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Weaving Indigenous Knowledges Into the Classroom as a Tool to Combat Racism

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ABSTRACT

Two years after the introduction of the new *Teaching Quality Standard* in Alberta, Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers from eight teacher education programs came together to examine how teachers were weaving Indigenous knowledges into their classrooms. The fifth competency of the standard requires that all Alberta teachers possess a foundational knowledge of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit and apply that knowledge in the classroom. Two hundred and forty-seven teachers, both non-Indigenous and Indigenous, responded to a survey, and another 30 participated in follow-up interviews. Results point to challenges and successes that teachers have experienced, the people that support their work, and how the integration of Indigenous knowledges acts as a tool to combat racism against Indigenous Peoples. Although teachers reported increased efficacy in applying a foundational knowledge of Indigenous Peoples, a multicultural perspective prevented some from understanding the unique nature of racism against Indigenous Peoples.

Introduction

In 2018, Alberta Education implemented a new *Teaching Quality Standard* (*TQS*), which provides a "framework for the preparation, professional growth, supervision and evaluation of all teachers" (Alberta Education, 2018, p. 2). The new *TQS* lists six competencies that all Alberta teachers must meet under the professional standard. *TQS* 5 states that all Alberta teachers must be competent in "applying foundational knowledge about First Nations, Métis and Inuit" (p. 6). This competency is demonstrated through "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" (p. 6).

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Two years after the implementation of the new *TQS*, a team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous teacher education researchers from eight teacher education programs in Alberta came together to examine how *TQS* 5 was being addressed in teacher education and in kindergarten to Grade 12 classrooms. This first phase of research found that teacher education programs in Alberta were weaving Indigenous knowledges into their programs through historical content; pedagogies such as storytelling, circles, and land-based learning; and content that required preservice teachers to apply their knowledge (Danyluk et al., 2023) but faced challenges due to a shortage of Indigenous faculty and reliance on unstable grant funding to deepen the work. Following this first research phase, the researchers turned their attention to Alberta teachers and schools.

Some teachers were integrating Indigenous knowledges in the classroom long before the new *TQS* was introduced in 2018 (Poitras Pratt & Danyluk, 2017; Scott & Gani, 2018). For those teachers who struggled to include Indigenous ways of knowing, Scott and Gani (2018) identified three beliefs that acted as barriers: (a) the highly diverse nature of Indigenous Peoples and communities makes it difficult to determine which Indigenous perspective to teach from; (b) only Indigenous educators can authentically teach Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing; and (c) Canada is a multicultural society, so no single perspective should be privileged (pp. 172–174). *TQS* 5 shifted the landscape, as teachers could no longer use claims of discomfort to avoid Indigenous content.

This article explores the results of a survey of 247 teachers and 30 semistructured interviews with Indigenous and non-Indigenous Alberta teachers. Three research questions guided our examination: How are Alberta teachers weaving Indigenous knowledges into their classroom? What challenges and success have they encountered? What ideas do they have for combatting racism against Indigenous Peoples? In choosing the term "weaving," we recognize that what is taught in the classroom must be more than an add-on to an existing lesson and instead should be connected to Indigenous worldviews (Hermes, 2005).

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This article begins with a literature review, which details the insidious ways in which racism against Indigenous Peoples came to be status quo. In the literature review, we examine how educational systems and teachers are implicated in combatting racism. Next, the survey and interview results are shared, and the themes are examined in the discussion section. The conclusion makes recommendations for how to support teachers in continuing this work.

Literature Review: Understanding Anti-Indigenous Racism

The foundation of anti-Indigenous racism has consistently rested on the quest for land. To seize land from Indigenous Peoples and assert ownership, colonizers needed to create the illusion that Indigenous Peoples were biologically inferior (Said, 2003; Wolfe, 2006). Beginning in the 1500s, Indigenous lands were depicted as absent of human life, through colonial devices such as the Doctrine of Discovery (Manuel & Derrickson, 2015; Reid, 2010; Thobani, 2007). This narrative persisted into the 1600s through practices such as craniometry, in which human skulls were measured and assigned attributes, reinforcing the notion of Western European biological superiority (Gould, 1981; TallBear, 2012). Portrayals of Indigenous Peoples as indolent and lacking intelligence were used to rationalize government policies that provided agricultural land to settlers and thwarted Indigenous efforts to farm (Carter, 1993, 2006).

In 1883, Prime Minister John A. Macdonald escalated the systemic discrimination against Indigenous Peoples when he advocated in the House of Commons for the removal of "Indian" children from their families, communities, and cultures (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, p. 2). According to Schick (2011), colonial narratives about Indigenous Peoples became so entrenched in settler thinking that they were accepted as factual within society and systems of education in Canada. Amid contemporary assertions that racism belongs to the past, there is a pervasive neglect of the ongoing impact of structural racism. Gebhard et al. (2022) contended that the helping professions, including health care,

social work, and teaching, are rooted in an identity that portrays white "helpers" as superior and "others" as inferior.

Teachers, embedded in a system that often reinforces colonial narratives, unknowingly perpetuate biases through the hidden curriculum (St. Denis, 2022). Deficit discourses in education blame Indigenous people for poor educational outcomes (McLean, 2022), with little acknowledgement of the hostile school climates that Indigenous students often encounter. This type of covert racism faults Indigenous students for not conforming to school expectations. Meanwhile, teachers remain uncomfortable talking about racism and are unsure how to react when they witness it (McLean, 2022). Schnellert et al. (2022) pointed to the difficulty teachers face when attempting to determine a process for "battling systemic racism" (p. 6).

Dr. Verna St. Denis (2007), a Cree and Métis educator, has advocated for integrating critical race analysis into school systems, emphasizing the importance of antiracist education. Blackfoot scholar Dr. Tiffany Prete (2020) found that in the absence of antiracist education, non-Indigenous students maintained negative perceptions of Indigenous Peoples and lacked a comprehensive understanding of racism and its implications. Yet, in 2022, the Alberta government made an unsuccessful attempt to prohibit the teaching of critical race theory (Johnson, 2022). A 2020 Alberta report highlighted how pervasive racism contributed to chronic absenteeism among Indigenous students living on-reserve (Fowler & McDermott, 2020). Insufficient cultural awareness and unexamined white privilege among educators were significant factors.

Education systems, provincial curricula and policy play a critical role in determining what counts as official knowledge (Ho, 2019; Kanu, 2011, Poitras Pratt et al., 2021). Weaving Indigenous knowledges into classrooms is a form of resistance against the assimilative, colonial, and genocidal processes that have been directed at Indigenous Peoples for centuries (Battiste, 2013; Smith, 2021). Murray Sinclair (2016), the commissioner of the Truth and Reconciliation

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Commission, emphasized that Canadians lack basic information about Indigenous Peoples, including their histories, and this gap fuels racism. Indeed, multicultural approaches to education overlook Indigenous Peoples' unique experiences of oppression and their deep-rooted historical and contemporary relationship to the Crown, which is not shared by other cultural groups in Canada (Wessel, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

Critical race theory emphasizes that racism is wide-ranging and present in all levels of society (Gillborn, 2006) and asserts that social justice issues such as privilege and power, equity versus equality, and intergenerational trauma are foundational to decolonization (Lund, 2018). Lawrence and Dua (2005) contended that antiracist theory does not recognize racism against Indigenous people in Canada, instead focusing primarily on people of colour. Yet people of colour often live as settlers on land that has been appropriated from Indigenous Peoples (Lawrence & Dua, 2005). Antiracism theory maintains that Canada is a multicultural mosaic, portraying all Canadians as settlers, minimizing the original peoples (Indigenous Peoples), and supporting a narrative of diversity (St. Denis, 2011). As antiracism theory is inadequate in its acknowledgement of racism against Indigenous Peoples in Canada, we undertook a critical race theoretical framework for this research (Ladson-Billings 1998, 2005). Consistent with critical race theory and Indigenous methodologies, this research draws upon the stories and experiences of teachers to confront racism (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Extending critical race theory to an Indigenous context, Brayboy (2005) proposed Tribal Critical Race Theory which contends that, "Colonization in endemic to society" (p. 429).

Methodology

This research drew upon non-Indigenous and Indigenous methodologies, including collective case study and storytelling. Collective case study as outlined by Schoepf and Klimow (2022), was used for the survey portion of the study, whereby each teacher education institution and its partnering school boards were

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considered as a separate but related case. Following the principles of collective case study, we described multiple cases and then compared them to gain insights into the research questions (Merriam, 1998, 2009; Stake, 1995, 2006). Each school board was considered a separate case, and cases were bounded by time, group and location. All data was gathered between May 2022 and February 2023, participants were Alberta teachers currently teaching within an Alberta school board. We hoped to reach Alberta teachers who recognized the importance of weaving Indigenous knowledges into their teaching while managing the multitude of complexities of teaching in Alberta classrooms.

Each of the eight teacher education programs which included the University of Calgary, Ambrose University, the University of Alberta, Mount Royal University, the University of Lethbridge, Burman University, St. Mary's University and Medicine Hat College applied for and obtained research ethics approval from their institutions beginning in fall 2021. Each program also identified two or three school boards that they work with for practicum placements. The process of obtaining ethics approval from the school boards continued into spring 2022. In total, 13 school boards across Alberta provided ethics approval and agreed to share the survey link with teachers.

School boards were asked to distribute the survey to a random selection of teachers. Large school boards with more than 50 schools were asked to send it to 100 teachers, whereas smaller school boards with under 50 schools were asked to share the link with 25 teachers. In total 1,000 Alberta teachers received the survey link and 247 teachers participated in the survey, a response rate of 24.7%. To gain more responses, we obtained ethics approval to share the survey link through the Facebook site "Alberta Teachers: Supporting One Another in the Spirit of Reconciliation," which yielded another 25 surveys, raising the response rate to 27.2%. We then conducted interviews with 30 survey respondents.

The survey consisted of open and closed questions, both quantitative and qualitative, to examine the experiences and stories of teachers as they wove

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Indigenous knowledges into their classrooms, including their level of comfort with *TQS* 5, resources they used, challenges and successes, and suggestions for how to address anti-Indigenous racism. At the end of the survey, teachers were asked if they were interested in participating in an interview or a podcast. The semistructured interviews focused on challenges and successes, and asked teachers to share a story about a time when they delivered a lesson and successfully drew upon Indigenous knowledges.

Data Analysis

The survey was designed using Qualtrics, which provided statistical and qualitative results. The narrative results were further examined through collaborative data analysis, in accordance with the thematic analysis process described by Merriam (2009). This process involved reviewing the data, including surveys and interview transcripts, creating an inventory of the data, and mapping how this information responded to the research questions by categorizing the results.

Four members of the research team analyzed the survey results and separately identified themes (Richards & Hemphill, 2017). Then they met to discuss the themes, determining where the themes overlapped and diverged. The next step was the presentation of the survey themes to the larger group of researchers from eight teacher education programs, who each had access to the data. The larger group of researchers entered into discussion and determined the final themes. Five themes emerged from the data: Teachers' perspectives on foundational knowledge, Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers in the classroom, natural connections to land-based learning, the role of Indigenous team leaders, and ideas for combatting anti-Indigenous racism.

Results

In presenting the results, all percentages have been calculated based on the total number of responses to each question. Consistent with the population distribution in Alberta, 75% of participating teachers resided in an urban area, while 25% lived

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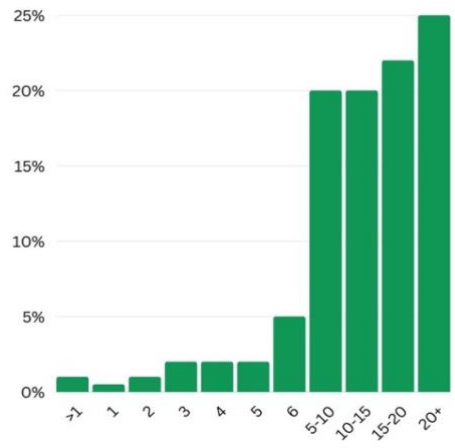
in a rural area. Teachers with 20 or more years of teaching experience made up 25% of the respondents to the survey. Of the remaining respondents, 22% had 10 to 15 years of teaching experience, 20% had 5 to 10 years of teaching experience, and the remainder had 1 to 4 years of teaching experience. See Figure 1.

Figure 1

Participants' Years of Teaching Experience



The majority of responses (55%) came from teachers of kindergarten to Grade 6. Of the remaining respondents, 21% taught Grades 7 to 9, 15% taught Grades 10 to 12. See Figure 2.

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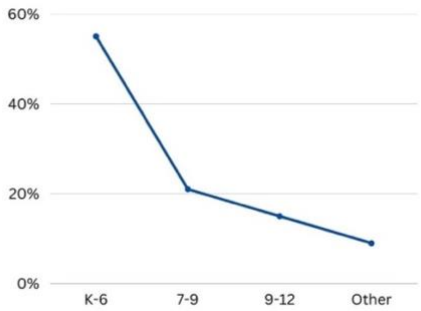
Figure 2

Grade Level Taught by Participants



Teachers' Perspectives on Foundational Knowledge

Since the *TQS* 5 states that all Alberta teachers must apply foundational knowledge about First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples, we asked teachers whether they believed they possessed a foundational knowledge of Indigenous Peoples. The majority of responding teachers (56%) indicated they did have a foundational knowledge, while 37% indicated they might have a foundational knowledge. The remaining 7% indicated they did not have a foundational knowledge. When teachers were asked to describe foundational knowledge, the most consistent response centered on understanding the history of Indigenous Peoples and the impacts of colonization. One teacher described foundational knowledge in this way: "Foundational knowledge means understanding indigenous history, past

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experiences and traumas, ways of knowing, connections with the land, spirituality, and pedagogy." Another teacher stated:

> Foundational knowledge is having an understanding about who the Indigenous Peoples of Canada are, their ways of knowing, ways of life, language, traditions etc. both historically and contemporarily. It is understanding who the Indigenous People(s) of where I live are, and the impact of colonialism on their way of life.

Teachers also said that a foundational knowledge included understanding the differences in teachings, values, culture, and languages between Indigenous groups and emphasized the importance of recognizing the distinctive qualities of each group. One teacher pointed out, "You cannot generalize FNMI [First Nations, Métis, and Inuit]. Each have their own unique and distinct foundational knowledge. Most importantly, their ideologies should be considered. Know the real history of Canada, specifically the treatment of Aboriginals by the Government of Canada." Another teacher commented on the multifariousness of foundational knowledge:

> Complex. The various foundations of different groups are not clustered within silos. The deeper you explore a foundational way of knowing the more intricate it becomes. What type of knowledge are we establishing? Pre or post contact? From which group? Are we talking Blackfoot or another plains group? Are we tapping into groups found on the east coast, great lakes or Rocky Mountains? What is the purpose and intent behind this foundational knowledge. Who or what is the authority from which we are investigating? Foundational knowledge is a shifting perspective depending on the context—one that should be handled with respect and care.

Recognizing this complexity, many teachers described a foundational knowledge as knowledge that continues to grow and deepen through continued learning.

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Teachers were also asked to comment on how they developed their foundational knowledge: 18% of respondents indicated they had developed it through workshops, 15% through courses, 15% through self-study, 14% through Elders, and 14% through their school. The remainder indicated other means.

Teachers reported that workshops, courses, self-study, and study with Elders and Knowledge Keepers were the most impactful methods of learning foundational knowledge. Workshops and study with Elders and Knowledge Keepers were linked to school board initiatives, whereas courses and self-study were often teacher-initiated. In the next part of the survey, teachers described the activities they draw upon to weave Indigenous knowledges into their teaching.

Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers in the Classroom

In response to a question about access to Elders and Knowledge Keepers, 74% of respondents indicated they had access, while 18% indicated they were not sure if they had access. Only 8% of teachers indicated they did not have access to Elders or Knowledge Keepers. When asked about their favorite resources for weaving Indigenous knowledges into their classroom, teachers revealed that Elders and Knowledge Keepers (32%) and speakers (26%) were their preferred resources. However, they also described challenges, citing "cost and connections to bring in Elders and knowledge keepers" as barriers to ensuring Indigenous voices were represented in the classroom.

Teachers shared that many school boards had established relationships with Indigenous communities in their area: 28% of teachers reported that their school worked with Indigenous communities to a large extent, while another 68% of teachers reported that their school worked with Indigenous communities to some extent. Only 4% of teachers reported not having worked with Indigenous communities.

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When asked who is leading the weaving of Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing into classrooms, 45% of respondents indicated that teachers were leading the work, 31% indicated school boards, and 15% indicated principals. The remainder of responses indicated others.

Natural Connections to Land-Based Learning

To be considered land-based learning, outdoor education needs to be connected to Indigenous knowledges (Bowra et al., 2021). When asked if they were using land-based learning in their teaching, just over half of respondents (55%) indicated they were, while 45% reported that they were not. In terms of time spent on land-based learning, 27% of respondents indicated 1 to 5 hours over the school year, while 18% reported 5 to 10 hours a week. Encouragingly, 18% of teachers reported they engaged in more than 20 hours a year of land-based learning with their students.

In the narrative portions of the survey, teachers reported natural connections between land-based learning, the science curriculum, and opportunities to engage students in outdoor learning. One respondent recounted, "This fall I collaborated with a co-worker to develop a lesson for science that involved reflecting on changes to the seasons and the land." In detailing the connections between nature and Indigenous ways of knowing, another teacher highlighted "a recurring emphasis on spending time on nature and using the land and nature as teacher" and explained that after a land-based experience, they ask students, "What did you learn today that didn't come from the teacher?"

Throughout their responses, teachers described subtle shifts in how they were teaching to weave Indigenous knowledges into their lessons and how access to Indigenous team leaders enhanced their efficacy in doing so.

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Role of Indigenous Team Leaders

In their narrative comments, teachers stressed the significance of Indigenous team leaders guiding this work. One respondent emphasized team leaders' ongoing efforts:

> [They are] constantly working to share resources and help us all further integrate the Indigenous perspective into our teaching, as well as take on the big events throughout the year, and provide us with ways to integrate Indigenous lessons and forms of assessment into our instruction.

Another teacher described the role of Indigenous team leaders in this way: "We have Indigenous leads that plan lessons for teachers to teach throughout the year. We also have leads that coordinate programs for us." Teachers identified Indigenous team lead teachers as crucial to their increased efficacy in weaving Indigenous knowledges into their teaching, with one noting, "Our school has an Indigenous education team. Bi-weekly, they provide us with ways to integrate Indigenous lessons and forms of assessment into our instruction."

Several Indigenous team leaders responded to the survey and shared some of the actions they take to support teachers. One wrote, "As an Indigenous Lead in the school, I completed a PD [professional development] day with the staff at the beginning of the year—we discussed various resources, I have provided ongoing materials for staff and have put weekly books and resources out to the community including in our staff session [which] was information and a small session on land based learning." Indigenous team leaders also supported teachers by assisting in the classroom and leading ceremonial acts such as smudging.

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Having Indigenous team leaders in the school also provided teachers with the opportunity to ask for guidance or check their understanding before teaching a concept. Teachers shared how they could double-check their lessons with Indigenous team leaders, leading to enhanced confidence in what they were teaching. One stated, "I make sure that the information I share is from an Indigenous person or is created by the Indigenous Education team." In fact, the opportunity to consult with an Indigenous team leader allowed teachers to take more risks and address challenges. Teachers described how drawing on supports helped them embrace a willingness to make mistakes. One respondent noted:

> Consulting Elders or knowledge keepers when available, connecting with [school board] Indigenous specialists, returning to [Alberta teacher] resources such as Education is our Buffalo or Empowering the Spirit for recommendations, telling my students that I will make mistakes in my instruction, but will acknowledge and correct them as we move forward.

On the willingness to learn from mistakes, another teacher commented, "I have spoken openly and honestly with our FNMI [First Nations, Métis, and Inuit] Resource Person for the division, and he has assured me that it is ok to make mistakes, as long as you keep trying to do the work." Consistently, another teacher reported receiving a similar message from an Elder:

> I was told by an Elder to not worry about making a mistake or having little previous experience as we need ALL educators to include Indigenous knowledges into their teaching practices. I asked once "does it matter if I am not Indigenous myself" and the Elder answered, "absolutely not…we need you to walk this journey alongside of us."

However, 24% of teachers still reported a fear of making a mistake. When describing the challenges they were most likely to encounter in weaving Indigenous

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knowledges into their teaching, 24% indicated they struggled with choosing an appropriate resource, 24% indicated they feared offending someone, and 19% indicated they feared engaging in appropriation. The fears teachers expressed appear to be rooted in a deep respect for Indigenous knowledges and a desire to do a good job. One respondent said, "I am very open about the fact that I am not indigenous, so I do not fully understand the complexities of what I am talking about. I always approach indigenous pedagogy with appreciation and high respect. My students seem to appreciate that."

Teachers described their efforts to demonstrate respect by researching Indigenous topics and "being brave." Consequently, they witnessed their own students weaving Indigenous knowledges into their assignments. In fact, 65% percent of teachers indicated they had witnessed their own students taking up Indigenous worldviews in the classroom. One respondent commented, "I have seen students who come to class (without any teaching from me) with a strong sense of the importance of reconciliation and have a strong desire to learn about this content and talk about it." Similarly, another teacher described "students requesting circle shares and independently learning the traditional territories of places they visit." When teachers demonstrated respect for Indigenous knowledges, students seemed encouraged to learn more and include Indigenous viewpoints in their own work.

Ideas for Combatting Anti-Indigenous Racism

Underpinning the work of antiracism are concepts of social justice such as equity versus equality, power and privilege, and the impacts of intergenerational trauma. When asked about teaching social justice concepts in the classroom, 79% of respondents indicated that social justice concepts were part of their teaching, while 21% indicated that they were not. Forty percent of teachers indicated they included the concepts of equity versus equality in their teaching, 27% of teachers indicated they included the concepts of power and privilege, and another 27% indicated they taught about intergenerational trauma. When teachers were asked whether

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antiracism was taught at their school, 53% indicated that it was, 30% were not sure, and 17% indicated that it was not.

Teachers stressed the importance of modelling respect for Indigenous cultures and provided examples of how they wove this respect into their classrooms by using the correct terminology, prominently displaying land acknowledgements, creating a safe and respectful environment, and participating in events such as Truth and Reconciliation Week, Métis Week, Red Dress Day, and Remembrance Day services that recognized Indigenous veterans. Teachers shared the importance of taking up a holistic understanding of Indigenous Peoples by celebrating Indigenous cultures and accomplishments while also teaching about the injustices Indigenous Peoples have experienced. One teacher described this approach as follows: "We need to showcase and celebrate the successes of the FNMI [First Nations, Métis, and Inuit] people in as many ways as we can." Another teacher offered, "I think it is equally as important to teach about positive things happening in Indigenous communities today and highlight Indigenous role models for students." Similarly, another teacher wrote about moving beyond deficit perspectives and "focusing on the positive sides of the culture. Sometimes the negative aspects are the only thing people are taught at schools."

Strengthening relationships with Indigenous Peoples and having increased Indigenous presence in schools were identified as key to addressing anti-Indigenous racism. Teachers stressed the significance of hearing from Indigenous Peoples by inviting "community members to share information and stories" as well as the need to

> find ways to have the voices of Indigenous students and their families be heard within the teaching and be open to learning from them and humble enough to realize the ways we have learned to teach are not necessarily the best or most inclusive ways.

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Indigenous presence in schools was seen as crucial to reducing racism against Indigenous Peoples and as well as enhancing the ways Indigenous worldviews are woven into teaching.

Teachers identified how limited funding was a barrier to increased Indigenous presence in schools while acknowledging the importance of compensating Indigenous people adequately. One teacher said, "We need to pay Elders and Indigenous People for the work they do." One teacher described limited access to Elders as follows: "We only have 3 Elders for the entire [school] board. This is not fair to anyone. We need to pay Indigenous Elders for their time to educate teachers on Indigenous practices. Education is key to combatting racism—the more we learn and unlearn, the more things will change." Another teacher responded that there was a need for

> more support and funding for school boards to have FNMI [First Nations, Métis, and Inuit] elders be involved in the lives of students in their school. We have regular elder visits for FNMI students who wish it, but I would like more presentations, workshops, talks by elders for all students. The students I have taught have experienced profound learning when they had the chance to listen to an Elder speak and to ask them questions.

The need to hire more Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and Indigenous teachers was consistently identified by teachers as key to deepening the practice of weaving Indigenous knowledges into classrooms.

Teachers shared how an antiracism approach was part of their daily messaging, as they found opportunities to address racism in their lessons. However, there appeared to be some confusion about how racism against Indigenous Peoples differed from other forms of racism. Responses reflected a multicultural perspective—"respect and acceptance of diverse cultures and traditions"—that fails to recognize Indigenous Peoples as the first peoples of this land. A

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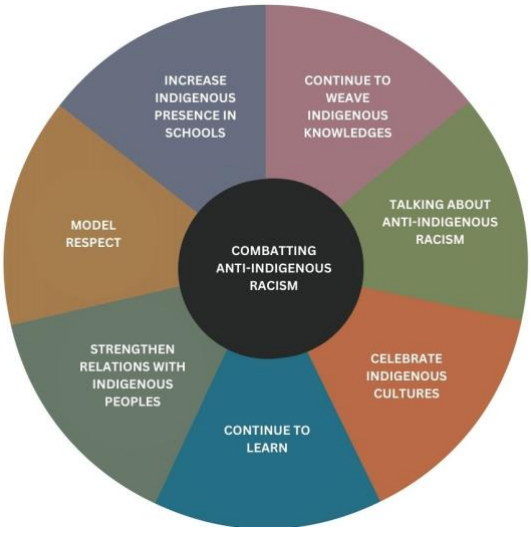
multicultural perspective combines a variety of social justice and multicultural initiatives, neglecting the unique nature of anti-Indigenous racism, as evidenced in this comment: "The LA [language arts] teachers have a whole units on racism and our leadership classes do monthly programs and post things around school. They have had school wide Black History, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ and groups." Another teacher shared the perspective that racism should be described as bullying. Still, some respondents acknowledged a critical race theory perspective, as seen in this response:

> Open people's eyes to the types of racism Indigenous people experience. I think the average person has no idea about the extent of racism Indigenous Peoples experience. This is ours to own and deal with (by ours I mean non-Indigenous, colonial members of Canadian society). We need to encourage people to stand up and speak out against racism.

Figure 3

Components of Combatting Racism Against Indigenous Peoples as Identified by Teachers



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When asked for ideas about how teacher education programs and schools might work together to combat anti-Indigenous racism, teachers made it clear that the work must continue: "Keep learning! Keep teaching! Keep talking!" Teachers shared how efforts to weave Indigenous knowledges into the classroom and use Indigenous pedagogies were foundational to addressing anti-Indigenous racism. One teacher summed it up as follows: "I feel that the more Indigenous perspectives are present in all classrooms, racism towards Indigenous people will lessen over time. Education is the key."

Discussion

The addition of competency five to the Teaching Quality Standard had important and wide-ranging implications for Alberta teachers. This research study suggests that this policy decision, in response to the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, has ensured Alberta teachers engage in learning and personal decolonization to understand and integrate Indigenous knowledges into their classroom practices. Despite participants expressing uncertainty and hesitance, the findings suggest that Alberta teachers are committed to weaving Indigenous knowledges into their teaching, and they are leading this work in schools. With 56% of respondents indicating they possess a foundational knowledge and another 37% expressing they might have a foundational knowledge, teachers remain devoted to ongoing learning and to further deepening their understandings. Key to engaging in this brave work was the support of Indigenous team lead teachers whose guidance resulted in enhanced teacher efficacy.

According to the data, the learning that had the greatest impact on improving foundational knowledge came from workshops, courses, and self-study, followed closely by Elders. Whereas workshops and courses may be school board initiatives, self-study represents a commitment by teachers to continue to decolonize their thinking. Study participant reports of self-study reflect the personal nature of decolonization and echoes earlier findings by Danyluk (2023) that demonstrate the

personal initiative of teachers and teacher educators to engage in this work on their own time in addition to their other responsibilities.

The finding that 32% of teachers identified Elders and Knowledge Keepers and 26% identified speakers as their favorite resources to draw upon in the classroom is somewhat problematic. Although there are many advantages to having an Elder or Knowledge Keeper in the classroom (Danyluk et al., 2023), teachers and teacher educators also reported barriers related to costs. Further, relying on Indigenous people to continually teach and reteach non-Indigenous people places the burden on those who have been the most oppressed. In addition, many Indigenous people have become distanced from their cultures due to the colonization process (MacDonald & Markides, 2018), which sought to erase their identity and they too are on a learning journey.

This finding may be connected to teachers' longstanding fears of contributing to colonization by sharing inaccurate information or saying something offensive to Indigenous people (Danyluk et al., 2023; Dei & McDermott, 2019; MacDonald & Markides, 2018, 2019; Scott & Gani, 2018). Though these fears persist, teachers also reported willingness to view mistakes as part of their learning journey. Thus, these fears may demonstrate the sincere desire of teachers to present Indigenous knowledges in an accurate and respectful manner. The consistent correlation between access to Indigenous team leaders and teachers' willingness to make mistakes, learn from them, and accept them as part of their learning journey underscores the importance of collaborative relationships.

The finding that schools and teachers are working on deepening their connections with local Indigenous communities is encouraging and addresses some of the concerns outlined by Schnellert et al. (2022), who pointed to the need for schools and teacher education to build better connections with Indigenous communities. Nearly all teachers (96%) who responded to the survey shared that their school had worked with Indigenous communities to some extent. Community connections that

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are reciprocal can result in long-term partnerships that alleviate some of the burden on Elders and Knowledge Keepers by shifting work to teachers and schools.

Just over half of respondents indicated using land-based learning in their teaching. This finding indicates that teachers may not be taking full advantage of one of the most accessible Indigenous pedagogies available to them. For Indigenous Peoples, land-based learning flows "with the rhythms of daily life and the needs of the land, family, and community" (Bowra et al., 2021, p. 132). Thus, integrating land-based learning into education remains feasible, even in urban environments, provided it is intertwined with Indigenous stories and relationships with the land. Notably, among teachers who embraced land-based learning, a significant 18% reported dedicating over 20 hours annually to such practices.

Weaving Indigenous knowledges into the classroom serves as a powerful tool in combatting anti-Indigenous racism due to its profound and lasting impact on societal thinking. When teachers weave Indigenous knowledges into their classroom, they make the effort to conduct research on the topic and educate themselves alongside their students. This effort, in turn, impacts the thinking of their students, as evidenced by the finding that 65% of teachers have witnessed their own students weaving Indigenous knowledges into their schoolwork. Many students will share what they have learned with their parents; some parents will be receptive, others will not. Over time, however, learning about Indigenous knowledges in schools can act as a tool to combat anti-Indigenous racism (see Figure 3).

Of concern is the finding that some teachers perceive racism against Indigenous Peoples as no different from other forms of racism, which highlights a fundamental misunderstanding. This observation is consistent with Scott and Gani's (2018) earlier finding that teachers who struggle to weave Indigenous knowledges into their teaching share the belief that no single perspective should be privileged in Canada's multicultural landscape. Though newcomers to Canada may have experienced racism, Indigenous Peoples have experienced a systematic

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denigration, which included portraying them as biologically inferior (Said, 2003; Wolfe, 2006), indolent, and lacking intelligence (Carter, 1993, 2006), with the aim of dispossessing them of their ancestral lands. This historical and ongoing context provides unique challenges stemming from the intertwined relationship between the Crown and Indigenous Peoples (Wessel, 2023). Indeed, to effectively combat anti-Indigenous racism, educators must abandon the notion of multiculturalism that equates all Canadians as settlers and instead educate themselves on the distinct dynamics of racism targeting Indigenous Peoples.

It is vital that students understand the truth of the history of colonization in Canada and the roots of anti-Indigenous racism (see Figure 4). As Poitras Pratt and Danyluk (2023) pointed out,

> Not teaching these truths has a direct bearing on how the next generation of citizens regards Indigenous peoples: avoiding this teaching means we will replicate current stereotypes and racism against Indigenous peoples, while teaching difficult truths around the impacts of colonialism ensures the next generation of citizens is well informed, compassionate, and understanding. (p. 30)

Figure 4

Weaving Indigenous Knowledges Into the Classroom to Combat Anti-Indigenous Racism

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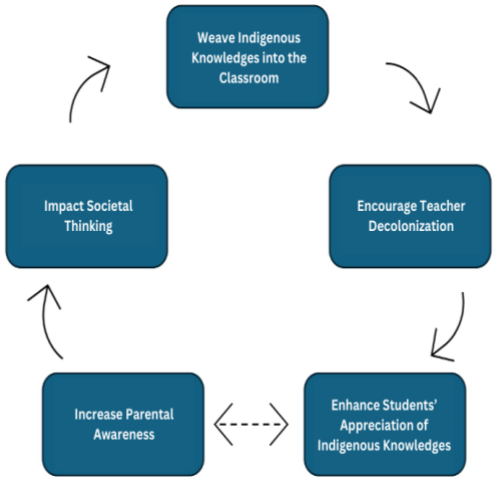

Limitations

During the period of data collection, school boards continued to respond to issues related to COVID-19, implementing measures such as shutdowns, extra cleaning procedures, and provisions for teaching both in the classroom and online to accommodate students exposed to COVID-19. As a result, concerns about teacher burnout were ongoing, with Alberta teachers reporting compassion fatigue from crisis and trauma work in classrooms amid funding cuts (Kendrick, 2022). This context may have resulted in fewer teachers responding to the survey.

Teachers who were invested in weaving Indigenous knowledges into their classrooms likely responded to the survey, and teachers who were not as invested were likely less inclined to respond. Some respondents did not answer all survey questions. Further, the survey did not ask teachers to identify whether they were Indigenous. However, we know that Indigenous teachers responded, as several chose to self-identify in their narratives.

Conclusion

Alberta teachers and schools are dedicated to ensuring that Indigenous knowledges are shared respectfully in the classroom, which is a powerful tool in combatting

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anti-Indigenous racism. Teachers demonstrate their commitment to learning about Indigenous Peoples not only by absorbing knowledge shared with them but also by seeking out learning opportunities through self-study, through connections with Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and Indigenous team leaders, and through land-based learning. Teachers are leading this work and are becoming less fearful of making mistakes, yet they continue to rely on Elders and Knowledge Keepers in the classroom. This overreliance may place additional pressures on Elders and Knowledge Keepers to revisit painful experiences and to take on the burden of educating teachers. For this reason, Indigenous team leaders are crucial to supporting teachers and encouraging them to take risks and learn from their mistakes.

Teachers told us that in order to combat racism against Indigenous Peoples, educators must continue to learn and to weave Indigenous knowledges into the classroom, talk about racism against Indigenous Peoples, celebrate Indigenous cultures, and model respect. Schools need to support teachers, strengthen relationships with Indigenous communities, and ensure greater Indigenous presence in schools. Anti-Indigenous racism is one of the truths that needs to be recognized before reconciliation can occur. Many Canadians, including teachers, do not understand how racism against Indigenous Peoples is unique from other forms of racism, and continue to portray Canada as a multicultural mosaic in which all forms of racism are the same and all people are settlers.

The impact of the work of teachers in weaving Indigenous knowledges into their classroom should not be underestimated because of its long-term implications for society as a whole. Though weaving Indigenous knowledges into the classroom is only one tool in combatting racism against Indigenous Peoples, it may be the most powerful tool we have.

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