful homemade signs and wearing

buttons and fabric hearts pinned to their jackets. They excitedly walked towards the steps of Parliament to join the hundreds of other students, teachers, and community members who had come to participate in the First annual Have a Heart Day event, one of many First Nations Child and Family Caring Society (Caring Society) reconciliation-based education campaigns. Many of the children chanted, "Equal education for First Nations!" and read speeches they'd written as the peace tower



*A sign made by students.*

bells rang out behind them. Others sang songs they'd penned, and hundreds mailed letters they'd written to then Prime Minister Stephen Harper calling on him to treat all children in Canada with love and fairness. The children's many hand-crafted signs expressed how they felt: "Respect First Nations Children"; "Fight for Equal Rights!"; "Treat First Nations Children Fairly, Please!" Another of the signs that the children held that day stated: "Just because we're small doesn't mean we can't stand tall!" The blue, pink, and yellow bubble letters that those words were written in made their message clear: the children were not going away until the discrimination ended.

Indeed, since that February day in 2012, the children have not gone away. They have grown, as children do, and many are now engaged in the Caring Society Campaigns as young adults. They've seen how taking action to do what's right has the power to make change. They know their voices have power because many of them were watching in the galleries of the House of Commons on the evening when [Shannen's Dream](https://fncaringociety.com/shannens-dream),<sup>1</sup> the campaign for equal education for First Nations, was unanimously passed (House of Commons, 2012). And many of those same children celebrated when, on January 26, 2016, the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal (CHRT 2, 2016) ruled that the Government of Canada was guilty of racial discrimination against First

<sup>1</sup> <https://fncaringociety.com/shannens-dream>



Nations children and ordered immediate remediation and compliance with its issued orders (Caring Society, 2016a). The children and youth have also seen that *standing* tall means *staying* standing. In the years since the CHRT ruling, there have been [20 non-compliance orders](https://fncaringsociety.com/chrt-orders)<sup>2</sup> issued and several rounds of litigation, and despite the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission \(TRC\) Calls to Action](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/british-columbians-our-governments/indigenous-people/aboriginal-peoples-documents/calls_to_action_english2.pdf)<sup>3</sup> directed towards education, many children and youth continue to learn *about* First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples rather than *with them* or *from them* (Donald, 2020).

### **The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada**

In order to more fully understand how we can learn *with* First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples while addressing the TRC's *Calls to Action* on education, this research project studies the impact of the Caring Society's reconciliation-education campaigns on elementary teachers and students who have actively participated over the years to ensure equity for First Nations children.

The [final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission](https://nctr.ca/records/reports/#trc-reports)<sup>4</sup> (TRC, 2015) emphasized that the transformation of our educational systems is key to achieving reconciliation, the ultimate object of which “must be to transform our country and restore mutual respect between peoples and nations” (p. 19). To this end, they called for the development and implementation, “in consultation and collaboration with Survivors, Aboriginal peoples, and educators,” of age-appropriate curriculum and learning resources on the history and legacy of residential schools, Treaties, and the historical and contemporary contributions of Aboriginal peoples for kindergarten to Grade 12 (TRC, 2015, p. 235). In

2 <https://fncaringsociety.com/chrt-orders>

3 [https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/british-columbians-our-governments/indigenous-people/aboriginal-peoples-documents/calls\\_to\\_action\\_english2.pdf](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/british-columbians-our-governments/indigenous-people/aboriginal-peoples-documents/calls_to_action_english2.pdf)

4 <https://nctr.ca/records/reports/#trc-reports>



A sign made by students.

addition, the TRC called for a commitment toward “[b]uilding student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect” while “[i]dentifying teacher training needs” and “[s]haring information and best practices” on reconciliation education (TRC, 2015, p. 235). Social justice-based reconciliation education, therefore, is not solely about educating, but rather has an end goal of action and change.

Inspired by the TRC’s *Calls to Action* on education, ministries of education, teacher education programs, school boards and teachers’ associations across Canada have designed and implemented new curriculum, courses and materials to achieve some of the *Calls to Action*. These efforts build on the teaching and learning that many Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators, students, and non-profit organizations have been engaged in for over 10 years (Smith, 2017; Howell, 2017; Alaca, Anglin & Thomas, 2015). Despite these efforts, some educators report that they do not have the skills, knowledge, or resources to teach about residential schools and reconciliation (Sterritt, 2017; Milne, 2017; CTF, 2013). Moreover, there has been very little research on the *impacts* of reconciliation education on First Nations, Inuit, Métis and non-Indigenous students, especially at the elementary level. Also, there is scant research on whether or not current resources and practices facilitate the “respectful learning environments” required for the transformational shifts the TRC calls for in order to “restore mutual respect between peoples and nations” (TRC, 2015, p. 19; Milne, 2017). The unprecedented participation of elementary teachers and students in Caring Society campaigns, as described above, offers a unique opportunity to advance knowledge about the impacts of social-justice based reconciliation education on children and provide evidence-based research about how we can best move forward to foster mutual respect and build capacity for empathy and intercultural understanding within classrooms as early as possible.

## SECTION 2 | ABOUT THE RESEARCH PROJECT

### **Research Intentions**

To begin remedying this dearth of knowledge and resources, our project is studying the impacts of the reconciliation-based education campaigns run by the Caring Society on elementary educators and students. Moreover, we wish to support learning that will encourage actions that lead to social justice. The Caring Society is at the forefront of actively engaging educators and children in reconciliation to ensure equity for First Nations children (Caring Society, 2016b; Alaca, Anglin & Thomas, 2015). The Caring Society's campaigns focus on social justice reconciliation education that leads to actions to end inequities and discrimination towards First Nations children in child welfare, education, and access to services.

### **Research Questions**

Our research has been guided by the following questions:

1. How do teachers currently use the Caring Society's campaigns in elementary classrooms?
2. How do educators perceive the effects of the campaigns on elementary students and their teachers? Do the campaigns promote child wellbeing and academic success whilst "[b]uilding student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect" (TRC, 2015, p. 235)? If not, what needs to change?
3. What can current use of the campaigns, and their effects on elementary students and teachers, tell us about best practices for reconciliation education moving forward?

### **Caring Society Campaigns**

While the Caring Society puts forth several campaigns, our research focuses on three of its campaigns: (1) *I am a Witness*,<sup>5</sup> (2) *Jordan's Principle*,<sup>6</sup> and (3) *Shannen's Dream*,<sup>7</sup> which we describe in detail below. Understanding the intentions of the campaigns is important to contextualize this research.



*A student remembers "Le rêve de Shannen/Shannen's Dream."*

<sup>5</sup> <https://fncaringsociety.com/i-am-witness>

<sup>6</sup> <https://fncaringsociety.com/jordans-principle>

<sup>7</sup> <https://fncaringsociety.com/shannens-dream>



The **Jordan's Principle**<sup>8</sup> campaign invites people to learn about the life of Jordan River Anderson and this child-first principle to ensure First Nations children get the services they need when they need them. Jordan was from Norway House Cree Nation and was born in 1999 with complex medical needs. He died in the hospital in 2005, never having spent a day in his family home due to payment disputes within and between the federal and provincial governments over who would pay for his home care services. **I am a Witness**<sup>9</sup> invites people to learn about the case before the CHRT on discrimination in First Nations children's services, which was filed in 2007 by the Caring Society and the Assembly of First Nations. On January 26, 2016, the CHRT found that Canada discriminates against First Nations children in its provision of the First Nations Child and Family Services Program and by failing to implement **Jordan's Principle**<sup>10</sup> (2016 CHRT 2<sup>11</sup>). Jordan's Principle aims to make sure First Nations children can access all public services in a way that is reflective of their distinct cultural needs, takes full account of the historical disadvantage linked to colonization, and without experiencing any service denials, delays, or disruptions because they are First Nations. The **I am a witness**<sup>12</sup> and **Jordan's Principle**<sup>13</sup> campaigns afford people an opportunity to see the discrimination that First Nations children and families experience and take actions to end inequity through bearing witness to court proceedings, participating in marches, and through writing letters to politicians. By 2012, so many students and teachers attended the CHRT hearings that the legal proceedings had to be moved to the largest court room in Ottawa.

8 <https://fncaringsociety.com/jordans-principle>

9 <https://fncaringsociety.com/i-am-witness>

10 <https://fncaringsociety.com/jordans-principle>

11 <https://fncaringsociety.com/publications/2016-chrt-2-2016-tcdp-2>

12 <https://fncaringsociety.com/i-am-witness>

13 <https://fncaringsociety.com/jordans-principle>



*Students on Parliament Hill at the first Have a Heart Day, February 14, 2012.*

Students and teachers continued to follow the case well after the 2016 decision, understanding that the success of the full implementation of the CHRT order promises to contribute toward the alleviation of the discrimination for First Nations children, youth and families.

**Shannen's Dream**<sup>14</sup> is a campaign building on the activism of Shannen Koostachin, a 15-year-old girl from Attawapiskat First Nation, in Treaty 9 territory, who called on Ottawa to build a proper school in her community to replace one that sat on a toxic waste dump. She also wanted other First Nations children to have what she called "safe and comfy" schools and a proper education so they could have the chance to live their dreams (First Nations Child and family Caring Society, 2020, p. 2). In 2008, Shannen and other Attawapiskat students launched the "Attawapiskat School Campaign." Shannen documented the condition of the school in Attawapiskat and invited other students

14 <https://fncaringsociety.com/shannens-dream>

across Canada to write letters to the federal government to get action. Shannen and the other children were upset by the federal government's failure to act and went on to recruit thousands of students and teachers to the movement to increase public pressure. Shannen's leadership resulted in thousands of children writing letters to elected officials to demand proper schools and education for First Nations students. Her example culminated in her nomination for the International Children's Peace Prize in 2008.

When Shannen tragically died in a car accident in 2010, the children she inspired created [Shannen's Dream](https://fncaringsociety.com/shannens-dream),<sup>15</sup> vowing to continue her work so that all First Nations children received a proper education. Shannen and the children's efforts paid off. A new school opened in Attawapiskat in 2014, but many other First Nations are without proper schools, so the campaign continues (Blackstock, 2019). The [I am a Witness](https://fncaringsociety.com/i-am-witness)<sup>16</sup> and [Jordan's Principle](https://fncaringsociety.com/jordans-principle)<sup>17</sup> campaigns also persist, as non-compliance orders accumulate and children continue to be denied basic services.

### **Research Team**

Our project depends heavily on a team approach to engage a reconciliation framework respectful of First Nations ontology and ethics while employing qualitative methodologies that emphasize collaboration and collective inquiry into a shared problem. To this end, we collaborate as a team of First Nations, Métis, and non-Indigenous members, contributing to the project based on our previous research and professional experiences. The interdisciplinary team, consisting of scholars and practitioners in education, social work, pediatrics and law, have expertise in the following areas: pedagogy and curriculum

development; reconciliation education; Aboriginal, elementary and social justice education and policy; teacher training; child rights, development and protection; First Nations research ethics and ontology; participatory action research and grounded theory; and the Touchstones of Hope reconciliation framework. Our team includes Drs. Cindy Blackstock, Nicholas Ng-A-Fook, Sue Bennett, Melisa Brittain, Teresa Libesman, and Lynette Shultz, as well as Sylvia Smith, Charlene Bearhead, Janet Porter, Gail Stromquist, and two doctoral students, Madelaine McCracken and Lisa Howell.

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15 <https://fncaringsociety.com/shannens-dream>

16 <https://fncaringsociety.com/i-am-witness>

17 <https://fncaringsociety.com/jordans-principle>

## SECTION 3 | RESEARCH PHASES AND METHODOLOGY



From "Spirit Bear and Children Make History." Image used with permission.

### **Participatory Action Research and Grounded Theory**

Our study draws on participatory action research (PAR), which supports participants' self-determination through robust collaboration between researchers and the communities affected by the research. It is "more than a particular research design. *It represents a philosophical approach that is rooted in social justice*" (emphasis added, Rutman, et. al., 2005, p. 155). Our research also utilizes grounded theory, which is an inductive approach to research, whereby theory is "discovered" from data drawn from the experience of everyday life (Egan, 2002; Elliot & Lazenbatt, 2005). Grounded theory is compatible with PAR and ideal

for studying new areas, since a lack of substantive existing literature is not a barrier to the success of this method (in this case, there is a lack of substantive literature on child engagement in reconciliation). As opposed to more traditional methods that involve a process of hypothesis testing and deduction, grounded theory approaches the research question(s) without formal assumptions about the direction or scope of the findings. In this way, it complements the PAR approach, which seeks knowledge grounded in the experience of the communities most affected.

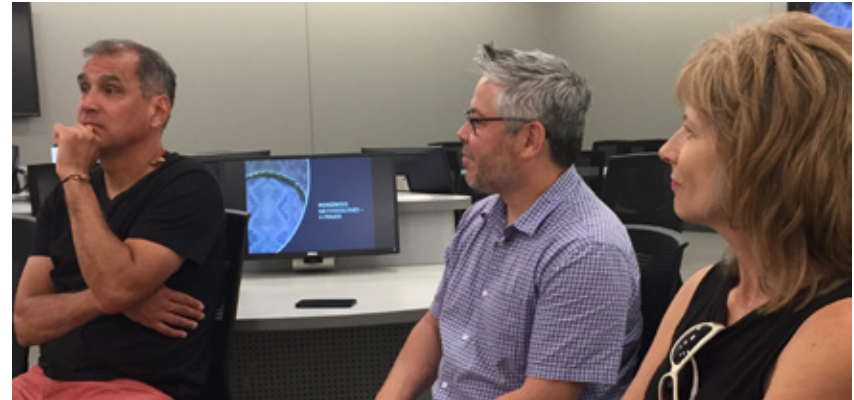


## Study Phases

### Phase 1

Our study has had several phases, many of which have taken place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Phase 1 began in September 2018 and involved the hiring and education of two part-time doctoral research assistants, Keri-Lynn Cheechoo and Lisa Howell. The research assistants received training in grounded theory methods and undertook extensive literature reviews on education for reconciliation, social justice in elementary education and many other themes. In February 2019, the research team met at Have a Heart Day to stand with teachers and students who were demanding action to ensure First Nations children have equitable access to education and public services. In March 2019, the Caring Society's adult advisory circle came together with two members of the research team. The Caring Society's adult circle includes practicing and retired teachers, as well as parents of students involved. Unfortunately, we were not able to include students themselves in this process, due to ethics restrictions. At the advisory circle, members suggested the names of teachers who might be interested in participating in the research project. Advisory members then contacted the teachers, who gave their permission for the research team to contact them. By the end of June 2019, ten teachers in the Ottawa-Gatineau region had been contacted, with plans for an interview that fall.

In June 2019, the research team, supported by the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa, hosted a learning retreat for its members, as well as faculty members and staff. Andrea Auger, who was then with the Caring Society, gave team members a presentation about the *Touchstones of Hope*. Later that day, Treaty 4 scholar Margaret Kovach gave a public lecture on Indigenous methodologies. The next day, the team was graciously invited to Kitigan Zibi Anishinaabeg to listen to



*Dwayne Donald, Nicholas Ng-A-Fook, & Sylvia Smith listen as Margaret Kovach presents a public lecture on Indigenous Methodologies at the University of Ottawa, June 2019. (Photo Credit: Melisa Brittain)*

community members, Elders, and education leaders at the cultural Centre. Dwayne Donald, who had travelled from treaty 6 territory (Edmonton) to be with us, talked to our group about understanding knowledge and knowing as organically connecting to what gives life. Dwayne spoke about how wisdom, relationality, holism, and treaty teachings are meaningful curricular and pedagogical guides.

### Phase 2

Phase 2 began in September 2019, with two research team members reconnecting with teachers who had expressed interest in being interviewed a few months prior. Interviews took place from September-December 2019. A total of 12 non-Indigenous and Anishinaabe teachers were interviewed. All teachers gave their permission to have their interviews recorded, and in January 2020, transcriptions and analysis began. Undergraduate students Cedar Iahtail and Reeta Koostachin were hired to assist with the transcription and

uOttawa

## Just Because We're Small Doesn't Mean We Can't Stand Tall: Reconciliation Education in the Elementary Classroom

Dr. Cindy Blackstock, Principal Investigator  
Drs. Sue Bennet & Nicholas Ng-A-Fook, Co-Investigators

Funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada – Insight Grant

### Research Problem and Objectives

- The final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC, 2015b) emphasizes that the transformation of our educational system is key to achieving reconciliation, the ultimate object of which "must be to transform our country and restore mutual respect between peoples and nations" (p. 3). The TRC (2015b) asserts that reconciliation must be fostered through "respectful learning environments" (p. 290) that place Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal knowledge, history and experiences on equal footing, so all students can develop "respect and empathy for each other" (p. 291).
- Inspired by the TRC's Calls to Action on education, ministries of education, teacher education programs, school boards and teachers' associations across Canada have been designing and implementing new curriculum, courses and materials to achieve the calls. This builds on work by several school boards, educators and non-profit organizations that have been teaching about residential schools and ongoing discrimination throughout Canada for over 10 years (Smith, 2017; Howell, 2017; Alaca, Anglin & Thomas, 2015). Despite these efforts, there has been very little on whether or not current resources and practices facilitate the respectful learning environments required for the transformational shifts the TRC calls for in order to "restore mutual respect between peoples and nations" (TRC, 2015b, p. 3; Milne, 2017).
- This project studies the impacts of the reconciliation-based education campaigns run by the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada (Caring Society) on elementary educators. The Caring Society is a leader in actively engaging educators and children in reconciliation to ensure equity for First Nations children (Alaca, Anglin & Thomas, 2015). The unprecedented participation of elementary teachers and students in Caring Society campaigns offers a unique opportunity to advance knowledge about the impacts of reconciliation-based education and provide evidence-based research about how we can best move forward to foster mutual respect and build capacity for empathy and intercultural understanding within classrooms as early as possible.

Students at Have a Heart Day on Parliament Hill, 2018

"The passion, the power, the creativity, and the confidence...as we all know, kids finding voice, kids finding a reason for voice, kids speaking publicly in front of people...is transformative. It transforms your relationship with them...it transforms what education is." (a teacher)

### Research Questions

- How do teachers currently use the Caring Society's campaigns in elementary classrooms?
- How do educators perceive the effects of the campaigns on elementary students and their teachers?
- Do the campaigns promote child wellbeing and academic success whilst building student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect? If not, what needs to change?
- How can our study of the campaigns inform promising practices for future curricular and pedagogical approaches for addressing reconciliation education in collaboration with elementary school communities?

### Preliminary Findings

Ways that teachers use the campaigns in their classroom:

- To engage in learning about historical truths and current issues facing many Indigenous communities.
- To be part of meaningful reconciliation through letter writing, artwork, school assemblies, and student-led initiatives.
- To be part of a community of educators working toward change.

Some of the impacts that educators perceive their students have during the campaigns are:

- Increased feelings of empathy, compassion, fairness, and justice.
- Greater leadership, motivation, and engagement in the school community and classroom.
- The development of new perspectives on Canada and the ongoing impacts of colonialism.

Key understandings about best practices for reconciliation education moving forward:

- Learning about and engaging in historical truths through rich classroom discussion, wall the stories, and student-led initiatives is powerful.
- Multiple resources and modalities are needed to support all students in this process.
- Friendships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students that extend beyond the campaigns is necessary to do the work of reconciliation.

### Methodology: Reconciliation as Research

- This study embeds reconciliation as a research philosophy and method by using the same "Touchstones of Hope" reconciliation framework that guides the Caring Society's campaigns (Auger, 2012; Blackstock, Cross, Brown & Formma, 2006).
- This study will draw on grounded theory and Participatory action research (PAR) to create meaningful opportunities for educators and children to shape the study (Egan, 2002; Elliot & Laubart, 2005). Both methodologies support participants' self-determination through robust collaboration between researchers and the communities affected by the research. Moreover, Grounded theory is compatible with PAR and Touchstone principles, and ideal for studying new areas, since a lack of substantive existing literature is not a barrier to the success of this method in this case, the lack of substantive literature on child engagement in reconciliation.

### Participants and Study Phases

- In most cases, participants for Phase 1 were selected by the adult members of the TRC's Advisory Circle. The advisory circle is made up of students, parents, and teachers who meet several times a year to guide Caring Society campaigns.
- To date, we have interviewed twelve elementary school teachers in the OCSB and at Kilgus Zibi Kikimaniadin School who had participated in Campaigns prior to their interview.
- Once data analysis is complete, we will translate our research findings into theory on best practices for reconciliation education; create professional development workshops and sample lesson plans in consultation with collaborators representing teachers' associations and teacher education programs, and with school boards and educators.
- In Phase 2, we will invite up to 80 teachers to take part in one-day professional development workshops 20 teachers X 4 workshops) based on the research findings. These teachers have been identified by the interviewees in Phase 1 (snowball sampling).
- In Phase 3, we will evaluate, revise, and disseminate workshops and sample lesson plans and disseminate research findings.

### Research Team

- Cindy Blackstock, PhD, Principal Investigator
- Dr. Sue Bennet, CHED, Co-Investigator
- Nicholas Ng-A-Fook, PhD, UOttawa, Co-Investigator
- Lisa Howell, Doctoral Research Assistant, UOttawa
- Renea Koodachie, Research Assistant, UOttawa
- Cedar Iahai, Research Assistant, UOttawa

Collaborators:

- Sylvia Smith, Founder, Project of Heart
- Charles Bechard, Education Director CANEGO
- Janet Porter, Reconciliation Education Consultant
- Gail Stromquist, BC Teachers Federation
- Melissa Britton, PhD, FICARES
- Lynnette Shultz, PhD, University of Alberta
- Teresa Liberman, PhD, University of Australia

Research Poster presented at the Jean Paul Dionne Research Symposium.

analysis process. At this point, the team developed a poster (left) and presented it and their initial findings at the *Jean Paul Dionne symposium at the University of Ottawa in March 2020*.<sup>18</sup>

In June 2020, the entire interdisciplinary research team met via zoom, and an update about the research findings and future directions was presented, and team members were asked for feedback and guidance. In the summer of 2020, we also started writing a first article for dissemination. This article will be submitted to the *Journal of Social Justice Research* in March-April of 2022.

## Phase 3

Phase 3, the phase we are now in, began in September 2020, with the development of the *I am a Witness Learning Guide*<sup>19</sup> (Learning Guide), the *Beary Caring Curriculum*<sup>20</sup> (Caring Curriculum), and the *Spirit Bear Virtual School for Teacher Professional Development*<sup>21</sup> (Spirit Bear School). The Spirit Bear School will be launched virtually in 2022 on the Caring Society's website. The school will feature different "rooms" where teachers will be able to access the Caring Curriculum, learning guides and many other resources to help them teach the Caring Society campaigns, including a special section that contains videos, webinars and workshops to support teacher learning. There will also be a space on the website where teachers can connect with other teachers to share resources and experiences. We are developing these resources as a direct result of the research we conducted with teachers.

18 <https://www.sjpd-jpds.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/2020-JPDS-final-program-5-mars-3.pdf>

19 [https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vTA1OEZHhuAbrosyJxsn0MzIHZ8k7lyTtf\\_LRWofhqifMtSo7aC3hDV-hrKxPjNiUucA9Rss5w\\_xgyj/pub](https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vTA1OEZHhuAbrosyJxsn0MzIHZ8k7lyTtf_LRWofhqifMtSo7aC3hDV-hrKxPjNiUucA9Rss5w_xgyj/pub)

20 [https://docs.google.com/document/u/1/d/e/2PACX-1vRYKEscCCLx1FA\\_dRgR08h931ZKhudDnd5QqAcLncOg202fm5I2crKyMCduSKL6w/pub](https://docs.google.com/document/u/1/d/e/2PACX-1vRYKEscCCLx1FA_dRgR08h931ZKhudDnd5QqAcLncOg202fm5I2crKyMCduSKL6w/pub)

21 <https://www.spiritbearschool.ca/home>

In January 2021, our first research product was ready to be shared and piloted with teachers across the country. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, we hosted a webinar to introduce teachers to the [I am a Witness](#)<sup>22</sup> Learning Guide. We presented to more than 100 teachers, giving them concrete examples of how to use the guide with their respective curricula. We provided them with a link to the learning guide and supplemental resources that would support their work.

In April 2021, we presented the Learning Guide and Caring Curriculum at the *Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario* Professional Development Day. We also presented the work at the *American Association of the Advancement of Curriculum Studies* virtual conference in May. In June, the research team presented the entire team with an update over zoom, with the opportunity to give feedback on current work and future directions.

In August of 2021, the first ever [Spirit Bear Retreat for Teacher Professional Learning](#)<sup>23</sup> was held over two days online. Over 250 teachers, administrators, and community members joined us to hear from many First Nations, Inuit, and Métis scholars, students, activists, and educators.

In September of 2021, twenty-one teachers from across Canada joined our pilot project. The research team held two sessions to support and guide teachers through the process of using the Learning Guide and the Caring Curriculum in their classrooms during Term 1. During the pilot sessions, we provided clear instructions to teachers including timelines, supports, resources, and in-depth explicit modelling of how to integrate the resources with the curriculum. Since the pilot sessions, several teachers have checked in with the team, and one of the participants

started a group for teachers involved on *Discord*, a popular social media application, thereby allowing them to share ideas, struggles, and resources. Each teacher was gifted with a \$30.00 gift card to GoodMinds Books as a token of appreciation for their participation. In February 2022, the research team held two focus groups, and were honoured to hear from teachers who shared their experiences and ideas for improving the resources. Based on this feedback, the learning guide and caring curriculum will be revised, published, and shared.

During this third phase, we produced a [video](#)<sup>24</sup> featuring two Ottawa teachers, Danielle Fontaine and Lynn Rainboth, who spoke about their experiences bringing the Caring Society campaigns into their classrooms. This video will be one of the resources available on the Spirit Bear School to support teacher learning about using the campaigns in their own classrooms.

#### Phase 4

Depending on funding and timelines, we hope to develop similar learning guides for [Shannen's Dream](#)<sup>25</sup> and [Jordan's Principle](#).<sup>26</sup> Moreover, as mentioned previously, we hope to have a permanent Spirit Bear Virtual School launched in 2022, whereby teachers can easily access all resources. We also intend to translate all resources to French and Anishinaabemowin. We also hope to further disseminate our research at conferences and in academic journals.

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22 <https://fncaringsociety.com/i-am-witness>

23 <https://www.spiritbearschool.ca/the-2021-summer-retreat>

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24 <https://vimeo.com/522124681/132bb04688>

25 <https://fncaringsociety.com/shannens-dream>

26 <https://fncaringsociety.com/jordans-principle>



## SECTION 4 | FINDINGS



*Kitigan Zibi Kikinamadinan students with Senator Murray Sinclair at Have a Heart Day 2017.*

In this section, we present our research findings. The first part of the section addresses the findings from the interviews we did with teachers. In the second section, we present findings from our research with participants following our webinars. This research is important, as it is guiding our creation of resources and the Spirit Bear School.

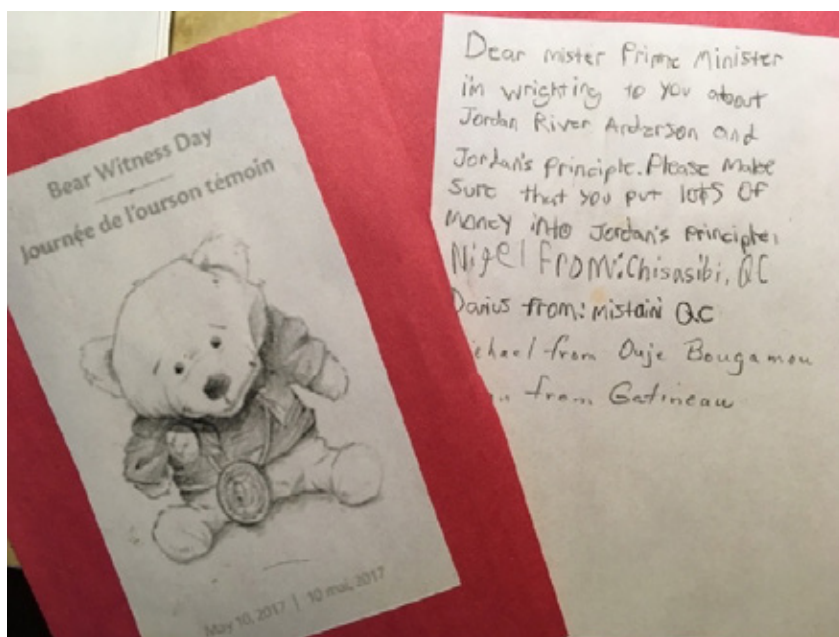
### **Part 1: Teacher Interviews**

After analyzing the interviews with teachers, we were able to begin answering our three research questions. Our findings are detailed below under three themes: (1) The ways that the Caring Society

campaigns are used by teachers; (2) The impacts that teachers perceive the campaigns have on student learning; and (3) Best practises for reconciliation education.

### **Theme 1: The Ways That the Caring Society Campaigns Are Used by Teachers**

Our first question was, “How do teachers currently use the Caring Society’s campaigns in elementary classrooms?” Our analysis of the interviews found that teachers are currently using the campaigns for many reasons, including to help non-Indigenous students understand current inequities that many First Nations children face and to take



Student writing on Bear Witness Day, May 10.

positive actions to ensure that all children are treated with love and fairness. One of the teachers we interviewed spoke about the depth of the understanding and connections her students were able to make during their learning with the campaigns:

*You're not just somebody getting a mark here, you're not just put on this earth to figure out a system. You can be somebody that looks around and cares about people and uses these wonderful skills you're getting at school-writing, reading, your ability to speak persuasively, your ability to care, to think empathetically, to do art, to think symbolically, to learn about history, to look at the hard truths, and to act.... and that's all embedded in the curriculum.*

Teachers feel that the campaigns can be used to begin learning about the impacts of ongoing colonialism in Canada in ways that are age-appropriate for children of all grades and backgrounds, and that this can be done in respectful ways that strengthen the classroom community. A teacher remembers:

*It's not hard for my English as a second language students to empathize with colonial tragedies because they've been through it. I've taught Syrian students last couple years, and boy do they get being displaced and why. I've had students from Somalia who have shared that they've been oppressed for 100 years... so they can really identify. They saw it with their own cultures. I overheard one of my students say something empathetic about that... about intergenerational trauma...about understanding it.*

Importantly, teachers overwhelmingly felt that the campaigns gave them and their students opportunities to respond to the TRC Calls to Action, by taking meaningful social justice actions, and to deeply understand the differences between charity and social justice:

*Charity is a band aid solution, whereas teaching about social justice is trying to find the deeper, more structural causes for inequity. Charity has its place, when someone has a flood and they don't have food and you find food for them, that's something that they need, right away. But to continue to look at the work that you do as just charity, kind of maintains the status quo and it's so superficial, but the work that we're doing with children on social justice is bringing them deeper into an issue, and having them take responsibility by educating themselves more asking more questions, and then taking action.*

Another teacher commented that the Caring Society campaigns also help her to teach about the vibrancy and strengths of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples, such as Shannen Koostachin and Jordan River Anderson. She stated:

*The TRC was very inspiring about education around residential schools, but I was trying to make sure that it's not the only focus of what I do in the classroom. I was really focusing on bringing in lots of perspectives, bringing in community members as much as possible and trying to get a positive message out that there's a vibrant community and culture.*

Our findings also show that teachers integrate the campaigns in the existing Ontario K-6 Social Studies curriculum, the Ontario 7-8 History and Geography curriculum, and the Ontario K-8 English Language Arts curriculum. Moreover, they also see the campaigns as easily integrated within the goals of inclusive learning, character education, and the development of citizenship in students.

*In the Ottawa Carleton District School Board, there's been a real movement to look at an inclusive framework. There are elements within that which so obviously connects to so much of what the Caring Society is doing.*

*For myself, when these opportunities [Caring Society campaigns] are available, they align with the curriculum and it's open ended. I'm just more aware of taking them up and the importance of taking them up.*

## **Theme 2: The Impacts That Teachers Perceive the Campaigns Have on Student Learning**

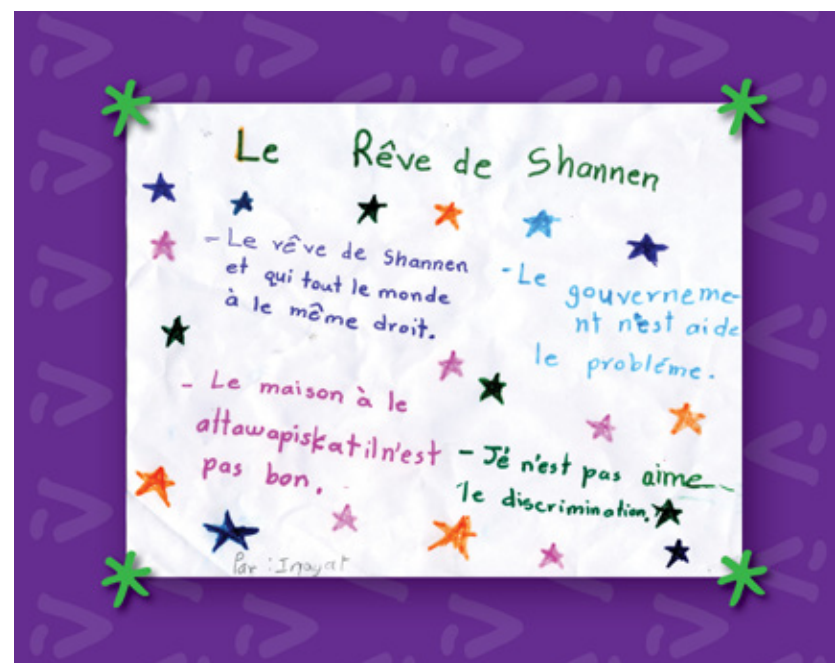
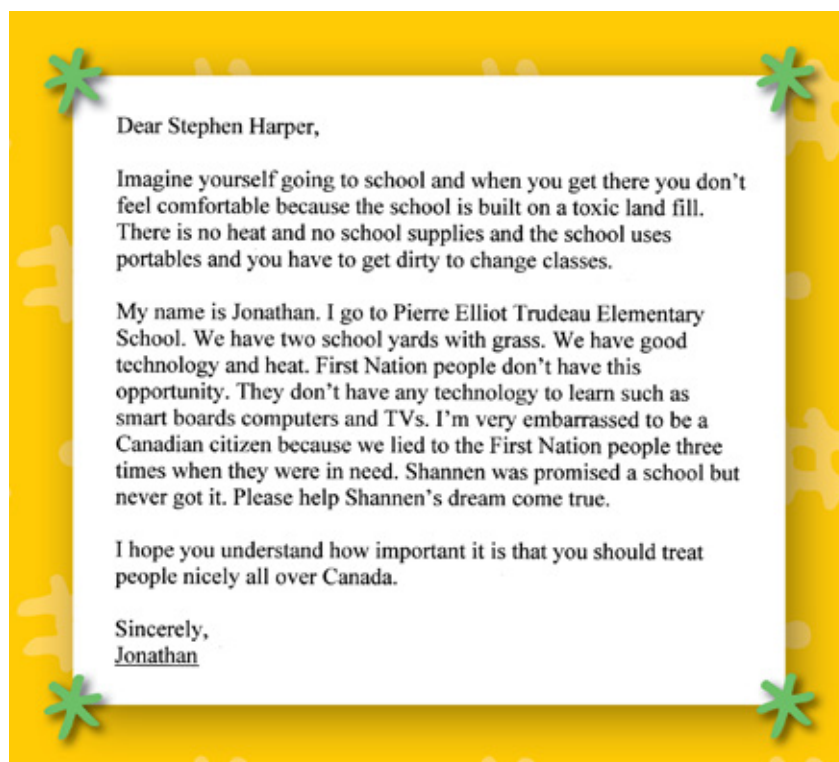
Our second question was, "How do educators perceive the effects of the campaigns on elementary students and their teachers? Do the campaigns promote child wellbeing and academic success whilst "[b]uilding student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect" (TRC, 2015, p. 235)? If not, what needs to change?" Our analysis of the interviews showed that teachers perceive many positive impacts on their students, including feelings of empathy, compassion, respect, and motivation to learn more about First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples:

*I think it's the empathy portion of it that really resonates with me...and how to be a kind human being through doing this work. The students really develop empathy and kindness, and a sense of being open-minded...they really have a different perspective. They want to learn more.*

Many of the teachers we interviewed also spoke about their student's strong desire to stand in solidarity with First Nations children. This deep desire for action comes from the understanding that social justice and equity is a human right, which students learn through the campaigns. One teacher shared that:

*For students who are new to Canada, they begin with the impression that it's (Canada) amazing, which it is, but there's a lot of stuff that is not told about Canada and kept almost like a secret. People don't talk about it. It was interesting and eye opening for them...they ask, "what is a reserve?" and then it snowballs into this huge conversation of, "oh, how do we change this?" Creating awareness at their level is so vital and important.*





Above and left: Students write letters to politicians as part of their learning. (Retrieved from Children Have Power [2012] and used with permission.)

Teachers also report that when working on the campaigns, their students often feel a sense of power, agency, and the realization that by using their voices, change can be made. They become leaders, speakers, organizers, and activists. As one teacher says, the campaigns:

*allow for student voice...they really become leaders. They take ownership of the assemblies, they do all the media, they do all the invitations, they welcome the guests, it really becomes their event and they share it with people in the community, which is amazing. They have a lot to say and now I feel more of like a facilitator to allow them to have that platform. They reach out*

*to members of the community of other schools and talk about creating Heart Gardens with other schools and having that learning happening together.*

An integral part of the campaigns is letter-writing to politicians. For many students, the campaigns are the first experience they have of writing to an elected representative about a social justice matter, and being part of democracy:

*The campaigns...remind us that...we're connected to democracy as well... and voice, the voice of the people. The value of kids writing letters and standing up for rights of others....and that has value that you can never quantify.*

However, the aspect of letter-writing was not a positive experience for all teachers. One of the First Nations teachers we interviewed spoke about the mindfulness she has when asking her students to put their voices and concerns to the prime minister. She said:

*Unfortunately, we wrote amazing letters, and put clear needs down and what comes back is...from a person who writes and answers back to letters...not the Prime Minister. And after that, it was like me being protective over them (the students) and being aware of how much effort we were going to put in to have our children feel unheard. I would rather spend my time and energy having them face to face with people who care, people who are interested, people who are willing to learn and exchange back and forth. That would be much more valuable than anything else because they develop confidence. They're not scared little children; they have the energy and the fire in them.*

Our study also found that teachers who take part in the Caring Society campaigns experience feelings of increased inspiration and passion for teaching, a confirmation of the value of student voice and student-led learning, and deeper understandings of the importance of learning and action, and a sense of community among teachers doing this work:

*Another thing that I want to talk about was how we connected as teachers and professionals, and how we created a community of support. So, we gathered together, and we would email after and*

*talk after the campaign after Have a heart day...there was such a feeling. We have so much passion. I've worked with other teachers since then and it's not been the same.*

For many teachers, being involved in the campaigns has led to life-changing learning about what it means to be Canadian on unceded territories and treaty land:

*It's changed my whole worldview ...just my personal understanding of our history and particularly the responsibility of non-Indigenous Canadians to be a part of this process. This is not an Indigenous issue–reconciliation, this is for everybody...and as teachers we have such an important way to impact that and an important role to play. I am learning along with the students and they have a lot of questions that I say, "I'm not sure"... you know, we're all learning this together....my whole worldview and mindset has really opened.*

For the First Nations teachers we spoke with, there was a sense that the campaigns provided a beginning, but that they wished for more reciprocity with non-Indigenous teachers and students. One teacher stated:

*We feel that sometimes, we're entertainment, like "come here to Kitigan Zibi and you're going to learn about traditional foods or you're going to learn about the language." We have to put on a show at that point and that might not be what is actually taking place in our community. But the Caring Society campaigns...we know that there's people out there that care. You get that sense that there are people that are wanting better for youth, for children, for families, for education, so we're seeing that. I wish there was more friendship that was actually created through the programs.*

Another First Nations teacher shared her thoughts about teaching the campaigns with First Nations students, who themselves are intergenerational survivors:

*We need to encourage real understanding and not just saying, "Yeah, we're going to do Idle No More rallies," or whatever that foreign concept is to the kids. Going back to understand the history.... So to think of it as social justice, I don't think we use that kind of framework. We just must address things that are not right. That idea would be is that in order to make this world a better place, we need to do what we can to appreciate all that is.... At the same time teaching about this... being very careful because I don't want to add additional stress, trauma or anything to the kids. At this point, I'm very protective. We had some Elders come and talk about the residential schools and the kids broke down in tears and it was very, very, very sad and hard. You can give enough of the information so that they are aware of what has happened and give the facts of some things but to be very careful with the emotional part, as well.*

These findings suggest that teaching the campaigns has many impacts on both students and teachers, and that doing this teaching in a mindful, respectful, and culturally responsive way is paramount to the work. Below are some of the actions and activities that teachers described doing during their work with the campaigns:

### **Social Justice Actions Teachers and Students Might Take When They Use the Caring Society Campaigns**

- Walks and Marches
- Letter writing to politicians and speeches
- Collaborating with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Elders and community members
- Sharing songs and poetry with others
- Teaching other classes in their school communities
- Organizing assemblies for action
- Bearing witness at the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal
- Making Public Service Announcements
- Writing articles in journals

### **Theme 3: Best Practises for Reconciliation Education**

Our third question is: "What can current use of the campaigns, and their effects on elementary students and teachers, tell us about best practices for reconciliation education moving forward?" Findings from asking this interview question helped guide our decisions about the professional development resources we created in Phase 3, and include the need for a professional learning community, including opportunities for mentorship and ongoing support as well as the need for more resources to support learning about settler-colonialism and its ongoing impacts for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities. One teacher commented that:





Students on Parliament Hill at Have a Heart Day, February 14, 2016.

*I was lucky enough to have access to a mentor, but potentially in other schools, I don't know if there's a list of people that other teachers could go to for mentorship and support. You don't need to reinvent the wheel, it's all out there. It's just, how do you find this information?*

Many teachers also spoke of the need for relationship building with other teachers and students who are involved in the work, and the acknowledgement that education for reconciliation is experienced differently within and between non-Indigenous classrooms and First Nations, Inuit, and Métis classrooms. Another teacher commented:

*You get that sense that there are people that are wanting better for youth, for children, for families, for education, so we're seeing that. I wish there was more friendship that was actually created through the campaigns...as an Indigenous educator, I think that reconciliation, if it was to actually be done in a good way, needs to come from Indigenous people taking lead rather than non-Indigenous people.*

Other teachers spoke about the need for support from the Caring Society, as well as resources that are stream-lined and easy to use:

*I know the Caring Society has a website, but just to make a specific booklet or something of ready-made stuff that can be sent to each school would be very helpful. I know the assemblies covers a lot of students, but it'd be nice- down the road to have individual caring society members visit classrooms and working with a smaller number of students so that more generating questions could occur and leading to more research for those answers on both the kid's parts, and maybe even expanding the knowledge.*

## Part 2: Webinars

In addition to conducting our initial research with teachers, we also distributed surveys to teachers who participated in our webinars to improve our delivery of professional development. In January 2021, we held our *I am a Witness Learning Guide Webinar*.<sup>27</sup> Teachers were asked to complete a survey after the webinar to help us improve our presentations, as well as inform us about what they need to know to teach toward truth and reconciliation. Results are compiled in the chart to the right.

When asked what they appreciated about the webinar, teachers commented on the speaker knowledge and personableness, the inclusion and importance of student voice, the information and resources provided, and the format and time of the webinar. Below are a few selected quotes from webinar participants.

*You presented your message and offered your invitation with such an inspiring, asset-based, humble manner. Thank you.*

*Very approachable speakers. The student was very mature and added good insight to the conversation.*

*Lots of resources! I already ordered the books.*

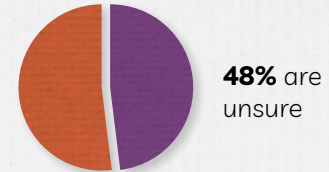
*Covered many topics thoroughly in the time; very efficient, organized. Your team has a wealth of knowledge and I appreciate the willingness to share.*

Our survey also asked participants to share what might have been even better. To this, teachers requested that resources be shared ahead of time, for practical examples and videos of the lessons being taught

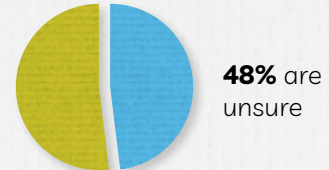
<sup>27</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R0LcrGsXHBE>

### After the webinar:

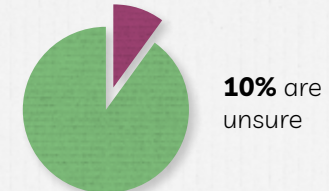
**52%** of participants feel *more confident about teaching social justice and equity.*



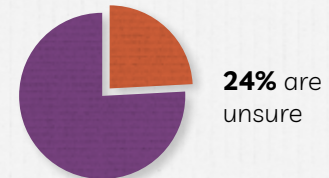
**52%** of participants feel *more comfortable teaching about inequities affecting First Nations, Inuit, and Métis families.*



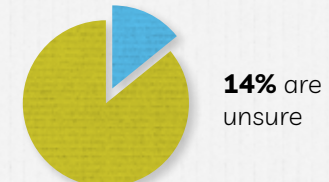
**90%** of participants agree that the *resources provided were useful.*



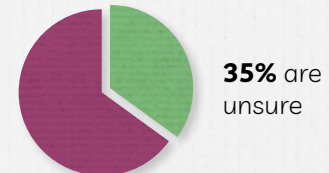
**76%** of participants *will use the I am a Witness guide in their classrooms.*



**86%** of participants *plan on celebrating Have Heart Day.*



**65%** of participants agree that they *have a deeper understanding of how to teach about injustices to younger students.*



*The Spirit Bear Retreat was truly meaningful, and profoundly inspiring. The two days of sharing has indeed left me with important additional understandings of the many struggles of First Nations, Métis and Inuit people and communities. Importantly, I have also been left with stories to move forward, and wonderful resources to add to my repertoire of teaching future educators.*

*I just wanted to take a moment to tell you how deeply moved and impressed I was by what was shared at the retreat. I learned so much. It was an open-hearted, open-minded, movement to reflecting and respecting the wisdoms of Indigenous elders while acknowledging the limitations of being mired in the context of current colonized, westernized, school structures. It renewed hope. It was nothing short of transformative.*

After our presentation, we asked teachers to complete a Google form if they were interested in participating in a pilot project. We received 56 responses from teachers interested in piloting the *I am a Witness Learning Guide* as well as the *Beary Caring Curriculum*. Two dates were set for Pilot Information sessions to accommodate time zones. The feedback from the first webinar provided us with concrete suggestions to improve our sessions, and we have 20 teachers who are currently piloting the resources in their classrooms.

Below is some of the feedback that we have received from teachers piloting the resources:

*The Grade 4s were very interested and asked good questions after reading "Echoes of the Past. I asked them to write a message to Dr. Bryce to thank him for trying to help the children in Residential Schools. They were given a shirt template, on which they wrote before colouring it orange. Apparently, the Grade 4*

*teachers have said that the students have asked when I was coming in again, as they were very interested in continuing the conversation.*

*We started with Math on the Land and connected the students to the land Acknowledgement. I wanted them to feel connected to Treaty 5 Land. I have been talking about why we have orange shirt day. We watched the [Spirit Bear] Movie. We have come up with ideas why we each matter. We wrote to Dr. Bryce on why he matters. We have talked about why we matter because we need to keep ourselves safe (MMIWG2S topic). We talked about the importance of the red dress and made our own to display. Next we will talk about children's rights and advocating for First Nations children and why.*



## SECTION 5 | RESEARCH DISSEMINATION AND RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT



*From "Spirit Bear and Children Make History." Image used with permission.*

To date, we have disseminated our research by way of academic journals and conferences, as well as teacher professional development conferences and webinars. Below is a description of our dissemination and resource development activities to date.

### **Workshops and Conference Presentations**

March 2020: Poster Presentation at the Jean-Paul Dionne Symposium.

April 2021: [Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario](#)<sup>28</sup> (ETFO) Teacher Professional Development Day.

May 2021: [American Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies](#)<sup>29</sup> (AAACS).

August 2021: [Spirit Bear Retreat for Teacher Professional Learning](#),<sup>30</sup> hosted by University of Ottawa, Faculty of Education.

### **Webinars and Podcasts:**

January 2021: [I am a Witness Learning Guide Webinar](#)<sup>31</sup>

June 2021: [Fooknconversation Podcast with Cindy Blackstock](#)<sup>32</sup>

September 2021: Pilot Project Webinars

### **Resource Development:**

January 2021: [I am a Witness Learning Guide](#)<sup>33</sup> (Learning Guide)

May 2021: [Teacher Video](#)<sup>34</sup> of Danielle Fontaine and Lynn Rainboth

June 2021: [The Beary Caring Curriculum](#)<sup>35</sup> (Caring Curriculum)

July 2021: Temporary home of the [Spirit Bear Virtual School for Teacher Professional Development](#)<sup>36</sup> (Spirit Bear School).

### **Academic Articles:**

September 2021: Article in [The Conversation](#)<sup>37</sup>

March 2022: First article nearing submission to the journal of *Studies in Social Justice*.

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28 <https://www.etfo.ca>

29 <http://www.aaacs.org>

30 <https://education.uottawa.ca/en/news/spirit-bears-teacher-professional-learning-summer-retreat>

31 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R0LcrGsXHBE>

32 <https://www.fooknconversation.com/podcast/episode-27-cindy-blackstock/>

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33 [https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vTA1OEZHhuAbrosyJxsn0MzIHZ8k7lyTtf\\_LRWofhqiFmtSo7aC3hDV-hrKxPjNiUucA9Rss5w\\_xgyj/pub](https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vTA1OEZHhuAbrosyJxsn0MzIHZ8k7lyTtf_LRWofhqiFmtSo7aC3hDV-hrKxPjNiUucA9Rss5w_xgyj/pub)

34 <https://vimeo.com/522124681/132bb04688>

35 [https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vRYkEEscCClx1FA\\_dRgR08h931ZKhubDnd5QqAcINc0g202fm5I2crKyMCduSKL6w/pub](https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vRYkEEscCClx1FA_dRgR08h931ZKhubDnd5QqAcINc0g202fm5I2crKyMCduSKL6w/pub)

36 <https://www.spiritbearschool.ca/home>

37 <https://theconversation.com/national-day-for-truth-and-reconciliation-universities-and-schools-must-acknowledge-how-colonial-education-has-reproduced-anti-indigenous-racism-123315>

## SECTION 6 | ONGOING AND UPCOMING WORK

As we continue to work on our research, we have several plans for the next few months. The *Spirit Bear Virtual School* will be launched this year, and we are currently producing short videos of educators, academics, and administrators speaking about their experiences with the Caring Society campaigns and social justice education. We also plan to write a learning guide to support teachers as they learn about [Shannen's Dream](https://fncaringsociety.com/shannens-dream),<sup>38</sup> as well as a learning guide for [Jordan's Principle](https://fncaringsociety.com/jordans-principle).<sup>39</sup> These short videos and learning guides will be accessible to all educators through the Spirit Bear School website, and provide support as they engage in this work. We also continue to work with our team of teachers who are piloting the resources, and look forward to another focus group in June 2022. Following that, we will analyze the data from the focus groups and use this feedback to revise the resources created thus far.

We will publish two more academic articles, present at an academic conference, and work with school boards to support teacher professional development with the Caring Society Campaigns. Moreover, we plan to write articles for the [EdCan Network](https://www.edcan.ca)<sup>40</sup> as well as [The Conversation](https://theconversation.com/ca/education).<sup>41</sup> Finally, we are beginning to plan the Spirit Bear Retreat for Teacher Professional Learning, which will take place in the summer of 2022.

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38 <https://fncaringsociety.com/shannens-dream>

39 <https://fncaringsociety.com/jordans-principle>

40 <https://www.edcan.ca>

41 <https://theconversation.com/ca/education>



Students gathered at Have a Heart Day, 2013.

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