

**Manitoba Education Reforms, White Settler Discourses, and the Marginalization of
Indigenous Perspectives**

by

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ABSTRACT

In 2019, the province of Manitoba started a process of reforming the education system, however it is important to question the role of white settler colonialism in this process. This critical discourse analysis examined how white settler colonialism is normalized and advanced through the discourses found in selected Manitoba education reform documents. Contrasting discourses emerged in the government documents and the briefs submitted from education organizations and school divisions. The dominant discourse, found particularly in the government documents and other documents, featured colour-blind ideology that normalized whiteness. Indigenous students were frequently discussed using a deficit narrative, while ideological discourse structures put distance between the Indigenous community and the education system. Neoliberal views of learning and achievement were emphasized in the dominant discourse, which conflicted with definitions of achievement put forth by Indigenous scholars. Attributes of Indigenous learning were often omitted or instrumentalized to further neoliberal views of learning and achievement. Superficial integration of Indigenous content and perspectives was evident, running counter to a more transformative trans-systemic integration of Indigenous and Eurocentric knowledge systems. In summary, these discourses worked to normalize and advance white settler colonialism and marginalize Indigenous perspectives, while contrasting discourses offered a transformative vision of an education system based in principles of equity.

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In Manitoba, there has recently been extensive dialogue about reforming the education system. While some voices have called for transformative changes motivated by principles of equity, other views are based in white settler colonial ideology that prioritizes neoliberal education reforms and marginalizes Indigenous perspectives within the education system. This thesis will explore how these discourses emerge within select education reform documents in Manitoba and how they work to advance white settler colonialism.

Research Problem and Research Questions

In 2021, the provincial government of Manitoba released plans to radically overhaul the education system. Citing the need to improve student outcomes, increase accountability and reduce achievement gaps (Government of Manitoba, 2021a), the province released Bill 64: The Education Modernization Act and the *Better Education Starts Today (BEST)* report. These documents outline a plan that involved eliminating elected school boards and centralizing the administration of school divisions under a provincial education authority, while also aiming to engage parents and improve student and teacher outcomes (Bill 64: The Education Modernization Act, 2021; Government of Manitoba, 2021a). Criticism of these planned reforms was immediate and varied. People cited concerns about losing local voice in the move to a centralized system (Koop, 2021), the lack of focus on poverty and other systemic barriers (Reimer & Brown, 2021), the entrenchment of systemic racism (Ennab, 2021; Macintosh, 2021), and the failure to prioritize Indigenous education and local knowledge (Sinclair, 2021). While the reform documents focused on improving student achievement, these critiques questioned which groups in Manitoba were being prioritized in the proposed plan.

In October 2021, the provincial government withdrew Bill 64 after intense public backlash against the bill. However, as the ideologies that motivated the bill remain, the ideas, values, positions, and arguments exemplified in the bill are still worth examining. Some journalists predicted a new education bill will be introduced due to the withdrawal of Bill 64 (Brodbeck, 2021). While this has not yet happened, in April 2022, the provincial government released the new *Manitoba K to 12 Education Action Plan* (Government of Manitoba, 2022), which lists current and future actions in response to the Manitoba Education Commission's report *Our Children's Success*. With the arrival of this action plan, it is clear that the ideologies that have been driving this reform movement have not disappeared and require scrutiny.

Education reform movements in North America have historically emphasized the perspectives and ideologies of white settler society, leaving Indigenous worldviews and ways of knowing on the margins (Battiste, 2013). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (2015) *Calls to Action* pushed back against these trends, calling for governments to educate teachers on integrating Indigenous knowledges and teaching methods and creating curricula that more accurately represent Indigenous peoples in Canada. Additionally, the Commission called for new Aboriginal education legislation committed to closing achievement gaps and improving education success rates of Indigenous students, while also emphasizing culturally appropriate curricula, protecting Indigenous languages, and "enabling parental and community responsibility, control, and accountability" (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, p. 165). While the latter call to action is directed towards the federal government, it is important to consider how the provincial reform movement that aimed to radically transform the province's school system compares to these directives. In the Manitoba

reform movement, how has white settler colonial ideology been advanced and how have Indigenous perspectives been positioned? The discourses of teaching and learning in the documents and discourses connected with these reforms are not neutral, but rather value-driven discursive events that merit examination for the underlying ideologies. As the province moves forward with a new K to 12 Education Action Plan, these ideologies continue to shape the provincial education system and what it means to learn and succeed in the school system.

This study analyses documents connected to these education reform discourses in Manitoba. These include government documents that present proposed reforms, as well as documents from other organizations that either present their own vision for education in Manitoba or respond to the government reform proposals. These Manitoba education reform documents were analysed to determine whether and in what ways white settler colonialism is advanced in the selected Manitoba education reform documents. To investigate this overarching question, I use the following specific research questions:

- i. How is race constructed in the selected documents and how might this construction work to normalize white settler colonialism?
- ii. Whether and in what ways do discourses of learning and achievement in these documents advance white settler interests and white settler colonial ideology?
- iii. How do discourses of learning and achievement in these documents position Indigenous ways of knowing and learning within the school system? How does such positioning link to a normalizing of white settler colonialism and an advancing of white settler colonial ideology and interests?

It is necessary to make a note about the terminology used in this study. In this document, I will use the term *Indigenous* when referring to Indigenous peoples, perspectives or knowledge systems, particularly when speaking more generally. In Canada, the term *Aboriginal* is another general term found in many legal documents. I will use this term when referencing specific documents where it was used, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action. The terms *First Nations*, *Métis*, and *Inuit* will be used to discuss specific Indigenous groups. As well, *White* will be capitalized when referring to a racial group, but not capitalized when referring to a concept, such as white settler colonialism or whiteness.

Purpose of the Study and Its Rationale

The recent proposed education reforms in Manitoba are important to consider because they denote prominent conceptions of learning, achievement, and success within the school system. These ideas will continue to influence perceptions of education, as well as future potential reforms. While *BEST* and other documents presented the plan as moving the province forward toward a bright future, this idea needs to be critiqued as a colonial move towards settler futurity (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013), meaning a move that maintains the dominance of settlers and settler perspectives in Canada going forward. Indigenous achievement is noted as a primary concern in *BEST*, but what ideology motivates this concern and this conception of success? Through examining the ideological discourse structure of the reform documents using critical discourse analysis, this study will identify whether and in what way they normalize white settler colonialism. Constructions of race and how Indigenous students are framed in the documents will be considered. As well, discourses of learning and

achievement will be analysed to determine how they position Indigenous ways of knowing and learning within the school system and how this positioning might advance white settler colonial interests and white settler colonial ideology.

It is important to study how white settler colonialism is normalized in Manitoba education reform documents due to the long history of cognitive imperialism in the Canadian school system. Cognitive imperialism is manifested in schools which are rooted in patriarchal and Eurocentric knowledge systems that privilege colonial dominance within curricula, language, and teaching methods (Battiste, 2013). A clear example of cognitive imperialism was the residential school system in Canada. From 1883 to 1996 at least 150,000 Indigenous children were removed from their families and required to attend residential schools. These schools were envisioned as a way to eliminate the children's Indigenous culture and language and replace them with Eurocentric culture. The forced removal of Indigenous culture and language, in addition to the abusive and deadly conditions at the residential schools, caused severe intergenerational trauma for survivors and their families (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). While residential schools are an example rooted in both distant and recent history, cognitive imperialism has continued to this day. Eurocentric curricula are widespread in Canada, where "Aboriginal content has been so marginalized, fragmented, and delivered from a Eurocentric perspective as to have not much effect on students" (Battiste, 2013, p. 163). Other structural inequities exist that further emphasize the presence of cognitive imperialism in Canadian education systems, such as the lack of an Indigenous education system in Canada, the limited control of education by Indigenous groups, and severe funding disparities

between First Nations students and non-Indigenous students (Vowel, 2016). The presence of cognitive imperialism in Canadian education systems is evident.

Cognitive imperialism in and through a Eurocentric-based education system has its impact in Manitoba. The 2016 census indicated that 18% of people living in Manitoba are Indigenous (Statistics Canada, 2017a). Within the provincial education system, there are significant gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in terms of graduation rates, grade twelve exams, middle years assessments and early years assessments (Government of Manitoba, 2021b). In addition to these achievement gaps, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) emphasized that the legacy of residential schools, a system based in cognitive imperialism and cultural genocide, “has led to the chronic unemployment or underemployment, poverty, poor housing, substance abuse, family violence, and ill health” (p. 133) for many survivors and has had intergenerational impacts, for instance, reflected in persisting income and education gaps. Cognitive imperialism has also resulted in a system that views Eurocentric curriculum as foundational, while devaluing Indigenous knowledge. This has resulted in the erosion and loss of Indigenous languages and knowledge, as these have not been protected or preserved in the education system (Battiste, 1998). As of 2016, only 15.6 percent of Indigenous people in Canada could have a conversation in an Indigenous language (Statistics Canada, 2017b). The impact of cognitive imperialism has resulted in many profound problems in Manitoba for Indigenous peoples.

These facts are not surprising, given a context where culturally responsive education practices have not been emphasized. As Battiste (2013) observed:

As a result of cognitive imperialism in education, cultural minorities in Canada have been led to believe that their poverty and powerlessness are the result of their cultural and racial origins rather than the power relations that create inequality in a capitalistic economy. (p. 161)

Battiste (2013), a scholar from Potlotek First Nation in Nova Scotia, noted that resistance to cognitive imperialism and inequitable structures in education has been growing. Many Indigenous educators in Manitoba have spent years building capacity in Indigenous education in their local contexts (Sinclair, 2021). There is a key tension within the education system as many people advocate for change away from Eurocentric practices and domination, even as proposed education reforms are largely silent on the topic. It is important to question how this recent education reform movement is positioned within the history of cognitive imperialism and how it helps normalize white settler colonial practices and ideologies. By better understanding how white settler colonialism is advanced through the discourses in the Manitoba education reform documents, I hope to challenge a system based in cognitive imperialism and make space for equitable and transformative visions of education.

Positionality Statement

As this study critiques whiteness and settler colonialism, it is important that I identify my position as a White settler living in Treaty 1 territory, on the lands of Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota and Dene peoples and on the homeland of the Métis Nation. Growing up in Winnipeg, I experienced schooling that erased the Indigenous perspectives that should be

foundational in this country, and instead was surrounded by Eurocentric curriculum and structures. Now as a teacher, I work within an inequitable system that acts to privilege White settlers while othering Indigenous students and students of colour. I am complicit within this system, and it is my ethical responsibility to use my voice as a scholar and educator to critique these colonial structures, make them visible and advocate for change. I am trying to act as a decolonizing settler, to borrow the term from Lowman and Barker (2015), working to expose how prevailing education reforms and policies impose a settler grammar, and challenging this status quo.

A significant part of this study considers Indigenous perspectives and how they are positioned within the Manitoba education reform documents, particularly in relation to discourses of learning and achievement. As I am a White settler, it is important that I discuss which Indigenous scholars inform my work as I pursue this analysis. I will use as a starting point the key elements of Indigenous learning as identified by the Canadian Council on Learning (2007), which defines learning as holistic, a lifelong process, experiential, rooted in Indigenous culture and language, spiritual, communal, and incorporating both Indigenous and Eurowestern knowledge. Battiste (2013) emphasized these elements as well. She discussed nourishing the learning spirit and said that “attending to spirit is always present in our learning environments- and is simply about creating an environment or space where people bring their whole selves, their stories, their voice, their culture, their symbols, and their spiritual experience to their learning” (p. 183). As well, I will consider the concept of trans-systemic knowledge systems, where Indigenous and Eurocentric knowledge systems both contribute in productive ways to the learning of students (Battiste & Henderson, 2021), as this offers a useful framework to

integrating both types of knowledge systems within schools. Informing my concept of achievement is scholarship by Bouvier et al. (2016) who indicated that in many Indigenous communities, “successes in learning are intimately tied to the overall community orientations and collective well-being demonstrated from the applications of their learning” (p. 28). This idea will guide my understanding of Indigenous perspectives of success and achievement.

These definitions of learning and achievement were developed in consultation with First Nations, Métis and Inuit groups in Canada. It is also necessary to approach this work with a place-conscious lens (Chartrand, 2012), by considering perspectives of learning and achievement from Indigenous groups from Treaty One and nearby territories. For instance, when discussing how she learned to be a Nêhiyah (Cree), Belinda Daniels-Fiss (2008) emphasized the importance of learning that is holistic, lifelong and experiential. She also shared the profound impact that the immersion in her language had on helping her better understand her Cree culture. She also indicated that communal learning that is guided by Elders is essential. Rebecca Chartrand (2012), an Anishinaabe scholar, stressed the importance of considering local Indigenous knowledge and perspectives within the classroom. She focused on the holistic learning that comes through storytelling in Anishinaabe culture, as well as the spiritual components of learning using the Medicine Wheel. According to Chartrand, for the Anishinaabe, learning is facilitated by teachers, parents, Elders, the environment and others. “Learning occurs from experience and builds from the relationships we have with all that exists in the life and world of our students: life-world” (Chartrand, 2012, p. 153). These scholars and others (e.g., Kovach, 2010; Poitras Pratt, 2021; Stavrou & Murphy, 2019) have provided me with

a beginning understanding of Indigenous perspectives of learning and achievement that are local to the Canadian prairies.

I acknowledge that Knowledge Keepers and Indigenous scholars with a deeper understanding and lifelong connection to Indigenous epistemologies would be able to approach this work in a fundamentally different way from me. However, I hope I can respectfully take up this work as a settler who is working to critically analyze and challenge settler discourses and institutions in Manitoba.

Theoretical Background

This study draws from several theories in order to support its methodology, critical discourse analysis. In this theoretical background section, I will start by discussing critical discourse analysis and its contributions to education policy analysis. Then settler colonialism is defined in order to more precisely identify how Manitoba education reforms advance settler colonialism. As well, decolonization is discussed, as this offers an alternative vision of education that challenges settler colonial structure and policies. Secondly, I draw from critical race theory in analysing how different racial groups are positioned in relation to each other within the documents and how colour-blind and multicultural discourses affect the advancement of white settler colonialism. Finally, I consider the neoliberal education reform movement in order to better understand how learning and achievement are constructed in the texts. This facilitates comparison to Indigenous conceptions of learning and achievement.

Critical Discourse Analysis and Educational Policy

I will discuss the methodological approach I use in this study, critical discourse analysis, in the methodology section below. Here I would like to discuss the growing body of literature that uses critical discourse analysis to analyse education policy and reform. Taylor (2004) noted that critical discourse analysis is a valuable approach for investigating policy reform in education. She indicated that critical discourse analysis “can be used to explore how language works in policy texts, and in particular how it can be used to document hybrid genres and discourses, and to highlight competing discourses and marginalized discourses” (2004, p. 444). In her study of Queensland education documents connected to education reforms, she

demonstrated how social democratic discourses become marginalized over time in the documentation. She noted that critical discourse analysis has potential for policy activism, especially because it can be used to analyse how power relations are constructed discursively. Policy comes down to text, so in her mind pushing for inclusion of certain discourses can lead to significant changes as policies are later implemented. Researchers using critical discourse analysis have used their research to challenge power structures and inequities, and it is clear that educational researchers are upholding that tradition.

Other educational researchers have also explored competing and marginalized discourses in education reform, particularly when it comes to the concept of educational equity and equality. Carpenter and Diem (2015) used critical discourse analysis to examine how policies relating to educational equity changed over time to use discourses of accountability and efficiency. Their analysis examined policy vocabularies in several American documents that outlined standards, as well as a blueprint for education reform. These policy vocabularies pointed to concepts that made up the dominant discourses and in turn guided the implementation process. The authors pointed out the lack of references to race and the inclusion of coded language that suggested a colour-blind ideology that in practice could contribute to discrimination. Another study that focused on educational equity examined discourses of equality in education policy documents and how these discourses were shaped by political ideologies in the United Kingdom (Smith, 2013). Documents that spanned decades were analysed in order to track how discourses of equality changed over time. Linking to critical race theory, Smith found that competing discourses existed. One discourse acknowledged differences between students, but included substantial amounts of deficit thinking, while

another called for a standardized curriculum and a return to homogenous knowledge. Both of these studies used their conclusions to emphasize the importance of teacher education in changing these discourses to promote greater equity in schools.

While much of the research involving critical discourse analysis has focused on education reform and policy in other parts of the world, Canada has also had a growing collection of education research that uses critical discourse analysis to examine education reform and policy. For instance, Bialystok and Wright (2019) analysed public outcry against reforms to sexuality education in Ontario and demonstrated that public discourse focused intensely on race and national identity. Another example is Colorado's (2018) critical discourse analysis of safe schools policies that examined how discourses construct students and their behaviours with the purpose of determining how to better support students in Manitoba. Both of these studies used critical discourse analysis to engage with education reforms and policies, and to advocate for changes that would better support or meet student needs.

A significant critical discourse study for the purpose of my research was Wotherspoon and Milne's (2020) analysis of Indigenous education policy frameworks. In analysing policy frameworks or draft policies from across Canada, they examined how Indigenous education was framed in the documentation and compared these documents to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's *Calls to Action*. While they found that progress was being made, they also concluded that many of the objectives are grounded in Western approaches to learning, which means deeper transformation of policy and school systems is necessary. This study provides a good jumping off point for further research. Wotherspoon and Milne (2020) noted that Manitoba's draft *First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework* refers to the

importance of Indigenous ways of life and emphasizes the significance of incorporating diverse worldviews. The document was produced after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report, so it refers more directly to the *Calls to Action* than other provincial documents. Despite these positive aspects, the implementation of this draft policy document is another matter entirely, and it is necessary to consider how this document might contrast with more recently proposed reforms in Manitoba. My study will investigate education reforms in Manitoba in order to consider how white settler colonialism is advanced and how Indigenous perspectives are positioned in the prevalent discourses.

Settler Colonialism and Decolonization

White Settler Colonialism

To investigate how Manitoba education reforms might normalize and advance settler colonialism, it is necessary to discuss how the literature defines settler colonialism. According to Tuck and Yang (2013), "settler colonialism is the specific formation of colonialism in which the colonizer comes to stay, making himself the sovereign, and the arbiter of citizenship, civility, and knowing" (p. 73). With settler colonialism, land is of paramount importance, along with the need to control land and the resources it contains (Starblanket & Hunt, 2020). This need leads to a logic of elimination where settlers act to eliminate Indigenous groups and thereby destroy their claim to the land (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). Elimination can take on many forms, such as the Canadian government's culpability in committing genocide (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015) or its creation of policies that segregated and enfranchised Indigenous people (Joseph, 2018). Additionally, there is the appropriation of

Indigenous ideas, culture, and symbols by settlers in Canada, structural racism and violence against Indigenous peoples, and the creation of national myths that deny or ignore a violent colonial history (Lowman & Barker, 2015). At the same time, the settler colonial state works to reproduce settler societies and assimilate others into these societies (Starblanket & Hunt, 2020). These dual drives of elimination of Indigenous peoples and reproduction and entrenchment of settler dominance are paramount to settler colonial interests.

Settler colonialism has developed differently in various regions of Canada depending on local contexts. Indigenous scholars Starblanket and Hunt (2020) linked the development of settler colonialism in the Canadian prairies to romanticized settlement narratives created during the campaign to attract settlers to farm the land: “The ideologies appealed to and cultivated were (and continued to be today) decidedly racialized and ethnocentric, masculinist, heteronormative, driven by capitalist ideologies, and built upon the notion that Indigenous peoples have vacated these spaces” (Starblanket & Hunt, 2020, pp. 42–43). Starblanket and Hunt asserted that these ideologies affect contemporary settler perspectives and lead to negative perceptions of those who would interfere with the order of things. This has led to narratives based in white supremacy, like the perception of Indigenous deficiency and the framing of Indigenous peoples as threats or uncivilized. This distinct regional form of settler colonialism is significant when considering the proliferation of settler colonialism in a Manitoba context.

Settler and Indigenous identities are often presented in binary terms, but it should be noted that these identities are not always discrete. Lowman and Barker (2015), two settler scholars, indicated that “there are many people who have a foot in both worlds” (p. 17). They

called settler identity an aspirational identity, tied up with the national myths of Canada as a multicultural, peacebuilding nation. As a result, this identity often works to absorb the exogenous other, creating systems that reinforce settler colonial ideology in newcomers to Canada. While settler Canadians comprise people who have chosen to settle in Canada in the past or contemporarily, this study takes particular interest in white settler colonialism. Not all settlers are White, but whiteness as a concept pervades settler colonialism in Canada.

Whiteness is not about racial profiling based on identity and skin color but rather relates to whiteness as a structural-cultural positioning of relations of power and privilege. It is not about who is whiteness but rather how whiteness is perpetuated and maintained through networks and relations of power and privilege within and across societies and in this case-within educational contexts... Relations of power and privilege and the networks that sustain them are always striving to maintain the status quo and recenter whiteness and settler colonial relations. (Styres, 2019, p. 31)

This essay will use the term *white settler colonialism* in order to make explicit how settler colonial relations work to maintain power and privilege of whiteness. This power and privilege involves the assumption that there are equal opportunities for all, regardless of race, gender, class, culture, or other differences, while privileging and recentering whiteness in a settler colonial context (Styres, 2019). This connects with the history of white supremacy that is engrained in prairie settler societies (Starblanket & Hunt, 2020). Drawing from critical race

theory, which will be discussed below, this study investigates how whiteness is privileged within the settler colonial ideology in Manitoba education reforms.

Researchers have pointed to how white settler colonialism is prevalent within schools. In the education system, settler colonialism often means that “settler perspectives and worldviews get to count as knowledge and research and... these perspectives – repackaged as data and findings – are activated in order to rationalize and maintain unfair social structures” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 2). Importantly, the processes of settler colonialism are often invisibilized (Tuck & Yang, 2012), making them more difficult to challenge. Whiteness is a contributing factor to this invisibilization, as whiteness is often constructed normatively and colour-blind discourses discourage criticism of its domination (Leonardo, 2007). For instance, Battiste (2013) describes teaching mostly White teacher candidates a Native Studies course and finding:

They did not realize... how they themselves sustained the dominant discourses of difference and reproduced a sense of superiority embodied in whiteness that marginalized, diminished, and reproduced inequities among students who were different. They did not have to consider how their own privileges were gained through the normalization of their ideas, values, and beliefs to the detriment of others. (p. 126)

As white settler colonialism acts in an invisibilized manner to reproduce inequities, it is necessary to use methodological tools like critical discourse analysis to expose how it privileges

White settlers in the education system, making explicit the white settler colonial ideology that would otherwise remain obscured.

Despite this invisibilization, in educational contexts white settler perspectives are actively reproduced and reinforced. In curriculum studies, critics point to projects of replacement, where Indigenous people are erased or framed as a part of the past, centering settler futurity (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). Other scholars have criticized the superficial appropriation of Indigenous knowledge that erases Indigenous epistemologies in order to transmit the dominant cultural capital of white settler societies (Hardy, 2016). Battiste (2013) described how the Eurocentric education system is based in cognitive imperialism, which builds its curricula and pedagogy on Eurocentric knowledge systems. “Cognitive imperialism then generates knowledge legitimation, production, and diffusion, thus positioning some knowledge connected to power, and others marginalized, dismissed, or lying in wait until they are found useful to the outcomes needed in society” (Battiste, 2013, p. 159). This Eurocentric foundation to education means that Eurocentric knowledge and worldviews are perceived as universal and necessary for success, while other ways of knowing are actively marginalized.

Decolonization

Many scholars have examined decolonization as a way of countering and dismantling white settler colonialism. According to Tuck and Yang (2012), decolonization is not a metaphor, but rather the unsettling of colonial structures and the reclamation of land to achieve Indigenous sovereignty. However, they warned that decolonization often gets coopted and interpreted as a metaphor in a way that ensures settler futurity. For instance, Lavallee (2020) viewed decolonization as a poorly accomplished endeavour within academia. Often the work of

decolonization is disproportionately assigned to and carried out by Indigenous scholars and although sweeping changes are necessary, decolonization within universities often does not go beyond micro-actions. Decolonization is an ambitious project that often gets sidelined by colonial priorities. Lowman and Barker (2015) said that “decolonization as an ethic and guiding principle for collective struggle is both the ending of colonialism and also the act of *becoming something other than colonial*” (p. 111, emphasis in original). They viewed decolonization as a collective and transformative struggle, where settlers must learn to think relationally and centre Indigenous knowledge and needs, while working in collaboration with Indigenous peoples to dismantle settler colonial structures. In order to criticize and reject colonial structures and ideologies within the school system, there needs to be an unsettling of colonial perspectives. Decolonization calls for a radical shift in the status quo that rejects settler futurity in place of Indigenous futurity, although scholars have different visions of this change.

One means of protecting Indigenous futurity is to authentically integrate Indigenous ways of knowing and learning into the school system. Tuck (2011), an Unanga scholar, advocated for a rematriation of the curriculum, meaning “an approach for participatory decolonizing educators and scholars-people who choose to consider curriculum in community, not on communities, and in ways that are anticolonial, not imperialistic” (p. 35). A rematriated curriculum includes elements that are well supported by other Indigenous scholars, including land-based pedagogies (Rorick, 2019; Styres, 2019; Weenie, 2020), Indigenous language learning (Battiste, 2013; Rorick, 2019), and relational learning in community (Battiste, 2013; Galla & Holmes, 2020; McGuire, 2020). Battiste (2013) echoed that drastic changes are required to current school structures and practices that are based in cognitive imperialism. “Until

institutions also interrogate the existing cultural interpretative monopoly of Eurocentric knowledges, assumptions, and methodologies, the efforts will be band-aids on festering wounds” (Battiste, 2013, p. 103). She stressed that education needs to build community strength and collective success, integrating Indigenous cultures and knowledges authentically into schools and school systems. These ways of knowing and learning must be holistic, experiential, lifelong, and communal. Integrating these ways of knowing is one step towards a curriculum and school system that centers and values Indigenous perspectives and knowledges.

Critical Race Theory

This paper also draws from critical race theory in order to better examine how different races are represented in the education reform discourses of Manitoba. This theory emerged from the United States when scholars like Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, Alan Freeman, Gloria Ladson-Billings, and Kimberlé Crenshaw began critically interrogating issues of race and racism in the study of law, following the Civil Rights movement. Originally it focused primarily on the experiences and treatment of Black people in America and it has since expanded to focus on other groups, including Asian Americans, Latinos, LGBTQ people, Muslims, and Indigenous people (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). As well, it has expanded into other areas of study, particularly education (Ladson-Billings, 2021). A central tenet of critical race theory indicates that racism is the norm and not an aberrant part of society. Further, critical race theorists note that inequity is a result of structural racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) and that property rights frequently take precedence over individual human rights. This has significant implications in the education system, where curriculum can be interpreted as intellectual property and where

whiteness as property works to influence curriculum, reify white norms, and exclude students of colour (Ladson-Billings, 2021). In the Canadian prairies, colonial projects of Indigenous dispossession and assimilation resulted in settlers discounting and ignoring Indigenous rights in favour of their own dominance. Starblanket and Hunt (2020) have linked this history to current settler colonial logics, especially in respect to land, resources, and commodities. The concepts of whiteness and these settler colonial logics are significant when it comes to considering education policies and reforms in Manitoba, particularly in connection with how white settler colonialism is reinforced within these policies.

Critical race theorists outlined many ways in which structural racism is embedded within the education system. For instance, Ladson-Billings (2021) reframed the achievement gap between White students and Black students in the United States as an education debt. She noted that Black students and other students of colour have experienced a series of inequities in the school system. Historically they have had fewer educational opportunities, often being excluded from public education or receiving schooling that was of lower quality. Currently there are significant funding disparities between urban and suburban schools and many families of colour have been actively excluded from decision making in their school communities. Taken together, these factors create a moral debt that must be holistically addressed in order to have a better and more just educational future. The idea of a moral debt is relevant in Manitoba, particularly considering the emphasis on the achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in government education reform documents (Government of Manitoba, 2021a). Critical race theorists also examined other issues of racial equity in education, including a curriculum that relies on a hegemonic European canon, the grouping of students along racial

lines, a disciplinary system that disproportionately targets students of colour and assessment practices that are racially biased (Ladson-Billings, 2021).

Various concepts emerged from critical race theory that are useful when analysing education policy and education reforms. Critical race theory “views policy not as a mechanism that delivers progressively greater degrees of equity, but a process that is shaped by the interests of the dominant White population” (Gillborn, 2013, p. 134). This is exemplified through the concept of interest convergence, which was originally conceived by critical race theorist Derrick Bell. Interest convergence means that marginalized groups will make progress towards equity only when this equity is also in the interest of the White people in power (Gillborn, 2013). A key example is critical race theorists’ analysis of the famous *Brown v. Board of Education* decision which ostensibly desegregated schools in the United States. Critical race theorists argued that this decision occurred as the result of White and Black interests converging. It served “White interests-improving the national image, quelling racial unrest, and stimulating the economy-as well as Black interests-improving the educational condition of Black children and promoting social mobility” (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 129). However, the *Brown* decision failed to ensure equality of outcomes for Black students and many schools still demonstrate considerable racial segregation. The critical race analysis of the *Brown* decision illustrates that while legislation governing education policies may endeavour to address issues of equity, the outcomes of these policies can fall short, particularly when equity is not the sole motive of the policy. As this critical discourse analysis examines the discourses within Manitoba education reform documents, the concept of interest convergence may be relevant in examining how Indigenous education is positioned within the documentation. Is Indigenous

education promoted to improve equity in schools or is it positioned as a means to ensure Eurocentric definitions of achievement?

Another important concept discussed by critical race theorists is colour-blindness, where discourses downplay or fail to acknowledge race or racism. Colour-blind discourses are prominent in many educational policies, such as the United States' No Child Left Behind Act (Leonardo, 2007). In policy, colour-blindness "individualizes success and failures... [and] blames people of color for their limitations and behaviors" (Leonardo, 2007, p. 267). Similarly, criticisms have been leveled at multicultural education, which posits that all races are equal, while in practice white middle class norms predominate institutions (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Multicultural discourses have also been criticized as limiting recognition of Indigenous sovereignty and curtailing meaningful integration of Indigenous content and perspectives in schools (St. Denis, 2011). Colour-blindness is relevant in this study, as it will offer a lens to analyse the language used within the education reform documents. Examining social group identifiers and how they are positioned in the texts will offer insights into how race is constructed in the discourses, as well as how these constructions are connected to Eurocentric or Indigenous conceptions of learning and achievement. The concept of colour-blindness will also help identify how whiteness may be framed as normative in the documents and will assist in exploration of how white settler colonialism may be advanced through these discourses.

Critical race theory offers a framework for education policy analysis that I considered when designing this study. Bradbury (2020) developed questions to ask when examining education policy, such as "How is white dominance prioritized?" and "How does this maintain/continue/reinforce white dominance?" (p. 247) The previously mentioned critical race

concepts are useful in addressing these questions as this study endeavours to uncover how white settler colonialism is advanced within Manitoba education reforms. When connecting critical race theory with issues of colonialism, it should be noted that Brayboy (2005) developed a tribal critical race theory, which is based on nine tenets. These include that “concepts of culture, knowledge, and power take on new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens [and that] governmental policies and educational policies toward Indigenous peoples are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 429). These tenets are important to consider as I draw from critical race concepts over the course of this study.

Neoliberal Education Reform

To examine the recent education reform movement in Manitoba, it is necessary to discuss the broader context of neoliberal education reforms. This section will discuss neoliberal education reform, paying particular attention to neoliberal views of learning and achievement. As well, this section discusses the neoliberal education reform movement in Canada, which includes policies that emphasize teacher performance and accountability, increased managerialism, standardized curriculum and testing, the decentralization of provincial responsibility in education, and increased privatization (Carpenter et al., 2012; Elnager, 2019; Rogers, 2021; Sattler, 2012). The section will also focus on the connection between neoliberal education reforms, inequity, and colonialism.

Neoliberal Views of Learning and Achievement

To understand neoliberal views of learning and achievement, it is necessary to discuss neoliberal approaches to education. Neoliberalism as an economic and political ideology that first emerged in the late 1970s as a form of capitalism that emphasized a smaller role for government in the regulation of the economy. Neoliberal economic movements meant a decrease in social programs, the reduction of inflation, and the centering of business needs as a government priority (Stanford, 2008). Neoliberal views of education are driven by a similar market logic, which envisions schools as places to train workers to fulfill economic needs using various market mechanisms to ensure effectiveness (Apple, 2001). Under the dual purposes of efficiency and accountability, this market logic often leads to the standardization of curriculum and assessment, the push to privatize and cut funding to public schools, and the treatment of knowledge as a commodity (Au, 2009; Giroux, 2013). As Giroux (2013) noted, “in this discourse, free-market reforms refuse to imagine public education as the provision of the public good and social right and reduces education to meet the immediate needs of the economy” (p. 460). In focusing on these economic needs, other purposes of school are not emphasized, particularly purposes that are more community-oriented such as the development of citizens who actively participate in the democratic process or who advocate for social justice.

Under such reforms, learning becomes a standardized process, defined by the acquirement of specific and targeted competencies and skills (Giroux & McLaren, 1986). Back-to-basics approaches are often prioritized, emphasizing literacy, numeracy, and science skills (Au, 2011). Giroux (2013) criticized the lock-step pedagogies that often result from these back-to-basics approaches, saying it is based on the:

erroneous assumption that all students can learn from the same materials, classroom instructional techniques, and modes of evaluation. The notion that students come from different histories and embody different experiences... is strategically ignored within the logic and accountability of management pedagogy theory. (p. 462)

Accountability for learning is key in neoliberal education reforms, which some criticized as resulting in the rote learning of disjointed skills and knowledge in an effort to satisfy test requirements (Au, 2011). With economic competitiveness being a key motivator for learning and achievement, neoliberal education reforms create a system that is in stark contrast to the Indigenous ways of learning that were previously mentioned, particularly the relational nature of learning in community and learning in context.

A key component of the standardization of learning is the standardization of assessment, which in many instances has evolved into high-stakes testing that aims to quantify the success of students and schools. The use of high-stakes testing as a measurement device has been prevalent in the United States since the introduction of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002. This legislation required that schools have students meet benchmarks in math, reading, and other selected subjects, or risk losing federal funding (Au, 2009). This type of standardized assessment and high-stakes testing demonstrate how a neoliberal worldview frames student achievement. Au (2009) noted that high-stakes testing leads to the strong classification of knowledge, pedagogy, students and schools. The tests typically assess math, reading and writing, which means the knowledge of those subjects is valued while the other, untested,

subjects are not. As a result, achievement is defined by aptitude with specific numeracy and literacy knowledge and skills, while other ways of knowing are less valued. Similarly, under this logic students and schools are classified as passing or failing, leaving limited middle ground when it comes to student achievement. “The strong framing associated with high-stakes testing literally communicates that some students should not be considered as a valuable part of the curriculum, thereby increasing their alienation from the process of education as a whole” (Au, 2009, p. 118). Under neoliberal reforms, student achievement is narrowly classified as meeting skills that offer perceived value to the economy, while other types of success are unvalued. While Au was primarily discussing high-stakes testing in the United States, reforms involving standardized assessment are growing throughout Canada (Carpenter et al., 2012; Rezai-Rashti & Segeren, 2020; Sattler, 2012), meaning understanding neoliberal views of education and achievement are relevant to this study.

Neoliberal Education Reforms in Canada

Neoliberal education reforms are becoming increasingly relevant in Canada. For instance, Rogers (2021) wrote about how strong movements for racial equity were frequently sidelined by neoliberal reforms and framing in Nova Scotia from 1994 onwards. Official documents pushing for education reform frequently focused on achievement gaps.

African Nova Scotian learners are only discussed in the ‘closing the gap’ section, meaning that their presence is noted in terms of achievement gaps, as connected to neoliberal understandings of test scores and productivity, and not as whole students who need to negotiate a racist system. (Rogers, 2021, p. 197)

In the Nova Scotia education reforms, individual achievement became the key focus, while racial equity and structural injustices were obscured. The prioritization of neoliberal education reforms in Canada over systemic antiracist reforms is apparent in this literature.

More broadly, neoliberal education reforms have started to take hold in other Canadian provinces. For instance, between 1990 and 2010 Ontario saw a trend towards increased curriculum standardization, centralization of governance structures, and accountability, regardless of which political party was in charge (Sattler, 2012). This led to “major policy shifts that have focused on decentralising provincial responsibilities to municipalities, destabilising organised labour amongst educators, privatisation within and of schools and increases in standardisation of testing and curriculum” (Carpenter et al., 2012, p. 147). Moreover, teachers have reported that the introduction of testing has affected their pedagogy as they try to meet the goals laid out in standardized tests. As well, a lack of funding resulted in corporate partnerships and increasingly the loss of arts courses (Carpenter et al., 2012). Other examples of economic-driven decision making in public school include the internationalization of Manitoba’s public schools, which “manifested a window of opportunity for these neoliberal public discourses to commodify, marketize, privatize, and expand the policy community of public schooling” (Elnager, 2019, p. 211). As neoliberal thinking is present in Canadian school policies and reforms, it is relevant to consider how discourses of learning and achievement in Manitoba education reform exemplify aspects of neoliberal education reforms.

Neoliberal Education Reforms, Inequity and Colonialism

While neoliberal education reforms incorporate rhetoric related to efficiency, privatization, standardization, and effectiveness, recently neoliberal movements have coopted concepts relating to equity, justice, and fairness (Sardoč, 2021). For instance, the use of high-stakes testing with the aim to close racial achievement gaps has been framed as an antiracist action that aims to promote racial equity. However, Au (2016) noted that “as a result of high-stakes testing, low-income, children of color are subjected to a qualitatively different educational experience than that of their Whiter, more affluent counterparts” (p. 51). Rogers (2021) found similar trends in Nova Scotia, where from 1994 to 2018 education policies shifted from policy that explicitly focused on race and structural racism to policies that were concerned with test scores. The intense focus on achievement gaps resulted in “neoliberal education policy [that] does not include conversations of race, racism, or institutional inequities, as they are incommensurate goals, which has led to a color-blind neutralization of public education” (p. 192). The links between neoliberal education reforms and colour-blind policies that fail to challenge institutional inequities are evident in this literature. Additionally, other studies have linked neoliberal reforms with increased segregation in schools and the reproduction of racial inequalities (Brathwaite, 2017). While neoliberal education reforms often make claims of promoting equity, researchers suggest the outcomes of these reforms are not equitable.

It is difficult to divorce neoliberal education reforms from a wider context of inequitable practices. For example, neoliberal focus on evidence-based education practices can be seen as an outgrowth of the colonial past, as argued by Shahjahan (2011). He asserted that as neoliberal market logic is promoted, past colonial ideologies are replicated in terms of how

global imperial economic powers are aiming to develop and exploit workers. The link between neoliberal movements and colonialism is also evident in Indigenous education reforms. For instance, Godlewska et al. (2013) studied a proposed plan that advocated for individualizing the distribution of Indigenous post-secondary funding, a plan which is consistent with the deregulation and privatization favoured in neoliberal reforms. In linking the plan to the broader neoliberal reform movement, they also connected it to a long history of assimilative and colonial education practices in Canada. Similarly, Wotherspoon (2014) connected democratic colonialism in Canadian Indigenous education reform to neoliberalism. Many of these reforms emphasize market interests and job readiness, which are not consistent with Indigenous perspectives on learning. “This neoliberal focus on economic opportunity as job training is accompanied by a neocolonial imposition of policies and actions that in many respects fail to take into account the rights and needs of indigenous communities” (Wotherspoon, 2014, p. 331). A relevant example of the disconnect between neoliberal education reforms and Indigenous perspectives is the steady emphasis on closing the achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. Wotherspoon (2014) noted that Indigenous attitudes towards educational success are often broader than filling the labour market, but discussion of the achievement gap generally has a narrow economic focus instead of more culturally responsive definitions. In this case, a neoliberal focus on education and colonialism are linked in their prioritization of white settler economic aims and their marginalization of Indigenous perspectives.

The links between neoliberal education reforms and colonialism are evident. Tuck and Yang (2012) noted that capitalism is a technology of colonialism, while Starblanket and Hunt

(2020) discussed the capitalist drive to settle the Canadian prairies that has contributed to settler colonial ideologies. The neoliberal education reform movement is consistent with this history, as it works to further settler colonialism. This is evident when concepts from critical race theory are used to consider the connections between neoliberalism and settler colonialism within the school system. For instance, Wotherspoon's (2014) discussion of the narrow and economic-focused achievement gap is consistent with Ladson-Billings' (2006) view that focusing on the achievement gap fails to address underlying problems. The concept of interest convergence is relevant when neoliberal education reforms are positioned as solutions to inequities, but with the underlying goal of furthering a neoliberal and colonial agenda. Au's (2016) discussion of high-stakes standardized testing is an example. Neoliberal education reforms function to further colonial projects, so it is useful to consider how these ideas are represented in the literature on neoliberal education reforms when examining discourses relating to learning and achievement. In particular, it will provide useful background for examining how discourses of learning and achievement are framed in the documents compared to how Indigenous ways of learning are positioned.

Methodology

In this section, I discuss why I chose to use critical discourse analysis and outline the sociocognitive approach to critical discourse analysis used in this study. Afterwards, I describe the documents that were analyzed and the analysis process.

Critical Discourse Analysis

This study used critical discourse analysis to investigate whether and in what ways white settler colonialism is normalized within the discourses found in the selected Manitoba education reform documents. Additionally, this study examined how discourses of learning and achievement in these documents position Indigenous ways of knowing and learning within the school system and how these discourses of learning and achievement might advance white settler interests and white settler colonial ideology.

Critical discourse analysis is a suitable methodological approach for this study as it is particularly concerned with questioning how power sites and structures are demonstrated within discourses. This is useful when critiquing colonial relationships as is the case in this study. Theorists who use this methodology assert that discourses demonstrate sites of power and domination in society, and these discourses themselves also exert power by shaping society (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). As a result, critiquing how discourses demonstrate colonial domination can also reveal how these discourses reify colonial structures. Critical discourse analysts also hold that language is a social construction, which is both influenced by context and exerts influence over the context in which it occurs (Rogers et al., 2005).

Critical discourse analysis is well positioned to question how the language within Manitoba education reform documents works to create discourses that normalize white settler colonialism. It can be used to examine discourses of learning, achievement, and accountability that advance white settler interests and white settler colonial ideology, while marginalizing Indigenous ways of knowing and learning. This analytic approach has proven to be a useful methodology for analysing how discourses work to reinforce and reproduce power within education policy (Carpenter & Diem, 2015; Colorado, 2018; Smith, 2013). Ball (2006) asserted that policy and its constituting texts act as discourse and “exercise power through a production of ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’” (p. 48). In this sense, the discourses in the Manitoba education reform documents discursively produce a ‘truth’ about the best way forward towards an improved school system, which in turn exerts power over public perception of what constitutes learning and achievement. These discourses are comprised of subjective mental models that are represented through ideological discourse structures (van Dijk, 2016). These structures are used to reproduce power; therefore, an analysis of these discursive structures can reveal an advancement of white settler colonialism in and through Manitoba education reform discourses. Since white settler colonialism is often invisibilized within society and construed as normative, critical discourse analysis can unpack what would otherwise remain obscured, while also questioning unequal power structures that are present within the education system in Manitoba.

This study drew on van Dijk’s sociocognitive approach to critical discourse analysis (van Dijk, 2016). The sociocognitive approach is distinct from other approaches to critical discourse analysis, as it involves the Discourse-Cognition-Society triangle. Other approaches in critical

discourse studies might ignore the cognitive component to discourse, arguing that mental processes of individuals are private and that public discourse structures deserve greater attention. However, van Dijk (2016) argued that positioning discourse within its cognitive context is an essential part of any sociocognitive critical discourse analysis. “Discourse structures and social structures are of a different nature, and can only be related through the mental representations of language users as individuals and as social members” (van Dijk, 2016, p. 64). In critical discourse analysis, it is important to examine cognitive structures, such as the mental models of individuals and groups, since these mental models affect how discourses are produced and are in turn affected by discourses. In fact, considering mental models helps to “make explicit many properties of text and talk that are now taken for granted” (van Dijk, 2006, p. 161). As a result, the focus on cognition allows for a more meaningful analysis of particular discourse structures, such as metaphors, ideological polarisation, argumentation, norms and values (Van Dijk, 2017). Considering cognitive structures alongside discourse structures is important for a fuller understanding of both.

Various cognitive structures exist and of particular note are mental models and social cognitions. Van Dijk (2006) indicates that mental models are viewed as socially constructed representations of reality, often representing individuals’ experiences, opinions and emotions. Mental models influence how texts are communicated, but only a piece of the mental model is articulated in the texts. Mental models play an important role in both the production and comprehension of discourses, as discourses are produced starting with a mental model and discourses can only be understood by an individual if it is possible for them to construct a mental model that facilitates understanding. Two types of mental models are involved in the

processing of discourses. Situation models encompass “the situation a discourse is *about*” (van Dijk, 2016, p. 67) and are more complex than what is expressed within discourse. Context models are subjective representations of the language user’s communicative situation and control what parts of the situation model are expressed and how they are communicated. While mental models are linked to individuals’ experiences, social cognitions are cognitive structures that are shared within a social group. These can consist of knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies, and can lead to mental models that are similar within a particular group (van Dijk, 2016). For the purposes of this study, considering the ideologies and attitudes that are underpinning Manitoba education reform discourses will help determine how white settler colonialism may be advanced within the texts.

Ideologies are important for critical discourse analysis, particularly since they can result in ideological discourse structures that both reflect and reproduce the ideology in question. For example, van Dijk (2016) used the sociocognitive approach to analyse how racist discourse is a discriminatory practice, while also being the main method of acquiring prejudices and racist ideologies. He examined various discursive strategies, such as the use of pronouns, positive self-descriptions and negative other-descriptions in order to explore how discourses reflect mental models rooted in racist ideologies. The sociocognitive approach has similar potential for examining white settler colonial ideologies. It provides an approach for analysing how discursive structures in the Manitoba education reform documents normalize white settler colonial ideology within the school system and society.

The social component is another essential part of the sociocognitive approach to critical discourse studies. An analysis of social components can include an examination of macro-level

and micro-level social structures. With either type of social structure, critical discourse studies are concerned with power and domination. Van Dijk (2016) makes the point that power and domination are connected to relationships of control, which includes both social and cognitive control: “control of actions (and hence discourses) of dominated groups and their members, on the one hand, and control of their personal and socially shared cognitions – mental models, knowledge, attitudes and ideologies – on the other” (p. 71). This domination can entail exerting power over the cognitions of a dominated group, but also influencing the mental models and ideologies of the wider society. In the case of this study, the sociocognitive approach will be useful for examining how discourses within the Manitoba education reform documents selected for this study may reproduce inequality and domination in education and society.

The integration of discourse, social, and cognitive structures within critical discourse analysis is essential within a sociocognitive approach. Selected discourse structures need to be identified and described, often with a particular theory in mind. These discourse structures need “to be described and explained in terms of underlying mental representations, such as mental models, knowledge or ideologies, as part of their production and comprehension by language users” (van Dijk, 2016, p. 74). Finally, the discourse structures and their underlying cognitions need to be considered in terms of their sociopolitical or cultural context, particularly when it comes to the effects of the structures (van Dijk, 2016). This study will integrate discourse, social, and cognitive components as outlined below.

Documents to be Analyzed

Documents relating to Manitoba education reforms were analysed, including documents that outline the government's vision for education reform, the Manitoba Education Commission's final report, as well as documents from other provincial organizations that advocated for particular changes to the education system, such as the Manitoba Teachers' Society, the Manitoba School Boards Association (MSBA), the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents (MASS), the Community Education Development Association (CEDA), the Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg and Neeginan College and Winnipeg Indigenous Executive Council Education Committee, the Newcomer Education Coalition and Manitoba Association of Newcomer Serving Organizations, and various school divisions.

Bill 64: The Education Modernization Act

Bill 64 was introduced during the spring of 2021 with the intention of replacing the Public Schools Act, the Community Schools Act, and the Education Administration Act. While the bill was withdrawn in October 2021, it is still relevant to examine the discourses that are present in this bill because it is unlikely that the underlying ideas and beliefs have disappeared. The bill was withdrawn after intense public opposition, and after a change in premier, but not necessarily because the government disagreed with its approach to reorganizing the school system. In addition to changing funding models and other matters, the legislation included plans to eliminate elected school boards and replace them with education regions under the Provincial Education Authority. Bill 64 also outlined plans for the creation of school community councils and a provincial Parent Advisory Council (Bill 64: The Education Modernization Act, 2021). Unlike the other texts, which are in part persuasive in nature, Bill 64 was a piece of legislation that aimed to change the organizational structure of the entire school system.

Elements that were prioritized in the plan should offer insight into the priorities of the provincial government.

Better Education Starts Today Report (BEST)

BEST was released the same day as Bill 64. It was developed in response to the Manitoba Education Review Commission's final report. The document accepted the intent of the seventy-five recommendations made by the commission, although *BEST* often diverged from the commission's recommendations. The report outlined education priorities over the next five years, saying that "our goal is to ensure our students have the most improved performance in Canada. We will build a consistent and aligned provincial education system that is student-centred, parent-friendly, classroom-focused and accountable for results" (Government of Manitoba, 2021a, p. 4). To achieve these goals, four pillars are prioritized: governance and accountability for results, high-quality learning and outcomes, future-ready students, and excellence in teaching and leadership. Each pillar is divided into sub-goals, with a list of priority actions and other actions. While *BEST* did have some links with Bill 64, it included many goals and priorities that were not part of the legislation and the organizational restructuring of the education system prescribed in Bill 64 was not part of *BEST*. *BEST* aimed to support the importance of various goals through persuasive language, statistics, and references to outside contexts. These explanatory and persuasive passages offered insights into how teaching, learning, and Indigenous ways of knowing are framed discursively.

Manitoba Education Mandate

With the introduction of *BEST*, the province of Manitoba updated the provincial education mandate with the "Manitoba Education Mandate, Mission, and Vision" (Government

of Manitoba, 2021c). In addition to defining the province's mission and mandate, the document also outlined new divisions or teams and their responsibilities. Analysing how education priorities are communicated in the document offered insights into current educational priorities.

Our Children's Success: Manitoba's Future

The Manitoba Education Review Commission was tasked in 2019 with conducting an independent review of the education system, a process that included consultation with the public and other stakeholders. While the review was completed in March 2020, the release of the report, entitled *Our Children's Success: Manitoba's Future*, was delayed to 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The report contained ten imperatives for improving the education system. Each imperative section included a summary of what the commission heard during the consultation process, as well as research highlights and recommendations (Manitoba's Commission on Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education, 2020). Analysing the discourses included in this document allowed for comparisons of how learning and achievement were framed in different contexts, particularly in what the commission indicates they heard, what they recommended, and what the provincial government ultimately included in Bill 64 and *BEST*. Although Bill 64 was formally withdrawn, the new *Manitoba Education Action Plan* was written with the commission's recommendations in mind (Government of Manitoba, 2022). As a result, even though the commission's report was done independently of the government, it exemplifies education discourses that are still relevant within Manitoba.

Selected Briefs to the Manitoba Education Commission

As part of their investigation, the Manitoba Education Commission called for individuals and organizations to submit briefs that discussed and provided recommendations in the categories of long-term vision, student learning, teaching, accountability for student learning, governance, and funding. This study selected the briefs by particular groups that are active across the province in the education system. These included the Manitoba Teachers' Society and the Manitoba School Boards Association. As well, the sole brief submitted by an Indigenous organization was included, a joint submission from the Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg, Neeginan College and Winnipeg Indigenous Executive Council Education Committee. This brief seems particularly important as it is the only documented text from an Indigenous group on education reforms in Manitoba and therefore offers valuable insights into Indigenous perspectives on the process. As well, briefs submitted by the Community Education Development Association and the Newcomer Education Coalition and Manitoba Association of Newcomer Serving Organizations were considered. Finally, there were eleven briefs offered by school divisions from across the province that were analysed. By examining these briefs, broader attitudes can be examined, allowing for a wider examination of whether white settler colonialism is being advanced through education discourses in the province.

Selected Responses to the Proposed Provincial Reforms

After Bill 64 and *BEST* were released, various educational stakeholders published texts in reaction. These included the Manitoba School Board Association's "Local Voices, Local Choices" webpage (2021), a statement from the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents (2021), and a Top Issues page and Frequently Asked Questions page from the Manitoba Teachers' Society (2021a, 2021b). Through analysing these documents, I endeavoured to compare the

prevailing discourses in government documents to discourses put forth by other educational stakeholders, particularly in terms of how white settler colonialism and Indigenous perspectives were positioned in the discourses.

Letters by the Government to Key Stakeholders

These letters were written by the government to different community groups, such as parents and caregivers, teachers and school staff, and Indigenous families and communities. Their purpose was to inform the public about the planned reforms and to persuade the groups that the reforms offer effective solutions (Government of Manitoba, 2021e, 2021f, 2021d). Analysing discourses present in documents intended to persuade the public should help determine whether or not white settler colonialism is being mobilized and normalized in the public sphere.

The Analysis Process

Using van Dijk's sociocognitive approach, I integrated the social, cognitive and discourse components in my analysis by following two main steps. For the *first step* of my analysis, I identified and described relevant discourse structures that were found in the documents selected for this study. I read the documents, using the first research question as a lens to identify and describe different discourse structures. Then I analysed these structures in terms of the associated mental models, particularly focusing on relevant ideologies. This analysis is discussed in more detail below. I repeated this process for the second and then the third research question, using each one as a lens for identifying mental models and ideological discourse structures relevant to the specific documents. After following this step three times, I

then proceeded to the *second step* of my analysis, where I analysed the overall discourse. This involved considering the effects of these cognitively mediated discourse structures on the reform discourse as a whole and determining whether and in what ways white settler colonialism is advanced within these discourses. The whole analysis process is summarized in Table 1. Van Dijk's Discourse-Cognition-Society triangle was relevant throughout this process. In general, I started by examining the discursive components of the texts. Then I interpreted these discourse structures in terms of relevant underlying ideologies and I examined how these influence social cognitions. Finally, I focused on how these discourses and social cognitions function to advance white settler colonialism.

Table 1*The Organization of the Analysis Process*

Stage of the Analysis	Stage of Reading	Analysis Question
Step 1: Identifying and analysing discourse structures using specific lenses	First reading	How is race constructed in the documents and how might this construction work to normalize white settler colonialism?
	Second reading	Whether and in what ways do discourses of learning and achievement advance white settler interests and white settler colonial ideology?
	Third reading	How do discourses of learning and achievement position Indigenous ways of knowing and learning?
Step 2: Overall analysis	Overall analysis	Whether and in what ways is white settler colonialism advanced in the documents?

What follows describes the first step of my analysis process in more detail. To respond to the study's first research question, I completed an initial coding process to examine how race is constructed in the discourses of the selected texts. In this case, I considered how the discourses were cognitively mediated by considering the ideologies that impacted how race was constructed in the documents. Prior to reading the texts, I identified the positionality of the groups who constructed and released the documents, determining if they are predominantly settler-based organizations, Indigenous-led groups or something else. I identified and described discourse structures that position different racial groups in connection to each other, focusing particularly on Indigenous groups and White settlers. This included social group identifiers, such as pronouns, positive self-description and negative other-description, or polarization of groups. Other grammatical structures were considered, such as the use of passive or active voice in sentences or distancing language. The erasure of specific racial groups, particularly Indigenous groups, through emphasis on multiculturalism was also noted. This process helped me consider how Indigenous students and families were framed in the texts by these discursive elements. As well, the absence of racial topics was noted, particularly when coming from a more settler-based organization, as this suggests that whiteness is framed normatively. Through examining this data, I considered which ideologies are affecting these constructions of race. I drew from the critical race concept of colour-blindness (Leonardo, 2007), in order to determine how discourse structures reflected colour-blindness by avoiding topics relating to race and how this promoted a normative construction of whiteness. After interpreting constructions of race in the discourses, I examined how this racial construction relates to white settler colonialism and how it may work to normalize white settler colonialism.

For the second reading, I coded the texts for references to learning and achievement, particularly considering discourses related to a neoliberal view of education. Using this view of education, I can consider how discourses of learning and achievement were constructed in the texts. The discourse structures that were analysed were the norms and values connected with learning and achievement. I identified discursive themes that encompass the norms and values of neoliberal education reforms, such as learning as job-oriented, achievement defined by tests and grades, as well as accountability. After examining this data, I considered commonalities and differences across the texts and connections to racial constructions within the discourses. By uncovering these themes, I determined how the discourses of learning and achievement act to advance white settler colonial ideology and interests.

For the third reading, I focused on the third research question and investigated how discourses of learning and achievement in Manitoba's education reform documents position Indigenous ways of knowing and learning within the school system and their perceived function. Battiste said that "it is time to change educational outcomes for Aboriginal youth by fully integrating their knowledge and heritage into an educational system that values and respects Indigenous ways of knowing and allows Aboriginal students to embrace and celebrate who they are" (Battiste, 2013, p. 180). To determine whether Battiste's vision is reflected within the documents, I coded the texts to identify references to Indigenous ways of knowing and learning. I drew from Indigenous attributes of learning identified by the Canadian Council on Learning (2007) and I considered how Indigenous perspectives, themes, or content were connected with curriculum. To aid in this task, I examined discourse structures, such as argument, active versus passive sentences, and foregrounding versus backgrounding. After

examining these discourse structures, I analysed how they positioned Indigenous ways of learning and knowing and the underlying ideologies that influenced this positioning. As well, I considered whether these discourse structures were operationalized to normalize white settler colonialism. The critical race theory concept of interest convergence was relevant when determining whether Indigenous ways of learning were prioritized due to equity or to further support the Eurocentric definition of achievement.

Data was categorized into a spreadsheet to help with organization and analysis. While the previous analysis focused on how Indigenous epistemologies were portrayed in the documents, the spreadsheet helped me identify if they were omitted from documents. Omissions of topics or discourse structures from specific documents were important to note. By comparing omissions between documents, and noting what is taking up space instead, this provided insights into priorities within the education reforms.

After reading, coding, and analysing the texts with the specific research questions in mind, I completed a final overall analysis, considering the data as a whole in its social context. I discussed the contrasting discourses that emerged during my analysis and positioned the different education reform players in relation to each other. I examined the effects of the discourses and how the ideology of white settler colonialism was normalized and advanced in the education system via these discourses. As well, I determined how Indigenous perspectives of learning were positioned, and how this positioning advanced white settler interests and ideology in society. These research questions and the overall analysis are consistent with critical discourse analysis, which aims to challenge how discourses reproduce inequities and domination (Fairclough, 2016; van Dijk, 2016). In this case, I asked how these discursive events

reproduce domination and white settler colonialism in the education system. I endeavoured to make explicit ideology that is often invisibilized in order to fulfill the aim of critical discourse analysis to identify and challenge power structures and inequities.

Analysis and Findings

First Research Question

For the first research question, I examined how race was constructed in the documents and how this construction worked to normalize white settler colonialism. I started by examining the racial positionality of the authors of the various documents. I found that the government and school divisions predominantly consist of white settlers, although there is more racial diversity within other advocacy groups. I tried to investigate how racial groups were positioned in relation to each other, but found a lack of references to non-Indigenous racial groups. As a result, I analyzed how colour-blind discourses normalize whiteness. I examined how Indigenous people were represented in the documents, particularly the deficit perspectives that emerged, the distancing of Indigenous people, and the positioning of Indigenous people as resources to be used within the school system. I found these elements worked to advance white settler colonialism.

Racial Positionality of the Authors

Prior to reading through each document, I endeavoured to identify the positionality of the people or group who put forth the document in terms of their race. Investigating their positionality is important as it could impact the discourses that emerge in how race is positioned or discussed. To better answer the research question of how the positioning of different racial groups in comparison to each other might work to normalize white settler colonialism, it is important to understand whether the authors of documents are predominantly White settlers, Indigenous, or members of other racial groups.

Identifying positionality of the authors was difficult, as the authors of most of the documents rarely identified themselves by their race. For instance, the Progressive Conservative Party of Manitoba, which published Bill 64 and the *BEST* report, has two MLAs who are Métis and two MLAs who are visible minorities. The biographies of the other thirty MLAs on the party website do not identify their race, although they are white-presenting (Progressive Conservatives, 2022). Similarly, for the Manitoba Education Review Commission, two commissioners identified as Indigenous, while the positionality of the other eight was never stated, although they were again white-presenting (Manitoba Education, 2019). The government documents discussed in this study seem to be created predominantly by White settlers, even though their positionality is not explicitly discussed.

For the school trustees who submitted briefs on behalf of school divisions, it was often difficult to determine positionality. Biographies from divisional websites do not mention information about race. For school divisions in Winnipeg in 2018, six percent of trustees were racialized persons (Newcomer Education Coalition, 2020) and in 2021 nine percent of trustees were Indigenous (Winnipeg Indigenous Executive Circle, 2021). It is unclear how school divisions outside of Winnipeg compare. It is difficult to assess the racial positionality of teachers due to a lack of data, although statistics from the Winnipeg School Division indicate that the majority of their teachers are White. The Newcomer Education Coalition reports that 10.2 percent of permanent teachers in the Winnipeg School Division were visible minorities in 2017/2018 (2020), while other school divisions in the city did not collect data on this topic. The province of Manitoba last conducted a Manitoba Indigenous Teacher Education survey in 2013, which reported that 8.6% of teachers in Winnipeg were Indigenous. While most divisions do not

collect this information, a selected staff profile of Winnipeg School Division indicates that 8.6% of its permanent teachers were Indigenous in the 2018-2019 school year (Winnipeg Indigenous Executive Circle, 2021). These racial representation statistics are probably echoed to some extent within other school divisions and education groups in Manitoba, such as the Manitoba Teacher Society (MTS) or Manitoba School Board Association (MSBA). White settlers are presumably more represented than other racial groups within these organizations.

While White settlers seem to dominate the positions of power within government and school divisions, there appears to be more diverse representation in other agencies who submitted briefs to the commission. Both the Newcomer Education Coalition and Manitoba Association of Newcomer Serving Organizations, and the Community Education Development Association (CEDA) had greater representation of people of colour. As well, the membership of the Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg is entirely Indigenous. The positionality of these organizations will be important to keep in mind when considering the discourses that emerge in their documentation, especially in comparison to other groups.

Diversity, Colour-blindness and Multiculturalism

During the first reading of the documents, I focused on analysing how different racial groups were positioned in comparison to each other. However, it became apparent while coding the documents that most racial groups were infrequently discussed. The key exception were Indigenous people who were a frequent focus across the documents. How Indigenous people were positioned within the documents will be discussed in more detail in the next section. In this section, I will examine how colour-blind and multicultural discourses emerge, which work to erase or downplay concerns relating to systemic inequities.

White people were never explicitly mentioned in any of the documents. There was one mention of Black people, which referenced events in another province, and the term *BIPOC* or *people of colour* did not occur in any document. The term *visible minority* occurred in two instances in briefs by the MSBA and the Newcomer Education Coalition, both in reference to representation of visible minorities among trustees. The terms *newcomers*, *refugees* and *immigrants* were present in eight documents to varying degrees, but most prominently in the Manitoba Education Commission's report *Our Children's Success* and the brief provided by the Newcomer Education Coalition. However, none of these eight documents explicitly connected these terms with any racial groups. The term *race* was included once in River East Transcona School Division's brief and *Our Children's Success*, although in both cases it was included in a list of other identity signifiers, such as culture, gender or socioeconomic status, and it was not the main focus. Similarly, the term *racism* was found in four documents, although for three of these documents it was in reference to anti-racism programs or training. The fourth document, *Our Children's Success*, mentioned racism five times, although four were in reference to a story about Senator Murray Sinclair. Race and racism were not a key focus in the documents, and non-Indigenous racial groups were rarely explicitly discussed. This suggests these documents are grounded in a colour-blind ideology that invisibilizes whiteness, which will be discussed in more detail later. By omitting focus on race and racism a mental model is created in which racism, particularly structural racism, is not presented as a problem that needs to be addressed.

In the absence of explicit discussion of racial groups, it is worth examining other racial signifiers and how they are portrayed within the documents. One such signifier are the terms *diverse* and *diversity*, when used in reference to people and communities. *Diverse* and *diversity*

are broad terms that are often used vaguely, sometimes including people of many races, cultures, abilities, genders and more. Because diversity frequently includes racial diversity, it is worth examining how the term is used within the documents, whether the term contained positive or negative connotations, and how it may contribute to multicultural discourses and the erasure of racial groups. Examining how this term is used within the documents can give some indication of attitudes towards identities that are not dominant in society and the underlying mental models that contributed to the creation of these documents.

The documents were examined for references to diversity and diverse classrooms, communities, or groups of people. To start, I examined whether *diverse* when applied to groups of people had positive, negative, or neutral connotations. The term *diverse* was applied neutrally or ambiguously in five documents. An example of a neutral use of diverse was MTS referring to “complex and diverse classrooms” (2019, para. 34), as the connotations for *diverse* are ambiguous. Designating classrooms as complex and diverse could be construed positively, in terms of the complex learning opportunities such an environment could provide. It could also be construed negatively, meaning an environment that is complicated or difficult to manage. The term *diverse* was only applied negatively in one document, *Our Children’s Success*, where diverse population was connected with negative factors in order to explain low achievement and high spending. At the same time, *Our Children’s Success* and three other documents applied the term *diverse* positively in other instances. In *Our Children’s Success*, the Manitoba Education Review Commission indicates that increased immigration is resulting in student populations that are “more culturally diverse and linguistically enriched” (2020, p. 13). Linking a

diversity of culture with linguistic enrichment frames diversity positively. The term *diverse* had negative, positive, and neutral connotations across the documents.

Diversity was constructed as a problem that needed to be addressed within some of the documents. Three documents discussed the need to respond to diversity. As well, the term *diverse needs* was present in six documents, including the three main government documents Bill 64, *BEST*, and *Our Children's Success*. The latter document mentioned *diverse needs* fourteen times and identifies the need for special training to respond to diversity. As well, diverse populations were grouped in this document with other categories that were viewed as posing educational challenges, such as low socioeconomic status, child poverty, large Indigenous communities, and children in care. Similarly, Pembina Trails School Division connected diversity with the need for supports. Often diversity was viewed as resulting in greater needs and requiring resources and attention. This suggests a mental model in which diversity is constructed as a problem. This mental model of diversity results in the othering of students who diverge from what is considered normative, meaning students who are not white, cis, straight, English-speaking, neurotypical, or nondisabled. This othering means that the needs of diverse students are likely addressed as an afterthought, compared to systems which are built with diversity in mind at the outset.

Another key theme that emerged when considering diversity is increasing representation within the school system of diverse groups. MSBA discussed how a quarter of trustees represent “diversity categories, including Indigenous peoples, newcomer communities, visible minorities, and persons with disabilities... Communities benefit from this strength and level of representation” (2019, para. 35). In this case, diversity is portrayed as a strength. Eight

other documents discussed the need to improve diverse representation within trustee and teacher populations. This included the three main government documents; Bill 64, *BEST*, and *Our Children's Success*, as well as three advocacy groups; the Newcomer Education Council, CEDA, and the Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg. This demonstrates that government and advocacy agencies share an interest in promoting the representation of diverse communities within the school system, even though definitions of diversity are imprecise. The government documents did not explain why diverse representation is important, beyond the idea that it will improve student achievement. The three advocacy groups discussed the need for diverse representation to improve the voice of Indigenous and newcomer groups within education systems, particularly when it comes to decision making. The Newcomer Education Coalition indicated that "representing the needs of newcomer youth requires local and diverse voices within the governance structure" (2019, para. 36) In this case, they did not discuss responding to diverse needs, as if the needs are a problem that must be addressed. Rather 'representing the needs' calls for inclusion of diverse voices in decision making. This framing of diversity as a strength offers an interesting contrast between documents, as it suggests contrasting mental models of diversity.

Schick and St. Denis (2005) contended that instead of discussing race or referring to students of colour explicitly, other code words are often used in education, such as *cultural difference* or *inner city*. In some of the documents, the terms *diversity* or *diverse* appear to fulfill the same function. Focusing on diversity, while omitting precise references to race or specific racial groups, suggests a shared social cognition that is based in a colour-blind approach to race. Within a colour-blind discourse, group membership is ignored, sometimes with the intended

goal of reducing bias and promoting positive interactions between groups (Rattan & Ambady, 2013). Therefore, when *BEST* recommended that parent representation on School Community Councils reflects the diversity of the school, without defining or explaining what kind of diversity, this suggests a colour-blind approach to diversity. This colour-blind ideology has potential policy implications, as it often results in the view that “not only should race no longer matter, it should not be a consideration to either social policy... or interpersonal interactions” (Leonardo, 2007, p. 265). This will be relevant later when discussing the lack of focus on systemic racism, as well as the deficit narratives that emerge in the documents.

Another diversity ideology that emerged in some documents was multiculturalism, which advocates for acknowledging and valuing group membership, with diverse identities and cultures being embraced (Rattan & Ambady, 2013). As previously mentioned, four documents used the term *diverse* positively in describing people, schools, or communities, framing diversity as an asset. Similarly, Lord Selkirk School Division indicated that “we support language and cultural programs that allow our students to celebrate differences and in so doing, foster understanding, respect and tolerance of individuals who are different from them” (2019, para. 5). This sentiment embodies a kind of multiculturalism that is often linked with narratives of Canadian identity (Anderson, 2017), and this social cognition is also not without criticism. St. Denis (2011) has been highly critical of multicultural approaches in schools due to their erasure of the distinct position of Indigenous peoples in Canada by conflating them with immigrant groups. The emphasis on diversity within the documents fails to distinguish between specific racial groups. As well, other scholars have criticized Canadian myths of multiculturalism and peacemaking as inaccurate and obscuring historical and contemporary injustices with a

narrative of progress (Anderson, 2017; Regan, 2011). The use of multicultural discourses within some of the documents suggests the erasure of distinct groups and less focus on systemic issues of racism.

The main question in this section aims to determine how racial groups are positioned in comparison to each other and how this positioning works to normalize white settler colonialism. First of all, non-Indigenous racial groups are rarely discussed in the documents. While White people are the dominant racial group in Manitoba, it should be noted that “whiteness seems to be invisible even while being the necessary standard against which otherness is marked” (Schick & St. Denis, 2005, p. 298). In these documents, whiteness is invisibilized, even though constant references to diversity within Manitoba’s classrooms provide a marker of otherness. The largely colour-blind focus within the documents suggests that race is not worth explicit focus and as a result minimizes concerns relating to racism and systemic inequities. This is in keeping with other education policies that are based in colour-blind mental models. When focusing on No Child Left Behind, Leonardo (2007) stressed that its “inability to locate educational disparities within larger relations of power does not just betray its color-blind ideology, but its reinforcement of whiteness” (p. 270). Similarly, whiteness is reinforced by the Manitoba education reform discourses. By not discussing race explicitly, the portrayal of whiteness as normative is further emphasized. Despite a colour-blind approach, more diverse representation within the school system is presented as desirable and multicultural discourses emerge in some documents. However, with the exception of some advocacy agencies, the need for better representation is not strongly linked to inequities within

education systems. In failing to make this connection and challenge these inequities, white settler colonialism is reinforced within the education reform discourses.

Representation of Indigenous People

While the documents rarely make explicit reference to non-Indigenous racial groups, Indigenous students are more often a central focus. As a result, while coding the documents, how Indigenous people were positioned was closely examined. During my analysis, I determined whether Indigenous groups were described using positive or negative connotations. As well, I noted whether passive or active voices were used in relation to these groups and whether distancing language played a role in the discourse. As I coded, themes emerged in relation to these grammatical constructions, particularly a deficit view of Indigenous students.

First, I examined whether Indigenous students, communities, or groups were described using positive or negative connotations. This involved examining adjectives that were used in describing Indigenous people, plus contexts or statistics linked with Indigenous people. It should be noted that fourteen of the documents had no or very limited discussion of Indigenous people. This analysis will focus on documents that included more frequent discussion of Indigenous groups, particularly *BEST* and *Our Children's Success*, as well as the briefs from MTS, CEDA, and the Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg. Within the documents, there were varied positive descriptions of Indigenous groups. Three school divisions discussed First Nations success or evidence of improved achievement. *BEST* discussed goals to improve graduation rates in upcoming years. Several documents, notably the brief from MTS, *BEST* and *Our Children's Success*, discussed the contributions of Indigenous people, echoing language

from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Few documents used adjectives in connection with Indigenous groups, although *Our Children's Success* did refer to distinct nations and “the distinct and unique culture” (p. 76) of the Métis people. These descriptors should be contrasted with the descriptors used for other communities, such as the “strong histories” (Manitoba’s Commission on Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education, 2020, p. 29) of the Francophone language and culture in Manitoba and newcomers, who were considered to be proud, confident, highly skilled and a “significant force” (Manitoba’s Commission on Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education, 2020, p. 29). The descriptors for these groups were more varied and more strongly positive than for Indigenous groups. There were significant differences between positive representations of Indigenous groups and other groups within this document, indicating mental models that represent non-Indigenous groups more positively than Indigenous groups.

Next, I examined how Indigenous groups were represented negatively in the documents. For this discussion, I focused on *BEST* and *Our Children's Success*, as few negative representations were present in the other documents. A key finding was the frequent representation of Indigenous students using negative achievement statistics. *BEST* twice referred to Indigenous students’ low graduation rates. *Our Children's Success* cited distinct negative statistics nine times, focusing on graduation rates, poverty rates, Early Learning Indicators, health outcomes, post-secondary rates, and mental health statistics. Six of these statistics come from Saskatchewan data and are repeated twice in the document, resulting in a total of fifteen negative statistics throughout the document. In addition to statistics, some of the language used to describe Indigenous students had negative connotations. For instance, *Our Children's Success* described Indigenous students as “consistently [facing] challenges in

academic performance compared to non-Indigenous students” (p. 30). As well, Indigenous students were linked to negative factors like poverty, low socio-economic status, and the high number of children in care in order to explain low achievement and high spending in the education system. Finally, children in care, which the document identified as a subset of Indigenous students, were described as vulnerable and least likely to succeed. These descriptions and the continual and repeated focus on negative statistics construct a deficit narrative of Indigenous students. More broadly, this narrative indicates social cognitions that represent Indigenous students negatively and ignore systemic factors.

In addition to these negative representations of Indigenous students, I also examined how Indigenous achievement was portrayed. As previously mentioned, three school divisions focused on improvements in Indigenous achievement that have occurred in recent years. However, most other focus on Indigenous achievement related to the achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and the need for improvement. The focus on achievement gaps is not surprising. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has called on governments and education systems to act to close achievement gaps for Indigenous students, and many of the documents cited their call to action. Three school divisions and the Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg discussed the achievement gap. However, how the achievement gap was framed and how it positioned Indigenous students should be examined.

In terms of government documents, *Our Children’s Success* mentioned the achievement gap fifteen times, calling it vast, persistent, distinct and putting Indigenous students at a “gross disadvantage.” They mentioned improving the outcomes and achievement of Indigenous students twelve more times. *BEST* mentioned the achievement gap five times and talked about

the need to improve Indigenous achievement or outcomes an additional six times. The section in *BEST* that focused on improving the achievement of Indigenous students started with a short summary of achievement data, including that “51% of Indigenous students graduate on time” (Government of Manitoba, 2021a, p. 16). These statistics used an active voice, with Indigenous students as the subject. However, the document concluded the paragraph by saying, “improving outcomes for Indigenous students and advancing reconciliation will require dedicated efforts” (Government of Manitoba, 2021a, p. 16). This statement suggests a passive acceptance of responsibility on the part of the government and other stakeholders. By using an active voice when discussing Indigenous students’ lack of achievement, while switching to a passive voice when it comes to government or other education stakeholders resolving the problem, a deficit view of Indigenous students was evident. When an active voice was used in relation to Indigenous academic achievement, it individualized success and failure, something that is common within colour-blind discourses (Leonardo, 2007). A more active voice when focusing on government’s role in solving the problem would have emphasized that government and other education stakeholders were mainly accountable for this achievement gap, rather than Indigenous students.

As I examined how the achievement gap was presented within the documents, I also considered whether contextual factors were present to explain why this gap exists. CEDA approached this topic the most thoroughly. Instead of describing achievement gaps, they discussed barriers to learning, which positions the problem as a systemic barrier to students rather than a deficit on the part of Indigenous students. CEDA described students who leave school not as drop outs, but as push outs, which indicates students’ completion of school is

impacted by systemic factors. In discussing low PISA scores, CEDA emphasized the need to address issues stemming from colonization. The agency advocated for “an integrated approach to change through addressing the inter-relationships between self-governance, land claims, education, housing, child welfare, health, economic development and clean drinking water” (2019, para. 10). The focus remained on the need for complex systemic changes to support student learning, rather than on the achievement gap itself. A lot of the language within CEDA’s brief is consistent with Ladson-Billings’ (2006) idea of the education debt, where achievement gaps are reframed as the result of historic and contemporary inequities and not student deficits. By positioning systemic issues as barriers to learning, CEDA rejected the deficit narrative that occurred in other documents.

Other documents did not examine the context surrounding the achievement gap. For instance, St. James-Assiniboia School Division recommended addressing this gap through rigorous instruction and evidence-based practices and Brandon School Division discussed how there has been some success in closing the gap. However, neither school division discussed the underlying reasons for the gap. *BEST* mentioned the achievement gap five times, but did not provide any context to explain why the gap exists. Of the five proposed actions within the Indigenous achievement section, three focused on creating plans to track and improve Indigenous achievement and two focused on programs and curricula to integrate Indigenous perspectives and topics into the school system. Explicit focus on removing or challenging barriers to learning was not present within the actions. *BEST* never mentioned broader systemic factors, and the lack of acknowledgement of these structural issues frames the situation as a deficit on the part of Indigenous students.

While *Our Children's Success* mentioned the achievement gap fifteen times and the need to improve Indigenous achievement twelve times, the document also examined systemic issues that impact the learning of Indigenous communities. Intergenerational and historical traumas relating to residential schools were mentioned four times, and there is some acknowledgement that inequities, like poverty, racism, and the foster care system, have an impact. The report indicated that:

Education must not be addressed in isolation, but must continuously be viewed through a broader lens of intersecting factors: poverty, unemployment, lack of basic infrastructure, insecure housing, insecure access to food, chronic and acute stressors (such as domestic violence or substance abuse), and mental health issues. (Manitoba's Commission on Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education, 2020, p. 75)

As well, they referenced an Indigenous community group and Martell, an Indigenous scholar, who advocated for confronting inequities and increasing Indigenous voice in governance. There was some awareness in the document about systemic barriers to education and within the education system. However, when it came to recommending actions, closing the achievement gap was the main focus of four out of eight of the actions. Beyond a recommendation to fulfill the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action for the education system, none of the actions explicitly called for addressing systemic issues. The achievement gap remained the central focus.

Overall, the representation of Indigenous people in the documents varied. First of all, most school divisions had limited or no mention of Indigenous people or communities, in keeping with a colour-blind discourse. A few school divisions, MTS, and some advocacy agencies presented a positive representation by focusing on improved achievement and contributions of Indigenous people. The two main government documents, *BEST* and *Our Children's Success*, presented negative representations, as did a few school divisions to a lesser extent. This is evident in the frequent reference to negative achievement statistics, plus the intense focus on the achievement gap and improving the outcomes of Indigenous students. While CEDA framed systemic barriers to learning as the problem, the absence or inconsistent focus on contextual factors in the government documents presented a deficit view of Indigenous students. This is consistent with a colonial mindset of Indigenous deficiency (Starblanket & Hunt, 2020). While some documents, like CEDA's, challenged white settler colonialism, the discourses found in other education reform documents normalized colonial perspectives of Indigenous students.

Distancing of Indigenous Community

When analyzing the documents, my original aim was to identify whether polarized language created distance between different racial groups. However, as non-Indigenous racial groups were not explicitly discussed in most documents, this was not possible as I originally envisioned. Instead, I focused on how Indigenous communities were positioned in relation to the school system. Since the school system is predominantly controlled by White settlers, this in effect looks at how Indigenous communities are positioned in relation to a white dominated system. I endeavoured to examine where language was used that put distance between Indigenous communities and the school system, as well as where language created proximity

and connection between the two. Two competing mental models emerged where Indigenous people were either viewed as resources to be used within the school system or where Indigenous people were viewed as active partners within the school system.

There were a few different ways that language use created distance between Indigenous communities and the school system. One key way in which distance was created within documents was through lack of consultation or inclusion of Indigenous communities and voices. This was most evident within *Our Children's Success*, which included different visions of the education system from survey responses, written responses, submitted briefs, and other sources. In the document, when they discussed Indigenous achievement, they included quotes from a variety of survey respondents. The respondents were anonymous, so assessing their positionality is difficult. However, none explicitly identified themselves as belonging to Indigenous communities. No first-person accounts of Indigenous experiences in school were evident, and more time was devoted to focusing on teachers' roles in improving Indigenous achievement. The commission included some recommendations from the only Indigenous group to submit a brief and they referenced an Indigenous scholar. However, this inclusion was undercut when their recommendations were followed by Indigenous achievement statistics derived from Saskatchewan rather than data with a local focus. The evidence suggested that local Indigenous voices were not front and center in this document. By contrast, when discussing Northern and rural communities, the commission detailed how they made special efforts to connect with these communities. As well, they quoted several survey responses where the inclusion of the pronoun *we* or phrases like "our rural communities" (2020, p. 91)

makes it clear they were written by members of rural communities. Unlike other groups, the evidence suggests distance of Indigenous voices during this review process.

Another example of how language showed distance between Indigenous individuals and the education system was when Indigenous people were positioned as a resource to be used by the system, rather than partners within the system. This type of distancing was found four times within *BEST*, as well as twice in *Our Children's Success*, and once in MTS and CEDA's briefs. For instance, when *BEST* discussed staffing issues, the provincial government referred to limited supplies of Indigenous and French language teachers. This framed these teachers as a resource, rather than members of a community and experts in a specialized form of knowledge. Similarly, the report called for the inclusion of Knowledge Keepers and Elders. This passive phrasing positioned their inclusion as "critical components of the Indigenous curriculum" (2021, p. 16). It is true that Elders and Knowledge Keepers can improve how Indigenous knowledges and perspectives are authentically included in the classroom. However, this phrasing treated Elders and Knowledge Keepers as resources to distribute rather than fundamental members of communities with knowledge to share and guidance to give. Similarly, MTS's brief called for "the use of Elders to utilize Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods in classrooms" (2019, para. 38). This is a positive aim, but its phrasing likened Elders to a tool to be used rather than partners within the education system. These examples suggest a mental model that emphasizes an extractive and colonial relationship between the school system and Elders and Knowledge Keepers, rather than a relationship based in collaboration and partnership.

Other documents echoed this theme. For example, *Our Children's Success* acknowledged the importance of Indigenous language and culture in schools, but did not

mention specific Indigenous communities as stakeholders. Instead, they indicated that “Indigenous (including Métis) peoples and their rights have become a kind of societal barometer of the health or dysfunction of a given region” (Manitoba’s Commission on Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education, 2020, p. 76). Comparing Indigenous communities to a societal barometer is dehumanizing as it reduces these communities to a number. Moreover, this statement positioned Indigenous peoples by their function for the government, namely in measuring health or dysfunction of a wider area. It should be noted that other groups were also categorized according to their usefulness. For instance, *Our Children’s Success* identified newcomers as proud, confident, highly skilled and well-educated people who will make valuable contributions to Manitoba. However, in this case a more positive description is attached to newcomers than to Indigenous groups. *Our Children’s Success* (2020) indicated that “there are so many contributions of Indigenous peoples that are not known by Canadians” (p. 73). They then offered a one-page summary of the life of Senator Murray Sinclair, followed by three paragraphs detailing how Indigenous peoples have contributed to the Canadian military. This information is out of place in the document, but it is also telling that they chose Indigenous people who succeeded within white colonial structures, such as the legal system and the military. Failing to discuss other Indigenous people who achieved outside of colonial structures underscores the theme of Indigenous people as a resource.

Conversely, there were other instances when language was used that emphasized a connection and proximity between Indigenous communities and the school system. First of all, the importance of consultations and collaboration between Indigenous communities was emphasized. *BEST*, *Our Children’s Success*, MTS and the letter to Indigenous families all

encouraged consultation, with the letter offering a direct invitation to Elder, Knowledge Keepers, and other community members to share perspectives and become involved. Collaboration was also emphasized by MTS and Pembina Trails School Division. The latter school division stressed working *with* Indigenous Elders, which differs starkly from the language previously discussed that framed Elders and Knowledge Keepers as a resource to be used. MTS (2019) recommended that to fulfill the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, the provincial government must act "in consultation and collaboration with Survivors [and] Indigenous peoples" (para. 36). They also recommended giving support to Indigenous parents and caregivers to promote engagement of families in school.

The type of consultation and collaboration was often vague in the preceding documents, but other organizations made more specific recommendations that better define what partnership could look like. CEDA discussed ways to increase the number of Indigenous teachers, discussing community-based solutions that persuade parents to work within local schools and laddering programs that help Indigenous educational assistants and high school students enter teaching. As well, CEDA (2019) stressed that "the representation of Indigenous peoples and racialized groups must be included in decision making systems in order to ensure their needs and aspirations are being addressed" (para. 20). In CEDA's brief, the importance of Indigenous voices at several levels of the school system was stressed. The Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg also called for more Indigenous teachers, suggesting the need for universities and school divisions to work with Indigenous organizations to create Indigenous-led teacher education programs. They also stressed engagement with community in order to build trust. Acknowledging a history of colonialism in the education system, they recommended

“purposeful outreach to parents and community accompanied by thoughtful policy and support” (Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg, 2019, para. 9). Making decisions in partnership with the Indigenous community was emphasized.

Contrasting mental models emerged when considering how language works to either distance Indigenous communities from the school system or to create connection. One discourse distanced Indigenous communities by omitting Indigenous voices in consultation and positioning Indigenous people as a resource to be used rather than active partners within the school system. This discourse worked to normalize white settler colonialism by positioning Indigenous people as subordinate and with limited voice within a colonial system, while emphasizing the extractive relationship the government and school system has with Indigenous communities. This normalizing of white settler colonialism is especially evident when contrasted with other documents that positioned Indigenous communities as partners within the education system.

Normalizing White Settler Colonialism

While Indigenous people are either positioned as deficient, a resource, or partners in education, other discourses emerged that position settlers as assets. *Our Children's Success* (2020) indicated that Manitoba benefits from immigration, phrasing it as making classrooms richer. The document indicated that “many newcomers are highly educated, skilled immigrants with great pride, confidence, and resolve. Their values and contributions will serve Manitoba and Canada well” (p. 83). This positive description of immigrants was in stark contrast to the description of Indigenous people within *Our Children's Success*, which suggested that Indigenous students can develop into resilient people and critical thinkers given greater

integration of Indigenous perspectives from kindergarten to grade twelve. This contrast is also evident considering the continual emphasis on a narrative of Indigenous deficits, as previously discussed. Similarly, the document referred to the 2019 provincial throne speech, saying that “government provided a vision for Manitoba’s future as a place where people from all over the world have come to build lives” (Manitoba’s Commission on Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education, 2020, p. 29). The Indigenous erasure in this quotation is evident, as is the emphasis on settler futurity. New citizens are framed as strong and resilient with much to offer to Canada, while Indigenous peoples are positioned as requiring support and improvement.

While whiteness was never specifically discussed in any of the documents, the emphasis on settler futurity along with the recurring colour-blind focus indicated a normalization of white settler colonialism. Critical race theorist Leonardo (2007) offered a criticism of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, which shares compelling similarities with some of the Manitoban documents. He indicated that the colour-blind discourses within NCLB individualizes and blames people of colour for failures, while downplaying institutional factors, all of which ultimately reinforces whiteness. Within some Manitoba reform documents, particularly the government documents, the Indigenous students are portrayed using a deficit narrative, while systemic barriers to learning are at times ignored or not acted upon. This focus on Indigenous students as deficient, along with pervasive colour-blindness and visions of settler futurity, advance white settler colonial ideology.

Second Research Question

My second research question was whether and in what ways discourses of learning and achievement in the documents advance white settler interests and white settler colonial

ideology. To start, I developed themes drawing from neoliberal perspectives on learning and achievement, particularly examining how learning is positioned as job-oriented, how student achievement is defined, and how accountability is framed within the texts. From this analysis, I determined that a job-readiness discourse is prominent within many documents and that this discourse promotes white settler interests while limiting other visions of learning and education that could challenge white settler colonialism. Additionally, discourses of achievement emphasized standardized test results and accountability. These neoliberal mental models reproduce historic colonial ideologies, as will be discussed below.

Learning as Job-Oriented and Future-Oriented

To start, I chose to investigate how learning was positioned within the documents as job-oriented. I found the government documents, and to a lesser extent several interest groups, defined the purpose of learning to prepare students for work and meet the needs of the labour market. This worked to advance white settler colonialism by limiting space for other visions of the future based on justice or equity, as I will demonstrate.

Within some documents, learning as job-oriented was a central idea. This discourse was particularly prominent within the government documents. Bill 64 identified the entry of students into the workforce as a key need. *BEST* discussed students entering the labour market or workforce four times. The document included a section about creating pathways to post-secondary education, training and employment, where work-related learning and employment were the key focuses of the six recommended actions. In one instance, *BEST* indicated that “the success of Manitoba’s students will continue post-graduation as they move into further education, enter the labour force and begin to build lives and livelihoods as adults here in

Manitoba” (Government of Manitoba, 2021a, p. 8). The needs of employers and the labour market were also prioritized within *BEST*. At one point, *BEST* indicated that “pathways to further education and employment must reflect student and employer needs” (Government of Manitoba, 2021a, p. 17), which put the needs of students and employers on par with each other. The importance of employer needs was clear within the document.

Our Children’s Success mentioned entering the labour market or workforce seven times and discussed employers’ needs seven times. A main aim of the commission’s work in *Our Children’s Success* was to “consider the continuum of early learning, post-secondary education, and labour market needs as part of an integrated lifelong learning approach” (Manitoba’s Commission on Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education, 2020, p. 7). This vision positioned labour market needs as one of the most significant considerations of the commission, while ignoring other possible purposes of lifelong learning. This is echoed in the seventh imperative of *Our Children’s Success*, which focused on community education and public outreach. While there was some discussion of the importance of parental involvement and a list of social services that can support learning, greater attention was given to the role of employers and the business community in supporting schools and addressing labour market needs. The business community was identified as a key stakeholder whose input should be consulted. This differed from how parental involvement was described, which was more focused on the day-to-day support of students. In this document, the needs of the business community were portrayed as influential within the education system. Within the government documents, there was significant emphasis on education for employment and the labour market.

This emphasis was found to a lesser extent within some briefs submitted to the Manitoba Education Commission. A recurring phrase found in briefs by the MSBA, St. James-Assiniboia School Division, Swan Valley School Division, and Louis Riel School Division was “cradle to career.” This phrase implies that a primary purpose of learning within the school system is to prepare students for employment. The briefs of six school divisions devoted attention to career preparation or vocational programs. For instance, when discussing the need for relevant curriculum, Brandon School Division (2019) described the importance of teaching the “basics of a good employee” (para. 12). Swan Valley School Division (2019) went into more detail, indicating that “emphasis needs to be placed on career exploration, curriculum needs to be relevant to today's world and career education needs to be mandated. Technical/Vocational programming in this area is key” (para. 9). This division also advocated for post-graduation data tracking to assess career success. The learning as job-oriented discourse emerged in both the government documents and school division documents.

A great deal of attention was devoted to ensuring students had the skills or competencies needed to succeed in work. *BEST* focused on competencies five times, discussing building competencies, measuring competencies, needing competencies to be future-ready, and the necessity of global competencies. The discussion of competencies within *BEST* was frequently connected with job-readiness or job preparation. *Our Children's Success* indicated four times the importance of giving students the skills, knowledge, and qualifications to succeed in work. In one instance, they discussed the need to:

provide access to the arts in all schools, including music, visual arts, dance, drama, and other value-added community activities, to make it possible for all children, regardless of their socio-economic circumstances, to broaden their exploration of career-related and employment-ready experiences. (Manitoba's Commission on Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education, 2020, p. 59).

BEST repeated this call, using similar employment related language. Calling these activities “value-added” indicates the activities are being assessed according to their economic worth, rather than other creative, cultural, social, personal or spiritual purposes that artistic learning fulfills. As well, describing the arts as an opportunity to expand employment experiences emphasizes the primary position given to instilling career-related skills and to career development in the learning process. Other groups also focused on providing students with the skills and knowledge for the workplace, including MSBA, the Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg, Pembina Trails School Division and Swan Valley School Division. Additionally, *Our Children's Success*, Pembina Trails School Division and Louis Riel School Division all made explicit reference to the importance of 21st century skills. While the exact make up of these skills varies, the general concept of 21st century skills is strongly connected with preparing students for participation in the workforce and the global economy (Mehta et al., 2019). In many of the documents, a key purpose for learning is to fulfill the needs of the labour market through skill development.

While this was a strong theme in some documents, it was largely absent in others. The briefs by MTS, the Newcomer Education Coalition of Manitoba, CEDA, Société de la

francophonie manitobaine, Lord Selkirk School Division, Prairie Spirit School Division, and Garden Valley School Division had very little to no mention of employers' needs or giving students skills for the workforce. Other school divisions described broader goals for learning. For instance, Louis Riel School Division talked about holistic learning that develops caring and confident citizens who collaborate to promote and participate in democracy and justice. River East Transcona School Division actively pushed back against the learning as job-oriented discourse, saying "the goal should not be just ensuring our children can become employable, but it should be what kind of citizens are we producing through our education system" (2019, para. 7). While this school division did focus on the development of skills, this process was oriented towards becoming engaged citizens. While the learning as job-oriented discourse was prevalent, it was not universal throughout the documents.

In general, this job-oriented discourse is also future-oriented. For instance, *BEST* included creating future-ready students as one of their four core pillars, with the implication that students should be ready for the future of work. In five other instances, the future was connected with career or employers. *Our Children's Success* linked the idea of future with achievement sixteen times (including in the document's subtitle *Manitoba's Future*), while also connecting the idea of future to career or employment six times. A key discourse that emerged within the government documents relates to the vision of a successful future, which is job-oriented and economic in nature. Some school divisions had visions of the future that focused on developing citizens who could be active within a democracy, centering issues of justice and equity. However, these visions were not the priority within the government documents, which consistently linked the future and economic success.

The emphasis in many documents on learning as job-oriented and future-oriented suggests a specific mental model relating to the purpose of school, one that is particularly influenced by neoliberal ideology. This mental model that emphasizes economic success, particularly with its future orientation, is relevant when considering how these discourses advance white settler colonialism. Historically, life on the prairies has been heavily romanticized, where:

The ideologies that were appealed to and cultivated were (and continue to be today) decidedly racialized and ethnocentric, masculinist, heteronormative, driven by capitalist ideologies, and built upon the notion that Indigenous peoples have vacated these spaces and thus it is just the wild and underutilized geography that needs to be conquered. (Starblanket & Hunt, 2020, pp. 42–43)

The normative framing of whiteness and the deficit narratives of Indigenous peoples that was analysed in the preceding section are consistent with this vision of colonialism on the prairies. Similarly, the repeated emphasis on learning and skill development for job-readiness also illustrates how the capitalist ideologies referenced in this discussion of colonialism are key underlying ideologies in some of the education documents. This has important implications when it comes to exploring other visions of learning and achievement within the school system, as will be discussed with the third research question.

Student Achievement and Accountability

When analyzing the documents, I found that student achievement was often defined primarily by achievement on standardized assessment results. This achievement discourse can be linked to white settler colonialism due to the significant criticisms of how standardized tests affect racialized students and the connections of these tests to colonial ideologies, which will be discussed further on. In conducting this analysis, I focused on themes relating to student achievement and accountability as I coded the documents. Given the intense focus on closing achievement gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, it is relevant to consider how achievement was framed more broadly. Achievement gets a lot of attention throughout some documents, particularly the government documents, with Bill 64 mentioning achievement twenty-seven times, *BEST* mentioning it fifteen times and *Our Children's Success* mentioning 106 times. There is dramatically less focus on achievement in the other documents.

Achievement was defined and positioned differently depending on the document. Some documents strongly associate achievement with results on standardized assessments, such as PISA, PCAP or other types of literacy and numeracy scores. *BEST* emphasized the need to improve achievement because of low scores on these assessments. *Our Children's Success* indicated that “we must regain and enhance Manitoba’s status nationally” (Manitoba’s Commission on Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education, 2020, p. 11) and justified the use of PISA and PCAP by calling them objective assessments. In two letters to parents and teachers, the creation of new Early Years and Middle Years provincial tests and assessments was mentioned as a key change that needs to be made, further emphasizing the focus on testing and assessing when it comes to student achievement. MSBA also discussed international and national tests,

although reframed the results positively. The organization noted that eighty percent of students demonstrated at or above expected levels and they advocated for more effective means of addressing poverty to improve the achievement of the remaining twenty percent of students. Whether the test results were interpreted positively or negatively, it is clear that achievement and the improvement of achievement is a key focus in many of the document.

Other documents were less focused on student achievement as defined by test results. For instance, the Newcomer Education Coalition focused throughout the brief on student learning rather than student achievement. By focusing on the former, this puts less emphasis on measurement than on the process of learning itself. Similarly, CEDA indicated that “educational success is not just about trying harder or spending more time on the three Rs, it is also about addressing these environmental barriers to learning” (2019, para. 2). In this case, precursors and obstacles to success were emphasized rather than test results. Several school divisions actively pushed back against the idea that achievement is fundamentally measured by standardized assessments. River East Transcona School Division (2019) said that “the measurement of student learning and success is multifaceted and cannot be driven by one aspect such as international or national standards testing. Tests are only a snapshot... They are not a true indicator of overall success” (para. 10). Pembina Trails School Division discussed the need for data to be accountable for goals, but also emphasized the need for assessment to go beyond numbers and consider the child as a whole. Brandon School Division recommended the use of growth models, where success is defined by consistent growth for individual students rather than averaged data as a whole. Louis Riel School Division (2019) was the most critical of the use of standardized tests to define achievement, saying “pitting countries, provinces, school

divisions, schools and individual learners against each other in a race of winners and losers is not a positive way to encourage future success” (para. 28). Instead, they called for a holistic approach that emphasizes the many talents of students, which suggests a broader definition of achievement than the narrow definition derived from standardized assessments.

Differences exist between the documents when the concept of accountability is examined. Within the government documents, the purpose of using standardized assessments was framed as a means of promoting accountability. In conjunction with multiple calls for accountability, *BEST* called for more rigorous assessment and “measurable standards of excellence” (Government of Manitoba, 2021a, p. 9). *Our Children’s Success* called for accountability fifty-six times throughout the document. They further linked the idea of testing to accountability by calling for “accountability and transparency through the implementation of provincial curriculum-based tests for mathematics and literacy (with a reading and writing focus) at Grades 3 or 4, 6 or 7, and 10, with school-level scores made available to the public” (Manitoba’s Commission on Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education, 2020, p. 114). Testing as a way to ensure accountability was a key feature in these documents. Within the briefs, accountability was a section that was recommended by the commission. Several school divisions were less supportive of test-driven accountability, by either actively criticizing standardized tests or calling for a teacher-led data inquiry to drive improvement. The Newcomer Education Coalition subverted the purpose of the accountability section, by not focusing on schools’ or teachers’ accountability for achievement, but instead advocating for increased accountability of the school system in supporting students. In this case, supporting students’ needs is central rather than achievement, which is starkly different from how

accountability is defined by other documents. While one main discourse actively espoused a focus on school accountability, other documents were resistant or subverted the idea entirely. This suggests contrasting mental models of what accountability and achievement should look like in the school system. The government documents illustrated a mental model where the education system must be managed and held accountable for specific measures of achievement. Other documents demonstrated a mental model where student needs are central.

When it comes to the question of how discourses of achievement advance white settler colonialism, the previous discussion of the achievement gap is relevant. As previously mentioned, repeated emphasis of the achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students contributes to a deficit narrative of Indigenous students, particularly when the systemic factors at the root of the gap are not identified and addressed. Some organizations, such as the Newcomer Education Coalition, demonstrated understanding of this idea by repeatedly emphasizing learning rather than achievement and endeavouring to hold the school system accountable for supporting students. By contrast, a dominant discourse that emerged in some documents emphasized the achievement gap and the need to rely on testing and accountability measures to improve achievement. Standardized tests, like the ones espoused within this dominant discourse, have faced criticism in terms of how they affect racialized students (Au, 2009, 2016; Kearns, 2011, 2016; Ryan & Whitman, 2013). Au (2016) indicated that “as a racial project, high-stakes, standardized testing constructs which children (and communities) are identified as ‘failures’ by the tests, how such ‘failure’ is used to justify neoliberal conceptions of individualist educational attainment and the denial of structural

inequalities” (p. 42). As a result, continual focus on standardized testing and accountability measures fails to acknowledge and challenge structural inequalities found within a colonial education system, while claiming to be essential for closing achievement gaps. Emphasis on these measures encourages the continuation of inequitable systems.

Neoliberalism and Colonialism

Competing discourses emerged when examining these Manitoba education reform documents. Some documents emphasized holistic forms of learning and achievement and put forth various visions of education based in equity or justice. Other documents, which included, but were not limited to the government documents, contained three main discourses: learning as job-oriented, achievement defined by test results, and accountability. Taken together, these three discourses are evidence of social cognitions that are consistent with a neoliberal view of education. This view posits that the primary purpose of schools is to train workers to fulfill economic needs within the workforce, often leading to the standardization of curriculum and the treatment of knowledge as a commodity (Apple, 2001; Au, 2009; Giroux, 2013).

Accountability and the standardization of assessment are key components of neoliberal education reforms. It is notable that the writers of some documents resisted or even subverted these discourses, particularly the government focus on standardized assessments. This demonstrates that the mental model of accountability demonstrated within the government documents has opposition, as illustrated by the discussion of more student-centered assessment practices and the centering of student needs over achievement measures. Interestingly, the government definition of achievement and success that emerges within these discourses is in contrast to visions of success put forward by Indigenous scholars. For instance,

Bouvier et al. (2016) indicated that success in learning is linked to the well-being of the community and has a distinct community orientation. This community-oriented definition of success contrasts with the economic focused definition of achievement found in the neoliberal discourse. Similarly, the Canadian Council on Learning (2007) has advocated for a more holistic approach to measuring the success of Indigenous students, emphasizing the need for culturally relevant models that incorporate holistic, lifelong learning. These approaches contrast strongly with the neoliberal discourses of learning and achievement discussed above.

Tuck and Yang (2012) have noted that capitalism is a technology of colonialism. With this in mind, it is possible to interpret the neoliberal discourses within the Manitoba education documents as envisioning and reinforcing settler society, driven by a capitalist focus on the needs of employers and the workforce. The needs of Indigenous students are not the central focus within a system where the primary purpose of learning is supporting the workforce. In criticizing the federal government's Indigenous education policies, Wotherspoon (2014) suggested that a "neoliberal focus on economic opportunity as job training is accompanied by a neocolonial imposition of policies and actions that in many respects fail to take into account the rights and needs of indigenous communities" (p. 331). This idea is replicated when considering the contrasting discourses found within the documents. As previously discussed, some of the non-government documents focused on holistic learning or developing citizens who are active in a democracy. Other briefs emphasized the importance of challenging systemic barriers in order to better support students, particularly Indigenous students. These visions of holistic or equity-based education are muted or largely absent within the documents that emphasized a job-readiness discourse. This persistent focus on job-readiness and the workforce offered a

narrow vision of future success, and omitted other visions of the future, ones rooted in equity, justice or decolonization. Instead, a capitalist vision of the future was put forward, which advances white settler colonialism.

The continual emphasis on achievement as defined by testing can be interpreted as moving forward a colonial agenda. Graham and Neu (2004) argued that standardized testing is a technique used to manage populations, where what is measured and measurable is what is valued. Testing as a tool communicates what is valued by the government and leads participants to self-regulate their behaviour with these norms in mind. There are colonial implications to this framework. As previously discussed, a standardized set of knowledge and skills relating to work-readiness are valued within the government discourse, while other kinds of knowledge or skills, such as cultural learnings, are not prioritized. “Pedagogically sound, culturally rich projects no longer stand on their own merits, but must fight for attention by being shown to support those behaviours that are being measured” (Graham & Neu, 2004, p. 27). The continual emphasis on achievement as measured by standardized tests fails to put other kinds of knowledge, skills, and learning first and instead moves forward the priorities of a white settler colonial system.

Further to this, evidence-based education can also be linked with a long history of colonial discourses. Shahjahan (2011) argued that the evidence-based education movement reproduces a monoculture of the mind where diverse ways of knowing are not tolerated, due to the reliance on standardized curriculum and assessment. Shahjahan pointed out that “evidence-based education, tied to high-stakes testing and neoliberalism, reproduces past colonial ideologies with respect to developing colonized labor” (2011, p. 195). Shahjahan made

links to past European colonialism that used education systems to assimilate and produce subservient labour around the world. This connection of evidence-based education with colonial discourses is consistent with the Manitoba government discourse that stressed work-readiness and achievement as defined by standardized testing, decrying achievement gaps while at the same time furthering a narrative of Indigenous deficits.

Third Research Question

During the third analysis of the texts, I turned my attention to examining discourses of learning and achievement in the documents and how they positioned Indigenous ways of knowing and learning within the school system. I coded the text with key attributes of Indigenous learning in mind, as defined by the Canadian Council on Learning (2007) and Battiste (2013). This included attributes such as learning as holistic, a lifelong process, experiential, rooted in Indigenous languages and cultures, and communal, which will be discussed in greater detail below. The Canadian Council on Learning (2007) noted that compartmentalizing these attributes contradicts the integrated nature of holistic Indigenous learning, but also acknowledged that discussing the different elements can promote better understanding of Indigenous learning. Focusing on these specific attributes during the following analysis should facilitate understanding of how Indigenous ways of knowing and learning are positioned in the school system as a whole, even though in an authentic context the attributes would be integrated holistically rather than compartmentalized.

A Eurocentric framework for learning is often characterized as focused on compartmentalized subject areas with an “education system [that] seeks to maintain, repeat,

and improve upon successful models and experiences (e.g., best practices)” (McDermott et al., 2021, p. 41). Battiste (2013) has criticized the Eurocentric foundation of education systems, which aim to transmit curricula that are based in a monoculture of knowledge in a European tradition. Given this framework, it was not surprising that many attributes of Indigenous learning were omitted within the documents. The attributes that were discussed in the documents were often linked with neoliberal discourses of achievement, accountability, and learning as work-oriented. The frequent linking of Indigenous attributes of learning with neoliberal discourses is consistent with the concept of interest convergence and the advancing of white settler colonial interests. I also examined discourses that focused on the integration of Indigenous and Western knowledge, particularly in relation to curriculum. I contrasted them with the idea of trans-systemic knowledge systems, where Indigenous and Western knowledge systems are integrated in a way that emphasizes the importance of each distinct system. This contrast illustrates the limited approach to the integration of Indigenous perspectives within the documents.

Omissions

Before focusing on how specific Indigenous attributes of learning are included within the reform documents, it should be noted that substantial gaps exist. Six out of the eleven briefs written by school divisions contained no mention of Indigenous learning, knowledge, curriculum, or achievement. Two school divisions made vague and imprecise references to Indigenous learning, such as briefly listing Indigenous initiatives or referring to the need for relevant and rigorous instruction to overcome achievement gaps. The omissions in some documents and the lack of substantive focus in other documents suggests that Indigenous ways

of knowing and learning are side-lined within the reform documents. While Indigenous ways of learning and knowing are likely found within classrooms and schools in these divisions, their absence in the documents implies that Indigenous knowledge systems are not prioritized. These omissions normalize white settler colonial pedagogy and epistemology, as these gaps portray white settler colonial pedagogy as normative.

Gaps also exist in which ways of learning were emphasized in the reform documents. Certain ways of learning received very little attention or were not mentioned at all. For instance, the Canadian Council on Learning (2007) indicated that Indigenous learning is spiritually oriented. However, only Brandon School Division referred to spirituality, with it being an essential component of their high school Indigenous language courses. No other documents referred to or discussed how Indigenous learning is spiritually oriented. Similarly, lifelong learning was mentioned in a few documents, often in conjunction with work-readiness. Louis Riel School Division was the only school division to describe lifelong learning more extensively, as necessary for a democratic and inclusive world. Otherwise, lifelong learning was linked to neoliberal ideals that ignore the other purposes of lifelong learning, such as personal development, spiritual development, or learning in community. Finally, land-based learning received scant attention, only being mentioned in three documents. CEDA and *BEST* both mentioned the importance of land-based learning. *Our Children's Success* referred to land-based programs, but also conflated it with outdoor education, which oversimplifies and obscures the deeper nature of land-based learning that is rooted in Indigenous epistemologies. Authentic land-based learning contradicts the settler drive to colonize, which views the land as “the wild and underutilized geography that needs to be conquered” (Starblanket & Hunt, 2020,

p. 43). Without an understanding based in Indigenous knowledge systems, it is questionable whether colonial relationships with land could be unsettled through superficial integration of land-based learning. It is clear that attributes like land-based learning or spiritual learning were not a central focus within the documents.

One of the most glaring omissions was the limited discussion of local Indigenous knowledge when it comes to Indigenous education. Only MTS discussed the importance of local knowledge explicitly, indicating that curriculum related to residential schools, treaties, and Indigenous contributions need to be relevant to local First Nations and community. A focus on local Indigenous knowledge could be implied in a few other documents, particularly considering the emphasis placed on inviting Elders and Knowledge Keepers into schools. However, the documents did not explicitly connect the significance of local knowledge in this process. By contrast, some programs that were discussed in the documents are based on generalized Indigenous knowledge and philosophy, rather than more specific local knowledge, such as the Circle of Courage program (Manitoba Education, n.d.). Local Indigenous knowledge was not a prime focus within the documents, which results in the erasure of specific Indigenous cultures, worldviews, and epistemologies within the discourses.

Learning as Holistic

The Canadian Council on Learning (2007) classified Indigenous learning as holistic, indicating that “the learning process simultaneously engages and develops all aspects of the individual—emotional, physical, spiritual and intellectual—and of the collective” (p. 5). Two documents focused on the learning process as holistic in this manner. The brief by CEDA discussed the Medicine Wheel’s focus on holistic development. Louis Riel School Division was

the only school division that discussed at length the importance of a holistic approach to education, both generally and for Indigenous students. They focused on physical, intellectual, social, emotional, and moral development and equated a holistic system with comprehensiveness. The division stated that “an Indigenous inspired holistic approach to learning can make the structures and norms of colonialism become less obtrusive for all learners” (Louis Riel School Division, 2019, para. 44). This statement indicates that holistic approaches can reduce the impact of colonial structures and norms, although the school division stopped short of a more radical reimagining of these structures. Their vision of holistic approaches included play-based learning, interdisciplinary learning, and collaborative multi-disciplinary project-based learning. Notably, their arguments for holistic learning were to foster lifelong learners and flourishing communities.

The government documents approached holistic learning in a different way. Bill 64, *BEST* and *Our Children’s Success* all focused on student well-being and supporting the needs of the whole child. Bill 64 described the need for social, emotional, and physical well-being for students to engage in learning. *BEST* described the importance of holistically supporting the needs of students. *Our Children’s Success* also discussed addressing the holistic needs of students eight times. Notably, fulfilling the holistic needs of a child is not precisely the same thing as pursuing holistic learning, as the latter is more focused on the growth and development of the child. While there was a great deal of focus on holistic needs, the government documents focused on education as holistic to a lesser extent. For instance, *Our Children’s Success* indicated that “an emphasis on academic, social, emotional, physical and ethical skills, and decision-making abilities play a role in ensuring that education is

comprehensive, rounded, and holistic” (Manitoba’s Commission on Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education, 2020, p. 18). However, the same document recommended reviewing the requirement for physical education courses in senior years and valued arts programs for their potential towards career development, rather than their role in helping students develop socially, emotionally, or artistically. This indicates contradictions within the document, as it advocated for holistic education while making recommendations that undermined this approach.

As well, *BEST* and *Our Children’s Success* frequently paired the concepts of well-being and student achievement in the same sentence or linked the idea of healthy well-being as necessary for achievement or success. This suggests that well-being and holistic development were not the central goal but were mobilized with academic achievement in mind instead. In the government documents, holistic learning was discussed in limited or sometimes contradictory ways or linked with the neoliberal discourse of achievement. The latter discourse in particular supports white settler interests within the school system, as discussed previously.

Experiential Learning

Experiential learning “is seen as connected to lived experience, as in *learning by doing*, and is structured formally through regular community interactions such as sharing circles, ceremonies, meditation, or story telling, and daily activities” (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007, p. 6). Experiential learning was mentioned a few times across the documents. *BEST* discussed “experiential and workplace technical-vocational learning experiences” (Government of Manitoba, 2021a, p. 19) as a way of advancing science, technology, engineering, arts and math skills. *Our Children’s Success* mentioned similar work-based learning experiences and gave

examples of hands-on learning. Louis Riel School Division emphasized an experiential mentorship that helps Indigenous students explore careers in the medical field. While other school divisions did not mention experiential learning, many emphasized the importance of vocational programming that would qualify as experiential. When experiential learning was discussed, it was consistently connected with career development programming, but not with other forms of learning. This emphasized the neoliberal focus of these documents, as experiential learning was strongly associated with career development, but less so with daily learning activities.

Learning is Rooted in Indigenous Language and Culture

The Canadian Council on Learning (2007) stated that language and culture play a vital role in the learning of Indigenous students.

Through language, Aboriginal Peoples transmit cultural knowledge from one generation to another and make sense of their shared experience... Language connects Aboriginal people to their culture's system of values about how they ought to live and relate to each other. (p. 6)

This significant link between language and cultural knowledge was apparent in some of the reform documents. For instance, Brandon School Division offered four Indigenous language courses for grade nine to twelve students, in which "traditional teachings, history, culture, and spirituality are essential components of each course, and are a primary basis for students to

develop fluency in their language” (Brandon School Division, 2019, para. 16). The link between Indigenous language and cultural knowledge was evident within this document.

Other documents were less focused on Indigenous languages. *BEST* discussed the limited supply of Indigenous language teachers, but the development of a language program was not included in their recommended actions and the importance of language for Indigenous students was not explained. *Our Children’s Success* did not make any recommendations relating to Indigenous languages in school, although the document cited research about the importance of Indigenous languages, and it was suggested that more Indigenous teachers who speak Indigenous languages would improve student achievement. Similarly, MSBA indicated that “responding to language and culture, and promoting accessibility and inclusion remain significant goals towards greater student achievement, performance and success” (2019, para. 13). This sentence was phrased with passive responsibility, as it is unclear who should be responding to language or what exactly responding to language entails. As well, “responding to language and culture” frames language and culture as obstacles to address in order to attain academic achievement, rather than goals in their own right.

Continual framing of Indigenous language learning as a means for achievement ignores the other fundamental reasons why Indigenous language is important in education. Battiste (2013) indicated that:

Indigenous languages are the most significant factor in the survival of Indigenous knowledge and culture. Indigenous languages in their symbolic, verbal, and unconscious orders structure Indigenous knowledge. Where Indigenous knowledge

survives, it is transmitted best through Aboriginal languages... The first principle of any educational plan constructed on Indigenous knowledge must be to respect Indigenous languages, not just because students have difficulty learning without their first language, but because each language represents a knowledge system that holds a depth of knowing that has not yet been tapped for contemporary education and the future of sustainable development. (p. 146)

Most of the documents did not refer to the knowledge systems and culture that are rooted in Indigenous languages. By focusing instead on the possibility of improving general achievement through language learning, the discourses featured an instrumentalist approach to Indigenous languages. Hardy (2016) criticized education approaches where Indigenous knowledge is instrumentalized in order to transmit dominant cultural capital and curricula. He indicated that this approach prevents Indigenous epistemologies from being foregrounded as curriculum and instead results in a superficial focus on Indigenous topics. Similarly, the government documents and the MSBA brief referred to using Indigenous language education to improve achievement within a colonial system, without centering the essential role language has in promoting the survival of Indigenous epistemologies and culture. The documents instrumentalized Indigenous languages to support white settler colonial interests, while ignoring other roles Indigenous language learning could play in decolonizing education.

The Canadian Council on Learning (2007) stated that Indigenous learning is rooted in Indigenous culture. A number of documents focused on the importance of Indigenous students seeing themselves and their culture reflected in the school system. CEDA and the Aboriginal

Council of Winnipeg both discussed the importance of students seeing themselves reflected in curriculum and in the school staff. Similarly, *BEST* mentioned that “students need to see themselves reflected in the space and in the texts they interact with by incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing and being in classrooms” (Government of Manitoba, 2021a, p. 16). A related concept that emerged was the idea of establishing cultural safety for students, which was referenced by the Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg’s and in *Our Children’s Success*. There was support within some documents for ensuring that students see their culture reflected in the school environment and creating culturally safe spaces in schools.

However, there are questions about how deeply culture would be rooted within classrooms. Louis Riel School Division was the only school division to discuss embedding Indigenous pedagogies within their systemic practices. Brandon School Division discussed the teaching of culture within high school Indigenous language courses. The other school divisions were silent on the topic of Indigenous culture and its place in the classroom. Some government documents discussed incorporating cultural teaching strategies and Indigenous worldviews but relied on language that suggests passive responsibility. *BEST* indicated that “learning environments for Indigenous students must infuse culturally and evidence-informed strategies that embed Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing” (Government of Manitoba, 2021a, p. 16). In this statement it is not clear who is responsible for infusing these strategies or what the strategies are. In the formal list of recommendations, the only action that *BEST* cited that relates to cultural strategies suggests that Elders “support student and teacher learning and to *promote* Indigenous world views in curriculum, programs and parent, family and community engagement” (Government of Manitoba, 2021a, p. 16, emphasis added). Indigenous

worldviews are to be promoted in schools, but this phrasing does not make their inclusion an imperative. While culture is mentioned within the documents, how deeply rooted or widespread it would be is in question.

Moreover, linking cultural strategies with evidence-informed strategies may be problematic. In the past and today, research has predominantly been driven by colonial systems where Western-based policies direct research processes (Kovach, 2010). This has resulted in research methodologies that are extractive in nature towards Indigenous communities (Kovach, 2010) or which center non-Indigenous communities. Research can be done through Indigenous research methodologies that rely on tribal knowledges, however it should be noted that “Indigenous knowledges can never be standardized, for they are in relation to place and person” (Kovach, 2010, p. 56). It seems unlikely that *BEST* was referring to Indigenous research methodologies, as this type of research is not mentioned anywhere in the document. Instead, *BEST* emphasized standardized, quantitative research, such as PISA or PCAP. As well, the frequent focus on student achievement throughout the document suggests that the evidence-based research would be quantitative research geared towards increasing achievement. By linking evidenced based strategies with cultural strategies, the latter was being viewed through an extractive colonial lens.

Learning as Communal

Another key component of Indigenous learning is learning as a communal endeavour, involving family, community, and Elders. This can involve parents and family being a child’s first teacher, as well as having partnerships with the school and roles in decision-making (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007). There was some emphasis on promoting parental and community

involvement within the school system in the documents. Both Bill 64, CEDA and the Newcomer Education Coalition mentioned the concept of community schools, which offer wraparound services and promote greater community involvement. However, a proposed structure that was given greater emphasis within the government documents was School Community Councils. These councils would be made of parents and community members and, as *BEST* indicated, would give “parents and caregivers a greater role in their children’s education by actively participating in the design and oversight of the system” (Government of Manitoba, 2021a, p. 4). This approach to parental involvement is focused on top-down oversight, rather than more grassroots engagement in the classroom and school. While *BEST* suggested School Community Councils would promote active involvement, other documents make it clear that involvement is in line with a neoliberal vision of education. For instance, Bill 64 outlined that School Community Councils members would review and recommend how to meet the needs of the community and evaluate the effectiveness of school programming. The emphasis on assessing effectiveness and giving oversight is consistent with neoliberal discourses of accountability that were previously identified.

Decision making for Indigenous parents within the school system is a significant aspect of communal learning. However, Anishinaabe scholar Niigaan Sinclair (2021) criticized the proposed School Community Councils, indicating that these types of councils typically result in the overrepresentation of those with privilege and wealth, while Indigenous community members remain underrepresented. The discussion of School Community Councils within the government documents was colour-blind, with no focus on how equitable racial representation on the councils could be reached. Other forms of parental involvement were discussed. For

instance, *Our Children's Success* listed parental values and actions that can support student success, such as having high expectations or providing a quiet space for homework. These statements put the active responsibility on parents to be involved, but little onus on the schools to facilitate communal learning, beyond a vague recommendation to build relationships with families. While elements of communal learning with family and community are present, the government documents portray schools as passive participants in this process.

Another important part of learning as communal is the involvement of Elders and Knowledge Keepers in the learning process. Some documents emphasized that Elders would assist with community engagement. *BEST* indicated that Elders in schools would be important “to promote Indigenous world views in curriculum, programs and parent, family and community engagement” (Government of Manitoba, 2021a, p. 16). The brief by MTS also emphasized the importance of Elders in teaching Indigenous knowledge. *Our Children's Success* linked Elders in school to increased student achievement, although this argumentation was not found elsewhere. Generally, the inclusion of Elders implied some emphasis on communal learning within the school system.

Integration of Western and Indigenous Knowledge

The Canadian Council on Learning (2007) emphasised that Indigenous learning integrates Indigenous and Western knowledge. “Aboriginal learning is not a static activity, but rather an adaptive process that derives the best from traditional and contemporary knowledge” (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007, p. 7). Integration offers continuity for students as they adopt two ways of knowing. Other scholars have explored this focus on two knowledge systems with the concept of trans-systemic education systems. Battiste (2013)

indicated that efforts to develop culturally inclusive curricula must also coincide with challenging the dominance of Eurocentric knowledge, attitudes and methodologies within education practices. Trans-systemic approaches foster new relationships between Eurocentric and Indigenous knowledge systems, where each system contributes equally and productively (Battiste, 2013; Battiste & Henderson, 2021). “Honorable reconciliation and trans-systemic synthesis need to be based on the belief that knowledge systems need to learn from each other to create a new vocabulary that transcends the existing categories” (Battiste & Henderson, 2021, p. vii). While there is some emphasis in Manitoba reform documents on integrating Indigenous perspectives and topics within the curriculum and into classrooms, the approaches fall short of a trans-systemic vision of transformative integration of Indigenous and Western knowledge systems.

A recurring topic within multiple documents is the integration of Indigenous knowledge into pre-existing curriculum. For instance, *Our Children's Success* indicated that “it is important to enhance student outcomes through comprehensive integration of Indigenous perspectives in all K to 12 subject areas” (Manitoba’s Commission on Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education, 2020, p. 69). The use of strong language, like ‘*comprehensive integration*’ and ‘*all K to 12 subject areas*’, suggests integration of Indigenous perspectives is valued. However, the lack of a principal actor, in this case the groups responsible for this integration, puts into question how this plan could be enacted or what integration would look like. Integration of Indigenous perspectives also appeared within the briefs of a few school division documents. Brandon School Division quoted a divisional report that referred to teachers receiving support “as they integrate Indigenous perspectives into their daily teaching activities” (CI report, quoted in

Brandon School Division, 2021, para. 15). By focusing on integrating Indigenous perspectives into subject areas or daily teaching activities, it implies that the previous Western activities and curricula are foundational. Indigenous perspectives, while valued, are secondary. Louis Riel School Division mentioned their “system-wide instruction and integration of Indigenous themes into language arts, social studies, math and science frames learning for all Grade 4 students in LRSD” (Louis Riel School Division, 2019, para. 53). The system-wide integration connotes a large-scale endeavour, albeit only for grade four students. However, integrating Indigenous themes into these courses places Indigenous themes within a Western curricular framework. Similarly, MTS advocated for teacher candidates to receive training for integrating Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy, without mention of reimagining the curriculum towards a trans-systemic approach. The focus on integration of Indigenous perspectives, themes, and knowledge continually implies integration into pre-existing Western curricula and structures, rather than a reimagined trans-systemic approach where both Indigenous and Western knowledge are foundational.

Curriculum

A discussion of integrating Indigenous and Western knowledge systems would not be complete without examining how curriculum is discussed. Many of the documents discussed curriculum when focusing on how to incorporate Indigenous perspectives, knowledge and culture. For instance, *Our Children’s Success* discussed curriculum in a number of ways. In some cases, passive or tentative language is used, such as when respondents indicated that “Indigenous perspectives, culture, and languages were identified as components that *could be* included in all curricula at every stage” (Manitoba’s Commission on Kindergarten to Grade 12

Education, 2020, p. 70, emphasis added). The document also indicated that some respondents called for the infusion of Indigenous perspectives and the enhancement of curriculum. Both of these terms suggest that Indigenous perspectives are being added to a Western curriculum, as previously discussed, while also being imprecise about how thorough this integration would be.

Other voices referenced within *Our Children's Success* offered a stronger vision of Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum. Indigenous leaders called for a “fully implemented curriculum that reflects Indigenous perspectives, values, and history” (Manitoba’s Commission on Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education, 2020, p. 71), which suggests a more thorough and widespread adoption of Indigenous perspectives within the curriculum. The document also referenced Martell, an Indigenous scholar, who recommends embedding Indigenous perspectives by including “epistemological roots through language and culture” (Manitoba’s Commission on Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education, 2020, p. 71). Martell’s insights are consistent with key attributes of Indigenous learning and advocate for a deeper inclusion by focusing on the knowledge systems at the root of language and culture. Finally, *Our Children's Success* quoted an anonymous written submission which said “systemic development of Indigenization in K-12 education is a priority that can be addressed through provincial leadership in holistic planning and implementation with Indigenous communities and educators that will result in cyclical long-term visioning” (Manitoba’s Commission on Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education, 2020, p. 71). This quote demonstrates a vision of curriculum where Indigenous perspectives are not an add-on, but rather the curriculum is Indigenized in a systemic, and long-term way. In summation, *Our Children's Success* quotes or refers to several

sources who focus on a more thorough integration of Indigenous perspectives or an Indigenization of curriculum.

Our Children's Success referenced various conceptions of how to integrate Indigenous and Western knowledge, but there remains a disconnect between these ideas and the document's actual recommendations. Three of the recommendations advised taking actions to improve achievement or outcomes for Indigenous students, but these actions are not explicitly tied to any recommendations involving curriculum. A different recommendation included a call to "maximize curriculum implementation" (Manitoba's Commission on Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education, 2020, p. 77). There is no explanation of what is meant by implementation, such as what specific knowledge, topics, perspectives, or worldviews should be implemented or whether this entails updated or new curricular documents or approaches. *Our Children's Success* recommended implementing the Calls to Action of the TRC that are under provincial jurisdiction, which includes developing and implementing curriculum on residential school, Treaties, contributions of Indigenous peoples, and Indigenous history. It is important that curriculum be updated to teach about Indigenous people and their history, particularly with emphasis on residential schools. However, no recommendations specifically focused on the teaching of Indigenous knowledge systems, languages, culture or worldviews, which is a substantial gap. No specific mention was made of curriculum renewal that would allow for a trans-systemic approach to integrating Indigenous and Western knowledge systems.

Similar observations can be made of the *BEST* document. The document mentioned incorporating and embedding Indigenous ways of knowing and being. As well, the document identified components of an Indigenous curriculum, including First Nations and Métis histories,

cultures, values, knowledge systems, current lifestyles, land-based education, and Elders and Knowledge Keepers in the classroom. The recommended actions however did not cover all of these ideas. One recommendation focused on developing curriculum as per the TRC's Calls to Action. The other main recommendation that focused on curriculum advised creating "an Elders and Knowledge Keepers in Schools Initiative to support student and teacher learning and to promote Indigenous world views in curriculum, programs and parent, family and community engagement" (Government of Manitoba, 2021a, p. 77). Inviting Elders and Knowledge Keepers is consistent with the focus on learning as a communal activity. However, phrasing the initiative as "promoting Indigenous world views" suggests that the actual integration of Indigenous knowledge is encouraged, but not mandatory. No recommendations focused on a more widespread curriculum renewal that would integrate Indigenous and Western knowledge systems.

Despite the surface level style integration of Indigenous knowledge, there were some curricular topics that received more widespread attention across the documents. In particular, the documents focused on integrating topics connected with the TRC's Calls to Action. The TRC recommended the creation of an "age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools, Treaties, and Aboriginal peoples' historical and contemporary contributions to Canada a mandatory education requirement for Kindergarten to Grade Twelve students" (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). This call to action influenced many documents, with five groups calling for curriculum on residential schools, five groups focusing on treaty education, and five groups emphasizing teaching about the contributions and histories of Indigenous peoples. Often the recommendations relating to this TRC Call to Action were

precise, with recommendations in *BEST, Our Children's Success* and the MTS brief directly referencing the Call to Action or detailing the topics that would need to be included within this curriculum. This precision is in contrast with other recommendations that focused on integrating Indigenous perspectives, which as previously discussed were often vague and imprecise within the government documents. In general, the teaching of concrete topics resulted in more precise recommendations, while integrating ways of knowing and being were not featured prominently or precisely. The emphasis on this Call to Action implied a focus on reconciliation and equity within the school system, but it also demonstrated a contrast with how other forms of integration were portrayed.

Finally, I examined how the documents approached educating teachers about integrating Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods. MTS referred directly to the TRC recommendation to provide more post-secondary funding to educate teacher candidates on integrating Indigenous knowledge and pedagogies. In other documents, there were notable omissions. *BEST* noted that an area of focus for professional learning would be “the effective integration of Indigenous content and histories” (Government of Manitoba, 2021a, p. 22). Indigenous teaching methods or pedagogies are not explicitly mentioned. As well, it is unclear whether Indigenous content would include Indigenous knowledge systems or focus on other topics. *Our Children's Success* focused on the need “to develop cultural knowledge and awareness” (Manitoba's Commission on Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education, 2020, p. 69) through professional learning. This is an important beginning step to integration of Indigenous and Western knowledge systems, but teachers need to go beyond awareness to be effective.

Overall, there was limited focus on the need to train teachers to integrate Indigenous and Western knowledge in substantive ways.

In the documents, the consistent focus is on integration of Indigenous knowledge into pre-existing Western curriculum. No recommendations were made to develop curriculum that approaches Indigenous knowledge as foundational. Recommendations regarding curriculum were generally vague, with the exception of the reference to the TRC's Calls to Action. No recommendations focused specifically on Indigenous knowledge systems, languages, or worldviews. In summation, the documents failed to challenge the Western curriculum that supports settler colonial ideology, and instead touted an additive approach. This falls short of a transformative trans-systemic model that integrates both Indigenous and Western knowledge system.

Interest Convergence

When examining how the different attributes of Indigenous learning were discussed within the Manitoba education reform documents, it becomes evident that interest convergence plays a significant role. Interest convergence was coined by Derrick A. Bell (1980) when he noted that progress on the desegregation of schools in the United States was only made when the interests of White people in power converged with the interests of Black people. A similar phenomenon is apparent within some of the reform documents, as the key attributes of Indigenous learning were most noticeable within the documents when they reinforce neoliberal discourses of achievement, accountability, or education as work-oriented.

A consistent focus within the documents, particularly the government documents, was the need to improve student achievement. In several instances, Indigenous attributes of

learning were connected with increasing achievement. Holistic well-being was frequently paired with the concept of success. Similarly, argumentation was used to promote the use of Indigenous languages as a means of improving achievement of Indigenous students, while not acknowledging the deep importance of Indigenous language learning for the continuation of culture and knowledge systems. Increasing student achievement is essential within the neoliberal discourse of achievement, so there is interest convergence in including attributes of Indigenous learning that may promote academic achievement. However, operationalizing these attributes to further a neoliberal colonial agenda results in a limited inclusion.

Neoliberal discourses of accountability and learning as job-oriented emerged in conjunction with other Indigenous attributes of learning. For instance, experiential learning and lifelong learning were linked with career development in several documents, which is consistent with the education as job-oriented discourse. However, both experiential learning and lifelong learning were generally absent outside of the job-oriented discourse, which resulted in a narrow and limited inclusion of both attributes within the documents. Similarly, neoliberal discourses of accountability were evident in the discussion surrounding communal involvement and decision making in schools within the government documents, although the communal involvement is framed in a colour-blind way that may marginalize Indigenous community members. Attributes of Indigenous learning, such as experiential learning, lifelong learning, and communal learning were present in some of the documents in connection with neoliberal discourses, but their inclusion was limited outside of these discourses. This suggests that they are sometimes viewed as a way to advance neoliberal and colonial interests, but not as central themselves.

Other attributes that do not connect with these neoliberal discourses were largely absent or were only superficially included. For instance, learning as spiritual, land-based learning, or local knowledge, were absent or nearly absent from the documents. The importance of Indigenous culture for learning was included, but with a passive responsibility when it came to its inclusion. Moreover, the significance of cultural teaching strategies was undercut with references to Western research approaches as a means of legitimization. The integration of Indigenous knowledge was included, but generally superficially. A more transformative trans-systemic approach to the integration of Indigenous and Western knowledge systems was absent, which I suggest is the case because challenging or reimagining Western curricula would run counter to the interests of a white settler colonial system. By including some attributes of Indigenous learning in ways that are consistent with neoliberal discourses, and excluding other attributes or including them only superficially, white settler colonial interests and ideology are advanced.

Discussion

After reviewing and analyzing the findings from the previous three sections, it is clear that white settler colonialism is advanced in many of the Manitoba education reform documents. In the following, I will discuss the contrasting discourses that emerged and then argue that white settler colonialism is advanced within the dominant discourse.

Contrasting Discourses

While white settler colonialism is advanced by a dominant discourse that emerged in many documents, my analysis identified contrasting ideas in a number of documents that challenged white settler colonialism. Contrasting ideas were apparent in the documents where some groups were willing to challenge inequities or neoliberal views of education and achievement. Interestingly, the discourse participants who challenged the dominant discourse shifted depending on the topic being examined.

For the first research question, the dominant discourse featured colour-blindness, deficit narratives, and distancing from Indigenous peoples. However, groups like the Newcomer Education Coalition, CEDA, and the Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg offered contrasting perspectives. The three groups have a more diverse racial representation among their members, so it is not surprising that they more strongly advocated for greater representation of Indigenous and other racialized people within the school system. CEDA in particular provided contextual factors behind the achievement gap and stressed the need for complex systemic changes. This offered an important counterpoint to deficit-focused documents, particularly the government documents.

For the second question, dominant themes that emerged included learning as job-oriented, achievement defined by tests and accountability. However, alternative ideas were also put forward. While the government, many school divisions, MSBA, and the Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg demonstrated a focus on the job-oriented purpose of education, this theme was notably absent from other briefs, including MTS, the Newcomer Education Coalition, CEDA, and several school divisions. Louis Riel School Division and River East Transcona School Division offered alternative visions of the purpose of education with a focus on a more holistic development of citizens. Some groups pushed back against the idea of achievement defined by testing, particularly the Newcomer Education Coalition, CEDA, River East Transcona, Brandon School Division, and Louis Riel School Division. Similarly, some school divisions were highly critical of how accountability was framed by the government. While the government documents were consistent in terms of these neoliberal themes, many other organizations and school divisions demonstrated contrasting ideas.

For the third question, there were differences in how various groups discussed Indigenous ways of learning. Many groups were silent on the topic entirely, evidencing an omission of Indigenous perspectives. A few briefs recommended increased focus on Indigenous ways of learning, such as CEDA and the Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg. A couple of school divisions demonstrated some engagement with Indigenous ways of learning, notably Louis Riel School Division. The government documents advocated for varying degrees of integration of Indigenous perspectives and content within the school system, although, as previously discussed the depth of this integration is in question. Some of the government documents presented contrasting ideas. Within *Our Children's Success* were quotes by community

members and Indigenous scholars that recommended a deeper and more transformative integration of Indigenous perspectives and world views. These ideas strongly contrasted with the dominant government view demonstrated within the recommendations given by *Our Children's Success*. Overall, while a few voices recommended a deeper focus on Indigenous ways of learning and curricular integration, this contrasted sharply with a more superficial focus or no focus at all in other documents.

Some groups presented views that challenged the dominant discourse. This was particularly true when it came to advocacy groups like CEDA and the Newcomer Education Coalition, or some school divisions which emphasized holistic learning and assessment. However, while these groups offered challenges towards the dominant government discourse, participants frequently shifted, depending on the topic, suggesting multiple and varied alternative visions of education reform in the province. Despite this variation, these ideas that contrast with the dominant discourse are significant as they illustrate other views of learning and achievement, and in some cases more transformative ideas of what our education system could become. I will return to some of these thoughts in the conclusion. For now, I will focus on the dominant discourse that emerged primarily in the government documents, as well as in many of the briefs.

The Advancing of White Settler Colonialism

White settler colonialism was advanced in a number of ways within the documents, which included the normalization of white settler colonialism, the promotion of cognitive imperialism, the instrumental approach to Indigenous perspectives, and the refusal to

challenge systemic inequities. I will discuss how these themes emerged across the examination of the three research questions.

Across the three research questions, a common thread that emerged was the normalizing of white settler colonialism through presenting whiteness and colonial ideology or structures as normative and/or desirable. For instance, colour-blind ideology was apparent, which functioned to invisibilize whiteness and prevent criticism of its dominance (Leonardo, 2007). When diversity was discussed, it was sometimes constructed as a problem. Indigenous students, the only racial group that was prominently discussed, were frequently portrayed as deficient, using Eurocentric definitions of achievement. As Battiste (2013) noted, “norms surrounding whiteness then are the measure for success or failure” (p. 106). In the documents, Indigenous students are viewed through a colonial lens that stresses Indigenous deficits while a colour-blind ideology continually reinforces whiteness and positions it as normative. As well, the emphasis on Indigenous deficiency is contrasted with a bright vision of settler futurity, as evidenced by the positive and future-oriented language used when discussing newcomers and other settler groups. Through contrasting this portrayal of settler futurity with deficit framing of Indigenous students using colonial definitions, white settler colonialism is normalized.

Discourses of learning and achievement also functioned to normalize white settler colonialism. The pervasive characterization of achievement as defined by testing precludes other visions of success, particularly more community-oriented definitions proposed by Indigenous scholars (e.g., Bouvier et al., 2016). Similarly, the emphasis on integrating Indigenous perspectives or content into pre-existing Eurowestern curriculum and structures works to position Eurowestern knowledge systems and colonial structures as the norm. A

recurrent result is the portrayal of settler perspectives, structures, and knowledge as normative, while Indigenous perspectives and knowledge are marginalized.

In the discourses of learning and achievement, it is possible to see an outgrowth of a long history of cognitive imperialism in Canada. In discussing cognitive imperialism, Battiste (2013) said that:

Education has been used as a sword of cultural imperialism to assimilate Native North America into a hegemonic system, not so that they might take their rightful place in the market economy after their economies were destroyed, but to be held hostage to systems of economy created outside the Aboriginal context. (p. 162)

The learning as job-oriented discourse that was present in the documents is consistent with this history. There was a persistent focus on improving the achievement of Indigenous students, using colonial definitions of achievement, and with the purpose of preparing them for the labour market. Battiste noted that while the foundations of schooling in Canada is Eurocentric, there has been some movement towards cultural inclusion, using an additive approach to the curriculum. However, she cautioned that this approach to cultural inclusion starts with a Eurocentric foundation taught from a Eurocentric perspective, which results in a fragmented and marginalized learning of Indigenous content. This criticism applies to the documents in this study. Recommendations cited in the documents suggested that some Indigenous content should be integrated into an otherwise Eurocentric curriculum, while Indigenous knowledge systems, languages, culture, and world views were largely ignored. Rather than disrupt

cognitive imperialism and white settler colonialism, the dominant discourse works to advance both.

Another theme that emerged was the instrumental approach to Indigeneity, where Indigenous people or Indigenous ways of learning were valued for how they could be operationalized towards specific goals. While Indigenous students were portrayed as deficient, Indigenous adults were often framed as a resource to be used within the school system. This framing varied, although sometimes it was explicitly connected to the goal of improving student achievement. This focus discounted Indigenous staff, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers as members of the community with knowledge to share and instead emphasized an extractive and colonial relationship. Similarly, some Indigenous ways of learning were put forward in instrumental ways. This included the idea of holistic learning as well as the teaching of Indigenous languages, which were both connected with the goal of improving student achievement. This is further supported by the discussion of interest convergence, where Indigenous ways of learning were generally more emphasized when they aligned with other neoliberal purposes of education, such as learning as job-oriented. In general, Indigenous ways of learning and Indigenous staff were instrumentalized in order to meet goals that supported a colonial education system.

Finally, white settler colonialism is advanced by these discourses because they obscure and fail to challenge systemic inequities that are caused by a colonial system. When discussing the achievement gap, a deficit narrative was put forth instead of exploring the education debts that have contributed to this gap. The documents advocated for greater accountability measures, such as more testing, which ignores the criticisms of these tests' effects on racialized

students (Au, 2016) and their role in governing populations (Graham & Neu, 2004).

Transformative solutions that challenge the Eurocentric foundations of the curriculum and school system exist. However, curriculum renewal and a deeper pursuit of trans-systemic integration of Eurocentric and Indigenous knowledge were not suggested, nor are other definitions of success. The discourses did not challenge the current education system and instead protected the Eurocentric status quo.

Conclusion

Examining the Manitoba education reform documents makes it evident how white settler colonialism is normalized within recent education discourses. However, what does this mean going forward? After withdrawing Bill 64 in April 2022, the province released the *Manitoba K to 12 Education Action Plan*, which sets a new direction for education reform. The *Action Plan* was published too late to be included into this study, but a cursory glance suggests there are notable shifts in this plan compared to the government documents included in this study's analysis. The deficit narrative relating to Indigenous students is absent and there is a new *Indigenous Education Policy Framework* that the authors of the *Action Plan* claim is foundational to their work. Their vision of student success is recast as more holistic and grounded in Indigenous world views, suggesting some substantial differences between the *Action Plan* and previous education reform documents.

The new *Action Plan* offers important avenues for future research on whether the discourses for the education reform movement in Manitoba are evolving or whether they remain consistent with the themes examined in this study. Certainly, the *Action Plan's*

recommended actions are consistent with previous themes of accountability and achievement defined by standardized tests, which is telling. Moreover, while a guiding principle for the Action Plan is equity, the plan uses language that frames individual circumstances as the cause of obstacles and avoids discussions of systemic issues. This suggests a coopting of the language of equity for other purposes (Sardoč, 2021). As well, the Action Plan does not make strong recommendations relating to curriculum renewal and Indigenous education, which raises questions about how deeply rooted Indigenous perspectives, languages, world views, and culture will be within classrooms under this plan. There is certainly much to question and investigate with the new Action Plan going forward.

Given the findings of this study and the questions raised in connection with the new Action Plan, it is important to consider other visions for education reform in Manitoba. The dominant discourse in the Manitoba education reform documents analyzed in this study revealed a vision of the education system that advances white settler colonialism. Deficit narratives of Indigenous students were prominent, with emphasis on achievement gaps that do not take into account contributing systemic factors. Visions of success and achievement revolve around neoliberal views of education and learning, which ignore other definitions of achievement and entrench a colonial mindset within the school system. As a result, Indigenous perspectives are either marginalized or instrumentalized, which leads to a superficial level of integration of those perspectives in classrooms and curricula. Even with the new Action Plan, these discourses are relevant, because their underlying themes still inform the future of the education system in Manitoba.

However, these discourses are not fixed. Contrasting visions of education emerged within the documents and even though these visions were not part of the dominant government narrative, they offered a different and important direction for the reform movement. Instead of a colour-blind narrative that positions whiteness as normative, proposed reforms could acknowledge the different experiences faced within the school system by people of different racial identities. Consequently, the reforms could emphasize increased representation of Indigenous and racialized people within the school system, particularly in positions of power. The documents stressed the importance of closing the achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and this goal should be pursued. However, this needs to be accomplished not from a standpoint that emphasises the deficits of Indigenous students or from within a system that continues to rely on a Eurocentric curriculum that advances cognitive imperialism. This problem needs to be addressed with an eye on challenging the systemic inequities that are at the root of the achievement gap and transforming the curriculum to authentically integrate Indigenous and Eurocentric knowledge systems. Many transformative changes are necessary, not to further colonial goals relating to the labour market, achievement or cognitive imperialism, but with equity in mind. There needs to be a focus on a school system that emphasizes student-centered holistic learning, that builds relationships and engages with community, and that authentically incorporates culture and language. Scholars are exploring the concept of trans-systemic integration of Indigenous and Western knowledge systems, and the K to 12 school system cannot ignore the need for integration that goes beyond the superficial. Curriculum renewal is necessary in order to

integrate Indigenous and Western knowledge systems in a way where each is equal, respected and productive.

Much needs to be done to move towards this vision of education in Manitoba. I hope that by better understanding the dominant but also the contrasting discourses in education reform documents in this province, the dominant discourses can be challenged, cognitive imperialism can be dismantled, and we can move forward with a different vision for an equitable school system.

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