Q & A with Dr. Sean Lessard

Recipient of the 2015 Pat Clifford Award for Early Career Research

Dr. Sean Lessard is Assistant Professor of Indigenous Education and Core Studies at the University of Regina’s Faculty of Education.

Dr. Lessard was born in the Montreal Lake Cree Nation of Northern Saskatchewan, but was adopted as a child by a non-Aboriginal rural family in North Battleford. Frequent trips between both worlds allowed him to develop strong attachments to both communities, which shaped his sense of self. He came to realize that there isn’t one singular story of identity, which now makes up the heart of his research.

Dr. Lessard is building an impressive research agenda that aims to support classroom teachers in pedagogical considerations of what it means to engage meaningfully in fostering success for Aboriginal learners with significant socio-economic and socio-cultural challenges in formal and informal learning spaces. His work has the potential to transform education for Indigenous learners in Canada and internationally.

The following is an edited interview transcript

Can you describe the challenges that urban Indigenous students face in Regina?

There are all kinds of challenges; institutional challenges; structural challenges; challenges around homelessness and poverty and challenges that come from the transition that these young people are going through coming to Regina from surrounding Treaty territories. They’re trying to make sense of what it’s like to live in a big city and are surrounded with many situational barriers. This is why I ask the questions: Who are these young people that we’re teaching? Who are going to be the young people teaching these kids?
What do Indigenous students need to thrive in the public school system?

I think we need to be more sincere and more purposeful in terms of creating spaces where we can disrupt the conversations. When I was a high school teacher in Edmonton, we used to dance around difficult issues, but I rallied for Aboriginal Studies to be part of the learning for everyone because this created a safe space where I could connect with kids so that we could talk about identity and Indigenous issues. We would travel around the city to make sense of who we were in relation to the urban centre and to consider the stories that existed within the land and space.

Aboriginal Studies class is a practical example of how we can start to slowly shift conversations because when I was in Alberta, there were only 2-3 questions on the Grade 12 diploma examination that had anything to do with Aboriginal issues and Worldview. My students used to ask me why we would spend so much time on subject matter that they weren’t going to be tested on. I told them that it wasn’t about standardized exams, but because it was part of the landscape that we are all living in. But it couldn’t be just “the Indigenous guy” leading this charge. I needed my colleagues to take a risk, and that’s where we started to make transformative shifts. I think a lot of people are walking on eggshells because we’re all trying to figure this out and sometimes you say something that people within the Aboriginal Community don’t agree with, but we’ve got to start taking risks to learn or we’re not going to move forward together.

When I’m thinking about the Indigenous students in Regina public schools, we can’t make monolithic assumptions and sweeping generalizations that every kid has the same story because this does more harm than good. Not all kids powwow; some kids dance contemporary. We have a strong Métis population to consider; Cree, Saulteaux as well as other Indigenous language groups; we have traditional dance and protocols, there is great diversity within the youth and their stories. Some kids are jigging and some kids are breakdancing. We have to consider the fluidity of identity and open these spaces for understanding. So we can’t just put kids in the same box. We have to try to understand that there’s difference and that’s a beautiful thing. There’s multiplicity. I’m really paying attention to respecting identity in school since my daughter is in Grade 2. Where is the practical application, rather than just philosophical, to deal with this properly?
How are you preparing non-Aboriginal teaching candidates to teach Indigenous students?

I’m preparing them to try to understand the complexities of life, so they don’t go into classrooms with assumptions, but rather an open mind and open heart to think about the possibilities of the learning spaces they’re creating. This has been my life’s work. It’s what I keep going back to in my research and teaching. When I’m successful, teaching candidates begin to understand and to interact with their students in such a different way. This is why I invite university students to a gymnasium where we run our Growing Young Movers Program research space – so that they can see these kids move in a different way – metaphorically and practically.

When I bring up the issues of identity in my classrooms, there are huge tensions, but as we get to know each other, we start to move in different directions, because I try to unpack our experiences around place and who the people in our lives are, and what it means to live in a place like Regina, Saskatchewan in Treaty 4 territory. A lot of my students come from rural places with a graduating class of five or smaller, and many of them come to university with some strong stereotypes of who Indigenous people are. So then I meet them in the class for the first time and it’s filled with tension.

With each class, I continue to work on my relationship with them to try to understand each other’s experiences, so that we can try to move forward. I do this through narrative; what it means to be from Treaty 4, what the significance of a Treaty is and why this matters. And I’ve had some super difficult conversations with 19-year-olds coming from rural places with anger, racism and prejudice. I try to get them to understand that this negativity comes from a place.

Some people get mad at me because they don’t think I’m hard enough on these students – that I should be calling them settlers, but how could I do this if I don’t even know the person’s name? I don’t where they’re from. I don’t know anything about their family. I’m trying to get these students to understand who they are and who they think they are, and then we can start moving forward in other ways; we can talk about some of those more contentious issues, but I’m not the one beginning any conversation. This is how I was taught in my community, how my mom taught me, how my dad in my other place taught me; they always talked about teaching by example – teaching gently, teaching sideways.
Can you describe what you mean by “teaching sideways”?

Teaching narratively – let the stories work on us, like when I read narrative experiences of youth who have struggled with school. The Elders that I work with call it ‘teaching sideways’. It’s that indirect teaching – teaching gently – where the lessons come from the side rather than direct teaching or lecturing it is about listening in this way also. We’re provoking dialogue by inquiring into stories. When I get students to do things like autobiographically inquire into what place means to them. I ask them to map timelines of what school looked like for them, to identify tensions on the school landscape. They tell me that no one had ever asked them to talk about that before.

So I do a lot of memory work with students so that they can try to unpack what their school experience was like and that it looks different for everyone; because if they base their understanding on a relatively smooth school experience, it becomes really difficult for them to step into a classroom in North Central Regina where the stories might not be as smooth. When working with Indigenous youth populations on- or off-reserve, teachers need to be able to travel to their worlds free of assumptions and arrogant perceptions. So I slowly bring these future teachers into this relational space and it can be hard work with 150 students at a time.

So your teacher-candidates participate in your Growing Young Movers Action-Research Program?

Yes – the philosophy that I share in my class occurs in a gymnasium space, where the growers and movers are a group of 25 Grade 2/3 students. This is a space where they watch Indigenous youth from North Central Regina – a stigmatized place where we ask them to play and interact with the kids. My students then tell me what they learned, what the kids were telling them, and they slowly start to see each other differently. What's equally important is that the Indigenous students see prospective non-Aboriginal teachers that also have singular stories that come from a place. Their perceptions and experiences can come from deep-seated intergenerational places that are real and that require healing through relationships. These kids have rarely had the opportunity to interact in a positive way with non-Aboriginal people and then all of the sudden magical things start to happen when they go to a gym and just start to play – it’s a connecting space and experience. All of the sudden they’re interacting differently through their experiences alongside one another. This is a way forward.
So you have Indigenous high school student mentors helping you to deliver the Young Movers Program?

There are six high school students to mentor the younger elementary students in paid internship positions – dynamic, Indigenous youth from North Central Regina. I think I’ve had only one of the kids miss a day of work in two years. They run the sessions now and we give them feedback. These young people have mixed reputations in their high schools, but they come to this gym space after school and they’re always on time, they’re ready to roll with positive energy and they’re sharing their intergenerational knowledge with the younger kids, they are shifting the stories. They’re engaging in physical wellness and creating a relational space. This is a home place for the Community. So now kids can come, the community can come, and the university students can come everyone is welcome. We now have nurses from the university and social workers who come to the gym – it’s a sustaining place.

What are the future policy implications that could be influenced by your action-research?

If we can begin to understand what makes sense to youth and families from the Aboriginal community, then we can begin to shift policy because we understand a little bit more about the multiplicity within their lives. Then when we’re thinking about policy, we’re thinking about pedagogy, and we’re thinking about curriculum in school. I wonder what a report card would look like if students were getting graded on the things outside of school that are valuable to them? How would that shape what we’re doing inside school? When I ask these questions to teachers, they tell me that they had never looked at subject matter this way, or the knowledge of the teacher and learning environments that way. These kids have valuable experiences on the trap line and fishing, or within the protocols of drumming in their communities. We don’t know anything about that. We don’t even know that these activities are important to them. We never even created space to even have these kinds of conversations. So that’s what my work is all about beginning to understand differently.