

Project 271

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# Papal Encyclical *Laudato si'* and Critical Pedagogy of Place

Catholic School Teachers Enacting  
Papal Encyclical *Laudato si'*

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# Themes and Analysis from Interviews with Land-Based Education Teachers

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## Purpose/Objective of the Study

This project seeks to understand how the pedagogical practices of Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools teachers in Saskatoon, Canada draw on ideas of anti-racist, anti-oppressive education to strengthen their understanding of critical pedagogy of place and commitment to the current papal encyclical *Laudato si'* of the Holy Father Francis On Care for our Common Home. Moreover, this project seeks to connect, strengthen, and educate both student and staff concerning Indigenous land-based pedagogies, worldviews, and spirituality. In addition, also disrupt settler/colonial education and move forward together in world leading pedagogies.

## Research Question

How do teachers in Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools use the Pope Francis' encyclical to improve social and environmental education?

## Methodology

Before the professional development workshop day, teacher-participants were asked to complete a voluntary questionnaire of five to ten questions on the participant's thoughts and understanding of Pope Francis' *Laudato si'*, and critical pedagogy of place. The research team hosted two, one-day workshops to initiate dialogue, examine current pedagogical practices, reflect upon those practices, and support new knowledge and pedagogies attained at the workshop in future teaching practices. In addition to the two, one-day workshops, the researchers also gave two days of release time for research participants to work on action research mini projects based on the objectives of the first workshop. Follow up with the research teachers-participants was provided to the teachers to support the implementation of the mini projects.

## Theoretical Framework

The teacher-participants involved in this research study talked extensively about the in-service with the project leaders, which centered on Indigenous land-based education. Teacher-participants were interested in incorporating anti-racist, anti-oppressive theory into their curriculum, and as one teacher-participant stated, "Environmentalism is not enough." The focus of this kind of land-based education is to create courses that integrate Indigenous, anti-racist, and critical environmental education. The project leaders suggested that an investigation of land/place requires that teachers and students ask three central questions: What has happened? (critical race analysis) What is happening? What should happen here? As one teacher-participant suggested, "I like the approach the leaders took with regards to really knowing Saskatoon's history ... they show both sides - the beauty or 'raw, raw' bits of Saskatoon, but also the hidden narratives that aren't publicized as well as they should be with regards to racism, etc." Making the connection between the history of racist discourses and our contemporary practices is essential for providing our students with an understanding of colonialism under the Canadian state.

Teacher-participants discussed their teaching philosophy and why they believe teaching Indigenous land-based education is important. This included teachers wanting to instill in students a respect for nature, or as one teacher-participant suggested, their reason for teaching land-based education is to encourage students to have "a greater sense of appreciation for the natural world around us." This appreciation for nature is often thought to give students a critical analysis of the unsustainable practices in our current context (McLean, 2013). Teachers also suggested that there are tensions between the way in which we live on the land, and the health of the natural world. As one teacher-participant suggested, "Human beings and material objects no longer extend a friendly hand to one another; the relationship has become confrontational." The idea that there is a conflict with material objects or nature is an important discourse to challenge. Human beings are a part of the natural world, and Indigenous peoples have lived in sustainable ways for 500,000 years on Turtle Island. The crisis within the current context has been driven by colonial systems such as white settler accumulation and consumption of Indigenous lands and resources, capitalist systems, and the formation of illegitimate state institutions.

Several of the teacher-participants in this study mentioned the impact of environmental racism as a form of systemic racism. One teacher-participant suggested that it is important to acknowledge and challenge "the biases that we have, that we don't even know we have." Another teacher-participant touched on how spaces are racialized by asking questions such as, "Why did they even establish national parks?" "What happened to the people?" "This is something that I need to explore more when doing the My Parks Pass project for 2017-2018 in Grasslands National Park." These moments of insight from the group participants involved in this research project illuminate the urgency to connect anti-racist, anti-oppressive theory with critical Indigenous land-based education.

Educational programs focused on land-based education require a critical analysis regarding the identities of the students drawn to the program. Historically, these programs were created with dominant group members in mind, which means that overwhelmingly environmental education programs have been dominated by white subjectivities. Middle class white students are often constructed as “top academics” and they have the financial resources to afford land-based programs (McLean, 2013). As one teacher-participant observed,

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**Let’s put it this way. I’ve been very fortunate and have created opportunities for myself to go and travel extensively. Privilege plays a factor here, I can’t deny that. I personally feel that I have always learnt and retained information WAY MORE when I travelled than when I read a book. Studies show this. Experiential learning is the best teacher. Personally, I believe travel, experience, and failure are the best teachers in life.**

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The issue of whiteness in schools, and in particular within environmental education, came up multiple times in the conversations between teacher-participants. This evokes a significant question: How do teachers invite predominantly white students to “reconnect with the land” when they continue to benefit from Indigenous dispossession?

## Pedagogical Practice

Teacher-participants in this study were given a snapshot of the EcoJustice program for Grade 8 students. By following along on a typical day, teachers were able to observe a class trip to the university campus where students worked on a research project, presented in front of a class, and attended a lecture on anti-oppressive education. Overwhelmingly, the teacher-participants were very impressed and surprised with the level of independence, self-discipline, and maturity of the students. As one teacher-participant explained,

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**I sensed that the students had a high level of independence. They were able to arrive at the University, somehow, on time ...They were able to work on their own, on what seemed to be a reflective term essay on how they have demonstrated growth. My connection/ thought here was, “man - I thought I had high expectations for my students to prepare for 3-Way Conferences, but I haven’t done anything like this yet.”**

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Providing experiential and student-centered learning is an important aspect of anti-oppressive education. Teachers interested in creating anti-colonial classrooms often think in terms of adding content. This was a common theme in the interviews with the teacher-participants. Teacher-participants gave many examples of how they included Indigenous content into their curriculum such as the following: "In art, looking at northern styled paintings and art." "In science, reading and discussing FNMI content from the textbook." "In social studies, the release teacher teaches treaty education and about residential schools." Adding content that allows students to learn about Indigenous people is one example of a way to intervene in the erasure of Indigenous peoples and challenge particular colonial narratives; however, as Kumashiro (2000) states, there is more required of teachers than simply teaching about the other. Kumashiro (2000) calls for anti-racist, anti-oppressive education that includes teaching about the conditions in which privileging and othering occurs, and using pedagogy that changes students and society.

One teacher-participant talked about how this research project has inspired them to make changes in the English language arts program at their school; "One thing that I'd like to do to bring more FNMI content into my classroom is to find a good truth and reconciliation book, including content that focuses on the impact of colonialism on Indigenous people, is an important intervention." However, one of the tensions created when teaching about the impact of colonialism on Indigenous people is that these discussions can further pathologize people already marked as deficient. It is important to teach about the agency of the many individuals and nations that have maintained Indigenous governance and education systems, cultural and land-based systems in spite of the impact of colonialism. As Wilson (2017) suggests, even though Indigenous people have been impacted by colonialism, they are not defined by it.

The teacher-participants in this study discussed how they might begin to integrate a critical Indigenous land-based education into their existing program. For example, in the following excerpt the teacher participant suggested that sometimes teachers just need to jump in to teaching land-based education.

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**I echo what the project leader said in that I just need to search out a few curriculum objectives that I'd like to cover and do a land-based project around that. The key is just to start. From there, it's important to go with the flow and allow the narratives of the locals to help shape and fill in the cracks for the rest. This must mean the teacher must give up the power and control of what is being taught. Instead, the teacher must create opportunities and environments where deeper land-based learning can occur.**

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In this excerpt the teacher-participant suggests that teachers must give up control and explore these spaces together, with a goal of sharing knowledge and learning from others. Adopting this form of pedagogy is an important intervention into the hierarchal teacher/student relations found in educational institutions. These hierarchical relationships serve to regulate and control student bodies.



## Indigenous Land-Based Education Includes Urban Spaces

The group of teacher-participants involved in this study all come from urban centers, and during the PD they talked extensively about how to incorporate critical Indigenous land-based education into their everyday practices of teaching. The concept of “land” often evokes the notion of open prairie and forest terrain; however, urban spaces are also built on Indigenous territory, and must be included as a text to be read critically by the students. One conversation in particular focused on how providing students with an understanding of identity constructions and power analysis will allow them to read various landscapes in a critical way. For example, project leaders talked about showing two videos on Saskatoon and prompted the students to use a critical analysis in reading how gender, race, ability, and financial status played out in the film. The class quickly noted the predominance of white able-bodied males performing activities that would cost quite a bit to do. The critical analysis students learned to use in this activity provided them with a lens to analyze other text such as city buildings and streets.

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**During the walk the next day, one student wrote down a question, “Why are all the people on the Drinkle building men?” Another wrote, “Why is the statue by the river of two men?” The walk mainly provided exposure to what surrounds them locally. We can dive into more critical thinking around Saskatoon’s history.**

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It is essential to provide opportunities for students to practice analyzing various landscapes as this lens can be used to read other texts such as films, books, art, articles, and social media. Teachers however, need access to this kind of critical education in order to guide the students. Often, teachers have been schooled in a mainstream education where unequal power relations remain unchallenged. As one teacher-participant stated,

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**I like how the program dives into much deeper, real issues, while providing opportunities to explore our provincial environment. It fosters critical thinking unlike any class that I have ever taught myself. It highlighted some weaknesses in my own teaching and provided some ideas on how I could improve on this as well. I have never considered myself to be a very critical thinker, so therefore, I naturally tend to shy away from this type of education on my own (unless it is part of a class that I have had to take).**

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In the PD workshop, the project leaders discussed how critically analyzing the urban landscape can be helpful in understanding social inequalities. For example, asking pertinent questions regarding health disparities that show how access to resources are not equitable for Indigenous people and low income families. Students can begin to understand the ways that city spaces are racialized, placing Indigenous people in predominantly low income neighborhoods where there are several pawn shops, yet no grocery stores. Once teacher-participants were introduced to a critical analysis of urban landscapes, they discussed incorporating this into their curriculum.

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**I learned a lot about Saskatoon's history with the EcoJustice class this day. To be honest, I had heard of John Lake and knew that there was a school called John Lake in the public system - but I had no idea that he was considered a founder of Saskatoon. I had biked or walked past the statue of John Lake and Chief Whitecap many times before as well, but never knew the full significance of the statue. I plan to use this info when our class does a bike trip in late May.**

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The opportunity for teacher-participants to witness specific examples of this kind of analysis encouraged them to imagine and plan for similar projects in their classrooms. This is an important finding from the data. Teachers that want to teach Indigenous land-based education may require ongoing PD that includes anti-racism theory as well as specific examples of pedagogical practices so that they can build a curriculum that centers an analysis of power.

## Limitations and Possibilities: Knowledge/Structures/Resources

Teacher-participants discussed some of the barriers to teaching a course similar to the EcoJustice program. One of the barriers mentioned previously in this paper is teachers' lack of awareness and critical knowledge. Most teachers are middle class, white, able bodied and straight, or straight performing, which means they benefit from maintaining the status quo in education. In other words, some of the lack of knowledge can be understood as a will not to know, and an act of resistance to education that challenges their superiority and dominance (Leonardo, 2009). As one teacher-participant stated, "I am Canadian. I know what I know. I am called to teach on Indigenous peoples, topics, and ways of life. Naturally, I don't do a very good job of this. It is something that I have to work at." The language choice in this excerpt makes it clear that being Canadian is an identity construction and social position that individuals embody, which is a barrier to teaching Indigenous issues.

Another teacher from the study describes the study of whiteness in education as “going off topic”, as though anti-racism education requires separate lessons.

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**I've often gone off topic before and I like bringing up a reading that I read in university when I was taking my B.Ed entitled *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*. In it, it talks about how an individual has privilege in society, automatically, based on their: race, gender, physical ability level, sexual orientation and socio-economic background. When I learned this in my B.Ed, I really let this sink in. I share it as often as I can with my students. However, there have never really been any formal lessons or teachings that I have done around anti-oppressive education in big themed units (aside from one off anti-bully lessons, etc.). I feel that I am going to learn lots of ideas on how to improve on this from these regular meetings.**

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In spite of this limitation, the teacher-participant in the excerpt stated they are openly willing to learn more about how to incorporate anti-racism education in their everyday practice, and felt confident they would learn more from ongoing meetings with the PD group. Anti-racist, anti-oppressive theory should be central to all of our courses and not viewed as a “one off” lesson for students. This requires ongoing teacher training and support from administrators and school divisions. Many of the teacher-participants also talked about the limits they face in incorporating Indigenous land-based education into their current teaching schedule. One of the themes that came out of the discussions was a concern that the structures of the school day, the timetable, and the expectations of administrators would make it difficult for teachers to integrate Indigenous land-based education into their classrooms.

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**The ideal goal would be to get out one afternoon every two weeks. This, of course, can only work if I have my class for the whole afternoon. I have to do my best to not interfere with the band of prep teachers' allocated time with my students. This also poses a challenge. Currently this year, this only leaves me with Friday afternoons to be out for the whole afternoon. When the 2017-2018 class schedule comes out, I will have to make it an effort and a priority to line up and organize an outdoor learning environment.**

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Another teacher participant explained that they used urban trips for physical activity alone, but did not incorporate a critical reading of the landscape,

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**On Monday, my class is going on a bike trip. Normally, I have used the bike trip as an opportunity to hit phys ed curriculum. I've always wrote in my field trip plan that it is also to connect with science, etc., but that honestly was to appease administration. It was purely a bike trip for fun. Now, for Monday, I'm actually excited to make it a bike tour of Saskatoon.**

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The honest observations teachers shared regarding their pedagogy during this study is an important way to understand the support and resources teachers require in order to begin teaching Indigenous land-based education. Teachers stated that they require more theoretical background, they need to witness specific examples pedagogy, and have a teaching schedule that opens space for them to take students outside of the classroom. This means that teachers also need a supportive administration and school board in order to challenge some of the traditional boundaries of public schooling.

## Notes on Connection to Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'* of the Holy Father Francis On Care for our Common Home

Through guidance of Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato si'*, the teachers believed they can build more capacity to connect both the Catholic faith and Indigenous spirituality, ceremony, and ways of knowing. As stated in No. 49 of the encyclical, "Today we have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor."

Paragraph 88: I've modelled my Lent goal/challenge around this. Technology tends to absorb everything into its ironclad logic, and those who are surrounded with technology "know full well that it moves forward in the final analysis neither for profit nor for the well-being of the human race."

What four aspects of the *Laudato si'* would you like to explore in your pedagogy?

Paragraph 6: It follows that "the deterioration of nature is closely connected to the culture which shapes human coexistence." (What cultures are the most sustainable? What cultures are the least sustainable?)

Paragraph 44: Proper Urban Planning: Nowadays, for example, we are conscious of the disproportionate and unruly growth of many cities which have become unhealthy to live in, not only because of pollution caused by toxic emissions, but also as a result of urban chaos, poor transportation, visual pollution, and noise. Many cities are huge, inefficient structures excessively wasteful of energy and water. Neighbourhoods, even those recently built, are congested, chaotic, and lacking in sufficient green space. We were not meant to be inundated by cement, asphalt, glass, and metal, and deprived of physical contact with nature.

Paragraph 93: Hence every ecological approach needs to incorporate a social perspective which takes into account the fundamental rights of the poor and the underprivileged.

Paragraph 102: It is right to rejoice in these advances and to be excited by the immense possibilities which they continue to open up before us, for “science and technology are wonderful products of a God-given human creativity.”

Paragraph 85: The Canadian bishops rightly pointed out that no creature is excluded from this manifestation of God: “From panoramic vistas to the tiniest living form, nature is a constant source of wonder and awe.”

The harmony between the Creator, humanity, and creation as a whole was disrupted by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations. This in turn distorted our mandate to “have dominion” over the earth (cf. Gen 1:28), to “till it and keep it” (Gen 2:15). This paragraph is a good opportunity to talk about how traditional First Nations culture says that humans are part of the earth and that they work with the earth. They are not above it as stated in Genesis.

## Conclusion

We would like to thank the McDowell Foundation for supporting this project. Although a pilot project, there may be opportunities to build groundbreaking pedagogical practices around the findings. We hope that we may find capacity for exploring educational implications for the future.

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# Appendices

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## Appendix 1: Unit Plan Analysis

### Unit Plan Title: Speaking Back to Manifest Destinies: A Land-Based Education Approach to Critical Curriculum Inquiry.

This section will analyze one of the unit plans developed for the study that worked to focus on incorporating critical Indigenous land-based education.

### Theoretical Framing from Interview with the Teacher-Participant:

"We continue to propagate settler society within our education system by continuing to be classroom placed. Our social studies curriculum continually places the "settlement" of the west as an inevitability, consistently undermining the societies that previously inhabited this land. We place First Nations connections to the land as something that existed in the past, and often believe it can no longer exist if they are no longer inhabiting their ancestral land. Before we begin to have effective land education, we have to first create a decolonization of our knowledge and think critically about our own system."

"In our stories of "settlement", we often promote the idea of the immigrant who has come to make this land better than their old land. This continues the mythology of the "noble savage" who was peaceful but naïve. It also ignores the thousands of years of humanity that existed prior to European contact."

"Calderon (2014) continues to illustrate that white supremacy is often ignored when discussing the "settlement" of North America, while continuing to teach that expansion was inevitable and that settlers were justified because they had "more economic" use of the land continues to support white supremacy over the first inhabitants of this land. This paradigm continues with the mentality that western culture is superior to Indigenous knowledge. As educators fail to discuss this pedagogy for what it is, it allows students to believe that western civilization is successful because European culture was "superior."

This ignores the complexity of history and the importance of contact with the western hemisphere, where Europe was able to utilize fully developed nations.” Teacher-participant.

The unit plan consisted of several questions and activities that appeared to be disconnected from the theoretical framework shown above. In the unit plan, the teacher-participant does not use clear questions or activities that might challenge settler colonialism with the students. The “essential questions” for the students include the following:

How are we connected to the land? How do we depend on the earth? Why should people care about the environment? What are some problems facing the environment? What are some ways you can show your respect for the environment? What actions can you take to have a positive impact on the environment? What is beauty? What do we appreciate about natural beauty?

These questions do not disrupt or challenge white settler colonialism and focus on an essentialized form of nature (beauty). These are the guiding questions of the unit plan and yet they are not connected with the teacher-participant’s initial analysis and thoughts.

Each of the activities for the unit plan are important introductory lessons for the teachers to invite and introduce students to think about land-based education. For example, the first day the teacher has students walk through the community and then use a poster and sticky paper to brainstorm what comes to mind when they hear “environment” and “earth”. This invites students to share their own knowledge and how they understand the issues of ecological destruction. This is also helpful for teachers when it comes to planning future lessons.

The second and third lessons invite students to think about how we are dependent on the environment and then shows the film *The Story of Stuff* which analyzes capitalism and our current consumption practices. Students are then invited to create a drawing depicting their own connection to the earth. This is a good activity as it positions students within our context and can help them to understand that as individuals, they are also implicated in the problems.

Lesson 4 is on the sacred teachings, which allows them to think about the gospel virtues of love, respect, reconciliation, faith, truth, courage, and hope. Students were asked to create a portrait of themselves and to explain which teachings they are the most connected to while sitting in a nearby park.

Lessons 5 through 7 provide the possibility of some critical analysis as the teacher-participant has asked students to research the names of nearby parks (ex. Henry Kelsey, Pierre Radisson, Leif Erickson) and then go to each park and to answer the following questions: Describe your surroundings. What is the importance of a name? Does a name matter? Why are names important to places? This could potentially allow students to understand how spaces are marked with the names of white settler males to further normalize white hetero-patriarchy and settler colonialism. An optional assignment was also given to the students to research the name of the street they live on. Although it is not clear in the unit plan that white settler colonialism would be discussed for this lesson, this would be an important opportunity to begin those conversations with students.



In Lesson 8, students are asked to work on the “family story” assignment where they meet with another class, interview each other, and find out about their family background. There is also an opportunity to write in a journal, addressing questions regarding how they felt during the research assignment on park and street names. Once again, although this is not explicit in the unit plan, it is clear that the teacher-participant could use this to help students position themselves and understand how we are all positioned differently based on a history of white settler colonialism. This could be the foundational understanding for teaching students about the government policies that produce inequality between white settlers, Indigenous people, and people of color. This helps lay the foundation for teaching how this continues to be reproduced today.

Lessons 9 and 10 are focused on the biohistory of Saskatchewan. The class will first listen to a guest speaker from the Saskatoon Zoo Society. There is also an opportunity to create a photo journal of the northeast swale, natural grasslands, and Saskatoon Forestry Farm Park and Zoo in order to identify animals and plants, participate in pond dipping (investigate aquatic creatures), and a scavenger hunt.

Students were then invited to create a PowerPoint of their day. Most of the guiding questions for this assignment are about how students felt about their research on an intellectual, emotional, and spiritual level. The teacher suggests using a medicine wheel but does not specify how this would be done. The use of the medicine wheel in teaching has been critiqued by a number of scholars as problematic, and more research needs to be done in this area.

These are all good introductory activities for students to learn more about their landscapes and their place on the landscapes. This unit plan needs to go further by explicitly asking students to investigate the impact of colonialism on Indigenous landscapes and the peoples who lived on them for over 500,000 years. Given the critical world view and teaching philosophy this teacher shared, many of the suggestions in this analysis may already be integrated into the unit plan; however, it was not specifically made clear. It is also possible that even when teachers have a critical analysis, it is difficult for us to think about how to integrate it into our pedagogy. This is important as it allows educators to think about how we might be avoiding certain kinds of conversations and curriculum with our students. We have all been socialized into upholding the white settler state. This means that even when we consciously work to teach against the grain, teachers may reproduce whiteness.

## Appendix 2: Report Video

See our full report video in the McDowell Foundation playlist on our YouTube channel at [www.youtube.com/c/saskteachersfed](http://www.youtube.com/c/saskteachersfed).



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