

Building Story Together

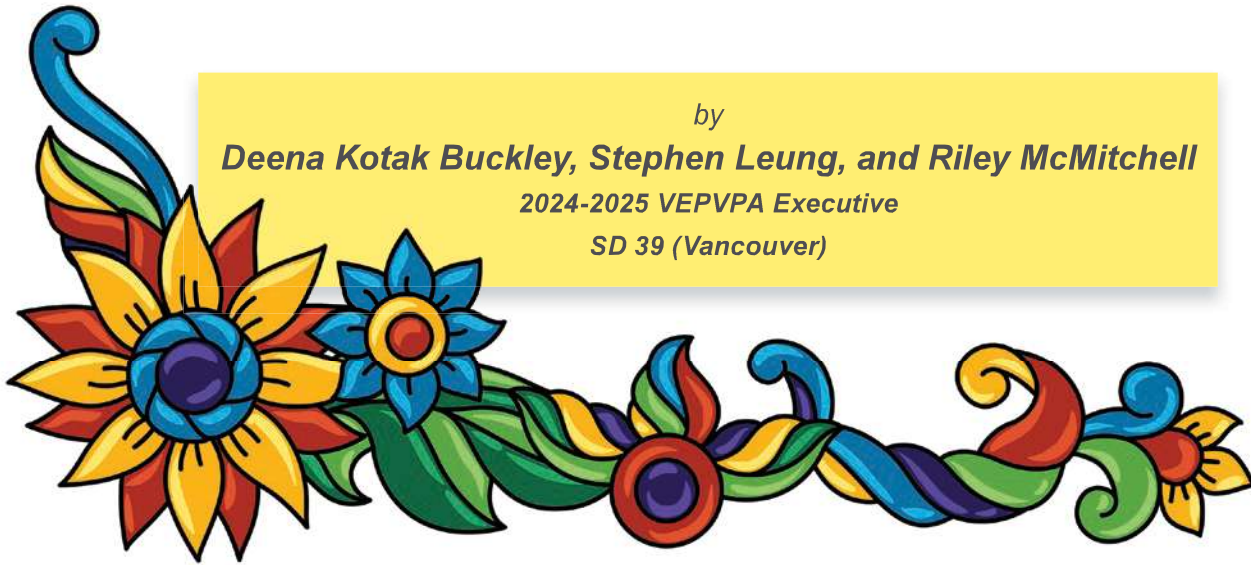
Decolonization Through Human-Centered Design and Joy

by

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Each year, Indigenous Focus Day invites us not only to reflect, but to act... to move from awareness to meaningful change. This is the heart of “ReconciliACTION”.

At the April 2025 Indigenous Focus Day, keynote speaker Dr. Dustin Louie offered a powerful reminder:

“The goals of decolonization are to expand whose story and truth matters, the ways of knowing and being that are represented in society, and the disruption of centuries of White supremacy.”

(Barriers to Engaging with Reconciliation in Canadian Education: Confusing Colonial and Western Knowledge, 2024)

Inspired by this call to action, we challenged ourselves to identify the places and spaces where we could begin this work.

We started to understand that decolonization doesn’t always require a radical break from the past. Instead, it can be an expansion – an invitation to build upon the wisdom, care, and collective strength that already exists within our communities.

In June 2024, a new executive team was elected to the Vancouver Elementary Principals’ and Vice-Principals’ Association (VEPVPA), united by a shared commitment to center decolonization in our leadership. As our own governing body, VEPVPA became a safe and supportive space to begin this journey. We were fortunate to inherit a strong

foundation laid by those who came before us, one rooted in care, accountability, and a deep sense of collective purpose.

We did not see strong governance as a barrier to decolonization. In fact, it became the platform that made experimentation and transformation possible. It provided us with:

- **Clarity of purpose** to align our efforts with our core values
- **Structures of accountability** to take bold, grounded steps
- **A culture of trust** to co-create, take risks, and learn together

These structures offered us the groundwork needed to imagine something even more liberatory. Therefore, rather than rushing into executive meetings in September, we intentionally chose to begin by connecting as people, to center relationships.

Carolyn Roberts (St'át'imc and Stó:lō) shared in her book *Re-storying Education* that, “decolonized education focuses on the whole being rather than the parts, and relationships are the key.” So, in early July we gathered informally for dinner and opened with a circle practice, taught to us by Carolyn. We asked: “If your school year were a movie genre, what would it be?” This relationship-focused prompt marked our first shift from *me* to *we*, seeing each other not just as colleagues, but as humans with stories.

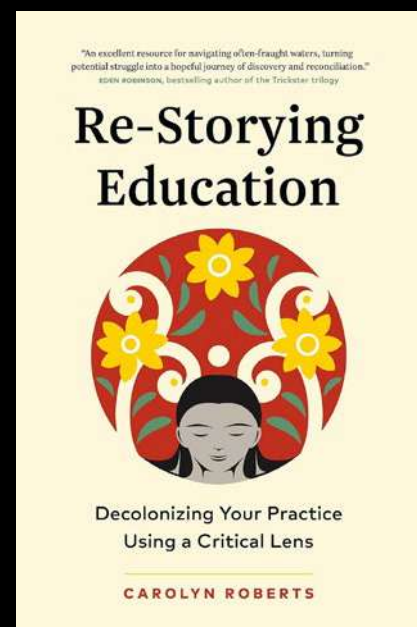
Human-Centered Design: A Pathway Forward

Following this informal gathering in July, we reconvened in late August for a facilitated session with Dr. Andrea McComb, BCPVPA Director of Professional Learning and Development. Together, we shaped a shared vision and framework for the year. What emerged was a commitment to inclusive leadership, guided by the KLSS framework, where everyone is **Known, Loved, Safe, and Successful**.

*“Circle Work is a practice of **decolonization**, in the way the physical space encourages engagement with the knowledge-making process. Positioning the educator as a facilitator and a participant, in the learning community, this removes the hierarchy of power and domination found in western colonial classrooms.”*

Carolyn Roberts

*Re-Storying Education:
Decolonizing Your Practice
Using a Critical Lens
Page Two, 2024*



*The work undertaken by VEPVPA has been based on a body of work by Kendall Zoller and Ochan Kusuma-Powell.
In the commentary below, Zoller and Kusuma-Powell comment on their framework.*

What has surfaced over time for those who experience our work is the continuing importance of relationships. When working with groups:

1. There will always be enough work
2. Time will always be too short to do everything
3. The higher the quality of our relationships, the more work we get done (and with greater quality)

Of course, others have said the same thing, so this is not new. What Ochan and I have been focusing on is the “how” of creating a culture with the attributes you want. We know that when you focus on something, you change it. All of us have engaged in professional development around teaching, assessment, collaboration, and more, and have seen the positive impacts.

We asked ourselves: if you focused upon culture, can you change it? The important piece for us around culture is exemplified in the 5 Intentions. By focusing on these 5 Intentions, you can develop a more robust culture centered on relationships.

Here is a recent writing Ochan and I created that describe the 5 Intentions in more detail.

Intentions Needed to Develop Inclusive Cultures

1. **Embracing Equity of Voice:** Not only is everyone, regardless of position or background, invited to participate and voice their perspectives, everyone also feels invited to contribute: their thinking is sought. Each one of us should feel capable of contributing and feel valued in doing so.
2. **Honoring and Valuing Cultures:** Knowing that prevailing culture within an organization often reflects the values, norms, and assumptions of a privileged group, space is made so the cultures and experiences of historically underestimated or overshadowed groups can be elevated. Regardless of whether or not we have membership in the dominant school culture, we need to develop a curiosity about the cultures of those with whom we work.
3. **Being Compassionate:** Empathy on its own is insufficient. The Buddhist scholar Thupten Jinpa writes the components of compassion to be empathy (feeling), cognition (thinking), and action (doing). Exercise kindness; be nonjudgmental. Seeing others in a generous light, and doing what it takes to recognize the humanity in others, serves to make our communities kinder places.
4. **Living Collective Purpose:** Understand, embrace, and live shared vision and goals. Help everyone find their place in the story so the work of the group is aligned and shared. We know that every school has a story, and every school serves the community in which it is located. Living collective purpose allows us to bring together the strengths and contributions of each community member so they feel a true sense of belonging.
5. **Dialoguing for Generativity:** We engage deliberately in collaborative conversations with the intention of exploring possibilities and seeking innovative and creative outcomes. This requires that we actively listen, maintain an open mind, and seek diverse perspectives. Each of us can serve to extend the thinking of others. When we dialogue for generativity, we build on each other's ideas and create something far more complex than we could have done on our own.

Ochan Kusuma-Powell, EdD – has had a lifelong interest in developing inclusive schools and currently serves as a consultant to International Schools in the areas of coaching, collaboration, and inclusion.

Kendall Zoller, EdD – is an author and global consultant on communication, facilitation, and leadership.

To Be Known, Loved, Safe and Successful

We define inclusion as the extent to which members of a group or community feel known, loved, safe and successful: acknowledged, cared for, secure and accomplished. These dimensions are easily recognized as essential to human well-being and provide the environment necessary for collaboration. They are also scalable across multiple and diverse stakeholder groups, including all members of a school community: ranging from students and teachers to non-teaching professionals and parents. When these dimensions are prioritized and integrated, they create a culture of acceptance and inclusion. When an individual feels included, they experience these four dimensions in the following ways:

Being Known

People in the organization recognize and value me • People know who I am • I matter and feel respected - I enjoy status within the organization • Others listen to me when I speak • What I say counts - I have voice

Feeling Loved

People in the organization care about me • They are interested in my growth and development • I can be my authentic, best self • I am accepted for who I am • Others show me personal regard - I feel appreciated and valued

Being Safe

People engage with me without judgment • I can take risks and others will not be judgmental towards me • I can make mistakes and be forgiven • I am not bullied • Others are careful and conscious of not committing micro-aggressions against me or others

Being Successful

I find meaning in the work I do • I am encouraged to be self-directed • Even as I work towards the organization's success, I also have my own, personal goals • I have a sense of achievement about my work - I can grow and learn in this environment • My values are aligned with the values of the organization - they are a good fit

Read the full article in
*International Schools
Magazine*, Summer 2023



This framework helped us shift our focus from systems to people. It led us to embrace human-centered design, not as a trend, but as a deeply relational way of working. It means:

- Listening deeply to voices long underrepresented
- Co-creating solutions that honour diverse ways of knowing
- Iterating with humility, knowing transformation is a journey

It was not about perfection – we wanted it to be about presence. We wanted to show up with open hearts and a willingness to be changed by what we hear.

Centering Joy in the Work

During our August session, we also co-created collaboration norms. The list was solid, but we felt something was missing. When Andrea asked, “What are we missing?” someone responded, “Where is the joy?” That moment was pivotal. We realized joy wasn’t an add-on – it was essential. Joy would be the thread that brought us together, kept us engaged, and made people look forward to gathering.

Joy can often be misunderstood in justice work, seen as frivolous or indulgent. But joy is resistance. Joy is resilience. Joy is what sustains us.

When we center joy, we:

- Celebrate cultural resilience and community wisdom
- Design spaces of belonging where people feel safe to be their full selves
- Reclaim our right to thrive—not just survive

Joy reminds us why we are here. It connects us. It sustains us. Research shows that it also makes things better for the students we serve. As shared by author, leader, teacher, and coach Elena Aguilar, “when adults thrive, schools transform into joyful, resilient, and equitable places of learning”.

Our Journey: What We Are Learning

Throughout the year, we recognized that this work is ongoing – and that it is messy, beautiful, non-linear, and deeply human. Across all our structures and touchpoints, we have purposely created space for joy, engagement, and belonging. Here is what we have tried:

- **From Me to We:** Starting every general meeting with connection activities related to one of the traits of inclusive leadership: Known, Loved, Safe, and Successful
- **Modelling purposeful land acknowledgments:** Opening Friday virtual meetings with learning about the land
- **Guest Speakers:** Inviting speakers aligned with our theme, decentering our voices, and sharing meals afterward
- **Personal Outreach:** Reaching out individually to support, and personally inviting colleagues to meeting and socials
- **Meeting Flow:** Flipping agendas – starting with connection and leadership, ending with governance: decentering systems, recentring humans

- **Leadership Series:** Launching a speaker series focused on relationships
- **Social Connection:** Creating relaxed spaces for people to connect at all levels of the 'hierarchy'

Our Impact

Over the year, we saw a significant increase in attendance at general meetings and socials, so much so that we have had to increase the budgets for these events next year. We also saw an increase in the number of people putting their names forward for working groups. We even ended the year with a fulsome election, with multiple people running for the positions, demonstrating to us that more people wanted to be part of the executive. Most importantly, the tone of our gatherings shifted – less formal, more joyful, more human.

We received feedback from our colleagues:

- *"The tone and tenor of the VEPVPA leadership – heart, clarity, good humour, and humanity. Thank you!"*
- *"I loved the opening activities, especially the one highlighting LOVE as a pedagogical centre."*



Norms

Notice discomfort, stay curious

Speak with (not to) others

Listen to understand and ask questions for clarity

Name and acknowledge contributions

One process at a time, one topic at a time

Leave with a little more joy than you came with