

**LIVED EXPERIENCE OF NEW TEACHERS IMPLEMENTING FIRST NATIONS,
MÉTIS, AND INUIT PERSPECTIVES INTO THEIR TEACHING PRACTICES**

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DEDICATION

One thing I want to exemplify in this final product is a narrative of the experiences that have made me who I am today. I aim to illustrate who I am as an educator while ensuring this is not an autobiography. My journey has been unique – one of cultural revitalization through the pursuit of knowledge that exists beyond traditional Western academics, as well as a pursuit of historical understanding about myself, my family, and my heritage.

There are moments and stories that have profoundly influenced my decisions as a Métis teacher, shaping the educator I have become. The lens through which I view the world and education allows me to approach teaching with empathy – and there is something deeply beautiful about that. This is what I want to share. I do not want to lose sight of the people and experiences that have inspired my passion for education, particularly Indigenous education.

As I move through this process, I hope to create a portrait of my story – my lived experience – woven together with the experiences of other educators who are also navigating the integration of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit histories into their teaching. Together, these stories can create a shared narrative that highlights both the successes and the challenges of implementing the government-mandated competency of incorporating Indigenous histories and perspectives into education.

This entire thesis would not be possible without the inspiration of my late grandfather, Thomas Joseph Sanregret. I have always admired him for his ability to be lighthearted in serious moments, his dedication to sport and hard work, and his lifelong commitment to self-discovery. He passed away while I was in the midst of my master's studies, and I continue to grieve that he will not see the final product. Still, I am grateful that his character and spirit live on in me. I hope that essence infuses this narrative. Maarsii, Grandpa Tommy – I hope you are proud of my

pursuit to learn more about our culture and my efforts to improve education for Indigenous students.

ABSTRACT

This study explores how teachers experience and implement Competency Five of the Teacher Quality Standards (TQS) into their respective teaching practices. This competency is one of six standards that Alberta teachers are required to follow to maintain their teaching licences. Competency Five is focused on incorporating First Nations, Métis, and Inuit histories and perspectives into the classroom and whole-school approaches to education.

Grounded in my own identity as a Métis educator, I approached this research with a desire to learn more about teachers' lived experiences as they navigated their personal approaches to attending to Competency Five. Using a Narrative Inquiry approach, blended with Indigenous Storywork, I conducted semi-structured interviews with ten educators from my school division.

The findings revealed that teachers recognize the importance of Competency Five – however, they often experience ambiguity in its interpretation, as well as emotional challenges as they wrestle with teaching difficult histories, fear of incompetence, and inauthentic implementation. At the same time, participants shared meaningful “heart-opening moments” and positive teaching stories that highlight the importance of this work. As teachers, they are sitting with the tension of understanding the value of Competency Five while feeling doubt about how to implement it well.

These findings suggest a need for clearer guidance, more meaningful professional learning, and greater collaboration with Indigenous communities. Ultimately, this research emphasizes that meaningful implementation of Competency Five is valuable work that positively impacts students and educators, and that it requires more support and time to have truly impactful implementation.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Work described in this thesis received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name “LIVED EXPERIENCE OF NEW TEACHERS IMPLEMENTING FIRST NATIONS, MÉTIS, AND INUIT PERSPECTIVES INTO THEIR TEACHING PRACTICES”, Pro00134224, JANUARY 25, 2024.

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Thank you to my participants – your vulnerability and honesty enriched this work and made the process fruitful and enjoyable. I hope that your professional journeys continue to have heart-opening moments that fuel your pursuit to incorporate Indigenous ways of learning and teaching into your pedagogies.

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Key Terms

Aboriginal: First Nation, Métis, and Inuit people in Canada.

Alberta Education: is the Albertan ministry responsible for early childhood education, primary education, and secondary education in Alberta.

First Nation: term used to describe Aboriginal peoples of Canada who are ethnically neither Métis nor Inuit. This term came into common usage in the 1970s and '80s and generally replaced the term “Indian,” although, unlike “Indian,” the term “First Nation” does not have a legal definition.

Indigenous peoples: In Canada, the term Indigenous peoples refers to First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples. These are the original inhabitants of the land that is now Canada. In the 2016 census by Statistics Canada, over 1.6 million people in Canada identified as Indigenous, making up 4.9 percent of the national population.

Inuit: a member of an Indigenous people of northern Canada and parts of Greenland and Alaska.

Métis: (especially in western Canada) a person of mixed Indigenous and Euro-American ancestry, in particular, one of a group of such people who in the 19th Century constituted the so-called *Métis Nation* in the areas around the Red and Saskatchewan rivers.

Teacher Quality Standards (TQS): The professional practice of all Alberta teachers is guided by the Teaching Quality Standard (TQS). This standard is the basis for certification of all Alberta teachers and holds them accountable to the profession and to the Minister of Education.

Introduction

In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) published 94 Calls to Action to address the legacies of residential schools that continue to negatively impact Indigenous peoples today. There are seven "Calls to Action" that pertain directly to education (Calls to Action 6-12), which address the elimination of educational and employment gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians, the levelling of funding inequalities for First Nations children educated on and off reserves, the development of culturally appropriate curricula, the protection of Indigenous languages through education, and the honouring of treaty relationships (TRC, 2015). In addition to Calls to Action 6-12, the TRC published four more Calls to Action, which have also influenced the shifts that have occurred in Canada's education system, particularly in Alberta. Calls to Action 62 and 63 will be the focus of this proposal; the TRC (2015) has called the Government of Canada to make age appropriate curriculum on residential schools and the histories of Indigenous Peoples, sharing best practices on how to teach the content, and to identify teacher-training needs to prepare current and future teachers on how to implement the curriculum from a place of understanding, empathy, and mutual respect. In response to the TRC's "Calls to Action", Alberta Education published a new version of the Teacher Quality Standards (TQS) in 2018. As defined on the Alberta Teachers' Association website (n.d.), "The Teaching Quality Standard is a ministerial order that defines the knowledge, skills and attributes that teachers are expected to demonstrate as they complete their professional preparation, enter the profession and progress through their career." To obtain and maintain a teaching certificate in Alberta, teachers must adhere to the TQS as a code of conduct. If a teacher fails to comply with the TQS, an investigation can take place to determine their (in)competency level. Incompetency is defined by The Alberta Teachers Association (ATA) (n.d.) as "the inability

of an ATA member to consistently meet the requirements of the Teaching Quality Standard." (What is Incompetent Professional Practice section, para 1). The TQS outlines the requirements of all teachers working with all students – including students with diverse needs and backgrounds. Before the 2018 version of the TQS, the last updated version of the standards was published in 1997. Mark Swanson (2018) notes that major changes were made from the 1997 document, which includes the following: the same set of standards for both interim teachers and teachers with their permanent certificate; an explicit focus on the inclusion of all students, and the addition of a section related to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) learning. Within the TQS (2018) there are six competencies that teachers are required to meet:

1. Fostering Effective Relationships
2. Engaging in Career Long Learning
3. Demonstrate a Professional Body of Knowledge
4. Establish Inclusive Learning Environments
5. Applying Foundational Knowledge about First Nations, Métis, and Inuit
6. Adhere to Legal Frameworks and Policies

Competency 5, the focus of this research, sets out a requirement for teachers to apply foundational knowledge about Indigenous groups in their lessons – ensuring the implementation of culturally appropriate curricula and teaching practices.

This study will examine the narratives of new teachers having one to ten years of teaching practice, about their experience implementing Competency 5 – Applying Foundational Knowledge about FNMI groups into their lesson plans and their ways of teaching. The study intends to gather information relating to teachers' confidence in implementing high-quality and meaningful lessons. Outcomes are intended to potentially inform leaders in the field about how

to improve the implementation of Competency 5 across multiple subject matters.¹ The results can also inform teachers on ways that their colleagues are attending to Competency 5, which may encourage more dialogue and collaboration on how to improve this in their subject areas.

The overarching intent of this research is to improve Indigenous students' educational experience in the Alberta public school system – particularly in the Rocky View School District. By interviewing teachers in Rocky View, information about teacher success and teacher need can be disseminated to the district to provide teachers with more resources and professional development opportunities to improve their ability to address Competency 5 of the TQS. As teachers receive the support needed to improve their confidence in this area, Indigenous students' experience will be positively impacted as teaching practice surrounding Competency 5 becomes more meaningful.

Situating Myself in the Research

I grew up in the town of Chestermere, Alberta, where I lived for the first nineteen years of my life. My home was made up of my two parents, Rob and Annette, and my two older siblings, Lisa and Kyle. Our family has always known that we have Métis ancestry, but it has only been in the last fifteen years that we have started to get to know our family's story. It first began when students in Alberta were taught about residential schooling in Social Studies class. I remember coming home to my parents to tell them of the tragic things I had learned. I remember my mom calling my grandpa, Thomas Joseph Sanregret, to ask him if the "boarding school" he went to was similar to what I had learned in class. This was the first time that my parents learned

¹ Leaders in the field would include curriculum developers, individual school administrators, and post-secondary educators.

about residential schools, and the first time my grandpa confirmed that the school he went to as a child was exactly like what I had learned about in class.

My grandpa's name was Thomas Joseph Sanregret, a Métis man from St. Paul, Alberta. He was a residential school survivor. I am a seventh-generation Métis, and my lineage comes out of the Red River Settlement, St. Boniface, Manitoba, and St. Francis Xavier, Manitoba. My ancestors moved west with the fur trade, and my great-grandparents, George Joseph Sanregret and Adelina Angele Hamelin, were married in Saddle Lake, Alberta, in 1922. Thomas Joseph was born in 1934 in St. Paul before he entered residential school at St. Mary's Boys' Home in Edmonton, Alberta (Figure 1 and Figure 2). Prior to his passing, he had not shared his experience in detail, but whenever he and his brothers talked to us about some of their memories, they were ones of sadness and pain. My grandpa and his brothers did not have a positive educational experience, and it shaped how they saw themselves for the rest of their lives

Motivation for the Research

The legacies of residential schools continue to impact our Indigenous students today. The literature says that Indigenous students have higher rates of achievement when they are taught from an Indigenous perspective, about Indigenous histories, and through an Indigenous way of teaching (Kanu, 2007). Kristoff and Cottrell (2021), who investigate the impact of integrating culturally responsive curricula into the classroom, argue, "...the data revealed that sustained and culturally responsive social support influenced more than the intellectual development of First Nations and Métis students; this type of support imparted a holistic effect that further touched the students' families and their broader Indigenous communities." (p. 56) They define culturally responsive curricula as integrating Indigenous knowledge, incorporating traditional teachings, and personal experiences into teaching (Kristoff & Cottrell, 2021). Through their research,

Kristoff and Cottrell (2021) found, "...traditional Indigenous cultural values are a necessary precursor to academic persistence, as cultural identity cannot be separated from academics, was supported." (p.54) The authors found that as Indigenous students advanced in their academic pursuits, they not only improved intellectually but also developed emotionally and culturally. This progress enabled them to attain their personal objectives, contribute to their families and wider communities, and preserve their cultural heritage (Kristoff and Cottrell, 2021).

Alberta Education has started to take steps towards creating a learning environment that includes the previously mentioned factors by creating the new Teacher Quality Standards (Alberta Education, 2018). The Teacher Quality Standard (2018): Competency 5,

Applying Foundational Knowledge about First Nations, Métis and Inuit, states:

A teacher develops and applies foundational knowledge about First Nations, Métis and Inuit for the benefit of all students. Achievement of this competency is demonstrated by indicators such as:

- (a) understanding the historical, social, economic, and political implications of: treaties and agreements with First Nations; legislation and agreements negotiated with Métis; and residential schools and their legacy.
- (b) supporting student achievement by engaging in collaborative, whole school approaches to capacity building in First Nations, Métis and Inuit education.
- (c) using the programs of study to provide opportunities for all students to develop a knowledge and understanding of, and respect for, the histories,

cultures, languages, contributions, perspectives, experiences and contemporary contexts of First Nations, Métis and Inuit; and

(d) supporting the learning experiences of all students by using resources that accurately reflect and demonstrate the strength and diversity of First Nations, Métis and Inuit. (p.6)

The questions that emerge for me when reading the above indicators are: Do teachers only need to teach *about* Indigenous peoples to fulfill this competency, or do they need to teach more deeply by implementing Indigenous ways of knowing and learning? What does supporting student achievement and capacity building for FNMI students look like? What does it look like to demonstrate the strength and diversity of FNMI peoples? Without answers to the above questions, it is unclear how teachers are expected to fulfill the competency. If the intention of Alberta Education is truly to improve the educational experience and outcomes for Indigenous students, then teachers should be equipped with the skills to teach using Indigenous ways of knowing and learning and accurately teach the histories of Indigenous peoples in Canada.

The purpose of this research is to give young teachers a voice about their experience attending to Competency 5. I am interested in how teachers interpret what the TQS is asking of them and what ways they believe they are addressing or failing to address the requirements of applying foundational knowledge about First Nations, Métis, and Inuit histories and ways of living. Some Alberta teachers have taken one or more Indigenous education courses as a requirement of their Bachelor of Education Degree. For example, The University of Alberta (n.d.) describes their Aboriginal Education and Context for Professional and Personal Engagement course, "...preservice teachers will continue to develop knowledge of Aboriginal peoples' histories, educational experiences, and knowledge systems, ways of knowing and being

and will further develop an understanding of the implications of this knowledge to the professional roles and obligations for teachers." (para. 1) The University of Calgary's (2023) Indigenous Education course description states, "Students will be introduced to the national and international experiences and advances of Indigenous peoples as related to education. Particular attention will be given to understanding the histories and diversity of the First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples of Canada and the concomitant implications that this has for education policy and practice." (para. 1) As a side to my research, I am curious to explore how much of an impact such a course has on current teachers and if it contributes to the efficacy of teachers' ability to deliver this topic. Certain post-secondary institutions do not require their education students to take an Indigenous Education course. I am curious to know if those teachers feel negatively impacted by the lack of education on this particular subject during their undergraduate degrees. Diving into this topic would allow for a broader depiction of where teachers could use more support, which could be used to inform areas of need.

Teachers are on the ground; they are the people who have one of the greatest opportunities to build relationships with Indigenous students and teach in a way that supports Indigenous student achievement. Teachers need to be properly equipped to take on this task. The point of this research is to find out just that – what are teachers' experiences; do they need more support to be able to teach in ways that attend to Indigenous ways of knowing and learning; do teachers know enough about Canada's history to understand the importance of this task; and how can teachers be supported to increase their efficacy in their respective subject areas?

Literature Review

Residential Schools

In 1831, the first residential school opened in Brantford, Ontario, named *Mohawk Indian Residential School* (National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, 2023). The Roman Catholic, Anglican, United, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches played a significant role in managing the residential school system. The government collaborated with these churches until 1969, and even though most of the schools shut down by the 1980s, the last federally funded residential schools were operational until the end of the 1990s (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). During this time, the Government of Canada was responsible for the funding of these schools (Union of Ontario Indians, 2013). These schools were often located in remote areas, where Indigenous students were removed from their families and forced to live for either 10 months of the year or all year round. The goal of residential schooling was to assimilate Indigenous people from a young age into Euro-Western culture (Union of Ontario Indians, 2013). This is displayed in the vivid statement by the Deputy Minister of Indian Affairs in 1920, Duncan Campbell Scott,

I want to get rid of the Indian problem. I do not think as a matter of fact, that the country ought to continuously protect a class of people who are able to stand alone... Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department. (National Archives of Canada, p. 55)

As a response to the trauma faced by Indigenous peoples of Canada, The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) published its *Final Report* in 2015. The TRC (2015) outlined what the conditions of the school were like for Indigenous students, describing

life in the schools as lonely and isolating, the curriculum as subpar, students were often physically or sexually abused, and the living conditions were unhealthy or unsafe. Indigenous students were stripped of their culture and language, as they were required to speak English and learn Christianity (Haig-Brown, 2002). Julian Walker (2008) published *The Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission*,

Many of the schools were overcrowded and critically underfunded, leading to poor heating, sanitation and clothing, as well as high levels of malnutrition and exposure to contagious diseases. Reports to the government in the earlier part of the 20th century noted that there was a crisis in the state of these schools and a high death rate among students – in some cases, the rate was reported to be as high as 50%. (p.7)

Residential schools resulted in a decreased quality of life during and after schooling, and a loss of life for many students. The legacy of residential schools is one that resulted in overall harm to Canada's Indigenous population.

Legacy of Residential Schools

The legacy of residential school lives on today. It can be seen in the disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups in areas such as income, health, and education (TRC, 2015). Partridge (2010) explains in *Residential Schools: The intergenerational impacts on Aboriginal Peoples* that Indigenous communities have experienced loss due to the intergenerational effects of residential schools – the loss of meaning, the loss of family, the loss of childhood, and the loss of feeling. The loss of meaning is summarized as the disconnect between the children and the traumatic events that occurred in residential schools – resulting in difficulty in processing the events later in life (Partridge, 2010). Loss of family and childhood was caused when children were forcibly taken from their homes during their childhood years.

During these formative years, children faced abuse and isolation (Partridge, 2010). The loss of feeling was caused by the lack of affection and comfort that children faced in residential schools (Partridge, 2010). Partridge states, "These losses to the mental, emotional, physical and spiritual well-being of the children who attended residential schools have impacted our communities intergenerationally right up to the present day" (p. 54).

Understanding the negative impacts of residential schools – on survivors and their families – leads to a better understanding of the impact on the future of Indigenous generations' academic experiences. Barnes, Josefowitz, and Cole (2006) explore this idea further, "... former students are also likely to transmit negative attitudes and expectations to parents, siblings, spouses, children, or grandchildren; in this manner, problematic residential school experiences have influences extending well beyond the immediate lives of former students" (p.29). This can play out in many forms, from truancy to defiance and lower academic achievement. This is explained in Gordon Stephanie's (2016) article entitled *Issues in Indigenous Education*, where he describes the distrust that Indigenous families have with the school system, resulting in a reluctance to send their children to public school. The TRC (2015) states in the section entitled *Failure to Educate*, "Although educational success rates are slowly improving, the fact remains that Aboriginal people still have lower educational and economic achievements than other Canadians. This is the legacy of residential schools." (p.62). The TRC's (2015) "Calls to Action" have been published to identify the impacts of residential schools, to hold the Government of Canada responsible and accountable for the atrocities experienced, and to promote and demand action to make changes toward reconciliation. The process of reconciliation cannot take place without first recognizing and addressing the legacy of residential schools.

Revitalization

The Indian Residential School System has negatively impacted Indigenous peoples for generations, however, the attempt to assimilate Indigenous communities into Euro-Western ways can be seen as unsuccessful due to the resilience and resistance of many Indigenous communities historically and today (Wilk et al., 2017). Kirmayer et al., (2011) explore the concept of resilience in multiple Indigenous communities across Canada. One of the examples in the article explored the Métis concept of *débrouillard*, which is a Michif word that can be directly translated to English to mean *resourceful*. Kirmayer et al., (2011) dive deeper into the significance of the word in Michif,

Although *débrouillard* can be translated as resourceful, the English word lacks the colloquial tone and symbolism it has in French or Michif (a language derived from French and Cree spoken by some Métis in the Midwest). Being *débrouillard* refers to a combination of being good at finding solutions, creative, having a lot of street smarts (or country smarts), being a jack of all trades, and being able to make a life for oneself and one's family. Most importantly, it also refers to perseverance and willingness to carry on in the face of challenges or setbacks. (p.88)

Throughout history, there are examples of Indigenous communities regaining control over the education of their children – displaying self-determination toward reclaiming their rights as Canadians (Neegan, 2007). Barman, Hébert, & McCaskill (1986) share the narrative of the Blue Quills school takeover of their education in 1970 as a display of taking ownership of Indigenous education – teaching the Alberta curriculum alongside Cree language and tradition courses. In 1970, the Indian Residential School near St. Paul, Alberta was closing, and the people of Saddle Lake and the Athabasca district lobbied the government for full control of the

school. In 1971, Blue Quills School became the first school to be managed and run by First Nations (Lewis et al., 2018). From 1971 onwards, Blue Quills School grew to deliver content from K-12. In 1991, the school became a college, and in 2015 it became the University of nuhelot'ine thiyots'i nistamêyimâkanak Blue Quills (UnBQ) (Lewis et al., 2018). The authors describe the impact of this example in their book entitled *Indian Education in Canada*, "...it turned the tide towards Indian self-determination, at Blue Quills and across Canada. A new era in Indian education had begun" (Barman et al., 1986, p. 167).

Another example of Indigenous resilience in the battle towards self-determination and ownership of education is in the story of the creation of Indian Brook First Nation's Mi'kmaq school in 1997 (Knockwood in Anderson and Lawrence, 2003). Jean Knockwood (2003) shares her experience in the book entitled *Strong women's stories: native vision and community survival*, as she removed her daughter from a public school after a racist event and began a community-based school for Mi'kmaq youth. The school started with 40 students (grades 7-12) and four teachers, who taught the provincial curriculum and integrated Mi'kmaq cultural teaching into all subjects (Knockwood in Anderson and Lawrence, 2003). After four years of operation, the school had grown to 170 students (Knockwood in Anderson and Lawrence, 2003). The school continued to grow, Knockwood explained, "After five years of operating, we had a staff of thirty: thirteen teachers and seventeen staff people from the community." (p. 197)

Written in the abstract of *Residential Schools: The Intergenerational Impacts on Aboriginal Peoples*, Cheryle Partridge (2010) states, "...it is with pride that we celebrate the resilience and tenacity of the holistic well-being of Aboriginal peoples. We are still here." (p.33) This statement is a powerful exclamation of the character of many Indigenous groups. As political and educational self-determination continues to strengthen, Indigenous leaders have

begun to demand equity within our education system for their children. Barman, Hébert, & McCaskill (1986) argue that the prosperity of a society starts with education,

Central to this process is control over education. The key to the future of any society lies in the transmission of its culture and worldview to succeeding generations. The socialization of children, through education, shapes all aspects of identity, instilling knowledge of the group's language, history, traditions, behaviour, and spiritual beliefs. It is for this reason that aboriginal peoples have placed such a high priority on regaining control over the education of their children. (p.1)

Indigenous resilience and the desire to keep values and traditions alive, transcended the harmful outcomes of residential schools. Kirmayer et al., (2011) begin their conclusion with the statement, "For Aboriginal Peoples in Canada, ideas of resilience are grounded in cultural values that have persisted despite historical adversity or have emerged out of the renewal of indigenous identities." (p. 88) As a Métis woman, I believe there is beauty in being inspired by our ancestors' perseverance, and comfort in knowing that their successes and efforts have shaped the Indigenous population today – it is in our blood to continue to work toward a flourishing community.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) states that education is the key to reconciliation. It is through education that the gaps in historical knowledge that perpetuate ignorance and racism can be remedied in ways that foster empathy and social change (2015). Kestila (2017) argues that due to settler ideologies portrayed in history textbooks and classroom curricula, stories of discovery and civilization have replaced the truths of exploitation. Therefore, it is crucial that all Canadian students – Indigenous and non-Indigenous – learn the true history

of this country, which was not "discovered" by Christopher Columbus as this language implies that the land was unoccupied before his arrival (TRC, 2015).

The TRC published 94 "Calls to Action" that influence today's education in terms of funding, curriculum, and support for Indigenous students, etc. Within the Final Report, volume 6, titled *Reconciliation*, the TRC outlines Call to Action 62,

We call upon the federal, provincial, and territorial governments, in consultation and collaboration with Survivors, Aboriginal peoples, and educators, to:

- i. Make 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.
- ii. Provide the necessary funding to post-secondary institutions to educate teachers on how to integrate Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into classrooms.
- iii. Provide the necessary funding to Aboriginal schools to utilize Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods in classrooms.
- iv. Establish senior-level positions in government at the assistant deputy minister level or higher dedicated to Aboriginal content in education.

(p.121)

The above Call to Action is directly speaking to the federal, provincial, and territorial governments to do their part in ensuring that the curriculum is being developed in an age-appropriate manner, with the consultation of Indigenous people and educators.

Call to Action 63 specifically calls the Council of Ministers of Education to uphold similar commitments to education and states,

We call upon the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada to maintain an annual commitment to Aboriginal education issues, including:

- i. Developing and implementing Kindergarten to Grade Twelve curriculum and learning resources on Aboriginal peoples in Canadian history, and the history and legacy of residential schools.
- ii. Sharing information and best practices on teaching curriculum related to residential schools and Aboriginal history.
- iii. Building student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect.
- iv. Identifying teacher-training needs relating to the above. (p.122).

Educating Canadian students about the residential school system in a manner that promotes constructive dialogue and mutual respect requires not only the implementation of an age-appropriate curriculum, but also the availability of the appropriate support and resources for teachers (TRC, 2015).

Understanding the structure of the education system in Alberta is important to recognize how changes to education can come to fruition in the province. Provinces have education ministries that govern their schools. In addition to determining school curricula, reviewing texts, establishing student standards, determining teacher qualifications, and setting classroom sizes, these ministries invest in research and analysis to measure student achievement (TRC, 2015). The TRC (2015) states, "Although efforts are being made, such as the development of the Common Curriculum Framework for Aboriginal Language and Culture Programs in the western

provinces, in general provincial, federal, and territorial governments have not committed the necessary resources to accomplish the task." (p.82) Continued research on this topic is needed to create reports that inform the public and governing bodies of the tangible efforts being made to fulfill the above-mentioned Calls to Action with the intent to hold educators accountable for their inaction.

Alberta Education's Response to the Calls to Action

The Alberta government has responded to the TRC's Calls to Action as they pertain to education – in 2018, an updated Professional Quality Standard was released for teachers, school leaders, and superintendents (Government of Alberta). In a document entitled *Walking Together: Education for Reconciliation*, published by Alberta Teachers' Association (2021) stated,

These standards include competencies that will ensure teachers and all educational professionals have knowledge and understanding of First Nation, Métis and Inuit cultures and ways of knowing, residential schools, and their legacy; Treaties; and First Nations, Métis and Inuit experiences and perspectives, cultures and contributions in historical and contemporary contexts. (v-vi)

In 2019, *The Indigenous Education and Reconciliation Circle* (IERC) was created by the Government of Alberta as a forum "for education partners and the Alberta government to collaborate in support of First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners and each other" (2022, p.1). The IERC aims to integrate Indigenous ways of knowing, understanding, and doing into its work with education ministries to improve student learning for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (Government of Alberta, 2022). The IERC was created after the Joint Commitment to Action Committee came to an end as a response to the TRC's Final Report. The mission of the IERC (2022) is to "Advance truth and actions for reconciliation, broaden the capacity of the

education system to support Indigenous learners, promote cross-organizational collaboration within the education system" (p.1) through collaborating monthly. The Government of Alberta (2020) published the responsibilities of the IERC, which include supporting education through the following ways:

1. collectively identify three to four goals and develop a strategic plan to guide the work of the committee
2. bring forth challenges and collaboratively develop potential solutions for the stakeholder organizations or groups they represent as they pertain to Indigenous education and reconciliation
3. ensure that member organizations and groups are informed of committee deliberations, where applicable
4. provide ongoing input and feedback as required
5. advocate for Indigenous education and advancing truth and reconciliation. (p. 1)

Lastly, the Alberta government has provided funding through the Innovation in First Nations Education Grant program to fund early childhood education, starting in kindergarten through to grade twelve, in the pursuit of reviving and strengthening Indigenous languages. This program invested \$7.8 million to fund projects that increased the capacity for teaching and learning in all major Indigenous language groups local to Alberta (Government of Alberta, 2018). Examples of how the grant can be used are provided by the Alberta Government (2018), "Development of courses, programs to train instructors; funding for access to existing training programs; development of transfer agreements; development of bridging programs towards a Bachelor of Education." (p.7)

Importance of the Research

Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has called for reform in our education system – requiring action from provincial governments, education ministries, and teachers to change how content is delivered to students and what content is delivered (2015). Wallace Casey (2022) states, "Given the gravity of what took place within the walls of Indian Residential Schools, and the colonial framework that made such institutions possible, Canada as a society – and educators in particular – can no longer plead ignorance..." (p.12) The time has come to start making changes, by providing proper training to teachers in Alberta to ensure that they are incorporating Indigenous pedagogies into their teaching and adequately and accurately teaching the history of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples in our country. True reconciliation is more than just making policy changes, but ensuring that those policies hold educators and educational leaders accountable for their (in)actions. This literature review will look at the research about the government's response to the TRC's Calls to Action, what resources are being provided for teachers, and teachers' experiences implementing FNMI ways of knowing and content into their curriculum. In an article entitled, *Improving Indigenous student outcomes through improved teacher education: the views of Indigenous educators*, written by Tracy Woodroffe (2020), the author explores the importance of implementing Indigenous knowledge into teacher education in Australia to improve Indigenous student achievement. Woodroffe (2020) states,

The results indicated that understanding the importance of Indigenous knowledge to Indigenous people and the application of this understanding to teacher education programmes would create an environment for promoting engagement and

participation and ultimately improving educational outcomes for Indigenous students.” (p. 146-147)

Therefore, it is important to research how well teachers are striving to achieve this and whether they are receiving the correct training to do so.

Government and Educational Institutions Response

Across Canada, provincial governments are making changes to their teachers' professional standards and their curriculum as a response to the TRC's Calls to Action in 2015. Alberta Education was ahead of other provinces as they implemented a new social studies curriculum in 2005, even before the TRC released the Final Report in 2015. The Government of Alberta stated, "for historical and constitutional reasons, an understanding of Canada requires an understanding of Aboriginal perspectives [and] Aboriginal experiences" (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 4). To make an impact in all subject areas, not just Social Studies, Alberta was the first province to update their professional standards for teachers, principals, and superintendents, which requires the implementation of Competency 5 for all staff (CBC, 2018).

KAIROS Winds of Change: Education for Reconciliation Report Card Summary was published in 2018. The report card is intended to evaluate all the provinces in Canada on their commitment to implementing the TRC's Call to Action 62.i. KAIROS' 2018 report analyzed each province's curricula to provide feedback on their implementation of Indigenous content in their classrooms – essentially evaluating how well each province is responding to Call to Action 62.i. The grading categories are as follows,

1. Residential schools
2. Treaties

3. Historical contributions of Aboriginal Peoples
4. Contemporary contributions of Aboriginal Peoples
5. The teaching of the curriculum from Kindergarten to Grade 12
6. The consultation between educators and Aboriginal Peoples. (KAIROS, 2018, p. 5)

Each category is evaluated on public commitment and implementation of the categories into the curriculum on a scale from excellent, good, needs improvement, and significant work required (KAIROS, 2018). Table 1 below was published after completing the evaluation of Alberta’s curriculum.

Table 1

Current KAIROS Report

Inclusion of Call to Action 62.i in Provincial Curriculum	Previous Report (2016) <i>(average grade across all categories)</i>	Change	Current Report (2018) <i>(average grade across all categories)</i>
Public Commitment	Good	+	Excellent
Implementation	Good	+	Good
Call to Action 62.i Subcategories: Consultation with Aboriginal Peoples ■ Mandatory Content from K-12 ■ Treaties ■ Residential Schools ■ Historical Contemporary Contributions of Aboriginal Peoples ■			

(KAIROS, 2018, p.9)

The justification for Alberta’s score in the Public Commitment category is,

It has received this rating due to numerous news articles, public surveys regarding the incorporation of an Indigenous language program, consultation with Indigenous Peoples and Elders, and the availability of culturally

appropriate resources to teachers, including The Provincial Survey of Curriculum of 2016, The Alberta Provincial Achievement Testing of Social Studies Assessment, and the mandatory Indigenous content found in Social Studies from K- 12. (p.9)

Alberta scored “good” in the implementation of the Call to Action 62.i. KAIROS (2018) justified this score by arguing,

It has received this grade because it has, in consultation with Indigenous Peoples and Elders, implemented the mandatory Indigenous content taught from grades K-12, including residential schools, Treaties. However, there is still a lack of information on the historical and contemporary contributions of Indigenous Peoples. (p. 11)

Alberta has made improvements in their efforts to implement Indigenous content into their curriculum, as shown by the evaluation done by KAIROS. In comparison to other provinces in Canada, Alberta is one of the top provinces in taking action to respond to Call to Action 62.i. (KAIROS, 2018).

Pratt and Hansen (2022) interviewed teacher-instructors at the University of Calgary on their experience teaching a mandated Indigenous education course. In 2013, the Werklund School of Education hired five Indigenous members in education and two more in 2015 (Pratt & Hansen, 2022). One of the roles of these teachers was to design and develop the mandatory education course for all Bachelor of Education students at the University of Calgary. They were responsible for creating content for a nine-week course that encompassed Indigenous peoples, perspectives, and learning across Canada (Pratt & Hansen, 2022). The authors share,

"Decolonizing education is a vast, complex endeavour; in its service, education faculty are required to prepare future teachers to address Indigenous subject matter and to foster success for Indigenous learners." (p. 869)

Pratt and Danyluk, two University of Calgary teacher educators, published research on the preparation of pre-service teachers at their university. In their article, *Learning What Schooling Left Out: Making an Indigenous Case for Critical Service-Learning and Reconciliatory Pedagogy within Teacher Education* (2017), they explore the effectiveness of the mandatory Indigenous Education university course for non-Indigenous pre-service teachers. The response from these teachers was, "Students' initial reactions to this mandatory course vary widely: from a complete lack of knowledge or understanding, to anxiety, excitement, sympathy, guilt, and outright resistance." (p.12) In these courses, most often, teachers will view the educational gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students as a lack of effort or intelligence on behalf of Indigenous students and their communities (Pratt & Danyluk, 2017). Prior to visiting a school on a reserve, a pre-service teacher stated, "I do not imagine much higher level learning takes place at the school" (p.15) and held the belief that, "Aboriginal people and communities [are] the source of the problem from which there is no easy solution." (p.12) (Pratt & Danyluk, 2017). The authors state that the University of Calgary's course intends to switch that narrative and ask teachers to reflect on their role in the educational gap, Pratt and Danyluk (2017) state,

This course attempts to provide alternative perspectives to this positioning within a university classroom setting; notably, there was no opportunity prior to this service-learning program for students to experience Indigenous learning, or community perspectives, outside of a formal field placement. These limitations in a teacher's

learning experiences have the potential for serious consequences for both teachers and learners. (p. 12)

The alternative perspective allows for growth and changes if teachers see themselves as part of the solution – by taking responsibility for their lack of knowledge and understanding and taking ownership over their learning to be more effective teachers.

After the TRC published the final report, with the Calls to Action which addressed the need for action in our education system, there have been tangible changes in our teacher training and professional standards that teachers are held to. Particularly, in Alberta, the province has made significant strides to improve Indigenous education by implementing mandatory university courses at some post-secondary institutions and mandatory competencies that require teachers to integrate First Nations, Métis, and Inuit perspectives in their instruction (Government of Alberta, 2018).

Issues with Implementation

Implementation of new policies and regulations can often be met with resistance from teachers due to uncertainty and a lack of time for professional development. In an article entitled *Examining social studies teachers' resistances towards teaching Aboriginal perspectives: the case of Alberta*, written by Scott and Gani (2018), the authors discuss the difficulty teachers have when required to change or implement new curriculum into their subject matters. The authors introduce data from a study conducted by Manitoba Social Studies teachers and their challenges in implementing Indigenous perspectives into the curriculum. Scott and Gani (2018) state, "Kanu (2005), for example, found that although there is an 'expressed openness among teachers to include Aboriginal perspectives into the school curriculum, in practice little headway was being made except in a few unique cases' (p. 57)." (p.168) When Scott and Gani (2018)

conducted their qualitative research, they found that most Alberta teachers supported the idea of teaching FNMI perspectives, but when asked what prevented the actual execution of the task, teachers responded with three common answers,

a) no perspectives can be identified due to the highly diverse nature of Aboriginal peoples and communities; b) only educators who are Indigenous can authentically offer insights into or teach Aboriginal perspectives; and c) Aboriginal perspectives should not be given special attention, because all cultural perspectives in Canada should be given equal treatment. (p. 168)

Similar to the issues that have been identified within this proposal, Scott and Gani (2018) argue that there is a significant amount of ambiguity in the Program of Studies (POS) and the Teacher Quality Standards (TQS), "Alberta POS does not provide a working definition of what is meant by perspective, nor does it provide a conceptual model for how non-Indigenous educators can ethically engage with the unique epistemic and ontological traditions of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples and nations in classroom contexts." (Alberta Education, 2005, p.168-169) This reinforces the evaluation given to Alberta by KAIROS (2018), which identified aspects of the curriculum as being unclear or inconsistent.

Woodroffe (2020) references her study, which she conducted in 2019, where she interviewed Indigenous educators in Australia who have taught in urban classroom settings. She asked them to answer if they thought it was important to include Indigenous knowledge in pre-service teacher education. The teachers answered,

Pre-service teachers should *learn about* the existence of Indigenous knowledge and its importance to Indigenous people. They should *learn about* examples of

Indigenous knowledge and how it impacts Indigenous students and Indigenous colleagues in the contexts of the school and classroom. Indigenous educators and Indigenous community members are the knowers and keepers of Indigenous knowledge. And preservice teachers should learn this from appropriate Indigenous teachers. (p.149)

Madjidi and Restoule (2008) compare Eurocentric ways of knowing to Indigenous ways of knowing. While researching the University of Toronto's preservice teacher program, they came across issues with implementing Indigenous teaching into the curriculum. When instructors were asked why this was the case, the response was, "...instructors reported no time to create lessons or to develop the expertise needed to adequately teach the topics under consideration, and inability to locate resources that were accurate or fit these topics." (Madjidi & Restoule, 2008, p.172) Madjidi and Restoule (2008) also interviewed a cohort of approximately 70 preservice teachers that provided a consensus that upon completion of their program, the teachers understood the importance of teaching Indigenous ways of knowing but felt less confident in their ability to do so than they did when they were at the midpoint of their program. The researchers inferred the following, "although they knew more about Indigenous ways than when they started, they realized just how much they still didn't know and how far they had to go." (Madjidi & Restoule, 2008, p.173) Although this article was published seven years before the release of the TRC's Calls to Action, the dilemmas that teachers face today are similar.

Oskineegish and Berger (2021) provide a similar narrative to the previously mentioned study. After interviewing instructors at Lakehead University, there was a consensus that the mandatory course about Indigenous education is valuable for preservice teachers, however, there are limitations due to the time constraints of a university semester. Instructors explained that the

course provided students with exposure to the topic and the opportunity to identify areas of need, but they hoped the biggest takeaway would be the desire to continue to learn how to incorporate Indigenous teachings, which is key to growth. Oskineegish and Berger (2021) argue, "Providing facts and knowledge is important, and yet, preparing teacher candidates to find resources and integrate Indigenous content requires that they be open and willing to initiate their own learning." (p.129) Although the training gave many teacher candidates a sense of understanding, and the majority show an interest and attitude that are favourable to continued study, the instructors' opinions confirm that teacher education needs much more time and preparation.

Oskineegish and Berger (2021) also identified another area of concern that could lead to a lack of implementation of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit perspectives and ways of knowing into teaching practices. Teacher instructors provided stories of experiencing resistance from pre-service teachers because what they were learning in their course challenged their understanding of Canada's education system. Oskineegish and Berger (2021) wrote,

Four of the course instructors described moments in class when they could see teacher candidates struggle with new information that conflicted with their preconceptions of Canada. Lex explained that the "implication that education is a tool of colonialism was really hard for them to wrap their heads around." (p. 129)

This could prevent pre-service teachers from absorbing the content and truly understanding the positive impact that it can make on the educational experience of all students. One teacher instructor explained this phenomenon as "cognitive dissonance," a constructivist theory that in an Indigenous education course can be described as "moments when we suddenly discover that things are not the way we thought they were in the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal worlds" (Doige in Oskineegish & Berger, 2021, p. 129). Grappling with the concept of an

education system that has caused harm to a group of students can challenge how a teacher feels about their role within the system, which can lead to discomfort and resistance to change. Pratt and Hansen (2020) summarize this concept in writing, "These moments represent sites of difficult learning for our (teacher) students as they are challenged to consider how they, as future educators, might hold and reproduce unearned power and privilege." (p. 857) However, it is a powerful shift in understanding when teachers can confront their privilege and choose to be part of the movement towards changing the education systems. Pratt and Hansen (2020) argue this point eloquently in stating, "The transformation that occurs when people face their own positionality and integrate their own narratives with the learning that they are doing can help them to develop a commitment to ongoing learning and decolonizing work in the long run." (p. 867)

Throughout the literature, the theme of teachers questioning whether they have the right to teach from an Indigenous pedagogy continues to emerge. There is discomfort because there is a lack of education for teachers in terms of what is appropriate to teach and what is sacred. Madjidi and Restoule (2008) explain the need for Indigenous pedagogy in the educational approaches of teachers. The article goes into depth about epistemologies and ontologies of Indigenous knowledge versus Eurocentric knowledge. The article also includes the struggles that teachers face when asked to implement a framework and pedagogy that is unfamiliar to them. Oskineegish and Berger (2021) support this argument by stating,

Part of the discomfort and uncertainty that teacher candidates feel may stem from the deconstruction and decolonization aspect of Indigenous education courses.

Decolonizing education within Indigenous education courses is often unsettling for

teacher candidates as it digs into the roots of self-identity within Canada and teacher education. (p. 120)

The issues listed above that prevent implementation can be seen in a 4-year longitudinal mixed methods research study conducted by Friesen et al. (2022), as researchers from the University of Lethbridge, University of Calgary, University of Alberta, and Concordia University of Edmonton collected data on the implementation of the most recent Teacher Quality Standard (TQS) from the years 2019-2022. The study revealed that out of the six competencies that Alberta teachers are required to implement, Competency 5 - Applying Foundational Knowledge About First Nations, Métis, and Inuit - was proven to be implemented the least. Teachers were asked a series of questions regarding the need for professional learning (PL) opportunities in each competency. On average, Competency 5 scored the highest for the need for professional learning opportunities. The subcategory that scored highest was the need for "...PL (professional learning) on developing knowledge of the histories, cultures, languages, contributions, perspectives, experiences, and contemporary contexts of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit." (p.22)

Although there has been a positive shift towards understanding the need for Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum, there are still multiple roadblocks that have led to a lack of implementation. As summarized above, the lack of teacher knowledge, time, and resources, the ambiguity within the Teacher Quality Standards on what it looks like to implement FNMI perspectives, and the belief that it is important to do so are all reasons why there has been a lack of action from teachers.

Indigenous Student Success

One of the indicators of whether the new professional standard for teachers is making an impact on Indigenous students can be seen in statistics that show student success. Moon and Berger (2016) indicate, "Public school teachers play an important part in Indigenous students' school success when they see themselves as interconnected with Indigenous and Settler students, families, and communities." (p. 13) Moon and Berger (2016) provide perspectives from teachers that defined Indigenous student success in many ways, however, there was a theme of creating a space where Indigenous students and Settler teachers collaborate as a team to create a safe space for Indigenous students. Creating this space leads to more student engagement – attendance rates and completion rates (Moon & Berger, 2016). Alberta Education (2019) released a document entitled *Accountability Pillar Overall Summary Annual Education Results Reports*, which compiled the results of FNMI student achievement in a variety of outcomes. The study was conducted after the TQS was updated, and teachers were required to implement FNMI perspectives and knowledge in their lessons. The study showed FNMI students were still performing below the average rate of non-Indigenous students; there was a significant increase in performance in areas such as high school completion rate, provincial achievement test scores in students K-9, diploma exam participation rates, and Rutherford Scholarship Eligibility. Gaudry and Lorenz (2018) state, "It should not be understated that research has shown that Indigenous inclusion policies have had a beneficial impact on Indigenous peoples in the academy, most notably on student completion and retention rates." (p.219) as they researched the effectiveness of incorporating Indigenous content and supports into institutions.

Limitations

Although many of these articles provide insightful information that pertains to the subject matter, some limitations require further research. Scott and Gani (2018) sought to answer the question: "What patterns exist around how educators in Alberta have understood and made sense of the curricular mandate to teach First Nations, Métis, and Inuit perspectives over the course of the pre- to post-implementation phases of the Alberta Social Studies Program (Alberta Education, 2005)?" (p.170) The methodology Scott and Gani (2018) chose was a meta-analysis of publicly available secondary literature, some of which were surveys, peer-reviewed articles, and ministry reports. These pieces of literature provide an overview of teachers' opinions on the POS requiring Indigenous perspectives to be taught in Social Studies, but they do not provide a detailed understanding of the teachers' experience. In this study, Scott and Gani (2018) only collected data about Social Studies teachers and did not investigate teachers who taught other subject areas – leaving a large chunk of information about the entire educational experience out of their report. The data was collected and disseminated in a Western manner – as statistics rather than stories. The limitation of this approach is the irony that comes with researching Indigenous ways of knowing and learning, only to use data and disseminate it in a counter-Indigenous method.

Woodroffe (2020) published an informative article that seeks to share the perspectives of Indigenous teachers on the requirements of non-Indigenous teachers. It seeks to answer what should be taught to preservice teachers about Indigenous perspectives to improve Indigenous student success. The limitation that comes with this article is that the data was collected in collaboration with Indigenous Australian teachers, not Indigenous Canadian teachers. Australian Indigenous communities have also faced colonialism in similar ways to Indigenous communities

in Canada (McGrath & Stevenson, 1996) which does allow for some inferences to be made regarding educational reform and Indigenous educational experiences. However, it does not provide a full and accurate picture of Canada or Alberta's Indigenous teachers' stories and opinions on the requirements of all teachers.

In the *Accountability Pillar Overall Summary* of FNMI student achievement published by Alberta Education (2019), the limitations are quite great. In this study, it is important to note that, "The results reported are solely based on students who identified themselves as Indian/First Nations, Métis and Inuit. These students may not be fully representative of the population of Aboriginal students. Discretion should be applied when interpreting the results over time." (Alberta Education, 2017, p.74). People for Education (2015) published a report about Ontario's publicly funded schools. They speak to this phenomenon,

many principals point to self-identification as a major challenge. Amongst other things, principals mentioned that the historical significance of self identification, and challenges in building trust amongst community members, elders, and parents as challenges to getting student to self-identify (p. 4)

Another limitation is that it is hard to prove the causation of the change in the TQS on FNMI student success. Inferences can be made about the correlation, but due to the limited input from students and teachers, it is difficult to conclude that it is the direct impact of the new TQS with certainty.

The largest limitation throughout the literature mentioned above is the lack of stories being shared by current teachers. There have been articles of preservice teachers sharing their reservations about entering the workforce and teaching FNMI perspectives, and there have been

surveys shared of current teachers' experiences, but there have not been narratives created by teachers who are in the midst of their experience. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argue, "...if we understand the world narratively, as we do, then it makes sense to study the world narratively. For us, life – as we come to it and as it comes to others – is filled with narrative fragments, enacted in storied moments of time and space, and reflected upon and understood in terms of narrative unities and discontinuities." (p. 17) I believe that narrative brings information, that could be presented as statistics or plain data, to life and explores the “why” behind the research – to allow participants, researchers, and readers to *feel* the importance behind the pursuit of the information.

Approach to the Research

Although I am not interviewing specifically Indigenous participants, the topic I have chosen to research is directly related to the implementation of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit perspectives and histories into contemporary curriculum. For this reason, I have chosen to approach my research from an Indigenous Research Methodology (IRM) (Wilson, 2008) – respecting the belief that relationships are the foundation of the knowledge. As a researcher, I have a relationship with my participants, as do they have a relationship with me, with their students and the curriculum. Shawn Wilson (2008) states, “Nothing could be without being relationship, without its context. Our systems of knowledge are built by and around and also from these relationships.” (p.77) Relationships shape how we see the world, how we situate ourselves within it.

Methodology

Wilson (2008) tells readers to enter research with the understanding of relational accountability by living out the three R’s – respect, reciprocity, and responsibility. (p. 78)

Researchers must have respect for their participants by treating them as equals within the research. Respect is also about honouring the importance of Indigenous histories and perspectives – that as our conversations about this topic are being teased out, both the participants and I speak about our experiences with respect to the validity and importance of their need in our curriculum.

Respect for participants can be shown by allowing participants to create, review, and edit questions that will be asked during an interview. Wilson (2008) explains, “relational accountability can be put into practice through choice of research topic, methods of data collection, form of analysis and presentation of information.” (p. 7) Participants will be made aware of the nature of the conversation – that it may seem informal, but rather the intention is to allow for authentic storytelling to dive deeper into the topic. The importance of the research will be made clear to participants, and they will understand that the desire is to give a voice to teachers, to provide them with the opportunity to share their experiences, with the hope that support can be provided for teachers in the years to come based on the issues identified by participants.

I have also chosen to pursue my participants from the school district where I work right now. As a form of reciprocity, I desire to give voice to the teachers within Rocky View Schools to help identify best practices and areas of need with the end goal of improving our district for the benefit of our Indigenous students. In *Indigenous Storywork – Educating the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit*, Jo-Ann Archibald (2008) illustrates, “Practicing respect and responsibility in relationship with people and towards storywork led to a traditional concept of reciprocity.” (p. 126) as she shares her lived experiences as a researcher engaging in an Indigenous storywork methodology.

The intent of researching teachers' experiences teaching First Nations, Métis, and Inuit perspectives to their students is to give teachers a place to safely speak about their struggles and successes, but also to inform educational leaders what is needed to provide support for teachers down the road, with the hope that this can impact Indigenous student success positively. I plan to do this by listening to their stories and allowing them to share their lived experiences. Clandinin and Connelly (2006) argue,

Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study. (p. 479)

By choosing this method, I believe that I am pursuing an Indigenous research approach by valuing the lived experiences of teachers who have the insight to share on the topic.

The methodology chosen is not a perfect, clean-cut set of guidelines provided by previous academics. Above, I have mentioned several methodologies that have been used by researchers in the past, which include storytelling, Indigenous storywork, narrative inquiry, and a semi-structured interview with guided questions. Written in *Decolonizing Research: Indigenous Storywork as Methodology* edited by Archibald et al. (2019), the authors provide a perspective on Indigenous Research Methodologies in stating, “Given the diversity of Indigenous people and our struggles around the world, decolonizing methodologies and research cannot be reduced to a singular, one dimensional theory or methodology.” (p.6) They explain that there is not one set of rules or guidelines that

researchers need to adhere to, but the heart of the methodology needs to reflect Indigenous worldviews (Archibald et al., 2019).

I plan to incorporate aspects of these methodologies to form one that reflects my upbringing as a Métis student and educator in Western academia. The interview process will reflect a semi-structured interview, with open-ended questions that leave room for participants to engage in the storytelling process. I plan to disseminate the results in a narrative format, engaging in storywork from my perspective as a researcher while sharing the stories of my participants in a manner that reflects similarly to Archibald's (2019) *Decolonizing Research: Indigenous Storywork as Methodology*, "Each chapter contains stories, accounts of others' experiences... as well as my experiences, reflections, and understandings in relation to them. Indigenous storywork brings the heart, mind, body, and spirit together for quality education." (p.153)

As I engage in this collaborative process, and plan to share these stories in a manner that reflects respect, responsibility, and reciprocity, while disseminating the experiences in a manner that is accessible and engaging to all audiences. As stated in Archibald et al. (2019), "No matter how much knowledge (or qualifications) a person accumulates, if the knowledge, research, or stories do not reach the collective consciousness of the wider group, then the person is failing to act in an Indigenous manner." (p.7) The final thesis will be one that honours and exemplifies the importance of story.

Method

This research explores the lived experience of eight Alberta teachers with one to ten years of teaching experience. The small sample size allowed for deeper connections to be made with

each participant. A conversational approach was taken, where participants were given a brief overview of the topic and some potential questions in advance. This allowed participants to be reflexive before the conversation, but due to the nature of the interview, they were not able to plan all their responses. The interviews had more open-ended questions – a conversational approach that prompted participants' responses about their teaching experience. As they shared their experiences, more individualized questions were asked to prompt participants to reflect inward, outward, backward, and forward. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argue that the types of questions that are chosen to determine the focus and type of interview that will take place, "using a structured set of questions in which the researchers' intentions are the uppermost (Thompson, 1978) to asking participants to tell their own stories in their own way (Anderson and Jack, 1991), in which case the participants' intentions are uppermost." (p.111) I aimed to create an environment that promoted a back-and-forth conversation, where both the participants and I could share our experiences. This environment led to more organic responses, resulting in teachers providing insight into their personal experiences, good or bad, in implementing the TQS Competency 5 (explained in detail previously). Clandinin (2006) writes,

The truth about stories is that that's all we are. 'I will tell you something about stories,' the Laguna storyteller Leslie Silko reminds us, 'They aren't just entertainment/Don't be fooled/They are all we have, you see/All we have to fight off/Illness and death. You don't have anything/ If you don't have the stories'" (as cited in King, 2003, p. 92)'. (p. 51)

The stories shared by these teachers have created a picture of what it looks like to teach First Nations, Métis, and Inuit perspectives in Alberta schools; stories that have

added a new sense of meaning for the need for Competency 5, a need for resources and support, and a space where more teachers shared their lived experiences.

Engaging in these interviews allowed me to become a student of my participants' experiences. I had the opportunity to listen and to put myself in their shoes, to understand their experiences deeper – it was a privilege to experience the vulnerability of each participant and learn from them.

I provided a copy of the transcript to each participant and allowed them to review it to make changes or clarifications where necessary. This increased the validity of the information gathered to ensure that I am conveying the narrative that the participant is intending to share.

Participant Selection

To participate in this study, participants had to meet the following criteria. They must have been teachers who have graduated from a Canadian university and must have a maximum of ten years of teaching experience. The rationale behind this criterion is that these participants will have entered the profession after the Teacher Quality Standard was updated – meaning they would have been required to teach Competency 5 since the beginning of their career. Therefore, I will be using purposive sampling, which Etikan et al. (2016) explain as,

...typically used in qualitative research to identify and select the information-rich cases for the most proper utilization of available resources. This involves identification and selection of individuals or groups of individuals that are proficient and well-informed with a phenomenon of interest. (p.2)

Due to the specific nature of my topic and target participants, purposive sampling ensured that the teachers I spoke to had experiences to share in our conversations.

I was granted permission from Rocky View School Division in February 2024 to interview teachers from their school district. I chose this district because I am currently employed by Rocky View Schools, and I have begun to build relationships with teachers, administrators, and employees in the central office.

Participant Overview

The participants in this study are practicing teachers originally from Alberta and Saskatchewan, teaching at the middle and secondary levels in a range of subject areas. During the consent process, participants were given the option to use their own name or to select a pseudonym; all names included here reflect those individual choices. Each participant brings a unique educational background and lived experience that shapes how they understand teaching, learning, and their engagement with Indigenous perspectives in schools as non-Indigenous teachers.

Brittany grew up in Alberta and attended a small high school outside of a major city. She teaches middle school and has experience teaching Grade Six and Grade Eight Humanities. At the time of this study, she had been teaching for six years. Brittany generally enjoyed her schooling experience, though she struggled with math and chemistry in high school, which influenced how she experienced school as a student.

Tanis grew up in Alberta and described her schooling experience as largely positive, noting that she found school relatively easy and enjoyable. Although she did not initially pursue teaching as a career, her positive experiences as a student motivated her to return to university to complete her Bachelor of Education. She is currently a high school English teacher.

Steve also grew up in Alberta and attended a smaller high school outside of a major city. He enjoyed school and learning, particularly valuing the extracurricular activities that

contributed to a positive educational experience. He has been teaching high school Science for nine years.

Matt grew up in rural Saskatchewan and was bused to a small school in a neighbouring town. While he enjoyed school, he identified the most impactful aspects of his education as the teachers who invested in him personally and supported his future. He is currently a high school math teacher.

Travis grew up in a larger city in Alberta and attended a large high school. He did not pursue teaching immediately after graduation, initially enrolling in a Chemical Engineering program at a college in Alberta, which he did not enjoy. He later transferred to the University of Lethbridge to study chemistry before re-evaluating his career path and applying to the Faculty of Education. He now teaches high school math and science.

Natalie grew up in rural Alberta and was bused to a small high school outside of a major city centre. She identified her mother, who was also a teacher, as a significant influence on her decision to pursue teaching. While she enjoyed school, she struggled in some courses, which contributed to her desire to support students who face similar challenges. She is currently a Grade Five generalist, teaching all core subject areas.

Austin grew up in a small city in central Alberta but was born in southern Alberta. He described his experience as a student as generally positive. Following high school, he served a mission for his church, an experience that influenced his desire to become a teacher. He noted that helping people practice English and building meaningful relationships were central to this decision. He now teaches high school Social Studies.

Devon grew up in a small town in central Alberta. While she enjoyed the social aspects of school and building relationships with peers and teachers, she struggled academically due to untreated ADHD. After high school, she travelled to Costa Rica to teach English. Upon returning to Canada, she applied to a Bachelor of Education program, initially intending to teach at the elementary level before shifting to secondary education. She now teaches high school Social Studies and English.

Taylor experienced a highly mobile childhood, moving between several communities in northern, central, and southern Alberta. These frequent transitions between schools and regions shaped her educational journey and contributed to a broad perspective on schooling across different contexts. She currently teaches high school Social Studies and Legal Studies.

Jen grew up in a large city center until the age of eleven, after which her family moved to a rural community where she completed middle school. For high school, she was bused to a neighbouring school in a small city. Her experience of moving between schools and communities has informed her approach to teaching. She is currently a high school Social Studies and Leadership teacher.

Framing the Results Through the Métis Self-Care Wheel

The findings of this study are organized using the Métis Self-Care Wheel as a guiding framework. The BC Métis Federation (2024) explains that the Métis Self-Care Wheel emphasizes balance and interconnectedness across four dimensions of well-being: spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical. Rather than treating these domains as separate or hierarchical, the wheel reflects a holistic understanding of learning, growth, and responsibility. This framework was intentionally chosen to honour Métis perspectives and to reflect the relational and cyclical nature of the participants' experiences.

Using the Métis Self-Care Wheel to organize the results allows the voices of participants to be situated within a structure that aligns with Indigenous ways of knowing, rather than forcing their experiences into conventional academic categories. Each section of the results corresponds to one aspect of the wheel, while also acknowledging that participants' experiences often overlap and move fluidly between these domains (BCMF, 2024).

The spiritual dimension of the wheel is reflected in the section titled *Heart-Opening Moments*. This section highlights experiences described by participants as moments of deep connection, reflection, or awakening that strengthened their relationship to Indigenous ways of knowing. These moments often involved ceremony, relationships, or meaningful learning experiences that moved beyond surface-level understanding. For many participants, these heart-opening moments were foundational in shaping their desire to engage with Indigenous perspectives authentically and to implement Indigenous ways of knowing within their teaching practice, aligning with the spiritual focus of the Métis Self-Care Wheel (BCMF, 2024)

The mental dimension of the Métis Self-Care Wheel is represented through participants' interpretations of the competency. This section explores how each teacher understands, makes meaning of, and intellectually engages with the competency within their professional role. Participants articulated varying interpretations influenced by their educational backgrounds, lived experiences, and teaching contexts. Examining these interpretations through the mental lens foregrounds the cognitive work required to engage with the competency, while also revealing areas of clarity, tension, and uncertainty (BCMF, 2024).

The emotional dimension is reflected in the section addressing the challenges participants face. These challenges include feelings of fear, frustration, self-doubt, and vulnerability, particularly when navigating institutional expectations, accountability measures, and concerns

about doing harm. Situating these experiences within the emotional domain acknowledges that resistance, hesitation, and discomfort are not simply barriers to be overcome, but emotional responses shaped by colonial systems, professional pressures, and personal histories, consistent with the emotional teachings within the Métis Self-Care Wheel (BCMF, 2024).

A dedicated section on *Positive Teaching Stories* is also situated within the emotional dimension of the Métis Self-Care Wheel. While challenges highlight moments of tension, this section centres on experiences of hope, affirmation, and relational success. Participants shared stories where authentic engagement with Indigenous perspectives led to meaningful student connections, increased confidence, or moments of shared understanding. These stories demonstrate how positive emotional experiences can sustain educators in this work, countering fear and uncertainty while reinforcing the value of relationship-based approaches. Including positive teaching stories within the emotional domain honours joy and encouragement as equally important emotional experiences that support balance and resilience (BCMF, 2024).

Finally, the physical dimension of the wheel is represented through the steps moving forward and calls to action identified by participants. This section focuses on tangible actions, practices, and changes participants believe are necessary at the classroom, school, and system levels. Framing these recommendations within the physical domain emphasizes action, responsibility, and movement, recognizing that meaningful change requires more than understanding or intention alone (BCMF, 2024).

Together, these four sections reflect a balanced and interconnected approach to understanding participants' experiences. By using the Métis Self-Care Wheel as an organizing framework, this study centres Métis perspectives while allowing participants' voices to remain intact, relational, and situated within a holistic understanding of learning and change.

Moments that Matter – The Spiritual Dimension

Deciding to do my master's came from many small moments that subconsciously impacted my view of education for Indigenous students. I have always been drawn to stories, like most people. I love to hear other people's lived experiences and how that has shaped who they are. I also love to tell stories; it is the primary pedagogy in my classrooms. I have a lot of storytellers in my family, and one person in particular who captivates his listeners with his humour and also his detail. My great uncle Joseph Alcide – or Uncle Allie – used to gather all of my cousins and me together to tell us stories of his childhood. He would tell us of times the Chief from Saddle Lake would come and visit his father, and his positive memories of being with his family during the summertime, at home in St. Paul or at Lac Ste. Anne. He has told us stories of being in residential school with my grandpa and their brother Bert, and how he often experienced the most abuse from the nuns because of his darker skin compared to his brothers. He told my cousin Cassandra and I that we are responsible for keeping our family's stories alive and to tell our children so that we do not forget what happened to them. I hope that throughout this narrative, I can exemplify his storytelling ability and portray each narrative as something each participant would be proud of.

One thing that all participants and I have in common is what I like to call *Heart-Opening Moments*. These are moments that have emotionally impacted all of us and have led to a deeper desire to honour and implement Indigenous content into our teaching practices.

Heart-Opening Moments

When I graduated from the University of Alberta with my Education degree, one vivid memory remains imprinted in my heart. It was June 12, 2019. The university allowed each graduate only two guest tickets for the convocation ceremony, which naturally went to my

parents. At first, I felt emotional knowing my grandfather would not be able to watch me cross the stage and receive my Métis sash along with my degree. Fortunately, a friend gifted me an extra ticket, and my Grandpa Tommy was able to attend.

During the ceremony, Elder Francis Whiskeyjack received an Honorary Doctor of Laws degree and delivered a speech that moved many to tears – including my grandpa. Elder Whiskeyjack, from Saddle Lake First Nation, shared his story of family tragedy and triumph, and how those experiences shaped his work at amiskwaciy Academy in Edmonton, a school that weaves Indigenous teachings and culture into its academics.

As I watched my grandfather’s tears stream down his face, I sensed a deep connection between his lived experiences and those of Elder Whiskeyjack. Listening to that speech, surrounded by the people who shaped my identity, I felt a profound desire to become a teacher who could make a difference in the lives of Indigenous learners.

Brittany

Brittany described her university experience as eye-opening and transformative. The difference between the education she received in high school and what she encountered in university left her feeling stunned. “My mind was blown going into university and into those courses and learning what I didn’t know, because it was so much compared to the teeny, tiny portion of that in grade school.”

At the University of Alberta, Brittany enrolled in three courses related to Indigenous histories and education. In one of these classes, she initially struggled with her professor – an Indigenous woman whose strict expectations felt intimidating. Brittany recalled that during the first few weeks, she kept her guard up. However, by the third week, something began to shift.

Her professor shared a deeply personal story about her experience as a female Indigenous academic and the harassment she faced on campus. She described needing escorts to walk her from her office to her classroom for her own safety. Hearing this changed everything for Brittany. What once felt like rigid rules now reflected strength, courage, and resilience. The professor's vulnerability opened Brittany's heart and transformed her perspective.

From that moment, Brittany approached her learning differently. She became eager to understand the difficult truths about Residential Schools and the Sixties Scoop – the latter she had never heard of before. She explained, “If it weren't for those classes and my openness and willingness to learn about it... I would have no idea what I'm doing.”

As someone who had always enjoyed Social Studies in high school, she found herself deeply engaged in the content, “I really enjoyed sitting and listening and just listening.” Looking back, Brittany reflected that her passion for Indigenous knowledge and teaching grew from that discomfort and realization. “Honestly, I think part of it is feeling as yucky as I did, going into those classes [in university] and now knowing everything that's happened.” This experience became a turning point for Brittany, a moment that shifted her heart and sparked her commitment to teaching Indigenous content with empathy and understanding.

Tanis

During her undergraduate degree, Tanis took a course focused on diversity in education that examined oppression within the school system. As the course came to a close, students were challenged to confront their own biases as educators. For Tanis, this moment was deeply impactful. She reflected that growing up just blocks away from Tsuut'ina, she had unknowingly carried significant gaps in her understanding.

She shared how she had travelled extensively and yet had never been to Tsuut'ina, despite riding her bike past it as a child. The realization that she knew nothing about the cultures whose land she was living on forced her to “check” herself and acknowledge her own bias. The course then pushed her to act on that awareness. Tanis reached out to the Aboriginal Friendship Centre, which connected her with a community member who hosted a sweat lodge in his yard on Tsuut'ina. She described the experience as “totally the coolest thing I have ever done,” noting how gracious and generous the people were with their knowledge. While she recognized she still had much to learn, Tanis emphasized that this course, in particular, was incredibly influential in shaping her journey.

Tanis also completed a course focused on Indigenous ways of teaching and knowing, where she learned philosophies that challenge the idea of teachers as the sole keepers of knowledge. Instead, the course emphasized collaborative, community-based, relationship-based, and land-based approaches to learning.

Later, during her master's program, Tanis took a course that was not explicitly centred on Indigenous perspectives but profoundly shifted her approach to teaching. The course, *Collaborative Creativity and Social Innovation and Design*, stood out because, as Tanis explained, “It was all about collaboration and there was the first time I've ever had a prof who didn't just tell me about Indigenous ways of learning and teaching but lived it.” Each class began with a personalized land acknowledgement that directly connected to the day's topic and the land they were learning on. Rather than feeling like a box-checking exercise, the course embraced Indigenous ways of learning in authentic and intentional ways.

Students were regularly encouraged to go outside to reflect and connect their learning to the land. Tanis recalled one day when she was walking through Weaselhead Park in Calgary and

noticed fireweed growing up through cracks in the concrete pathway. That observation became a powerful metaphor for resilience, both in nature and within groups. By living the learning rather than simply discussing it, Tanis felt the concepts were connected in a far more meaningful way. She noted that the experience felt “much less of a tokenized experience” than others she had encountered in the past.

Through this course, Tanis learned that teaching from this perspective requires humility. She explained that there is always more to learn – not only from Indigenous people, but from everyone and everywhere we are connected to. Learning, she shared, is about approaching the world with curiosity and recognizing the value in people and places alike, rather than engaging with Indigenous knowledge solely because it is mandated through the Teaching Quality Standard.

The way the course was taught was transformative for Tanis and her classmates. The collaborative approach fostered a strong sense of community, where students felt acknowledged and seen as powerful sources of knowledge simply because they were living beings with lived experiences. Tanis reflected that this recognition shifted many perspectives, changing how they understood learning and what is possible within classrooms and schools.

Austin

Austin shared an experience that took place during a Professional Learning day, when he and two colleagues chose to attend a sweat lodge. Entering the space, he was immediately struck by the warmth and openness of the people who welcomed them. He described the experience as “really cool,” noting that he was both impressed and a little taken aback by the level of trust and inclusion extended to him. At one point, someone simply handed him a pitchfork and invited him

to help carry burning stones, a moment that made him feel unexpectedly included rather than like an observer.

Participating in the ceremony allowed Austin to engage directly with Indigenous practices in a meaningful way. He found the experience more than just eye-opening, particularly in learning about Indigenous perspectives on world-building, interconnectedness, and the idea of eternity in relation to the earth. These teachings challenged him to think differently about his relationship to the land and to others.

What stood out most to Austin was the humility of the people who guided the experience. He reflected on how open-armed and generous they were in sharing their culture, creating space for him to learn through participation rather than explanation alone. That willingness to share allowed Austin to build his own understanding through lived experience, leaving a lasting impression on how he approaches learning and connection within Indigenous spaces.

Devon

Devon spoke candidly about how little she was taught about Indigenous histories growing up. Reflecting on her schooling, she stated plainly, “We were taught nothing... I had no idea.” It was not until later in her life that her understanding began to shift, prompted by a meaningful relationship with someone who trusted her enough to share his personal experiences with intergenerational trauma.

As Devon described this moment, emotion surfaced in her voice. Hearing those stories was eye-opening and forced her to confront not only gaps in her education, but also the perspectives she had been surrounded by within her own family. She began to recognize how deeply white, colonial narratives had shaped the way Indigenous people were spoken about and understood in her household.

Devon recalled memories from her childhood that took on new meaning through this lens. “I remember my parents talking about drunk natives and seeing it and not understanding why it had been so common and why it was so prevalent.” With new awareness, she came to understand how harmful and dehumanizing these narratives were, and how they contributed to ongoing harm experienced by Indigenous people in her life.

This realization marked a significant turning point for Devon. What began as discomfort evolved into a deeper sense of responsibility – one rooted in listening, unlearning, and committing to a more informed and empathetic understanding of Indigenous experiences.

Matt

Matt emphasized the importance of being willing to listen, observe, and learn from cultures beyond one’s own. He reflected that authentic engagement is essential when trying to foster Indigenous ways of knowing in the classroom. Without lived experience, he explained, teaching these perspectives can feel artificial. As Matt shared, “If you’ve never had organic experience teaching the importance of different cultures or you don’t have that background to make it more real, it’s more forced.”

One experience in particular made this idea tangible for him. While teaching at a school in Regina, Matt worked in a community where the majority of students were Indigenous, particularly Cree. Within that environment, learning became relational. He spoke about a student who regularly led smudges in the school and how meaningful it was to learn from a student who was willing to guide and teach him.

Matt also recalled being involved in various Indigenous events at the school, including a traditional feast. He observed how the roles within the feast reflected Cree cultural teachings: the women prepared the food, while the men served it. Witnessing these practices helped him

understand that “everyone has a role to play in a feast,” and, more broadly, within a community. These moments deepened his respect for Indigenous culture and strengthened his desire to meaningfully incorporate Indigenous histories and perspectives into his teaching.

Reflecting on these experiences, Matt noted how valuable it was to participate rather than simply observe from a distance. “It was nice to be part of that, so I have those experiences,” he shared, recognizing that teaching becomes far more authentic when it is grounded in lived experience. Without those connections, he explained, it becomes much harder to make learning feel real for students if he has not experienced it himself.

Travis

Similar to several other participants, Travis shared that he did not learn about residential schools until he was in university. Reflecting on his schooling, he explained that Indigenous experiences were largely absent from the curriculum. “It wasn’t as common in the curriculum, and a lot of this stuff about Indigenous experiences, whether it be residential schools or the treaties and the Indian Act, that would have been my first time learning about it, in like 2020.”

Learning this history as an adult, while simultaneously learning how to teach, was unsettling for Travis. When asked what that experience was like, he described it simply as “pretty appalling.” He contrasted this with how extensively the Holocaust had been taught during his own schooling, noting that far less attention was given to the genocide and cultural genocide experienced by Indigenous peoples. Encountering these truths later in life forced him to reflect critically on what had been omitted from his education and why. At the same time, he acknowledged that learning as an adult allowed him to develop a deeper understanding of the historical and ongoing impacts of colonization.

This new knowledge reshaped how Travis interpreted past interactions with Indigenous people. With greater awareness, he began to see the resilience required to carry the weight of intergenerational trauma and continue forward. The history no longer felt abstract; it became personal and relational.

Travis also spoke highly of learning from an Indigenous professor who shared his own lived experiences alongside the course content. Hearing history taught through personal narrative made it feel tangible and real, moving it beyond textbooks and timelines. For Travis, this approach deepened his understanding and reinforced the importance of learning Indigenous histories through lived experience, voice, and relationship.

Steve

Steve explained that two university courses significantly shaped his awareness of topics connected to Competency Five: a diversity course and a First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) course. One of the most influential aspects of these classes was learning from a Métis professor who focused heavily on historical events and the lasting impacts of trauma within Indigenous communities. Steve shared that this learning continues to shape how he approaches teaching today.

Reflecting on his own background, Steve acknowledged the privilege he grew up with and how these courses pushed him to see beyond his own experiences. “I come from a very privileged background, so it opened my eyes to seeing how not everybody had those same experiences. I didn’t see how things might be different for some people. But now that I look back and reflect, I had different opportunities than some of my classmates did.” He explained that this awareness has carried directly into his teaching practice. “When I am teaching, I am definitely

more aware than I would have been about backgrounds and opportunities that my students may or may not have.”

Steve also shared a powerful example from his role as a coach that demonstrated how this awareness shows up in practice. On National Truth and Reconciliation Day, several students on his football team chose to wear bold and courageous face paint to honour the day. “I loved it,” he shared. Three Indigenous athletes, along with two Indigenous coaches, painted red handprints over their mouths to raise awareness of the harms of residential schools and the ongoing impacts connected to Missing and Murdered Indigenous women. Reflecting on the moment, Steve said, “I was really proud of our boys for doing that.”

What stood out to him most was the level of support surrounding the students’ decision. “It was celebrated and supported,” he explained, noting how teammates and coaches stood together in solidarity. “It was good to see our boys standing up for what they believed in and also their teammates and coaches support them and have their back as well.”

When one of the coaches asked whether it was appropriate for their child to participate prior to the event, Steve’s response reflected his commitment to student voice and agency, “We’re not going to let someone else tell you, you can’t do that.” For Steve, moments like these represent what it looks like to move learning beyond the classroom and into lived action. Seeing the impact of this courageous action (write something about how this is a moment that has made it real to Steve, making him want to continue to give voices to Indigenous people in educational/school spaces).

Aimee

Prior to applying to my master’s program, I was in my second year of teaching with Edmonton Public Schools. It was 2021, meaning I had already taught through a full year of

COVID. During that time, I had signed multiple temporary contracts, moved between online and in-person teaching, and transitioned from Harry Ainlay High School to Jasper Place High School. In a single year, there was an overwhelming amount of change and uncertainty. I found myself questioning whether I wanted to continue down that path or take the opportunity to pursue further education.

While teaching at Jasper Place, I worked alongside a colleague who was completing his master's degree online through the University of Saskatchewan. We had many conversations about Indigenous education, and I shared with him stories about my grandfather and my growing desire to learn more about how I could positively impact the education system for Indigenous students. He was the person who encouraged – and pushed – me to apply for my master's program, and I remain deeply grateful that he did.

On our final day teaching together, he gifted me a book, *The Reason You Walk* by Wab Kinew (2015), along with a handwritten card. Inside, he wrote, “Good luck on your journey. This is the reason you walk. – C.” His words referenced a passage in the book that reads, “Ningosha anishaa wenjii-bimoseyan — I am the reason you walk.” (p.132) In the text, Kinew explains that these words carry four layers of meaning, spoken from the perspective of the Creator, as though God Himself were singing to you. The first meaning is, “I have created you and therefore you walk.” The second is, “I am your motivation.” The third meaning speaks to love – the spark within that animates life and allows one to live by the Anishinaabe values of *kiizhewaatiziwin* (unconditional love). The fourth and final meaning is, “I am the destination at the end of your life that you are walking toward.” (p.132)

That day, the words resonated deeply. As Kinew writes, “On that day, the Creator spoke to us all, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, and reminded us of the reasons we walk.” (p.

132) In that moment, I felt affirmed in my uncertainty and my longing to learn more. Applying to my master's program was not just an academic decision – it was a continuation of a journey rooted in purpose, self-discovery, and a desire to make a difference.

All Together

Across all participant narratives, including my own, a pattern of *heart-opening moments* emerged – experiences that disrupted prior understandings and created space for empathy. These moments did not arise from mandated curriculum alone, but through lived, relational encounters with Indigenous histories, peoples, and ways of knowing.

For many participants, heart-opening moments began with the realization of how little they had been taught about Indigenous experiences prior to university or adulthood. Learning about residential schools, treaties, and intergenerational trauma later in life was often described as shocking and unsettling, prompting critical reflection on educational omissions and personal privilege.

Relationships were central to these moments. Indigenous professors, students, Elders, and community members who shared their lived experiences made history tangible and deeply human. Experiences such as ceremony, land-based learning, and cultural participation emphasized humility, reciprocity, and learning through relationship rather than observation or literature.

Discomfort emerged as a necessary and transformative part of the process. Confronting bias, privilege, and harmful narratives became catalysts for unlearning and growth. Collectively, these heart-opening moments reshaped how participants understood Indigenous education – not as a requirement to be checked off, but as a relational responsibility grounded in respect, lived experience, and ongoing learning.

Review of Competency Five

Alberta Education has started to take steps towards creating a learning environment that includes the previously mentioned factors by creating the new Teacher Quality Standards (Alberta Education, 2018). The Teacher Quality Standard (2018): Competency 5,

Applying Foundational Knowledge about First Nations, Métis and Inuit, states:

A teacher develops and applies foundational knowledge about First Nations, Métis and Inuit for the benefit of all students. Achievement of this competency is demonstrated by indicators such as:

- (a) understanding the historical, social, economic, and political implications of: treaties and agreements with First Nations; legislation and agreements negotiated with Métis; and residential schools and their legacy.
- (b) supporting student achievement by engaging in collaborative, whole school approaches to capacity building in First Nations, Métis and Inuit education.
- (c) using the programs of study to provide opportunities for all students to develop a knowledge and understanding of, and respect for, the histories, cultures, languages, contributions, perspectives, experiences and contemporary contexts of First Nations, Métis and Inuit; and
- (d) supporting the learning experiences of all students by using resources that accurately reflect and demonstrate the strength and diversity of First Nations, Métis and Inuit.

(p.6)

Understanding Competency Five – The Mental Dimension

To better understand each teacher's experience implementing Competency Five of the Teacher Quality Standards, it was first necessary to establish a shared baseline of what it means

to enact this competency in practice. Each participant was asked to interpret the competency and explain its meaning in their own words.

When asked to interpret Competency Five of the Teacher Quality Standards, participants offered a wide range of understandings, though several shared ideas consistently emerged. Most participants framed the competency around Indigenous ways of knowing, historical awareness, and the need for authentic, relational implementation rather than surface-level inclusion.

For many, Competency Five begins with learning Indigenous histories and perspectives. Brittany described it as, “looking at First Nations, Métis, and Inuit ways of knowing and then diving deeper into the history around everything that’s happened.” Jen shared this emphasis on historical truth, stating that implementation “boils down to a lot of awareness,” and stressing that “truth” must come before reconciliation. Steve similarly emphasized the importance of educators being informed, describing Competency Five as, “being educated as the educator on current and historical struggles that Indigenous Peoples have had.”

Participants consistently emphasized that Competency Five is not only about *what* is taught, but also about *how* it is taught. Natalie explained that it involves “providing opportunities to see [Indigenous culture] and how you can include it into your everyday teaching practice,” whether through English Language Arts or Science class, while still honouring the differences between Western and Indigenous knowledge systems. Devon reinforced this idea, stating that Indigenous perspectives “should come naturally and flow... not just happening on Indigenous Peoples’ Day.”

Authenticity and frequency were recurring themes. Brittany emphasized trying to implement Indigenous perspectives “as frequently and authentically as I can,” noting that this

often happens through classroom practices rather than formal curriculum. Taylor expressed concern about the vagueness of the competency, suggesting that without clarity, it risks becoming “this forced perspective” rather than meaningful reconciliation work.

Several participants highlighted educator responsibility and respect as central to the competency. Tanis drew attention to the assumption that teachers possess adequate foundational knowledge, questioning whether that is actually true. She emphasized that teachers must be aware not only when Indigenous content is taught explicitly, but also “implicitly when we’re teaching students in general about anything.” Quoting the competency directly, she stressed the importance of developing “respect for” Indigenous histories and perspectives, explaining that it is “not just about exposing, it’s about exposing and then recognizing the beauty” and strength of Indigenous cultures.

Others interpreted Competency Five through a relational and community-based lens. Matt described it as “more of a community approach within a classroom,” emphasizing collaboration, movement, and shared responsibility. Drawing from his experience in a predominantly Indigenous school, he described a sense of unity where “everyone was kind of one.” Austin similarly framed the competency as “incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing into your practice” in ways that connect historical context to present-day realities. Travis described implementation as existing on a spectrum from broad curricular inclusion to more focus on cultural and relational supports for Indigenous students.

While participants shared overlapping values, their interpretations of Competency Five varied significantly in depth, focus, and application. These differences suggest that, in practice, teachers are relying heavily on personal understanding, experience, and comfort level to interpret the competency. This lack of shared clarity has the potential to create inconsistency in

implementation, making Competency Five challenging to enact in cohesive and meaningful ways across classrooms and schools in Alberta.

Challenges – The Emotional Dimension

While participants expressed a strong commitment to implementing Competency Five, they also identified several interconnected challenges that complicate this work in practice. These challenges extend beyond individual effort and point to structural and systemic barriers within schools and the curriculum. Teachers spoke about limited time – for both meaningful professional learning and for embedding Indigenous perspectives into an already crowded curriculum – as well as a lack of accessible, authentic resources that include clear lesson plans. Participants also highlighted concerns around scope and sequence, noting that students often report learning the same surface-level content about Indigenous peoples year after year. Compounding these issues were teachers' own gaps in knowledge and confidence, alongside the ongoing challenge of making learning authentic, respectful, and meaningful while navigating heavy topics and facilitating honest conversations in the classroom.

Time

Across participants, time emerged as one of the most significant barriers to implementing Competency Five – whether time to plan, to engage in meaningful professional development, or to meaningfully integrate Indigenous perspectives into curricula that were not designed with TQS 5 in mind.

Tanis described the tension between good intentions and limited time when sharing an experience that initially felt positive but later raised concerns. After inviting an Elder into her classroom to supplement a class novel study of *The Marrow Thieves*, she reflected, “It was an awesome learning opportunity for kids. But I do feel that the way that it’s done when we bring an

Elder in for one 90-minute block, then we never see them again, it's a bit tokenized." She paused, almost apologetically, as if unsure whether the term was appropriate, before adding that it can feel like "just checking a box." Tanis expressed a desire for deeper, ongoing relationships, stating, "I think I'd like it to be more meaningful – to build a lasting or repeated relationship with an Elder." Her reflection highlights how time and access to resources shape what is possible in practice.

Austin framed time as deeply tied to emotion and self-reflection. He shared, "I think it's a combination of guilt, selfishness, and incompetence... When I prioritize my current life and my current workload, how much time do I have?" He acknowledged his own privilege and wrestled with the choices he makes, explaining, "I could sacrifice some of these things to become a better educator... So, when I don't do those things, that's being selfish. Then the guilt comes in, 'oh, now I'm a bad teacher.'"

For Devon, time pressures were especially acute as a new teacher. She described entering Rocky View School Division feeling unprepared for the volume and pace of expectations, stating, "No one prepared me for this... you're just thrown into the school." With fast-approaching deadlines, she struggled to balance SSP [Student Success Plan] benchmarks, short-term goals, learning PowerSchool, and navigating school expectations for students and staff. She explained that there was "not enough time to learn these things as well as learn new ways to incorporate Indigenous content well."

Matt echoed this concern, particularly in relation to the daily demands of teaching. Teaching four out of four classes with only a forty-minute lunch, he shared, "Nine times out of ten there's a kid in my classroom asking questions [during lunch]." His day, from "9:00–3:40," felt nonstop, pushing administrative work into evenings. He asked plainly, "When do I have time

to do this administrative thing?” He reflected that if time were available, “I would be able to incorporate more or different activities to make sure people are exploring different ways of understanding.” Similarly, Taylor pointed to structural scheduling issues, sharing, “There is a lack of time, too, right? Because we are seven of eight... that’s not a lot of time to actually implement these authentically, if we don’t have the priority to do so.”

Travis described time as a constraint imposed by curriculum expectations, particularly in diploma courses. He stated simply, “I don’t get to teach the full picture.” He explained the difficulty of balancing TQS 5 with curriculum demands, noting, “There is a lot, and to add more information that isn’t necessarily going to be tested on... especially in a diploma course.”

Jen returned repeatedly to the density of the curriculum, particularly in Social 30. She explained, “There’s no stop, there’s no break. There’s so much information that you have to pump out.” Finding space to make “authentic connections [to Competency Five]” felt increasingly difficult. She emphasized, “You don’t have a day to wiggle...you don’t have the time.” Reflecting on the cumulative impact, she stated, “Finding ways to integrate it properly, authentically, meaningfully, when you’re crunched to get all the assessments done... it’s hard.” She concluded bluntly, “Time is the enemy of all good things in teaching.”

Resources

Alongside time, participants consistently identified access to usable, meaningful resources as a major challenge in implementing Competency Five. While many described being given *resources*, they emphasized that these were often disconnected from classroom practice. The resources were heavy on information, light on guidance, and difficult to translate into authentic learning experiences.

Brittany reflected on the flood of materials shared after the discovery of 215 children in unmarked graves at the former Kamloops Indian Residential School. She recalled, “In May, when they sent those resources out, it was just bookwork. It was a huge PDF file.” While she scrolled through and selected pieces she wanted to address, she explained, “I felt like I was a robot just repeating information, regurgitating information.” The issue was not access, but application, as she admitted, “I don’t know how to go about implementing that in my lessons.”

Austin echoed this sense of uncertainty, stating simply, “I just sometimes feel a little lost in it all,” referring to the abundance of resources without clear direction. Natalie similarly highlighted how difficult it is to teach from materials alone, explaining, “It’s hard to teach anything when you’re just reading it or watching a video without any background knowledge or proper ways to teach it or convey the message you’re trying to teach.”

Devon spoke to a broader need for support beyond traditional classroom materials. She shared, “I think that as teachers, we need more resources and support when it comes to knowing what to do and bring into our classrooms,” including guidance on place-based learning. She asked candidly, “Even how to embrace outdoor classrooms... what do we do with our outdoor classroom?”

Travis described actively seeking guidance from his school division while trying to incorporate Indigenous perspectives into a science unit on Early Society. He received a list of book recommendations in response, which left him feeling overwhelmed. “Where do I start? Where am I going to find time?” he asked. He emphasized a desire for practical tools, stating, “Practical resources, not just a book. I would love a PowerPoint to outline what Indigenous people did with X, Y, and Z.” He clarified further, “A teachable would be great, not just a resource to be more knowledgeable about it.”

Steve offered a slightly different perspective, expressing hesitation around pre-made lesson plans. While acknowledging the need for resources, he shared, “I don’t want lesson plans because I find it not unhelpful, but maybe a little awkward, teaching other people’s lesson plans, regardless of whether it’s something FNMI.” His comment highlights the tension between wanting guidance and maintaining teacher autonomy and voice.

Taylor connected the issue of resources to emotional capacity, explaining, “I just don’t feel like I have enough resources and emotional capability to be able to do that.” She added that accessing authentic materials rooted in Indigenous ways of knowing felt particularly challenging, stating, “To find some sort of resource that would be good for myself and kids... in a more authentic and Indigenous way of knowing, it’s just so hard to get access to now.”

Jen returned to the question of legitimacy and usability. As a non-Indigenous teacher, she explained, “I can’t really say if the resource is perfect or not,” but valued knowing that materials had been vetted and approved. At the same time, she expressed frustration with generic lists, stating, “I love a good resource list just as much as the next person, but I sometimes find them really ineffective because it just says, ‘Here are the resources.’ I have no clue what to do with it.” She summarized the challenge concisely in stating, “It’s great to offer us a 400-page book, but then I have to read the book, then think about what I’m going to do with that book, then create something with the book.”

Across participants, the issue was not a lack of information, but a lack of bridge-building between knowledge and practice, intention and implementation. The variation in what teachers wanted or needed from resources underscores a broader challenge: without shared guidance or coherent support, Competency Five is enacted inconsistently, leaving teachers to navigate its expectations largely on their own.

Repetition Without Progression

Lack of Scope and Sequence

Although Competency Five includes multiple objectives that, in theory, make it adaptable and malleable across the curriculum and all grade levels, teachers report that students often experience frustration with Indigenous content because it is repetitive. The Alberta curriculum and Programs of Study for each subject and grade are written with clearly defined grade-level scopes and sequences – an intentional order of operations that allows concepts to build upon one another (Alberta Education, 2017, p. 5). This structure differs from Competency Five, which has resulted in students encountering the same concepts year after year. This repetition creates several problems. First, it limits students' ability to develop a robust and meaningful understanding of Indigenous histories, cultures, and languages, instead producing a superficial familiarity with only a few topics. Second, teachers report that this redundancy contributes to student apathy and frustration toward Indigenous content overall.

Student Frustration With Repeated Content

In my third year of teaching, I taught Social Studies 9 for the first time. Within the curriculum, students learn about the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, including Collective and Individual Rights. As part of this unit, I taught about the Indian Act – how it came into legislation, its original purpose, and its ongoing ramifications. After the unit test, one student wrote an entire page on the back of his exam describing how frequently he has learned about the Indian Act and the harms committed against Indigenous Peoples in Canada. He expressed frustration and annoyance at repeatedly encountering the same material year after year. While he acknowledged the importance of the content and noted that it was likely not my fault, he questioned why the same topics were taught to him every year.

Teachers' Perspectives on Surface-Level Instruction

Without a clear scope and sequence for Competency Five, several participants described instruction as repetitive and often surface-level rather than developmental. Brittany captured this clearly when she shared, “I feel like it’s repetitive. It’s the same material covered, and it’s like the shovel takes the teeniest little bit of dirt. That’s how deep we’re going, right?” Tanis explained that as an English teacher, repeating the same historical content year after year feels unnecessary, noting, “I’m not going to tell kids over and over again about residential schools because most of the time they already know about it.” Instead, she intentionally shifts her focus to listening “for the bias that can come out” and emphasizes “intergenerational trauma... not so much about what happened, but how it has impacted and left a lot of lasting legacy.”

Steve described how students experience this repetition across grade levels, explaining that “the things you do in grades seven and eight and nine are all very similar,” and while it technically builds, “it doesn’t deviate much,” leading students to feel as though they have “been told this since grade seven.” Jen echoed this frustration both as an educator and through her own schooling, stating, “I felt like it was just the same information regurgitated every year in the same slideshow, with the same ten points that I’m supposed to remember,” recalling that as a student she often thought, “You have told me this already. I know this. I understand this.” Together, these experiences point to a systemic issue in how Competency Five is implemented – without intentional progression, repetition replaces depth, limiting opportunities for meaningful learning.

Fatigue, Responsibility, and Reframing the Narrative

In university, I took a course titled *Issues in Indigenous Education*, where we examined both the challenges Indigenous students face within the education system and the difficulties

teachers encounter when implementing Indigenous content in their lessons. The course was delivered over Zoom, which may have contributed to participants' willingness to openly share their perspectives. During one class discussion, a classmate unmuted her microphone to describe her experience teaching about residential schools and the trauma Indigenous Peoples have endured. I vividly recall her stating that "students are tired... they are fatigued from learning about this over and over again," framing the topic almost as a burden for both students and teachers.

I raised my digital hand and was invited to respond. While remaining professional, I pointed out that Indigenous people are likely far more exhausted from living with the ongoing realities and consequences of residential schools. I emphasized that, regardless of student *fatigue*, it is our responsibility as educators to continue teaching this content thoughtfully and to challenge narratives that minimize its importance. Later that evening, I received a message on Facebook from an unknown classmate that read,

I just wanted to let you know that your comments in class today were super interesting! I really like that you discussed how to incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing on a daily basis. Also, it's really shitty that the comment was brought up today that people are 'fatigued' from learning about FNMI. It's ironic that it was said in a class called Issues in Indigenous Education. I'm very impressed by your ability to eloquently challenge that perspective. Thank you for being strong and teaching me something today.

While these experiences outline the very real challenges teachers face – particularly student apathy and frustration stemming from being taught repetitive Indigenous content, they also highlight the importance of Competency Five. Rather than serving as a justification to minimize or avoid this learning, student fatigue signals a need for more intentional and

thoughtful implementation. As educators, our responsibility is not only to teach Indigenous histories, cultures, and perspectives, but to do so in ways that are purposeful, varied, and responsive, allowing students to deepen their understanding rather than revisit the same surface-level narratives. When approached with care and creativity, Competency Five has the potential to move beyond repetition and foster meaningful, lasting learning that honours its significance.

Sitting in the Tension Between Emotional Vulnerability and Professionalism

Teaching Competency Five requires educators to navigate deeply emotional and often painful histories while maintaining professionalism and care in the classroom. Topics such as residential schools, intergenerational trauma, and ongoing colonial impacts can evoke strong emotional responses – for both teachers and students. Educators must balance honesty and empathy with the responsibility to create safe, supportive learning environments, particularly when Indigenous students are present.

Emotional Vulnerability in Teaching Painful Histories

In 2021, I accepted a temporary position teaching Social Studies 10 at Jasper Place High School. I was entering the second semester of my second year of teaching, and it was the first time I had taught Social Studies beyond my nine-week practicum, where I had taught the economics unit in Social Studies 9.

The second unit in Social Studies 10 focuses on historical globalization and its lasting legacies. I took this as an opportunity to teach about residential schools and to share parts of my grandfather's lived experiences. It was the first time I had ever taught this content, and I was not prepared for how deeply it would impact me emotionally. As a department, we decided to show *We Were Children* (2012), a film that follows the lives of two residential school survivors. While watching the film alongside my students, I felt a profound sense of heartbreak and discomfort.

The topic itself is heavy, and in that moment, I found myself grappling with how much emotional vulnerability was appropriate while still maintaining professional boundaries in the classroom.

This subject matter hits close to home for me, and I recognize that my response may be more visceral than that of some other educators. At the same time, this history matters. Students *should* feel some level of discomfort when learning about residential schools – it is a painful and tragic part of our shared history. If students felt nothing, I would be more concerned. The challenge, then, is finding the balance: creating space for honest emotion and meaningful learning, while ensuring that I am not overwhelming students or causing harm. Walking that line – between truth, care, and professionalism – remains one of the most complex parts of teaching Competency Five.

Shared Understanding of Emotional Labour and Ethical Responsibility

Other participants echoed this tension between emotional honesty and professional responsibility. Austin spoke about teaching residential schools during the historical globalization unit in Social Studies 10 and the weight of doing so with Indigenous students in the room. He described an internal hesitation, explaining, “I’ve already seen enough stuff from some of these students’ work to know this is going to hit really close to home.” He worried about “taking them to that place so that the other students could try and have something meaningful,” particularly when using films like *Sugarcane* (2024), noting that “there’s stuff in the movie that’s just going to be triggering.” For Austin, the presence of Indigenous students whose “families, literally families... their grandparents, have been torn apart by residential schools” heightened the responsibility to approach the topic with care, sensitivity, and restraint.

Steve similarly emphasized that while teaching First Nations, Métis, and Inuit content may not be logistically difficult, it is emotionally demanding. “I think teaching FNMI stuff is not

hard, as in practically difficult,” he shared, “but I think it’s emotionally hard, and I still think it’s important, because kids need empathy. Everybody needs empathy.” He acknowledged the emotional weight that this learning places on students, noting, “It’s heavy stuff. It’s hard to be told that other people don’t have it as easy as you. It’s hard not to feel guilty about it.”

Jen added another layer to this challenge, cautioning against reducing Indigenous histories solely to trauma. She emphasized that while these topics are undeniably heavy, “Indigenous people are more than just survivors of residential schools [or] the Sixties Scoop.” She stressed the importance of sharing “stories and knowledges and things that can be shared in a positive way too,” reminding educators that “it doesn’t always have to be so traumatizing, because it’s a heavy topic... it’s a heavy class to have to teach.” Together, these perspectives highlight the emotional labour educators carry when teaching Competency Five – balancing a heavy topic and care for students while maintaining professionalism and avoiding harm.

Lack of Knowledge

Lack of knowledge remains a significant challenge when implementing Competency Five, particularly when educators fear making mistakes. I approach this work with the belief that learning requires grace, yet many teachers hesitate to engage because they do not feel that grace exists – especially when working with Indigenous histories and cultures. While there is power in modeling humility and showing students that mistakes are part of learning, this becomes more complex when those mistakes risk being culturally insensitive or inaccurate. In these moments, the fear of causing harm can outweigh the willingness to engage, creating another barrier to meaningful implementation.

When reflecting on my experience implementing Competency Five, I recognize that it is something I have grown into overtime. In my first few years of teaching, I carried a deep sense

of shame for not feeling confident incorporating authentic Indigenous practices into my classroom, especially because I am Métis. I believed I *should* know more than colleagues who do not have Indigenous backgrounds, and that belief weighed heavily on me. Moving past that shame – shame that was never mine to carry, but rather a direct consequence of residential schools – and into a place of humility was a pivotal moment in my development as an educator. It required both humility and social awareness to admit that I do not know everything. That admission was uncomfortable, not because I thought I knew it all, but because I wanted to be seen as knowledgeable and competent. Asking for guidance around Indigenous lesson planning and implementation felt like a risk to my identity, as though admitting I needed support somehow made me “less Métis.” Letting go of that belief was necessary for my growth and for my ability to engage with this work in a more honest and meaningful way.

Building on my own experience, it became clear that a lack of knowledge and the fear that accompanies it are shared challenges among educators attempting to implement Competency Five. Like me, many participants described feeling a tension between what is expected of them as teachers and what they actually feel equipped to do. Austin articulated this honestly when he admitted that “out of the TQS competencies, I feel woefully inadequate when it comes to [implementing it].” As a Social Studies teacher, he felt an added pressure to be a source of knowledge, explaining, “it’s expected that I am a source of knowledge... and I feel like I don’t have the answers.” What made this especially difficult was the recognition that his own learning was still ongoing, “I don’t have the information or experience I need to convey to learning minds, because my mind is still learning a lot.”

Natalie shared similar uncertainty, tracing it back to her own schooling. While she described her post-secondary education as positive and informative, she reflected that she “didn’t

really ever learn, unless it was in history [class], about Indigenous culture.” Even university courses designed to address Indigenous perspectives left her feeling uncertain rather than confident. She explained that she was “definitely left with more questions,” noting that many of the experiences felt meaningful only “with a university class or with the guidance of an Indigenous person there.” This left her wondering, “How does that apply if I’m teaching a grade five class? How can I recreate this with them?” She described moments where strategies such as a read-aloud felt insufficient, sharing that if it is not meaningful to a kid, it is likely going right over their head, and at times felt like “you’re just doing it for the purpose of doing it, not making it meaningful or stuck with the students.” Ultimately, Natalie acknowledged, “I don’t necessarily know enough about it to answer their questions or properly teach it, teaching about another culture from something that you are not a part of... that’s hard.”

Natalie’s reflection also highlighted how easily well-intentioned teaching can cross into cultural misunderstanding. She shared a story about one of her Indigenous students who won Student-of-the-Week and chose to teach his classmates how to smudge. Wanting to celebrate the moment, she took a photo of him holding the shell and sent it to his mother. The response, while gentle, was corrective. Natalie learned that in their culture, it is disrespectful to take pictures of a sacred ceremony. The student’s mother then shared her own experience of being corrected by an Elder at a round dance, which she described to Natalie as an example of “*gentle teaching*.” This moment stayed with her, particularly the realization that “there are so many rules and things that we’re not aware of that come off rude just because of cultural differences.” As she reflected, “The chances of an Elder or Knowledge Keeper finding out about how you taught one lesson are slim, but you want it to go well, and you want it to be taught correctly.”

For teachers without Indigenous backgrounds, the fear of misrepresentation weighed heavily. Travis described the discomfort of teaching material he had not lived himself, explaining, “I don’t personally come from an Indigenous background. So, I can tell the stories, but I feel like I’m telling someone else’s story,” he shared, “and it’s tough to do that not having that lived experience.” The fear of making mistakes was ever-present, as he admitted, “to misspeak, I would feel terrible.”

Teachers’ narratives consistently highlighted how fear, uncertainty, and questions of authenticity complicate their efforts to meaningfully integrate Indigenous perspectives. Tanis articulated this hesitation clearly, stating, “I think a lot of people are scared a bit. They’re scared to say the wrong thing. They’re scared to step on toes.” This fear, she explained, can be paralyzing, noting that even within her own English department, some teachers will not teach certain texts because they are just scared to say the wrong thing. Her comments point to how apprehension often leads to avoidance rather than deeper engagement.

Jen offered an important perspective that reframed the issue of knowledge. She observed that many teachers already engage in practices rooted in Indigenous ways of knowing, “doing sharing circles, different ways of teaching, different activities,” but often lack the understanding to name where those practices come from or why they matter. “They don’t know how to put a name to it to fully show where that knowledge comes from,” she explained. For Jen, knowledge is deeply connected to truth. She emphasized that “when we talk about things like Truth and Reconciliation, the first part of it being truth is very, very crucial.” She also stressed the importance of local knowledge, stating that teachers should be aware of “where you live and the people and the histories and the cultures that are around you,” while acknowledging that “a lot of people just don’t.”

Together, these experiences reflect a shared vulnerability among educators – a desire to do this work well, paired with a fear of harming through ignorance or misrepresentation. Much like my own journey, participants described navigating shame, uncertainty, and the pressure to appear competent, while learning to embrace humility and ongoing growth. The lack of knowledge is not rooted in apathy, but rather in systems that failed to equip teachers adequately and in the emotional weight of knowing that mistakes in this context carry real consequences.

Navigating Fear and Authenticity

Participants described a tension between intent and impact, noting that fear of “doing it wrong” often leads to practices that feel forced, performative, or surface-level rather than authentic. Several teachers expressed discomfort teaching perspectives or practices that are not their own, worrying that their efforts come across as “ticking a box” or “another white person speaking,” which students readily recognize as inauthentic. Others pointed to common school-wide approaches, such as repetitive slides or prescribed activities like sharing circles, as examples of well-intended practices that lose meaning when applied without context or care. Collectively, these perspectives highlight how fear, positionality, and prescribed approaches can unintentionally undermine the goal of meaningful and respectful engagement with Indigenous perspectives.

Natalie further explored the challenge of authenticity when teaching outside one’s own lived experience. She described the difficulty of “conveying the message you’re trying to, in the best way possible from a non-Indigenous person,” acknowledging that “you can only make it so meaningful when it’s not coming from that source directly.” As a result, she admitted that “sometimes it does feel forced in certain things,” even when intentions are genuine. This sense of limitation underscores the tension between wanting to do the work well and recognizing the

constraints of one's positionality. Taylor echoed this sentiment even more bluntly, asking, "Who am I as this white lady to tell you about Indigenous learning and ways of knowing, especially because I'm not a part of the community?"

Devon's reflections revealed how fear of misinterpretation or backlash can shape classroom decisions. She expressed discomfort with prescribed approaches, saying, "I feel like we've been told sharing circles constantly, which that feels very... not authentic." Her hesitation was rooted not only in fear of "doing it wrong," but also in the possibility of unintended consequences: "I think that's my biggest fear of stretching beyond the surface level stuff." She explained that "that's what scares me, not even just doing it wrong, but doing it right and angering the wrong people," referencing an experience where a parent felt she had elevated Indigenous perspectives at the expense of others.

Matt echoed similar concerns, questioning the legitimacy of his voice in this work. He struggled with "how do I share a way of understanding and ways of knowing of a culture when it's not my own culture?" and worried that his teaching might be perceived as inauthentic, saying, "Oh, it's just another white dude speaking, and it's not organic." He also noted that students are perceptive, emphasizing that "students can know when you're ticking a box... they can tell a mile away when you're doing something for the reason of 'I have to,' instead of 'I want to.'" His comments highlight how performative approaches undermine trust and engagement.

Jen synthesized many of these concerns by emphasizing the importance of integration over performance. She stressed "finding ways to kind of seamlessly integrate it. It shouldn't be a huge display... it shouldn't be performative." Jen criticized school-wide approaches that rely on repetition without depth, describing how "the whole school basically [uses] the same five slides to say, 'this is the Indian Act. This is residential schools. This is the 60s Scoop,'" which reduces

complex histories to “checking off a box.” For her, authenticity and meaning require moving beyond surface-level compliance toward sustained, thoughtful engagement with Indigenous perspectives.

Colonial Bureaucracy

In my first year of teaching at Bert Church, I was teaching Social Studies and Physical Education while also coaching the junior varsity boys’ volleyball team. I wanted to lead my volleyball team through a smudging ceremony and asked my principal for permission to do so. He was unsure of the division’s protocol and asked that I email the Director of Indigenous Learning to inquire about any administrative procedures that might be required.

I received a response that included a checklist of expectations, many of which were related to safety. One guideline stated, “The person leading the Smudge must have permission granted by someone who has shared the teachings.” I understand the intention behind this requirement – to prevent cultural appropriation and ensure respect for Indigenous practices. However, reading it, I felt an immediate sense of discomfort and self-doubt. In that moment, I felt like an imposter.

I did not grow up smudging regularly, but my family began this practice during my teenage years whenever we were at our cabin in Lac Ste. Anne. My cousins and I learned through participating alongside family members – however, we were never formally “given permission” to share the teachings in the way the checklist described.

In my reply, I explained, “...I wouldn’t say that I have formally been given authority, but rather encouraged by my Grandpa, Aunts, and Uncles to continue our family’s practice to build relationships with non-Indigenous people in our lives.” I was ultimately granted approval to

proceed. Still, the experience left a lasting impact. In navigating the administrative requirements, I found myself questioning my legitimacy and whether I was “Métis enough” to be leading this practice with students. That moment of hesitation highlights how well-intentioned policies and procedural safeguards can unintentionally create barriers – particularly for educators who are trying to engage authentically with Indigenous practices while navigating institutional expectations.

In my Aboriginal Studies class, students were given the freedom to design a class-wide project that demonstrated their learning over the course of the semester. They chose to develop a proposal for custom orange shirts that our school could order, noting that not every teacher had worn an orange shirt on National Truth and Reconciliation Day the previous September. Students researched local Indigenous suppliers and designers, contacted them for quotes, and worked collaboratively on design concepts. By the end of the semester, they had completed a full proposal, which we submitted to our principal.

Two students chose to continue the project in the second semester as an extra-credit opportunity. As a first step, we contacted the Indigenous Learning Team to seek approval. In response, we were provided with a list of requirements intended to ensure the process was approached thoughtfully and respectfully. These included ensuring that the school would not profit from the sale of the shirts, that this was clearly communicated to the school community, that funds collected would either cover production costs or be donated to residential school survivors through organizations such as the Indian Residential School Survivors Society or the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, and that it be made explicit that the project was led by an Indigenous teacher alongside their students.

We followed each of these requirements closely. Students collaborated with a local Indigenous designer from Calgary to create a logo that reflected both our school identity and our commitment to reconciliation. They also contacted the Orange Shirt Society to receive permission to use the phrase *Every Child Matters* and ensured that 50% of the funds raised would be donated directly to the organization.

Despite the care, intentionality, and collaboration that went into the project, we encountered additional barriers before receiving final approval. We were asked to revise the design multiple times and were given suggestions that did not align with the vision developed alongside the Indigenous designer. The process became increasingly drawn out, with several back-and-forth exchanges, and at multiple points, the possibility of pausing the project altogether was raised.

At one stage, I was also instructed to explicitly state in our messaging to stakeholders that I am Métis. This request felt uncomfortable and tokenizing. I questioned why my identity needed to be foregrounded in order to legitimize the work. If a non-Indigenous teacher had undertaken this same project with care and integrity, I would have celebrated their participation in reconciliation efforts. While we were ultimately able to find a resolution, the amount of red tape involved was discouraging – for me, and especially for the two students who had invested significant time, thought, and emotional energy into a project rooted in genuine learning and intention.

Collectively, these experiences illustrate how bureaucratic processes can unintentionally reproduce the very colonial structures that Competency Five seeks to disrupt. Devon described this tension directly, stating, “They colonized the paperwork process. They made it as colonial as they could have. I have heard about how difficult it can be, and there are a lot of hoops and

things that you need to jump through in order to do what feels like it should be a natural thing.” Rather than supporting educators in engaging meaningfully and respectfully with Indigenous ways of knowing, these layers of approval, compliance, and procedural oversight often create hesitation, frustration, and disengagement. While safeguards intended to prevent harm or appropriation are necessary, when they become overly rigid or performative, they risk discouraging authentic, student-centred initiatives and reinforcing a compliance-based approach to reconciliation. As a result, educators may be left navigating systems that prioritize risk management over relational learning, ultimately undermining the spirit of Competency Five.

Positive Teaching Stories – The Emotional Dimension

Brittany

Brittany shared several moments where she felt she was successfully implementing Competency Five in ways that felt both meaningful and authentic. One of the most significant breakthroughs came during a Grade 6 science unit on constellations and space, where she used Indigenous storytelling alongside Greek mythology to explain the imagery in the stars. Reflecting on this experience, she shared, “I finally felt I had a breakthrough, almost with myself, but also the engagement of my students.” Students were asked to write down two things they found interesting about both Greek and Indigenous stories, and Brittany recalled that “I had kids bring me full sheets of paper, and they were smiling [while they were writing], you could hear a pin drop in there... because they were so into it.” This experience reinforced for her the power of storytelling as a pedagogical tool, noting that students were able to recall more information and remained engaged in ways she did not always see with more traditional approaches. Storytelling became something she intentionally returned to in future lessons because students had learned to value it as a meaningful way of knowing.

Brittany also spoke about intentionally selecting books by Indigenous authors that feature Indigenous characters in ways that extend beyond narratives of trauma. She emphasized the importance of showing students stories that are joyful, creative, and contemporary, sharing titles such as *The Case of the Missing Auntie* and *The Barren Grounds*. She reflected, “I just think, what a creative way to approach something that’s really hard to talk about,” highlighting how these texts allowed students to engage with Indigenous perspectives without the learning feeling overwhelming or performative.

One of Brittany’s most impactful stories centred on representation and belonging. She recalled a Grade 7 student who was new to the school after moving from British Columbia, explaining, “I think representation is super important, too.” At the beginning of the year, Brittany had posters of Indigenous Canadians displayed on her bulletin board alongside posters of Black Canadians. She shared that the student, “walks right up to me and says, ‘Hey! I’m that,’” a moment that stood out to her as deeply affirming. Brittany later described how, at the end of the year, during the Celebration of Learning, “his mom came in, and that’s the first thing he showed his mom.” Reflecting on this, she shared her excitement about teaching him again the following year, noting how these small but intentional choices created moments of connection, pride, and visibility for students.

Together, Brittany’s experiences illustrate how Competency Five can be implemented in ways that feel organic, engaging, and affirming for students. Her stories highlight the impact of thoughtful integration, creativity, and representation, showing that meaningful implementation does not always require large-scale initiatives, but rather intentional, well-considered practices that center student engagement and belonging.

Tanis

Tanis described her successful implementation of Competency Five as something that developed gradually over time, shaped by both reflection and experience. Earlier in her teaching career, she shared that she approached Indigenous content with a great deal of caution, explaining, “Earlier in my teaching career, I was a little nervous and did want to make sure that I was doing justice to teaching Indigenous perspectives as a non-Indigenous person, and so I did put a lot of time and preparation [into those lessons].” While this careful planning was important, Tanis noted that her practice has since shifted in ways that feel more authentic and responsive to students.

Now, Tanis described moving away from being the primary source of knowledge and toward creating learning spaces where students do much of the meaning-making themselves. Using *The Marrow Thieves* as an example, she explained that students are able to make deep connections independently, noting that “The Marrow Thieves has connections to the residential school system in Canada, and the kids are making those connections based on what they’ve learned.” In this role, Tanis sees herself less as a lecturer and more as a facilitator, sharing, “I’m simply there now to provide space to honour their voices and their learning and their understanding... I just set up a structure that gives them voice and choice.”

This shift has also created reciprocal learning in her classroom, where students are not only learning from the text but from one another. She reflected, “They are all teaching each other and teaching me, like some of them are picking up on things, and I’m like, ‘I’ve read this book six times, and I didn’t know... I never saw that, but you’re right, and that’s brilliant.’” For Tanis, this moment of shared discovery reinforced the value of stepping back and trusting students’ thinking.

Tanis described this evolution as a shift from teaching *about* Indigenous peoples to teaching *in an Indigenous way*, emphasizing relational learning, dialogue, and shared understanding. As a result, she observed higher levels of student engagement and deeper learning, explaining that "...their eyes aren't glazing over while I am talking about a book and what it means. They are actively engaged and having those discussions and arguing over books. And they tell me they're learning so much from each other." Tanis's story highlights how growth in confidence, pedagogy, and perspective can lead to learning environments where Indigenous ways of knowing are meaningfully embedded rather than simply added on.

Natalie

Natalie shared several experiences where she felt Indigenous perspectives were centred in authentic and meaningful ways, often by creating space for Indigenous voices rather than directing the learning herself. One of the most impactful moments came when she awarded Student-of-the-Week to an Indigenous student and invited him to present on something meaningful to him. The student asked if he could bring his mom to class to teach students how to smudge. Natalie described how she worked with her administration and central office to ensure the experience was done respectfully and appropriately. The student and his mother taught the class how to smudge and explained its cultural significance, and they provided twelve smudge kits to students who were interested in practicing at home. Natalie noted that students talked about the experience for days afterward, and one student shared with her that although he was Indigenous, he did not practice cultural traditions at home and was excited to take a smudge kit home to share with his mom.

Natalie emphasized that while this experience was not something she had planned as a formal lesson, she believes it was deeply meaningful because it uplifted Indigenous voices and

allowed students to learn directly from lived experience. She reflected that, when she does plan lessons, she is intentional about where the knowledge comes from, explaining, “I always try to find information directly from the group I’m teaching about. If I’m learning about Métis, it’s directly from Métis people, in their words.” This commitment to sourcing knowledge authentically has shaped how she approaches Indigenous content across subject areas.

Natalie also described a lesson she planned around National Truth and Reconciliation Day, where she intended to teach about residential schools and the story behind Orange Shirt Day. Although the lesson was originally planned to last only half an hour, it extended into two full class periods because students were deeply engaged and eager to ask questions. Natalie shared that she felt it was important to honour their curiosity and allow space for discussion, even when she did not have all the answers, noting the importance of “acknowledging that I don’t really know the answer to most of their questions about the subject...” This willingness to learn alongside her students created an environment where inquiry felt safe and shared.

Beyond her classroom, Natalie highlighted the role of collective support in strengthening Indigenous education at her school. She described how an Indigenous Committee of teachers helped plan school-wide initiatives, including Orange Shirt Day and lessons on the Seven Sacred Teachings delivered in homeroom classes. The committee also organized learning specialists to lead a blanket exercise with staff, which Natalie explained helped make the content more accessible and built teacher confidence by providing both shared experiences and access to accurate information. Additionally, the school invited Indigenous dancers during the month of June, using the opportunity to model proper protocol in front of students by demonstrating how to thank and respect Indigenous peoples for their time, knowledge, and talents. Natalie’s experiences highlight how intentional planning, humility, and collaboration can create

meaningful opportunities for Indigenous perspectives to be honoured and embedded within school communities.

Matt

Matt's positive experiences implementing Competency Five were grounded in a shift in mindset, moving away from obligation and toward opportunity. He reflected that "when it's less of 'I have to,' and more of 'I get to teach this way,' kids will buy in and will understand more and more," emphasizing that Indigenous ways of knowing do not always need to be the explicit focus of a lesson to be meaningful. Instead, he found that "there's a lot of ways to incorporate it without making it the forefront," allowing it to exist naturally within everyday classroom practice.

One of Matt's most impactful examples came from his math class while teaching about circles. He invited students to think critically about why hand drums are circular rather than square, prompting discussion around structural stress points and the way a circle bends under pressure without breaking. From there, the conversation transitioned into the cultural significance of circles in Indigenous communities, including the medicine wheel and talking circles. What began as a mathematical discussion evolved into a daily practice as Matt introduced talking circles into his classroom. "We did one every day, because the kids wanted to," he shared, noting that some days he provided prompts while on other days students were free to share whatever was on their minds. He described how the practice developed organically, explaining that "it kind of happened organically, which was really nice to see them picking it up and being like, 'hey, it's really nice to have everyone see each other when they are speaking.'" Matt reflected on how powerful it was to see students become more comfortable sharing, even if

their contributions were brief, stating, “it was neat to see how many people grew willing to share a very simple answer.”

Through this process, Matt also found that his own understanding deepened. He explained that “when I was researching it, I grew my understanding of a circle so much more in how it plays a role in the understanding of Indigenous knowledge,” and that the learning was reciprocal between him and his students. When asked whether meaningful learning occurred through these experiences, Matt responded confidently, “Absolutely!” He observed that students began advocating for the talking circle themselves and that he was often learning more about their understanding than he would through traditional assessment. “They were pushing more for the Talking Circle... I was getting more information out of them than most think I am. I could gather information without students realizing.” These conversations frequently revealed concepts students were struggling with, allowing Matt to reteach ideas or provide individual support. Reflecting on the process, he emphasized that “they made it happen. It wasn’t a ‘me-led charge,’ it was a ‘them-led charge,’ which is what I would say was more meaningful, because it was them led instead of me.”

When Matt shared his experience with talking circles, it prompted me to reflect on my own first experience participating in one during my undergraduate studies at the University of Alberta. I remember feeling deeply uncomfortable as a verbal processor, struggling with the expectation to listen quietly while others shared. Sitting near the end of the circle, my thoughts raced, and by the time it was my turn, I felt both overwhelmed with ideas and unsure of what to say. That experience taught me an important lesson about patience, respect, and honouring the time and voice of others – insights that echoed strongly in Matt’s reflections on how talking circles supported student growth and understanding.

Matt also spoke about how, earlier in his teaching career, he believed that incorporating Indigenous perspectives required large, visible gestures. Over time, he learned that smaller, intentional actions could have a significant impact. While teaching an entrepreneurship class composed almost entirely of Indigenous students, he hoped to bring Indigenous business leaders into the classroom. When in-person visits were not possible, one speaker offered to join via Skype. Although initially disappointed, Matt proceeded with the opportunity and was struck by its impact. “I was sitting back and watching them interact with someone that looks like them, talks like them, goes a lot further than I was thinking,” he shared. What seemed like a small accommodation became deeply meaningful, as “it wasn’t a big gesture, it was something that could have gone unnoticed, but its impact was something that was very noticeable... you can see how big those little actions can go.”

Matt’s experiences underscore the importance of Indigenous representation in classrooms for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. While teaching about the harms and legacies of residential schools remains essential, he highlighted the need to also showcase Indigenous success, leadership, and resilience so that Indigenous identity is not framed solely through trauma. His reflections demonstrate how authenticity, intentionality, and a willingness to learn alongside students can create powerful, meaningful learning experiences grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing.

Travis

Travis spoke about successfully implementing Competency Five through approaches that are intentional, flexible, and grounded in shared responsibility. He emphasized that “there are different ways to integrate Indigenous wisdom and knowledge,” and that meaningful inclusion does not always require a complete overhaul of curriculum. Instead, he has found success by

adapting instructional strategies he learned during his university education and reframing them through an Indigenous lens.

One method Travis regularly uses involves breaking a larger topic into smaller components and assigning each part to different student groups. Each group is responsible for learning as much as possible about their section and then sharing their understanding with the rest of the class. Travis noted that this structure promotes collaboration and collective ownership of learning, as students rely on one another to construct a fuller picture of the topic. He connected this approach to the Circle of Courage, which emphasizes the four universal needs for healthy growth: belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity. By positioning students as both learners and teachers, Travis found that this method naturally aligned with Indigenous values around community, shared knowledge, and reciprocity, while also fostering deeper engagement and accountability among students.

Travis also reflected on the emotional and professional growth that comes with repeatedly engaging in this work. He acknowledged that teaching Indigenous perspectives can feel uncomfortable at times, especially when lessons do not unfold as planned. However, he stressed the importance of humility and perseverance, explaining that “the more you do it, the less uncomfortable you are. Or even just being with it going south.” For Travis, understanding that a lesson may not be perfect – and accepting that possibility – has been essential in continuing to implement Competency Five in meaningful ways. Rather than allowing fear of mistakes to become a barrier, he views discomfort as part of the learning process, both for himself and his students, reinforcing the idea that growth comes through engagement, reflection, and continued effort.

Steve

Steve shared that one of the most meaningful ways he has implemented Competency Five is by embedding Indigenous perspectives naturally into his science curriculum, rather than treating them as an add-on. When teaching genetics, he intentionally incorporates discussions about epigenetics to help students understand how external factors can influence gene expression and how those changes can be passed down through generations. This creates space to talk about the lasting impacts of Canada's history on Indigenous peoples in a way that feels relevant and grounded in scientific inquiry. As he explained, "I try to tie it in with multi-generational trauma... We have all these generations where there would have been methylation or changes in these genomes that are causing changes in who we are." He emphasized that even if an individual did not directly experience residential schools, "that doesn't necessarily exclude them from feeling the effects of that, not just because of the psychological stuff of their parents going through that, but also the genetics behind it."

Steve noted that approaching Indigenous history through a scientific lens often deepens student engagement and understanding. He observed that, "when I talk about it with the First Nations bit, it sticks a bit more because it's a bit heavier," and that weight encourages students to think more critically and empathetically about the experiences of others. For Steve, this approach reinforces why Competency Five matters across subject areas, not just in Social Studies or English. He believes that "the more we can inform kids about how this is what's happening, the more they can have empathy towards their classmates or other people post high school." By connecting scientific concepts to real-world histories and lived experiences, Steve has found a way to make learning both academically rigorous and deeply human, supporting students in developing empathy alongside content knowledge.

Taylor

Taylor described her growth in implementing Competency Five as closely tied to how she approached content delivery in Social Studies, where Indigenous perspectives are already embedded in the curriculum. Rather than relying on lectures, she intentionally tried to centre primary sources to help students actively engage with historical perspectives. “One of the things that I did was I wanted to use primary resources as much as possible to get kids to actually engage with the ideas,” she explained. However, accessing Indigenous primary sources proved challenging. Without strong divisional connections at the time, she found herself relying on European sources instead. Rather than abandoning the lesson, Taylor reframed it as an opportunity for critical analysis, asking students to examine bias and perspective. She had students reflect on “what the bias in that is, and how are they perceiving Indigenous people versus what do we actually understand about residential schools and how that actually came to be.”

Going into the lesson, Taylor was very aware of her positionality and felt significant anxiety. “I was really anxious, because I always feel like, who am I as this white lady to tell you about Indigenous learning and ways of knowing, especially someone who's not a part of the community,” she shared. This uncertainty was heightened by her concern about not having deep enough knowledge or lived experience. Despite this, once the lesson was underway, her discomfort began to ease. “Once I got out of the lesson, it actually felt pretty good,” she reflected, particularly because of how students engaged with the material. Students began to critically examine the language used in historical documents, especially terminology like “Indian,” and questioned why it was used historically and why it is no longer appropriate. Taylor identified this moment as evidence of meaningful learning, “That’s how I found what they

learned... they're looking at this, and they're going, well, that's not how we do it today, so why was it back then?"

For Taylor, student curiosity became the clearest indicator that the lesson had been successful. "I really think that it's meaningful when it becomes authentic when kids are asking those questions," she explained. She noted that the learning extended beyond the classroom itself, with students continuing to ask questions as they were leaving. "It feels like they have a better understanding than if I would have just lectured it and given them some sort of exit slip," she said. This experience reinforced her belief that meaningful implementation of Competency Five does not require perfection or complete confidence, but rather thoughtful lesson design that invites students to think critically, question historical narratives, and engage deeply with the content.

Jen

Jen spoke intentionally about the importance of ensuring that teaching Indigenous histories does not focus solely on trauma and abuse. While she acknowledges that these truths must be taught, she makes a conscious effort to also uplift Indigenous cultures, knowledges, and lived experiences in ways that feel authentic and respectful. For Jen, this begins with how her classroom is structured. She described how her desks are arranged in a large circle, reflecting a more holistic, Indigenous approach to learning that emphasizes community and shared responsibility. As a Social Studies teacher, she recognized that it can be easier to incorporate Competency Five because of the topics embedded in the curriculum, but she emphasized that *how* the learning is approached matters just as much as *what* is taught.

One of Jen's most meaningful experiences implementing Competency Five came through a lesson focused on residential schools. Rather than relying on a traditional lecture format, she

intentionally designed the lesson around relational learning. “I have all these stories and excerpts, and pieces from Indigenous Knowledge Keepers about residential schools, about the 60s Scoop, about life,” she explained. “Basically, all these testimonials about things that have happened.” The class began by sitting together in a circle and discussing why the space was arranged that way before moving into a sharing circle. Jen uses a talking stick that was gifted to her by a colleague, who had received it from an Indigenous student, adding another layer of meaning and responsibility to the practice. Drawing from what she learned in her Indigenous Learning course, she emphasized “the importance of open communication and being able to choose for yourself what you’re going to say or not say.” As she read short excerpts aloud, “we just started talking, and passing the stick around the room.”

Jen described this as “the most impactful thing that I do with my students,” noting that the conversations often moved beyond the historical content and into students’ own lived experiences. “I think because they start sharing a lot,” she said, “and even talking about, like, losing children. I have students opening up about, ‘well, I lost a family member through the foster system.’” She emphasized that students do not need to share identical experiences to build understanding, but rather, “finding ways to help them feel the empathy or understanding.” For Jen, teaching Indigenous content through rows of desks and note-taking would undermine the purpose entirely. “We shouldn’t be talking about Indigenous issues, and I shouldn’t be standing at the front of the room with a pointer and they’re sitting in rows and taking notes – that kind of defeats the whole purpose.”

She spoke candidly about the care and preparation required to teach this lesson well. “I spent a lot of time making sure I was going to do it right, because I didn’t want to do it wrong,” *she shared*. “I felt like if I was going to do it half right, then I’m better to not do it.” Central to

her approach was resisting the role of authority. “I wanted to make sure I wasn’t positioning myself as... I’m not an authority figure on this. I am a learner, a teacher. My job is to learn and to teach, but I could never tell you a lived experience.” Instead, she focused on situating and contextualizing the learning in a way that honoured Indigenous voices while creating space for students to engage meaningfully.

Jen noted that during these circles, students who rarely spoke in class often shared openly. “It’s the one time that kids can say anything about their lives, and it never leaves my room,” she explained. “They open up, and then no one ever says a word, because it’s a safe space for communication.” She believes that students leave these experiences having gained “some type of emotional understanding, which I think is very important for these issues.” Reflecting on the experience, she highlighted “the importance of setting up a space before diving into something like that,” adding that even her most challenging Grade 10 class “were angels through this, and they had so much to share with each other.”

Through these experiences, Jen came to an important realization about her own pedagogy. “I realized very early on that my way of teaching is much more aligned with Indigenous ways of knowing and communicating and knowledge than it is with Western ideals.” This understanding has shaped how she approaches Competency Five – not as an obligation, but as a relational and reflective practice grounded in community, empathy, and shared learning.

The positive stories shared by participants highlight that meaningful implementation of Competency Five is possible when teachers prioritize authenticity, humility, and student voice over perfection. Across disciplines and grade levels, teachers described success when Indigenous perspectives were integrated naturally into their practice – through storytelling, discussion, community-based approaches, and inquiry – rather than treated as isolated or performative

moments. These experiences often involved teachers stepping back, allowing students or Indigenous voices to lead, and creating learning environments rooted in relationship, empathy, and curiosity. Participants emphasized that meaningful learning was evident when students were engaged, asking thoughtful questions, making connections, and seeing themselves reflected in the curriculum. Collectively, these stories demonstrate that small, intentional actions can lead to powerful and lasting impacts for both students and educators.

Recommendations – The Physical Dimension

Rewrite Competency Five

A central recommendation that emerged from both my reflections and participants' experiences is the need for greater clarity and coherence in how Competency Five is understood and enacted. Currently, teachers interpret the competency in vastly different ways, which contributes to inconsistency across classrooms and schools. There is a clear need to shift away from solely teaching about Indigenous histories, languages, and cultures, and toward teaching in Indigenous ways – through relational, community-based, and holistic approaches to learning. Participants questioned whether the competency, as written, provides sufficient guidance, noting that it is the only Teacher Quality Standard that prescribes what must be taught without offering direction on how it should be meaningfully implemented. This lack of guidance, paired with the absence of a clear scope and sequence, has resulted in repetitive learning experiences for students throughout their schooling, often revisiting the same surface-level content without deeper progression. Revisiting and potentially rewriting Competency Five to include clearer pedagogical intent and developmental progression would better support teachers in implementing it with confidence, consistency, and authenticity.

Competency Five is structurally and conceptually different from the other Teacher Quality Standard competencies, and these differences can create significant internal conflict for teachers. Competencies One through Four and Six emphasize *how teachers teach* rather than *what teachers must teach*. They focus on pedagogical skills, professional dispositions, and relational practices – such as fostering inclusive environments, applying professional knowledge, engaging in ongoing reflection, and building relationships with students and communities. These competencies are intentionally broad and flexible, allowing teachers to enact them in ways that align with their subject area, teaching context, and professional strengths.

Competency Five, however, stands apart in that it explicitly dictates *content*. It requires teachers to “apply foundational knowledge about First Nations, Métis, and Inuit” histories, cultures, and perspectives, using the program of studies to provide learning opportunities that foster respect and understanding. Unlike the other competencies, it does not simply describe a professional practice or mindset; it prescribes a specific body of knowledge that teachers are expected to possess and teach. This makes it the only competency that directly intersects with curriculum content rather than instructional approach. Competency Five assumes a level of cultural, historical, and pedagogical knowledge that many teachers were never formally taught.

Additionally, the absence of clear guidance on *how* to implement Competency Five contributes to uncertainty and inconsistency. Whereas other competencies emphasize reflective practice, collaboration, and responsiveness, Competency Five leaves teachers to determine on their own what “authentic” implementation looks like. Without a clear scope and sequence, teachers may default to familiar, surface-level content – often repeatedly teaching the same topics year after year – rather than engaging in deeper, developmentally appropriate learning.

Reframing the competency as *Integrating Indigenous Ways of Knowing and Being into Professional Practice* rather than Applying Foundational Knowledge about First Nations, Métis and Inuit more accurately reflects the active, relational, and contextual nature of Indigenous education. This shift moves the teacher's role from compliance toward intentional pedagogy, aligning the competency with the broader structure of the Teaching Quality Standard while supporting teachers in engaging with Indigenous perspectives in meaningful, respectful, and sustainable ways. Ultimately, such a revision has the potential to reduce performative practice, foster professional confidence, and create space for more authentic learning experiences for both teachers and students.

Meaningful Professional Development

A dominant theme across participant responses was the need for more meaningful, ongoing, and authentic professional learning related to Competency Five. Many participants expressed that current professional development opportunities often feel surface-level or disconnected from lived Indigenous experiences. As Austin shared candidly, "I'm not profoundly learning right now. I'm just doing it to check off the [competency]." This sentiment was echoed by others who described existing professional learning as "blanket" or "baseline," with Taylor noting that one-off sessions limit opportunities for deeper engagement, particularly outside of Social Studies. Participants consistently emphasized that if Competency Five is one of the six foundational Teaching Quality Standard competencies, it should be supported through sustained, immersive professional learning rather than occasional or optional sessions.

Several participants highlighted the value of land-based and experiential learning opportunities for teachers as a critical recommendation moving forward. Experiences such as attending a sweat lodge, engaging in ceremony, or learning directly from Knowledge Keepers

were described as transformative, not only for personal understanding but for classroom practice. Matt noted that “the more teachers are involved in those different settings, the easier it is to bring it back into the classroom,” while Travis reflected that it is difficult to integrate Indigenous ways of knowing when “we don’t get many learning opportunities to experience that kind of thing.” Austin similarly expressed appreciation for opportunities grounded in land and tradition, emphasizing that learning “based on actually getting out there” felt far more meaningful than traditional professional development formats. Participants recommended that divisions prioritize these experiences, not as mandatory checklists, but as opportunities for authentic learning and relationship-building.

Another key theme was the importance of collaborative professional learning structures, particularly Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Tanis described PLCs as inherently aligned with Indigenous ways of knowing, stating that “a PLC is almost an Indigenous way of learning and teaching... because it’s about inquiry, learning from each other, [and] collaborating around common experiences.” She raised a critical question echoed by others: “How can we as teachers actually adopt Competency Five if that’s not even being modelled in our own professional development?” Participants suggested that department-based or cross-school PLCs could create space for teachers to share best practices, discuss challenges, and learn collectively, reducing isolation and increasing confidence in implementation.

Guidance from the Division

Participants also identified a need for clearer guidance and access to division-level supports, particularly for new teachers. Devon emphasized that simply directing teachers to newsletters or forms is insufficient, noting that “there needs to be some professional learning about how to [access division support] ... Sit down with the new teachers and talk about it,

because it's a part of the competency." This recommendation reflects a broader desire for mentorship, modelling, and relational support rather than passive dissemination of information. Several participants suggested the creation or expansion of Indigenous Learning Specialists who could support classroom instruction, co-teach lessons, or provide ready-to-use, outcome-aligned materials across subject areas.

Finally, participants consistently expressed the importance of practical access to resources and time to engage with them meaningfully. While many acknowledged that divisions are beginning to acquire Indigenous resources, teachers like Jen emphasized that access alone is not enough: "If we have the resources, that's wonderful. Now, I would just love to know how to use some of them, or what other people have done." Taylor echoed this by advocating for professional learning that allows teachers to "dive into" materials over multiple days, rather than brief overviews. Participants recommended that professional learning days include hands-on exploration of resources, opportunities to ask questions, and concrete examples of classroom implementation.

Summary of Recommendations

Collectively, participant recommendations highlight a clear need for systemic alignment between the intent of Competency Five and the ways teachers are supported in enacting it. Participants consistently emphasized that meaningful engagement with Indigenous perspectives cannot be achieved through surface-level professional development, isolated lessons, or a checklist approach to compliance. Instead, they called for ongoing, authentic, and experiential professional learning that is land-based, relational, collaborative, and modelled after Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Teachers expressed a desire for learning opportunities that extend beyond Social Studies, include access to Knowledge Keepers and Elders, provide time to explore

and practice with resources, and offer clear guidance and mentorship – particularly for new teachers. These recommendations underscore a central tension: teachers are being asked to demonstrate a competency that is not consistently modelled, scaffolded, or coherently structured at the system level. As a result, many experience uncertainty, discomfort, or internal conflict in their attempts to “apply” the competency. Reframing Competency Five as *Integrating Indigenous Ways of Knowing and Being into Professional Practice* responds directly to these concerns by shifting the focus from content acquisition to professional orientation, pedagogy, and relational practice. Such a revision would more closely align the competency with the rest of the Teaching Quality Standard, reduce ambiguity in interpretation, and better support teachers in engaging with this work in ways that are authentic, meaningful, and sustainable.

Conclusion

This research set out to explore how teachers understand and implement Competency Five within Alberta’s Teaching Quality Standard, and to examine the lived realities that shape this work in classrooms. At its core, this study asked: How are educators enacting this competency in practice? What tensions, challenges, and opportunities emerge in the process? And what shifts are needed to move from compliance toward meaningful integration?

The findings show that educators understand the importance of implementing Competency Five for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students – however, the process has proven to have its challenges. The majority of participants shared meaningful moments of learning and teaching about Indigenous content or implementing Indigenous pedagogies, but they have also outlined the hurdles that have made consistent implementation unrealistic in the current structure of our academic system in Alberta.

Organized through the Métis Self-Care Wheel, the findings explain the *spiritual* connections that motivate teachers to engage in this work, the *mental* interpretations that shape how they understand the competency, the *emotional* tensions they carry in practice, and the *physical* calls to action required to move forward. Together, these dimensions suggest that meaningful implementation of Competency Five requires more than a change in policy language. It requires relational accountability, thoughtful curricular design, sustained professional learning, and institutional commitment. Most importantly, it requires the meaningful inclusion of Indigenous peoples at every stage of policy development, curricular design, and implementation. Indigenous voices cannot be consulted as an afterthought – they must be central to the decision-making processes. Without Indigenous leadership and guidance in this process, we continue to marginalize the voices of those we are attempting to amplify in our classrooms – leaving us with surface-level curriculum and continuing the problems identified in this study. True and lasting implementation is only possible when Indigenous community members are partners in decision-making and execution daily.

This research has deepened my understanding of both the responsibility and the privilege of teaching this content. It has challenged me to be more intentional in how I approach teaching, how I hold space for discomfort without causing harm, and how I ensure Indigenous histories are not reduced to trauma alone. It has shown me that it is okay to not have all the answers and to seek guidance when I am unsure how to incorporate Indigenous content into my lessons. It has also strengthened my desire to advocate for systemic change, recognizing that meaningful implementation cannot rest solely on individual teachers. As I move forward in my practice, I remain committed to teaching in good relation – to my students, to community, and to the histories that shape this work. I know that I will continue learning, listening, and adjusting,

guided by Indigenous voices and grounded in the belief that this work, when done with integrity and partnership, can strengthen educational environments by promoting equity and relational responsibility for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

Lastly, this work has made me very proud to be Métis – with roots that are grounded in resilience and pride. I have appreciated every ounce of self-discovery that has accompanied this academic journey, and I know my grandfather would be proud.

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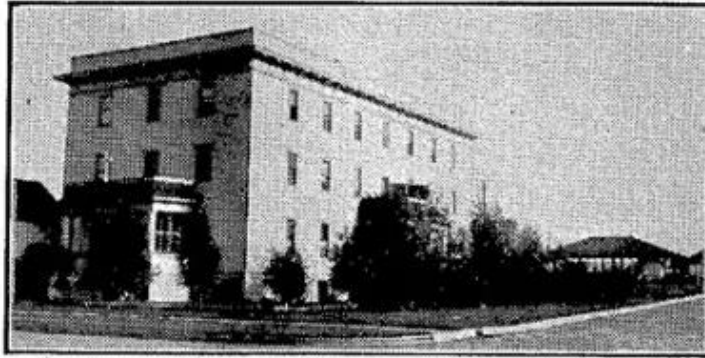
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Appendix

St. Mary's Boys' Home

Figure 1



ST. MARY'S HOME, EDMONTON
— FOR BOYS —
Under direction of Sisters of Providence

Note: (Edmonton | Sisters of Providence of St. Vincent De Paul, n.d.)

Figure 2



St. Mary's Home after the renovations, ca. 1941 (SPSVPA 014-205.1.2-10)

Note: (Edmonton | Sisters of Providence of St. Vincent De Paul, n.d.)

