An Indigenous Self-Declaration Relational Policy Framework

Gordon A. Martell & Nicole Mercereau
University of Saskatchewan

Abstract

Canadian historical records demonstrate the role of schools in diminishing Indigenous identity, either intentionally or as a result of neglect, within dominant western systems (Battiste, 2013; Harper & Thompson, 2017; Henry et al., 2017; Marom, 2019; Pidgeon et al., 2013; St. Denis, 2011). Despite the oppressive effects of institutional racism (Gillies, 2021; Harper & Thompson, 2017; Henry et al., 2017; Marom, 2019; McLean, 2022) and policies that limited the participation and influence of Indigenous people in publicly funded Canadian schools, Indigenous educators have maintained a presence in schools, contributing positively to Indigenous students' experiences (Battiste, 2013; Burgess & Cavanagh, 2015; Gillies, 2021; Keddie, 2013; Santoro, 2015; St. Denis, 2011). While the Saskatchewan socio-political environment is increasingly characterized by reconciliation and expectations of Indigenous participation (Ministry of Education, 2019), our study identified that the provincial school policy environment is largely silent on the role of Indigenous educators in meeting system goals and on indications of how school divisions navigate issues of Indigenous identity and authenticity. With expectations of increased presence and participation of Indigenous people in publicly funded education in Canada consistent with Call 62 in the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015), school divisions must confront the need to ensure that Indigenous staff participation is prioritized and that they defer to Indigenous community norms and expectations (Burgess & Cavanagh, 2015; Pidgeon et al., 2013) when considering questions of authentic Indigenous voice and participation. Through the lens of an Indigenous analytical framework and the principles of critical policy analysis (Apple, 2019), we examined the Saskatchewan educational policy environment to explore ways in which extant policy reflects imperatives of Indigenous participation and identity. While our analysis identified shortcomings in these areas, we made sense of these gaps in policy and provided a framework for school divisions useful in prioritizing Indigenous participation at all levels and in beginning to navigate the complex issues associated with Indigenous identity and authenticity.

Keywords: Indigenous participation, Indigenous identity, policy, reconciliation

Introduction

Consistent with the experiences of colonized Indigenous peoples, awakening to our potential is often instigated by events that stir our spirits to action (Apple, 2019; Episkenew, 2009). There are many such examples in the Canadian context, including the 1969 Liberal Government White Paper (Government of Canada, 2011) that led to a First Nations response that galvanized First Nations communities and signalled a new era in organization and advocacy (Kirkness & Bowman, 1992; Turner, 2006). A more contemporary example is the Idle No More movement, which raised Indigenous consciousness (Wilson, 2014) and provided an equally galvanizing narrative complementary to the reconciliation narrative advanced by the Canadian government (Dorrell, 2009). Interestingly, the recent exposure of Indigenous imposters in Canadian universities (Henry & Tait, 2023; Leroux, 2019) instigated a visceral response from Indigenous people working within postsecondary education, as well as the broader Indigenous community (Leo, 2022), as some universities and research institutes appear to have advantaged non-Indigenous voices that effectively displaced authentic Indigenous participation.

Of the many potential responses to the high-profile cases of fraudulent Indigenous identity in universities, as educators, our interest was in looking to the publicly funded education system in Saskatchewan and querying whether those systems articulated a role for and value of Indigenous participation within their organizations, or whether they considered where or how to connect with Indigenous communities through authentic relationships. Our interest in these areas caused us to think about the limitations and opportunities in policy, both as a context that historically excluded Indigenous participation and influence (Harper & Thompson, 2017; Marom, 2019), as well as a mechanism that might be used to address those shortcomings (Burgess & Cavanagh, 2015). We opted for a constructively critical perspective where we believed that our presence in the policy environment was, in part, precipitated by a developmental continuum characterized by the four nesting themes of reconciliation, empowerment, claiming, and responsibility. For us, these four themes represented a continuum where the emergence of an attitude of reconciliation provides a pause where Indigenous peoples might consider their places and participation in social and organizational contexts and make purposeful forays into these contexts on behalf of their communities. Taken together, we experienced those four elements as an articulation of Indigenous resurgence, as presented in Figure 1, that we believe is useful as a conceptual organizer in Indigenous educational policy analysis.

Figure 1

An Indigenous Relational Framework
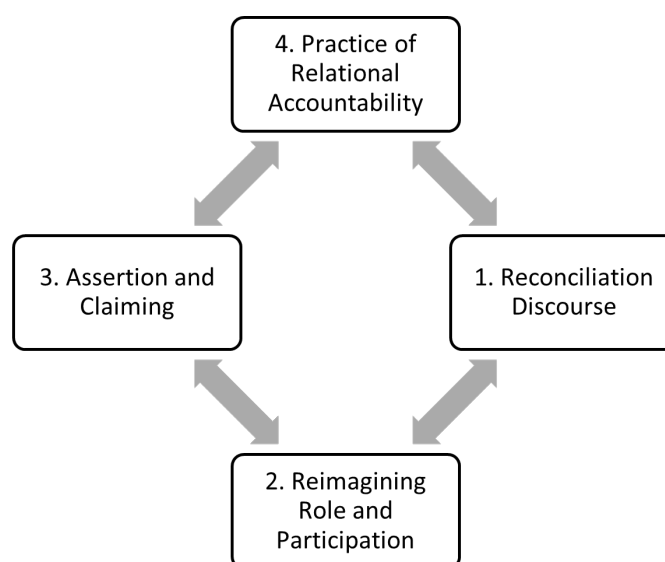
Our participation in reconciliation discourse prompted us to reimagine our roles and participation in an assertive manner consistent with our commitments to our communities. Our act of assertion and claiming on behalf of our communities, then, was to identify inclusion criteria for Saskatchewan educational policy at the Ministry of Education, Saskatchewan School Boards Association, and Saskatchewan school division levels, and examine those policies for characteristics conducive to analysis of the landscape of Indigenous participation in publicly funded education. For us, these acts of critical policy analysis constitute our practice of relational accountability.

Our Call to Action

Our participation in Indigenous education (Abeyta et al., 2020; Santoro, 2015) is informed by marginalized histories and our motivation to transform education from a diminishing influence over Indigenous peoples (Picower, 2009) to a mechanism that supports cultural renewal and educational participation and success (Episkenew, 2009; Hare, 2020). Indigenous reclamation in education warrants that we tell our stories and harness the motivation inherent in our families and communities to make things better for Indigenous students (Archibald, 2008). Our narratives count and serve as important motivators for the liberation of schools from colonial foundations. We aspired to engage in policy analysis as an exercise of relationality, so we engaged our voices and positioned ourselves within our histories, kinship systems, and perspectives. Our narratives stand as testimony for the people who put us here and commissioned us to utilize our gifts to make a difference for our communities.

Gordon

My family history is a narrative of amalgams, and making sense of those amalgams, in figuring out our place and participation. I am a member of a First Nations community in Treaty 6 territory where my paternal grandfather and his family were brought into an adhesion to Treaty 6. My paternal grandmother was a Cree-Métis woman from a traditional-cultural and land-based family. My maternal grandparents were from French families who relocated to western Canada from Quebec and the United States. My mother was a civil servant teacher assigned to teach in a day school on reserve when she met and married my father. Despite my father's pride in his culture and language and his successes in life, he experienced early setbacks, likely precipitated by his residential school experience that caused our family to leave our First Nation. As a result, I was mostly raised off-reserve.

A combination of an era characterized by overt racism toward Indigenous peoples and an almost complete absence of Indigenous participation and influence in the school systems contributed to my childhood and youth characterized by a desire to repatriate to my First Nation's cultural heritage while navigating racist environments and systems that devalued Indigenous peoples and cultures. My seeking and reclaiming characteristics led me to an Indigenous teacher education program where I flourished and built a long career in Indigenous educational leadership, contributing to many policy and program initiatives that helped to transform schools through authentic Indigenous participation.

My ability to navigate systems in a western way and to relate to Indigenous communities positions me to understand and participate in policy contexts in ensuring that schools contribute to the building up of Indigenous student belonging and identity. I believe that Indigenous peoples must participate in and utilize policy to create the conditions for participation and success rather than leaving schools vulnerable to popular opinions regarding the place and participation of Indigenous peoples in publicly funded education. Schools are not neutral environments but are constructed based on what societies value (Harper & Thompson, 2017; St. Denis, 2011). Reshaping schools as supportive systems for Indigenous students will be achieved through deliberate change, largely instigated by Indigenous peoples with voice and authority to make these changes and advance Indigenous control.

Nicole

My Métis-Ukrainian Ancestry roots place me amid two very different cultural worlds. My father originated from a historically rich Métis community in Treaty 6 territory. My mother is of second-generation Ukrainian Ancestry whose family settled in a small town in Saskatchewan. Like numerous Métis families in the 1930s and 1940s, my family experienced a shroud of shame associated with being Métis. My father's neocolonial education with Catholic nuns further reinforced that he was *lesser than* so that

he came to believe he would *not amount to much*. My dad exhibited his pride in his Métis identity only within the confines of his home community and family settings as these contexts provided a level of protection from predominantly racist attitudes. Silencing his Indigeneity was a path of least resistance to fitting in with his non-Indigenous peers and the broader community. As a result, I had to rely on other sources to strengthen my Métis identity as my father was not open to sharing his cultural knowledge and experience to protect me from similar subjugation.

My early educational experiences in a predominantly Indigenous community reflected my Métis culture through the presence of Indigenous content, albeit with limited presence of Indigenous educators. However, that changed when we relocated to a predominantly non-Indigenous community. With reliance on a Eurocentric, westernized curriculum that did not include Indigenous content, regardless of the historical Métis influence that was rooted in the land, my Métis identity was suppressed in school. Despite these diminishing influences, I overcame adversity to become the first in my immediate family to attend university and strengthened my Métis identity and culture as a student in an Indigenous teacher education program. That experience provided the missing piece that the public education system lacked by focusing on Indigenous culture. This experience ignited a passion in me and allowed me to embrace Métis pride and extend my Métis social and community participation.

As a mother of young children, I have concerns regarding the role of publicly funded schools in fostering Indigenous student identity and belonging. With a focus on truth and reconciliation, there is motivation for schools to recognize past wrongs and move toward a more inclusive education system that values Indigenous peoples and cultures. However, without appropriate representation of Indigenous voice through the presence of Indigenous educators, we have become reliant on allies to teach about our cultures, which I believe is inadequate to empower Indigenous youth and instill in them a strong sense of Indigenous identity. There is now greater cultural responsiveness in schools than what I encountered, although the limited presence of Indigenous educators in schools is discernable in the settings that my children encounter. My children are fortunate to be raised in a home with strong Métis influence and pride which will guard against assimilation. I believe that stronger influence of Indigenous educators in schools will contribute to culturally informed and meaningful learning experiences, challenge deficit thinking, and help overcome systemic biases.

Our Commitment

As Métis and Mixed-blood First Nations people, we are aware of diminishing perspectives of mixed-blood people as less worthy under the pan-Indigenous umbrella, therefore occupying less of a focus in school curriculum (Scott, 2021). Mixed-race people are Indigenous people and relying solely on genetic definition is, in our opinion, genocidal. Our community and kinship ties (Adese et al., 2017) are our birthrights. Our narratives, therefore, constitute a foundation for our inquiry. Our stories, at least at the distilled level of suppression and reclaiming, are sadly common narratives among Indigenous peoples in Canada. We present these narratives as foundational to our understanding, as well as to signal an emerging attitude among Indigenous peoples characterized by the desire and skill to boldly claim place where we were historically excluded.

Policy Context

Expectation and demand for Indigenous participation and influence in publicly funded education is becoming more prevalent (Keddie, 2013; Santoro, 2015; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC], 2015). This signals a transition from inclusion to occupation, with occupation employed in a positive sense of being a routine part of rather than an anomalous adhesion. The desire for authentic Indigenous participation is a key motivator in recently heightened vigilance on the part of Indigenous communities and the calling to account of systems that opt for convenience over authenticity (Henry & Tait, 2023; Leroux, 2019). This cultural identity reclaiming movement is a fulcrum with the potential to leverage increasing Indigenous participation and influence in publicly funded education. It is precipitated by Indigenous educators and communities who are making sense of their visceral reactions to influential Indigenous imposters in postsecondary systems and asking how those mistakes were allowed to happen and how they could be avoided.

Demand on the part of Indigenous peoples and communities for authenticity and participation raises

questions about how heightened vigilance might unfold within the context of publicly funded K–12 education systems. Anticipating questions such as whether levels of employment of Indigenous teachers are rising or have plateaued and why, the exploration of factors that either promote or constrain Indigenous participation in schools, the experience of Indigenous educators in publicly funded education systems, and whether that influence is commensurate with needs and expectations of both systems and communities highlights the need for systems analysis and policy development commensurate with changing community contexts.

Examining Saskatchewan provincial Indigenous education policies, as well as the echoes of those policies in program, provide analytical context so that leaders in Saskatchewan provincial education systems might better understand the imperative of authentic Indigenous participation, consider inclusion as a key component of quality, mobilize internal structures and systems to support growth in Indigenous participation, and ensconce these goals in accountability structures. While aspirations of Indigenous *inclusion* in publicly funded education were not predicated on inviting Indigenous articulations of public education policy, Indigenous participation is increasingly characterized by expectations of systems improvements informed by Indigenous experiences and wisdoms (Cherubini et al., 2009; Keddie, 2013).

A Relational Inquiry Framework

Consistent with a reclaiming exercise, we chose to advantage Indigenous perspectives in our policy analysis as "indigenous knowledge offers legitimate ways of understanding the world – ways that have never been respected within the legal and political practices of the dominant culture" (Turner, 2006, p. 8). In framing our inquiry, we consistently returned to the four related concepts of reconciliation, empowerment, claiming, and responsibility. We considered that the social context of reconciliation, if authentic, needed to accept Indigenous critique and analysis of the publicly funded education policy context. Genuine reconciliation must be preceded by Indigenous truths (Hare, 2020), where authentic Indigenous participation is enhanced by these truths.

Reconciliation served as an entry point to our inquiry that aimed to contribute to shared goals of authenticity and participation as characteristics of a strengthened publicly funded education system. Sharing responsibility for systems change contributed to our empowerment as we interrogated the policy context. We approached our reconceptualizing, renaming, and reframing of public policy as a claiming exercise. These acts add value to the social goals of publicly funded education by deconstructing and reconstructing educational policy informed by Indigenous perspectives and aspirations toward the "re-emergence of indigenous cultural and social institutions" (Alfred, 2009, p. 56). Our sense of responsibility to our communities instigated our foray into western policy to advantage Indigenous students in publicly funded schools. Taken together, the four factors of reconciliation, empowerment, claiming, and responsibility represent a continuum of inquiry that best described our process of inquiry into unfamiliar (or unwelcome) policy territory. With the best interests of Indigenous students in mind and motivated by the desire to orient publicly funded schools to the needs and aspirations of Indigenous students and families, Indigenous educational policy analysis is at once a technical exercise and a relational act (Wotherspoon, 2006).

Our effort at culturally responsive policy analysis was part of the journey toward authenticity that will be achieved by addressing the binary of anti-Indigenous biases and deficit thinking and Indigenous realities (Gillies, 2021; St. Denis, 2011). A focus on decolonization and Indigenization (Blair et al., 2020) brings Indigenous voice, culture, and values forward as both the solution and the goal and as a hopeful mechanism to address the social and learning needs of future generations. Our inquiry framework helped to examine the policy environment from an appreciative perspective through an orientation of solution-building in transforming the provincial educational landscape to benefit from and steward Indigenous participation and influence.

Methodology

Consistent with our commitment to address the limitations that western research methodologies have placed on the flourishing of Indigenous paradigms and social science research, we employed an Indigenous methodological approach to "offer a systematic but different approach to knowledge construction [that prompts] Western institutions to expand the notion as what counts as knowledge" (Kovach, 2021,

p. 28). Furthermore, to advantage Indigenous voice and participation, we were guided by the principles of critical policy analysis (Apple, 2019) in designing our inquiry. Critical policy analysis is consistent with our aspirations as it aims to exercise an "ethical obligation to make public the effects of [western dominant] policies, to challenge these positions, and to defend a robust education that is based on human flourishing" (Apple, 2019, p. 277). In addition to attending to the inclusionary shortcomings of policy analysis, critical policy analysis orients the researcher to receive and treat contributions in a manner that respects their original context and epistemological foundations (Young & Diem, 2018). Critical policy analysis demonstrates the potential of Indigenous and non-Indigenous analysis of a policy context that accounts for differentials in power and participation to advantage Indigenous theoretical and analytical frameworks.

Critical policy analysis prompted us to consider how publicly funded education policy either furthered or impeded aspirations for Indigenous participation and influence. The reconciliatory educational policies that are forefront in current educational praxis need to be examined to ensure that institutions are truly reforming to reflect a more equitable landscape for Indigenous students as "the Canadian state, and arguably the majority of Canadians, often view reconciliation less as a relationship and more of a thing, an accommodation thing" (Kovach, 2021, p. 258). We found motivation in relational accountability (Wilson, 2008) as an integral component of ethical Indigenous research as the communal, relational context must "demonstrate respect, reciprocity, and responsibility" (Wilson, 2008, p. 99) and be based on the needs of Indigenous peoples and how it can benefit those involved.

Wilson (2008) acknowledged that knowledge is gained through relationships and the ethical accountability to apply that knowledge purposefully. Relationships are paramount and are integral to research, as opposed to traditional westernized analysis where the whole is dismantled for analysis (Wilson, 2008). The dominant, linear "western tradition teaches us to separate our head from our heart and our spirit as well" (Wilson, 2008, p. 119), and this denies the intuitive process of traditional Indigenous knowledge which establishes that the whole cannot be reconstructed once it has been broken (Wilson, 2008). Relational accountability is integrity, as our authenticity, voice, and experiential knowledge are reflected in the research. It holds us individually accountable to ourselves just as much as it does in relation to others. Relational accountability illuminates the advantages of Indigenous participation in all realms of educational praxis through empowering and respectful relationships arrived at via the policy under consideration. Relationships among community, Indigenous parents, Indigenous students, and Indigenous educators flourish when mutual voice and cultural and experiential knowledge are dispersed through the teachings of Indigenous educators (Keddie, 2013). Wilson's (2008) relational accountability allowed us to look at our analysis with our own intuitiveness and heart, reflecting on commonality of experiential knowledge within westernized educational institutions.

Through our analytical orientation, we set out to investigate provincial educational policy for the articulation and actualization of Indigenous participation and influence. We adopted a broad definition of policy that reached beyond policy manuals to the actualization of policy including system programs, initiatives, acts, and outcomes. We contend that all of these on the part of systems enact either governance or administrative policies. We examined Ministry-level documents, including the *Inspiring Success: First Nations and Métis PreK–12 Education Policy Framework* (Ministry of Education, 2018). We also examined the *Inspiring Success Policy Framework* (Indigenous Education Responsibility Framework Advisory Committee, 2022). At the school division level, we included publicly available board goals, board foundational statements, board and school division strategic plans, and school division annual reports. The annual reports constituted an echo of policy consistent with our belief that all undertakings of school divisions are grounded in policy. In line with our appreciative approach, analyzing the annual reports allowed for consideration of the many rich manifestations of Indigenous participation and influence resulting from provincial policy and socio-political influence but that may not yet be ensconced in school division policy. The inventory of policy documents that we included for analysis is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Inventory of Policy Documents Analyzed

Type of policy	Number of policies analyzed
School division annual reports	25
School division strategic plans	19
School division foundational statements	14
Ministry of Education policy documents	7
School division aspirational statements	3
School Boards Association Indigenous education policy	1

Methodologically, we oriented to the task of assessing the Saskatchewan provincial educational policy landscape to describe the context associated with Indigenous participation and influence. Our theoretical framework supported constructively critical analysis that looked to interrogate policy for gaps while at the same time describing the policy landscape supportive of Indigenous participation. This approach provided an awareness of the policy landscape that allowed us to recommend, with authority, points of departure that school divisions might consider in strengthening their response to the needs and expectations of Indigenous students and families in shaping systems as spaces conducive to authentic Indigenous participation and influence. This approach is consistent with the ethical obligation of critical policy analysis to challenge the status quo, allowing for marginalized Indigenous youth the opportunity to flourish (Apple, 2019). Our objective was the promotion of system infrastructure that relies on and reinforces authenticity, thereby reducing the risk of reliance on those who speak for or displace authentic Indigenous voice.

Our document analysis began with the development of a prioritized checklist that corresponded to our theoretical framework concepts of reconciliation, empowerment, claiming, and responsibility. Additional categories were developed as themes were drawn from the documents, including the identification of Indigenized curriculum; the importance of relationships with Indigenous community, parents, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers; the role of Indigenous educators; professional development for educators and administrators; improvement of engagement and graduation rates; additional supports provided for Indigenous students; engagement of Indigenous stakeholders in strategic planning; and anti-racism and anti-oppression training. Themes emerged through the application of the constant comparative method (Olson et al., 2016).

In accordance with our analysis, the imperative of system-learning from Indigenous perspectives emerged, standing in stark contrast to longstanding observations and assumptions of the role of publicly funded education in diminishing Indigenous perspectives (Battiste, 2013). The acceptance and significance of Indigenous participation and voice as articulated by the documents predicted a hopeful orientation to an inclusive environment for Indigenous students. However, our findings raised further questions as to how the actualization of those good intentions were being exercised. Consistent with Apple's (2019) constructively critical policy lens, we considered these commitments through an Indigenous perspective with expectations of authentic Indigenous participation and influence rather than proxies for those goals.

Findings

As Saskatchewan's Indigenous population continues to rise (Statistics Canada, 2023), Indigenous families and communities expect their children to encounter their cultures, perspectives, languages, and ways of knowing reflected in publicly funded education (Blair et al., 2020). Through analysis of school division documents, the prevalence of Indigenous engagement and participation initiatives varied among school divisions. Our document analysis revealed that Saskatchewan school divisions reported Indigenous student populations varying from 2% in one school division to as much as 99% in another. This variance may account, in part, for varied emphases on Indigenous initiatives among school divisions. According to Statistics Canada (2023), an estimated 19% of the province's students self-declare as Indigenous. With 19% of the province's students being Indigenous, there is an imperative to ensure authentic Indigenous presence in curricula and ensure that Indigenous students are afforded opportunities for equitable out-

comes. Our analysis yielded the following themes, illustrating emerging priorities among Saskatchewan provincial education systems.

Recognition of the Imperative of Indigenous Inclusion

The TRC (2015) Calls to Action, in part, advance a mandate for schools in decolonizing educational praxis and addressing systemic barriers to Indigenous student success. Call 62 calls for mandatory age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools, Treaties, and Aboriginal peoples' historical and contemporary contributions to Canada; the provision of the necessary funding to postsecondary institutions to educate teachers on how to integrate Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into classrooms; the provision of the necessary funding to Aboriginal schools to utilize Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods in classrooms; and the establishment of senior-level positions in government at the assistant deputy level or higher dedicated to Aboriginal content in education. The Calls to Action were prolifically referenced in school division documents.

Our analysis revealed that Indigenous cultures, perspectives, and ways of knowing were deemed as integral in schools as this imperative was mentioned in all of the 69 policy documents we reviewed. The documents supported the need to Indigenize curricula to benefit all learners, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous; to strengthen relationships; and to create awareness of marginalization and systemic oppression. The Saskatchewan School Boards Association's Indigenous education policy (Indigenous Education Responsibility Framework Advisory Committee, 2022) attempts to shift the narrative from "accountability" to "responsibility" with the understanding that "each of us bears responsibility to foster the growth and development of all children" (p. 5). Among the 69 policy documents, 18 articulated an imperative for the prioritization of the goals and aspirations of Indigenous students through the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in both the curriculum and learning supports. Moreover, Indigenous languages were viewed as a crucial component of Indigenous student experiences and learning. This was mentioned in 19 of the 69 policy documents.

Recognition of heightened responsibility was evident in the imperative of school divisions to include Indigenous policy frameworks to "guide the development of First Nations and Métis education plans at the provincial, school division, and school levels, and to ensure that Indigenous perspectives and ways of knowing continue to shape the learning experience for all students" (Ministry of Education, 2018, p. 2). The provincial Indigenous frameworks, *Following Their Voices* (Ministry of Education, 2019) and *Inspiring Success* (Ministry of Education, 2018), provide meaningful points of departure for systems to support Indigenous students to achieve equitable outcomes, which is paradoxical to years of underserved Indigenous students as the accepted norm. Analysis consistently reinforced the imperative of Indigenous inclusion at all levels. This finding describes an emergent context of commitment from which to analyze system strengths and limitations in fostering Indigenous student belonging and success. The consistency of commitment among school divisions with varying Indigenous student populations demonstrates the influence of the imperative in provincial policy.

Professional Development for Educators and Administrators

Our analysis identified professional learning opportunities as essential in understanding colonial influence and its repercussions for Indigenous students and families. Among the 69 policy documents, 25 indicated that educators and administrators participated in Indigenous-focused professional learning to strengthen relationships with and inclusion of Indigenous students and to promote student success. A plethora of professional development occurred among provincial school divisions focused on land-based education; anti-racism and anti-oppression; Métis education; decolonizing and alternative assessments; cultural arts; and the incorporation of the principles of Indigenous STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, and math).

Indigenous stakeholder engagement in planning was implicated in enhancing the ability to create and deliver meaningful and respectful Indigenous professional learning opportunities. Among the 69 policy documents, 30 referenced that relationships had been established with provincial Métis and First Nations organizations and communities. Those relationships provided support and Indigenous perspectives to work toward improving Indigenous engagement and success in closing the gap between Indigenous students and their non-Indigenous peers.

Strengthened collaboration with Indigenous communities and stakeholders supports Indigenous student achievement (Burgess & Cavanagh, 2015; Cherubini et al., 2009; Hare, 2020; Harper & Thompson, 2017). Among the 69 policy documents, 22 noted that additional supports were necessary for Indigenous students to achieve equitable outcomes. In school divisions with a higher proportion of Indigenous students, there was a tendency to incorporate a greater variety of supports for Indigenous students reflective of the population. Examples of Indigenous student supports included Aboriginal Student Achievement Coordinators who assist with academic, self-advocacy, attendance, and postsecondary planning; graduation consultants; Indigenous family advocates to foster support between communities and students; strategic facilitators to aid educators in the classroom setting through the provision of side-by-side supports; and literacy programs that focus on Indigenous authors, including reading material being delivered weekly to homes. Those supports acknowledged the need for continued Indigenous influence and participation within schools to promote positive outcomes for all learners.

The prolific landscape of Indigenous-related professional development for teachers and leaders indicated a desire and imperative for learning through collaboration and building the capacity of teachers and leaders to provide a context of support for Indigenous students. As learning organizations, it is fitting that there was an imperative for learning and growth, and this learning and growth contributed to an imperative for authentic Indigenous participation and influence.

Addressing Issues that Contribute to Systemic Racism

The need to address roadblocks and misconceptions that contribute to systemic racism is an imperative as racism is a reality for Indigenous students in schools (Daniel-Mayes, 2020; Gillies, 2021; Harper & Thompson, 2017; St. Denis, 2011). As stated by the TRC (2015), "much of the current state of troubled relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians is attributable to educational institutions" (p. 285). The movement toward reconciliation needs to begin at the school level through the mending of relationships, beginning with an acknowledgement of wrong-doings and an evolution of new perspectives that respect Indigenous peoples and their cultures and ways of knowing (Harper & Thompson, 2017). Reasons behind outcome gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners must be addressed, as biases and deficit thinking continue to affect Indigenous student experiences and successes (Daniel-Mayes, 2020; Gillies, 2021; Harper & Thompson, 2017; McLean, 2022; St. Denis, 2011). The movement to work toward reconciliation was explicitly recognized in 12 of the 69 policy documents. One provincial school division articulated that when "focusing on equity, we will be open to all, maintain high expectations for all, enact anti-racist/anti-oppressive practices, and pursue a representative workforce" (Saskatoon Public Schools Division, n.d., para. 10). A resource hub that focuses specifically on anti-racist education was established in another school division, alongside providing professional development for 13 schools and further leadership education to be shared among other staff.

Racism is a product of colonization, and it is sustained in schools as it is situated in many aspects of society (Daniel-Mayes, 2020; Gillies, 2021). Through anti-racism and anti-oppression education professional development, Indigenous inclusion can move from being culturally responsive to addressing the real factors that contribute to the marginalization of Indigenous students (St. Denis, 2011). A challenging question is whether the enhanced presence of Indigenous students within provincial schools predicts a greater presence or reduction of racism. Our broad definition of policy yielded relatively few references to addressing racism in schools, although most would not have been present in governance or administrative policies but in reports reflective of the effects of those policies. These findings reinforced the imperative of Indigenous participation and influence to enliven discourse on the presence and effects of racism and to participate in addressing racism in schools, including through policy means.

Community, Elder, and Indigenous Participation

Indigenous participation and influence are crucial to ensuring that equitable outcomes are realized for Indigenous students. The importance of community partnerships; the participation of Indigenous stakeholders; and Elders sharing Indigenous perspectives, cultural teachings, languages, and experiential knowledge was acknowledged in 29 of the 69 policy documents. Elders and Traditional Knowledge Keepers play an integral role in numerous provincial school divisions to promote Indigenous belonging and inclusion as the movement toward reconciliation continues.

Through analysis of policy documents that recognize the role of relationships in promoting Indigenous voice and participation, a noticeable gap emerged. The importance of Indigenous educators and the integral role that they play in reconciliation was only mentioned in 4 of the 69 policy documents. By way of example, the Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools Division, in partnership with the Saskatoon Tribal Council and the Indian Teacher Education Program at the University of Saskatchewan, developed the *wāhkōtowin* program that "is designed to decolonize teacher education, foster student learning and engagement, develop *nehiyaw* teacher identity, and support reconciliation" (Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools, 2022, p. 10). This illustrates an initiative that articulated an imperative for enhancing the participation of Indigenous teachers.

Indigenous educators have the ability through their participation and experiential and cultural knowledge to create positive outcomes and the necessary changes to create a more inclusive, equitable learning environment for Indigenous students, independent of levels of awareness and commitment of their professional peers, as Indigenous educators bring invaluable lived experience (Harper & Thompson, 2017; Marom, 2019; Picower, 2009; Santoro, 2015). Indigenous educators must overcome systemic barriers to achieve personal educational success to achieve status as professional educators, which provides the opportunity to influence Indigenous students as role models and supportive guides (Burgess & Cavanagh, 2015; Cherubini et al., 2009; Santoro, 2015; Wotherspoon, 2006).

Analysis

Our analysis demonstrated a movement toward reconciliation by recognizing the role of Indigenous participation and influence in the publicly funded education system. The very perspectives, languages, and cultural teachings that were once excluded under colonialist-assimilative agendas (Daniel-Mayes, 2020; Harper & Thompson, 2017) have emerged as imperatives in Saskatchewan provincial schools. Indigenous perspectives and participation in publicly funded education at the levels that are currently being witnessed would have been unimaginable, yet we have arrived at a societal consciousness where Indigenous truths and cultures appear to be valued and recognized as vital components of progress in realizing a just society. If these statements in policy result in the actions that they intend, then Indigenous pedagogical renewal gives hope to those who have experienced intergenerational trauma, allowing for the potential of reclaiming and revitalizing traditional perspectives within the context of schools. This awakening is prefaced in the province's educational policy landscape as it appears to respond to a changing socio-political context.

Given positive recognition for the need to support Indigenous students differently, now is the time to revisit the role of Indigenous educators in advancing authentic Indigenous voice, influence, and participation as integral to reconciliation goals. Our analysis identified a near absence of recognition of the role of Indigenous educators within the province's publicly funded educational system. Moreover, our analysis raised the question of whether this absence is a mere oversight or if it indicates a lack of trust in Indigenous peoples assuming responsibility for the provision of Indigenous knowledges and cultural perspectives, demonstrating that much work still needs to be done to relinquish the dominance of the western education system. Kovach (2021) stated:

> Imagining a new way means pushing back at racism at large. Imagining a new way means full recognition of the colonial wound. For one's country, there can be no full racial reckoning, no healing, without tending to this primary colonial wounding. … Without this acknowledgement, societies and their institutions will veer towards equity and diversity strategies that perpetuate the erasure of Indigenous peoples. (p. 255)

Acknowledgement that inequities still exist within educational environments, despite strides that have been made to reflect Indigenous perspectives, cultures, and identities, can help create a society that is more conducive to belonging and success for all.

Just as Indigenous content is being promoted within publicly funded education, so too should the need to Indigenize the teaching profession to reflect the diversity of the student population (Cherubini et al., 2009; Gebhard, 2015; Gillies, 2021; Henry et al., 2017; Young et al., 2010). Keddie (2013) articulated that through the exclusion of Indigenous voice and representation, Eurocentric western views continue to dominate, even in the presence of good intentions as "ethnocentric advocacy reflects a paternalism

and arrogance that undermines Indigenous self-determination" (p. 28). It is fitting that the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives be realized in all aspects of publicly funded education, including through the prolific representation of Indigenous educators, to ensure the integration of Indigenous influence and representation is reflective of students served.

Participation and influence of Indigenous educators has the potential to transform the learning experience for students (Burgess & Cavanagh, 2015; Gebhard, 2015; Santoro, 2015). Relationships flourish when commonalities and understandings are nurtured between Indigenous teachers and Indigenous students, which can further promote motivation and engagement (Cherubini et al., 2009; Daniel-Mayes, 2020; Keddie, 2013). Wotherspoon (2006) articulated that many Indigenous teachers are "drawn to teaching in order to enable their students to have better opportunities than they encountered in their earlier lives" (p. 677). Empathy, through acknowledging commonalities, further strengthens relationships between educators and students with the goal of creating meaningful engagement. When addressing structural racism, sensitivity and support can exist through a common understanding of the realities of marginalization and oppressive experiences (Daniel-Mayes, 2020; Gebhard, 2015; Keddie, 2013; Santoro, 2015; Wotherspoon, 2006). Furthermore, Indigenous peoples "traditionally identify mistakes as opportunity to grow and find new insights that sustain and motivate them as life experiences" (Cherubini et al., 2009, p. 41). Resiliency allows Indigenous educators to pay forward to the next generation of students, allowing them to strengthen their cultural identity and "support independent thinking, initiative, and flexibility" (Cherubini et al., 2009, p. 42). Positive influential guides motivate and empower Indigenous students, which positively affects the latter's trajectory, allowing them to experience success in school (Keddie, 2013) and challenging stereotypical tropes of Indigenous students being unmotivated and lacking engagement (Gillies, 2021).

Increased presence of Indigenous educators does not diminish the need for allyship and advocacy by non-Indigenous educators. A well-rounded and diverse education team is needed to focus on enhancing Indigenous voice, participation, and success (Hare, 2020). Through our analysis, it became clear that allyship is viewed as paramount through the strong focus on professional development for educators to enhance their knowledge of Indigenous peoples and the establishment of relationships with Indigenous communities, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers. There is responsibility attached to allyship for non-Indigenous educators to truly embrace the need for prioritizing and providing Indigenous content as "being an ally in Indigenizing education means acknowledging the complexity of being an oppressor in a system designed by oppressors and managing the guilt and emotional responses that arise from this realization" (Blair et al., 2020, p. 9). This paradigm shift presents a revolutionary change not only for Indigenous students but also for educators as all aspects of the education sector are evolving to create a more racially just and equitable society.

Reconciliation efforts should encompass Indigenous representation and participation in all aspects of educational institutions (TRC, 2015). When Indigenous educators take a more active stance, non-Indigenous students will be provided the opportunity to avoid biased thinking through the influence of authentic voices, stories, and experiential knowledge. Acknowledgement of Indigenous perspectives prepares students for the reality of diversity outside of school environments as they become "culturally aware, socially just, and responsible global citizens who understand the world past their local context" (Santoro, 2015, p. 860). This serves as a mechanism to strengthen relationships among all students as the reconciliation movement proliferates.

By applying our inquiry model of reconciliation, empowerment, claiming, and responsibility to our critical policy analysis, we witnessed the strengths and shortcomings of the public education system in Saskatchewan. Empowerment is realized when priorities are put in place that allow for Indigenous engagement, leading to equitable outcomes and attitudes that reach beyond the school setting. Strengthened supports that exist in many school divisions throughout the province, such as Indigenous student leader coordinators, allow for self-determination and empowerment for Indigenous youth (Keddie, 2013). Reconciliation efforts are visibly altering the educational landscape, and there is a palpable responsibility that is reflective of that movement in the policy document analysis. This has allowed for a claiming and strengthening of Indigeneity as policies, and the effects of those policies, provide leverage for cultural resurgence. Increased representation of authentic Indigenous educators will further fuel realization of an equitable education system that appropriately reflects Indigenous influence.

Educational Contributions

Through critical yet appreciative inquiry, we aimed to contribute to the empowerment of the next generation of Indigenous students as they lay claim to their Indigeneity and grow to be the best versions of themselves. When supported by authentic Indigenous educators who are accountable to their communities and have rightfully claimed their roots and community and ethnic belonging (Niezen, 2009), Indigenous students are better prepared to achieve their full potential (Santoro, 2015; Wotherspoon, 2006). It is our hope that providing points of departure for school divisions to demonstrate their commitment to Indigenous self-determination further contributes to respectful relationships and reconciliation.

Our analysis illuminated a gap in the imperative of Indigenization and further illustrated the need for Indigenous educators to be appropriately represented, commensurate with the province's Indigenous population. Discrepancy in the ratio of Indigenous educators to Indigenous students was noted by the Ministry of Education (2009, as cited in Gebhard, 2015), where "there are 271 Indigenous students for every one [Indigenous] teacher" (p. 32). At that rate, the likelihood of an Indigenous student ever being taught by an Indigenous educator is low (Gebhard, 2015). We propose a policy consideration framework that satisfies the desire for a more equitable system by challenging the accepted delivery of Indigenous knowledges and perspectives by predominantly non-Indigenous educators. Educational institutions must tread softly to ensure that schools do not "trivialize Aboriginal content and perspectives, and at the same time [allowing] them to believe that they are becoming more inclusive and respectful" (St. Denis, 2011, p. 313). This demonstrates a rhetoric that presents favourable conditions that simply mask shortcomings and omissions.

Achieving equitable Indigenous representation through targeted hiring would account for growth in the employment of Indigenous educators to levels that education systems and their Indigenous community partners identify as appropriate. This would keep school divisions accountable as they move forward in recognizing the next steps of the reconciliation process and fully embrace Call 62 (TRC, 2015). Adequate representation considers goals beyond a single Indigenous educator in a school, including Indigenous educator teams that discourage responsibility falling on a single educator as "a cultural ambassador [to carry] the burden of cultural diversity" (Santoro, 2015, p. 865). This would prevent burnout and increased workload placed on a single Indigenous teacher while respecting their identity beyond the label as "the Indigenous teacher" (Santoro, 2015). Gillies (2021) expanded on the responsibilities and pressures that fall on Indigenous educators when they are underrepresented:

> The expectation that all teachers must teach Indigenous content thus often falls upon the small number of Indigenous teachers who are objectified through pan-Indigenization or assumptions that Indigenous teachers must know everything about all Indigenous people. Indigenous people then face pressure to provide culturally relevant support to White teachers—who comprise approximately 90% of the provincial teacher force—without financial compensation. (p. 11)

This reinforces the importance of developing policy that supports the increase of Indigenous participation at a level conducive to retaining Indigenous educators.

We noted that some schools incorporate strategies such as a *Cree word of the day*. These innocuous yet seemingly impactful initiatives are important yet limited in their impact, where the presence of Indigenous language-speaking educators would reinforce recognition of Indigenous languages as welcome and valued. As St. Denis (2011) articulated, "Aboriginal teachers emphasize that teaching about Aboriginal culture and history must go beyond cultural artifacts. We need perspective, not just beads and feathers" (p. 314). To ensure the delivery is authentic, Indigenous educators must have significant presence to preserve the sacredness of traditional perspectives. Strategic relationships between Indigenous teacher education programs and school boards would signal the beginning of the vision of a more representative Indigenous educator complement. This relationship exists in at least one Saskatchewan school division, demonstrating that it is possible to achieve. There are numerous considerations that expand beyond the breadth of our research; however, the need to consider policy to increase Indigenous educator presence in publicly funded education is evident as a potential next step in the reconciliation journey.

The policy framework we offer is illustrated in Figure 2. It coincides with our policy analysis and the emergent themes and has the potential to support meaningful change and initiatives for school divisions to meet the real needs of students through equitable Indigenous participation and influence.

Figure 2

Indigenous Participation Policy Framework
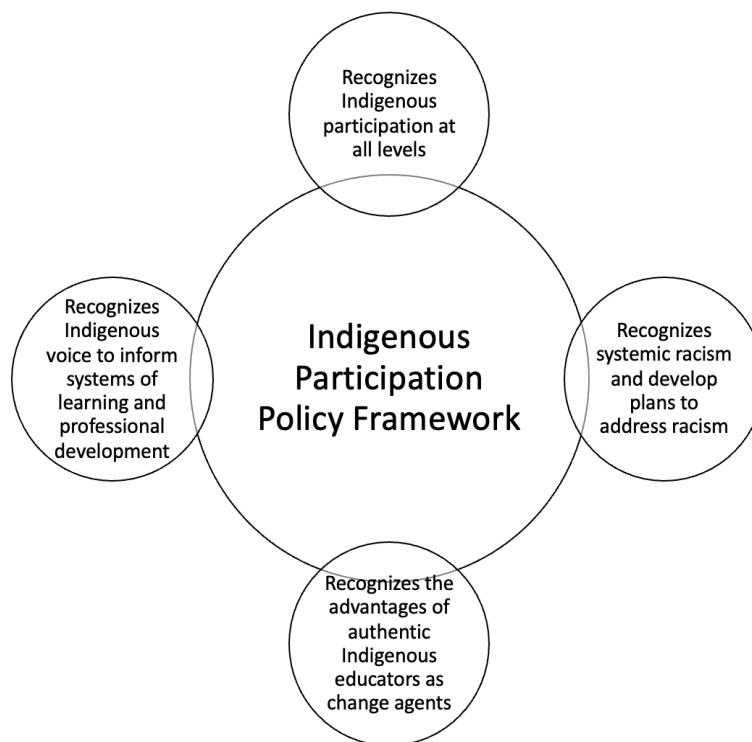
The Indigenous Participation Policy Framework emerged in our discussions of what the findings suggested about the aspirations and actions articulated in Saskatchewan provincial educational policy and what considerations policy makers might undertake to build on good intentions. We observed policy aspirations for Indigenous participation along with concerning limitations on that participation evident in the lack of articulation of the role and value of Indigenous teachers. The framework serves as a catalyst for enhancing authentic Indigenous participation by raising four imperatives that both create the conditions for enhanced Indigenous participation and rely on Indigenous participation for actualization.

1. Recognition of systemic racism and the development of plans to address racism. Inviting Indigenous participation into organizational contexts that validate the experience of Indigenous peoples with racism messages to Indigenous educators that the organization is committed to creating the conditions for Indigenous participation.

2. Recognition of the advantages of authentic Indigenous educators as internal change agents that bring Indigenous influence into developments in school culture, student engagement, teaching and learning, and leadership and policy. Organizational transformation is the result of many complex influences, but the increased presence of Indigenous educators strengthens the imperative for systemic change.

3. Recognition of Indigenous voices to support system learning and professional development. The proliferation of Indigenous educators introduces varied skillsets and contributions that make space for the commitments of Indigenous educators to contribute to peer learning within collegial contexts.

4. Recognition of the crucial inclusion of Indigenous participation at all levels. Increased Indigenous participation and influence will advance expectations and opportunity for Indigenous participation through diverse contributions in administration, curricular leadership, human

resources, or governance.

These priorities serve as provocations for systems to consider what constitutes authentic Indigenous participation and, when translated into action, opens infinite possibilities for relationship building and system learning. The commonality among these priorities is that Indigenous participation challenges Indigenous exclusion. We present these affordances to authentic Indigenous participation as more than aspirational statements. They are affordances to open closed doors, express the value of and commitment to Indigenous educators, facilitate influence, and inspire and facilitate advancement within the organization. School divisions enact policy to actualize all manner of social goals (Ministry of Education, 2018), and we believe that our analysis of the Saskatchewan education policy context is ready to subsume these challenges into the work of school divisions.

This approach encourages authenticity as community accountability so that vigilance shifts from one of proof of identity to proof of belonging and service. Simply, as Indigenous community presence is enhanced within systems, Indigenous community will mediate authenticity. While issues of authenticity may arise, we believe that efforts to "let in" authentic Indigenous educators will result in more tangible benefits to students and systems than the necessary but limited influence of efforts to "keep out" those who make claim to an identity not their own.

Implications for Further Inquiry

As this inquiry aimed to make sense of the heightened awareness of the imperative of authentic Indigenous participation and influence in educational institutions within the publicly funded K–12 education system, the need for educational policy to orient toward Indigenous participation and influence became clear. This came into focus not just because of the absence of an imperative for the role and participation of Indigenous educators but also because of the many positive statements of intent and action on the part of school divisions to create a context conducive to Indigenous student participation and success. This promising policy environment invites more specific inquiry into reasons behind the lack of imperative for the participation and influence of Indigenous educators, as well as whether these gaps are deliberate or simply resulting from the inability of systems to make connections between their system goals vis-à-vis Indigenization, and the role of Indigenous educators. Shining a light on the benefits and contributions of Indigenous participation toward system goals could influence policy where jurisdictions express the value for Indigenous educators and create policy constructs that facilitate greater Indigenous participation.

While our analysis focussed on public-facing policy documents, we are interested in initiating inquiry with specific school divisions to analyze their context more closely in investigating statements and strategies conducive to the enhancement of Indigenous participation and influence. Specifically, there could be human resource policies and practices that are not public facing that would speak more specifically to the imperative of Indigenous educators. There could also be statements on the value and role of Indigenous educators inherent in agreements with Indigenous communities or organizations. This analysis provides context from which to initiate further inquiry by inviting school divisions to elucidate Indigenous recruitment and staffing goals and strategies.

A key motivator to our work was the high-profile exposure of academics who fraudulently claimed Indigenous identity and who were allowed to flourish within their respective universities. As we chose an appreciative approach of emphasizing the role and participation of authentic Indigenous educators, we believe there is still a need to examine questions associated with authenticity and what types of knowledge articulation might help school divisions to make good choices around deferring to authentic Indigenous participation. While we recognize that Indigenous communities reserve the right to determine their membership and should be exclusively deferred to in terms of claiming their community members, we think that school divisions need to learn from the discourse on identity that is prolific among postsecondary institutions and prepare the context so that authentic Indigenous participation is an attribute of quality rather than a gatekeeping function. While deliberations within and among universities are resulting in policies for the validation of Indigenous identity, (National Indigenous Identity Forum, 2022; University of Saskatchewan, 2022) no such efforts were made evident in the K–12 policy documents we reviewed.

Our foray into Saskatchewan provincial education policy demonstrated that there is much to be analyzed and considered within this context. The ability to step back and view public policy relating to

Indigenous education in the province was a gift that opened many potential inquiries consistent with our commitment to appreciation and relationality. Our hope is for communities to grow together in common efforts to support Indigenous students for success and recognize that the core of these initiatives must be Indigenous participation at all levels.

Conclusion

Recognition of strengths and weaknesses in Saskatchewan education system efforts to better serve Indigenous students encourages new initiatives and fosters creative problem-solving. Enhancing the presence of Indigenous educators within publicly funded education systems provides support for Indigenous students through shared experiential knowledge, ensuring that Indigenous perspectives are valued, allowing for systemic racism and bias to be addressed, and disrupting the underrepresentation that reifies westernized pedagogy (Gebhard, 2015; Gillies, 2021; Harper & Thompson, 2017; Keddie, 2013; McLean, 2022). As hooks (1994) articulated:

> The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy. ... Urging all of us to open our minds and hearts so that we can know beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable, so that we can think and rethink, so that we can create new visions, I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions—a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom. (p. 12)

The positive progression from when colonial influences controlled Indigenous education through residential and day schools is reflective of the resiliency and strength of Indigenous communities evident through the inclusion of diverse perspectives in public education. This awakening demonstrates that we are not static; in fact, we are capable of a change that is beautiful and all encompassing, reflective of the need for all voices to be welcomed and included. We exist in an era of inclusion, where equity is not optional. Through this narrative, the representation of authentic Indigenous educators and voice is the next step in the progression of Indigenous self-determination and reconciliation.

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