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Following their Voices: Supporting Indigenous Students' Learning by Fostering Culturally Sustaining Relational Pedagogies to Reshape the School and Classroom Environment

Dawn Wallin

University of Saskatchewan

Dawn.Wallin@usask.ca

Scott Tunison

University of Saskatchewan

Scott.Tunison@usask.ca

Abstract

Canada's colonial relationship to First Peoples was predicated on the imposition of church-run residential schools, systemic racism, and chronic underfunding of education on reserve (Dart, 2019). As a result, the relationship between Indigenous learners, families and the school system is fraught with mistrust, scepticism regarding the purposes of education, and questions about educational success, quality, and achievement (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). This paper presents findings of a meta-analysis of 11 case studies of public and First Nations-run schools in rural, remote and northern schools Saskatchewan, Canada. These schools are part of an initiative called Following Their Voices (FTV) that has as its objective the improvement of educational outcomes for Indigenous students. In this paper, we describe the FTV initiative and discuss the challenges and facilitators of fidelity to the processes, goals and outcomes faced by schools attempting to implement a complex school initiative such as FTV. Emerging from our meta-analysis were concerns related to collective responsibility, sustainability, and leadership.

Key words: *Indigenous education, cultural responsiveness, program implementation*

Introduction

In 2015, Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) described Canada's imposition of church-run residential schools for Indigenous children, systemic racism, and chronic underfunding of First Nations education on reserve as a deliberate cultural genocide in which schools intended to "kill the Indian in the child" (TRC, 2015, p. 130). Recent findings of the unmarked graves of thousands of children at these predominantly rural, remote and northern schools has drawn attention to the horrors of these places that were ostensibly sites of learning, but were more often sites of abuse, child labour, disease and death.

The TRC released 94 *Calls to Action* aimed at mobilizing Canadian society toward taking responsibility to foster healing of the intergenerational trauma perpetuated by these policies. Four *Calls to Action* (#62 - #65) specifically focus on the need for preK-12 and post-secondary

institutions to renew curriculum; integrate Indigenous knowledge, language and culture within classrooms, and improve teacher training (TRC, 2015).

This paper describes findings from a research study in Saskatchewan, Canada that examined a school transformation initiative called *Following Their Voices* (FTV; Government of Saskatchewan, n.d.) aimed at meeting the learning needs of Indigenous students by (i) transforming the nature of student-teacher interactions through the implementation of relational pedagogies; (ii) fostering powerful teacher collaborative learning structures, and; (iii) enhancing teachers' and administrators' capacity for using data as evidence of progress toward creating a more culturally sustaining and efficacious learning environment. The paper describes the design and development of FTV in the province of Saskatchewan, Canada. It then discusses the challenges and inhibitors faced by 11 schools that were in their second year of the four-year implementation cycle of the project. Findings are organized according to three themes that ran across the meta-analysis of the schools' experiences: collective responsibility, sustainability, and leadership.

Following Their Voices

Supported by Canada's *Constitution Act* of 1867, there exist three publicly-funded school systems in Saskatchewan, Canada: a Roman Catholic school system and a non-denominational public school system funded through provincial taxation, and; on-reserve First Nations band-run schools that are funded federally with administration devolved to each community. Regardless of system, however, Canada's colonial history has yielded significant differences in the educational achievement rates for Indigenous students as compared to their peers.

Indigenous peoples are the fastest growing population in Canada, exemplified by a 42% growth between 2006 and 2016 (Government of Canada, 2020). The province of Saskatchewan has one of the highest percentages of Indigenous peoples (and therefore students) in Canada (16%), 46% of whom lived in rural or First Nations communities (Tank, 2020). Saskatchewan is also the province that closed the last residential school in Canada in 1996, leaving behind generations of families living with the effects of intergenerational trauma (Castellano et al., 2011; TRC, 2015). Although First Nations peoples administer schools in First Nations communities (overseen by the federal government), Indigenous people off-reserve in rural, remote, northern, or urban centers attend school in public schools governed by the province of Saskatchewan. These governance differences, underpinned by a colonial history of racist practices, have created concerns related to jurisdictional responsibility, service provision, disruptions in school experience, and discrepancies in learning outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. A plethora of scholars have discussed school and societal factors that have negatively impacted the school experience for Indigenous students. These writers discuss the continued presence of systemic racism and white privilege in Canada that undermines attempts to foster change (Battiste, 2013; Hansen & Antsanen, 2015; Madden et al., 2013). Other writers speak to systemic concerns within the school system, such as a lack of attention to culture, anti-racism and anti-oppression within curricula (Aikenhead, 2017; Gunn et. al, 2011; St. Denis, 2007). Wotherspoon (2014) and O-Connor (2020) note concerns with how success and/or achievement are defined despite recognized differences in worldviews that continue to privilege Western knowledge. Scholars such as Tessaro et al. (2021) and Kanu (2005) advocate for more Indigenous teachers who can have significant impact on Indigenous student engagement and well-being as students learn from people who understand their lived experience and worldviews (Kirkness, 2013; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Whitinui et al., 2018). Within schools, scholars have noted that teachers often continue to hold low expectations for Indigenous children (Jensen, 2009; Riley & Ungerleider, 2012), and many lack sensitivity to the importance of Indigenous languages or how to work with Indigenous first language speakers (Demmert, 2011; Kovach, 2009). This is particularly important in Saskatchewan, where there are seven Indigenous languages spoken in communities across the

province. As a consequence, Tunison (2018, p.2) noted that regarding the state of learning in Saskatchewan:

Decades of provincial data – including credit attainment; final marks; school completion; attendance; and over-representation in alternative and remedial classes – show that Indigenous students have been poorly served by the system. Despite good intentions, multiple programs, curriculum renewals, provincial strategies, and other initiatives, outcomes for ... Indigenous students ... have remained perniciously stagnant.

In addition to general provincial education trends, Saskatchewan is considered to be a primarily rural province of 1.2 million people. Its two largest urban centres (Regina and Saskatoon) collectively serve 49% of the population (589,000), with the rest of the population living in small cities, or rural, remote, or northern communities that were settled on Indigenous lands after questionable treaty practices disenfranchised Indigenous peoples from traditional territories. This has led to a deep and often bitter past of unfulfilled treaty promises, conflicts over land rights, clashing worldviews, racism, and mistrust between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples that has been reified in school systems and rural communities (Jones, 2019; Mackey, 2016). As Burleigh (2020, p. 691) notes, the *relational complexities* of colonization, self-determination and decolonization are “*lived out daily in the practical experiences of [Indigenous student] lives, [in remote schools] and thus relationships with students, families, and communities become central to understanding the work of teachers*”. It is particularly important that these relational complexities be addressed in schools given that the Indigenous population in Canada is considerably younger than the national average, with higher birth rates, and tend to have high mobility rates as families move between rural and urban locations (Government of Canada, 2020).

It is only relatively recently that school systems and local communities have committed to (re)addressing the social, emotional, spiritual and educational harms created by this colonial relationship. Many suggest that reconciliation will be difficult to achieve (Wotherspoon, 2021), but as Senator Murray Sinclair, Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation has noted in a number of his addresses, “*Education got us into this mess and education will get us out of it*”. All 11 schools that participated in the case studies and meta-analysis that is the focus of this paper are situated in First Nations or rural/remote/northern communities that are moving forward on this complex reconciliatory journey.

In order to respond to the TRC’s *Calls to Actions* (2015), the Ministry of Education in Saskatchewan came together with a number of First Nations and Métis communities to create an initiative called FTV. A formal FTV Leadership Team was established with representation from First Nations and Métis education authorities, Elders, provincial school divisions and the Ministry of Education. Throughout the development of FTV, there has been a strong commitment to ensuring Métis and First Nations Elders provide guidance and oversight to ensure any pedagogical approach was grounded in Indigenous practices and ways of knowing. It was the Elders of the Leadership group that advocated for this research project to be undertaken so as to gain a sense of how the initiative was unfolding within participating schools.

In the fall of 2014, an initial Elders’ Gathering was held at the Wanuskewin Heritage Park, to gather advice and direction from a group of Elders representing all language groups and regions of the province. At the Gathering, the Elders confirmed the FTV Guiding Vision and provided advice and direction on the development of the Understandings and Indicators forming the underpinnings of the FTV initiative.

At its heart, the initiative attempts to foster community engagement in education, transform teacher practice, and improve educational achievement of Indigenous students in particular. The FTV initiative is unique as compared to other programs in the province in that public, Catholic and First Nations schools are invited to participate as part of a collective investment in, and

responsibility for, Indigenous education. Once schools join the project, they learn together during regional professional development events and share successes and challenges with each other in a spirit of mutual support.

Inspired by a similar initiative founded on Maori worldviews in New Zealand called Te Kotahitanga (Bishop et al., 2014), FTV is premised on three objectives that have consistently been found to improve student success: (a) positive student-teacher interactions; (b) culturally sustaining pedagogies; and (c) the establishment of safe and caring learning environments (FTV website). In order to remain true to the spirit and intent of its goals, FTV was intentionally designed through adherence to cultural protocols, including teachings and input from Indigenous peoples, Elders and Traditional Knowledge Keepers.

FTV is based on research that was conducted with First Nations and Métis engaged and non-engaged students, parents/caregivers, teachers and school administrators about what is needed in order to be successful as a First Nations or Métis student in school. The voices of these groups of people were profound in terms of the issues they identified. Their words and insights, along with international research, and guidance and advice from Elders and Knowledge Keepers formed the foundation of this initiative. (www.followingtheirvoices.ca/#/)

The FTV Model

Schools that are interested in participating in the FTV initiative complete an application and are chosen based on context (rural, urban, First Nations), enrolment (proportion of First Nations, Inuit and Métis students in the school), and staff size. Schools commit to a four-year professional learning cycle with the provision of additional funding and staff investment from provincial personnel who work with schools to implement the initiative and support their growth over time. A train-the-trainer model is utilized whereby provincial facilitators work with School Change Leadership Teams (SCLT) that normally include a representative from school administration, a local facilitator, and catalyst teachers to implement the model. A local school-based FTV facilitator is provided with time to support local teachers and to work with the provincial support team. School-based facilitators work with cohorts of teachers over a four-year cycle to support, observe, monitor and provide feedback to their teacher colleagues as they learn about and implement a range of discursive, culturally responsive instructional strategies. A new cohort begins annually with expectations that full school implementation will occur within two years of joining the project. The expectation exists that the school will be self-sufficient with respect to continuing its FTV work within four years.

Led by the school-based facilitator, teachers engage in three to five critical learning cycles per year based on the instructional coaching principles of Knight (2009). They are observed by the school facilitator once per cycle. Along with feedback from First Nations, Métis and Inuit students and their families, the data are discussed in relation to FTV critical indicators and are used to set individual improvement goals. Teachers work collaboratively to co-construct a group goal and participate in classroom walk-throughs to support each other as they implement changes in practice. At the end of each critical learning cycle, they reflect on the degree to which goals were attained and set new goals for the next cycle. Weekly small-group huddle meetings occur along the way so that teachers can discuss progress and support each other's growth. During each cycle, the school facilitator shadow coaches individual teachers to provide support and guidance.

Within each cycle, teachers learn about and implement culturally sustaining pedagogies to create spaces where culture and identity are affirmed and celebrated. The primary focus centres on fostering relationality between teachers and students such that students' voices drive the teaching and learning environment. It is also expected that local schools work with local First Nations Elders and Traditional Knowledge Keepers, families and community leadership to build culturally relevant supports for students. FTV is premised on six indicators of success:

- caring for and believing in First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students and their cultures;
- having high expectations that Métis, Inuit, and First Nations students are self-determining, can participate, and can achieve;
- creating a secure, well-managed learning environment;
- engaging in teaching and learning interactions that are responsive to student interests and needs;
- using a range of strategies to promote accelerated growth; and
- using evidence from Inuit, First Nations, and Métis student outcomes for critical reflection and for identifying strategic actions that promote accelerated growth.

In order to evaluate progress towards these indicators, the province and local schools utilize a number of data collection techniques. Teachers, students, and parents/caregivers participate in three online surveys per academic year to assess progress toward the creation of a positive learning environment. Student progress is measured via attendance, graduation rates, final and mid-term grades, and course completion rates. Instructional transformation is supported through goal setting using tools designed by the FTV project leaders to focus attention on collegial and facilitator observations of teaching, walk-throughs, and collaborative reflection about teachers' progress toward their goals.

Methodology

Our research team employed an appreciative inquiry multiple case study approach with 11 schools in their second year of FTV implementation. All too often, research on/with Indigenous peoples has been based on deficit and discriminatory thinking that has reified white privilege and systemic racism (Hayward et al., 2021). Appreciative inquiry methodology, however, intentionally incorporates a strengths-based approach to research within these communities and offers a positive framework for organizational transformation (Bhattachary & Chakraborty, 2020). Based on recommendations from the Elders from the FTV Leadership team, we intentionally built our research team to include researchers from the University of Saskatchewan, the University of Regina, and First Nations University of Canada, two of whom are of First Nations ancestry. We were supported by two graduate research assistants, one of whom identifies as Métis and the other who identifies as First Nations. Given the nature of study, it was especially important to be respectful of cultural protocol and to ensure that our research team was inclusive of Indigenous peoples and perspectives. Although the authors of this paper are non-Indigenous, they both have worked with and for Indigenous communities, organizations and peoples on a number of professional/research projects and were invited by the FTV Leadership Team to be part of this research study. They both have lived generational experience in rural communities as white settlers who are on their own learning journeys towards decolonizing their thinking, actions, and relationships as leaders, academics, and researchers.

The 11 communities who were part of this research (conducted between February and May, 2019) were situated across Saskatchewan in treaty territories four, six and 10. Four of the schools were band-controlled First Nations schools. One of the schools was part of the separate (Catholic) school system and one was part of a unique partnership between the public school system, the separate school system and a tribal council. Four of the schools were located in northern Saskatchewan and two of the schools were located in small cities (one of 35,000 people and one of 13,000 people). Six of the schools were high schools, one was an early/middle school, and four of the schools offered PreK-Grade 12 programming.

All of the sites voluntarily agreed to participate in the FTV program with appropriate approvals from school divisions, tribal councils, or Chief and Councils. All sites signed on to the initiative with recognition that there would be research conducted in those sites for the purposes of determining efficacy of the initiative. Each school community in the study has local Elders and Knowledge Keepers who support the initiative. The research team engaged in appropriate

protocols for accessing knowledge keepers' consent and participation (normally through the offering of tobacco and oral assent). On occasion, the groups engaged in smudging as part of the ceremonial aspect of building relationships, asking for positive spirit, intent and outcomes, and preparing oneself to speak truth and to listen with an open heart and mind. It was also part of protocol to gift the school as a means of showing gratitude for the knowledge that had been shared. All individuals directly involved in the study provided voluntary consent to participate in their capacities as parents, students, etc. In addition to parental consent, younger children were asked to provide oral assent. Each individual was provided the opportunity to ask questions and provide their perspective.

A multiple case study method focused on the following research targets: (a) the extent to which the implementation process of the FTV initiative was successful; (b) early indicators of improved teacher/student relationships, and (c) evidence of changes in pedagogy. Because these schools were in their second year of implementation only, it was not our intent to make claims based on student achievement data; rather, it was our intent to share available data that had been collected to date, and gather qualitative data related to program implementation concerns, evidence of improved relationality between teachers and students in particular, and teachers' pedagogical growth/change fostered by the facilitator model. Each school received an individual report for their own purposes. Once the 11 individual case studies were completed, the authors of this paper completed a meta-analysis of the 11 reports, the findings of which are the focus of this paper. All data are aggregated across the 11 schools as per the collective agreement around ethical use of data beyond the individual reports that were sent directly to communities.

The study was designed in three phases. Given that the research team was able to access provincial and school-based data that already existed for each school, the first phase involved reviewing the existing provincial and school-based quantitative data that included: (i) results of perceptual surveys of parent/caregivers, students, and teachers; (ii) graduation rates, and (iii) high school course completion rates. All secondary data were stored on a provincial server at the Ministry of Education that is security protected. The data provided to the researchers were anonymized to ensure anonymity.

These secondary quantitative data were collated by the research team and served as the foundation for creating phase two research questions and qualitative data collection discussion guides for students, teachers, parents/caregivers, Elders/Knowledge Keepers, and school leadership teams. The discussion guides were similar in construction from one school to the next but were adapted to schools' results on the common Indicators noted in the section above. Discussion guides focused on helping participants identify their learning community's strengths and opportunities for improvement with respect to their efficacy with the common indicators. Available collated data from phase one was shared with each group, and participants were asked questions related to what they perceived was going well, what was getting in the way of achieving their goals for each of the indicators, and what supports would be valuable to help them achieve the goals of FTV and its successful implementation.

In total, 308 students; 162 teachers, 57 parents/caregivers and Elders/Traditional Knowledge Keepers; and 42 members of the Strategic Change Leadership Team of each school participated in semi-structured group and/or individual interviews in phase two that was completed on site in each school. Table 1 offers an aggregate account of discussion groups, interviews and participant numbers based on group type. The FTV facilitators and administration teams in each school helped research teams set up group meetings with participants.

Table 1: Participant Group Representation by Method

Participant Group	Early years (K-3 arts-based work)	Discussion groups	Interviews	Total participants

Students	Groups: 2 N=18	Groups: 34 N=290		N=308
Teachers		Groups: 14 N= 146	N=16	N=162
SCLT		Groups: 9 N=32	N=10	N=42
Caregivers/Elders/ Knowledge Keepers		Groups: 7 N=41 Caregivers N=11 Elders	N=5 Caregivers	N=46 Caregivers N=11 Elders
Total	Groups: 2 N=18	Groups: 64 N=520	N=31	N=569

Younger children (grades K-5) engaged in child-friendly activities where they were asked to draw pictures of places in their school or classrooms where they felt safe, where they enjoyed learning, where they had good relationships with teachers, and where they were able to feel good about themselves. The teams then engaged in conversations with the children related to the pictures to gather information about relationships, safety and wellbeing, cultural learning, and the teaching and learning environment. Older students (grades 4-12) engaged in discussion groups with specific questions targeted to the ways and extent to which the indicators were being met in their school experience. Parent/caregivers and Elders/Knowledge Keepers engaged in group conversations, often with the provision of refreshments/food. In some schools, the local school honoured the research team by offering a feast prepared by students and/or community members from fish or other game acquired during land-based learning opportunities. Members of the Strategic Change Leadership Teams served as support for coordinating school visits, and also engaged in a formal data collection conversation related to quality of the implementation of the initiative and growth/changes in teacher/student relationships and culturally responsive pedagogy over time. Teacher groups were presented with the collated secondary data and asked to comment on their perceptions of the results and what they meant for the teaching and learning environment in their school, particularly as it related to supporting Indigenous learners. They were also invited to participate in interviews to offer their sense of how well the project was being implemented, the extent to which they had noticed changes in relationships between teachers and students, and their experiences with the facilitator model and its efficacy for supporting teacher pedagogical growth that supported Indigenous learners.

Once the school visits were complete, qualitative data were analysed thematically using a sequence of open-, axial-, and selective-coding similar to that advocated by Strauss and Corbin (1990). To enhance code validity, the research team worked in pairs and triads to negotiate coding values of verbatim field notes and participant-created written products generated during group interviews; then verified draft codes with the other members of the research team who were present during data collection. For each school site, qualitative data collected through phase two were combined with the secondary data from that school to develop a multi-faceted narrative of findings. Schools were invited to contribute a chapter of the narrative to incorporate their own stories on how they came to be a *FTV* school, its importance to their community, and their progress toward school transformation. Telling their own story extended the intent of the research team to offer participants a means of co-constructing the knowledge embedded in the research. After the individual reports were complete, the research team came back to each community to present research results and to work with the school community to co-construct a positive path forward. One of the authors of this paper continues to work with schools from this

research study that are interested in maintaining a research relationship as they carry on their local journeys. Subsequent to the completion of the individual case studies, results from all 11 schools were collated and cross-referenced to develop the meta-analysis of the results as phase three of the study.

A number of limitations to the research must be acknowledged. In many sites, access to parents/Elders was limited, except in cases where they were staff members, or in schools where parent engagement efforts were very strong. This limited access was not surprising to our team given the mistrust that many Indigenous families still harbour towards the education system. We had the most success engaging with parents/Elders and other community members in schools that intentionally created a welcoming space with tea, food, and cultural protocols supported.

Another limitation involved hesitancy in some schools regarding outsider research team involvement. This hesitancy was also to be expected given the skepticism towards research that has taken knowledge from communities and has seldom been reciprocated with sustained community involvement. To minimize this concern, we were intentional in our effort to create a research team that had personal connections to some of the communities, and who were familiar with the protocols and/or languages spoken in the communities. We also did our best to focus on the relationality inherent in the work, incorporating cultural protocols where appropriate and visiting with Knowledge Keepers to ensure we were respectful of each territory and community.

A third limitation related to a lack of administrative support from a few schools, which led to a lack of coordination of some of our visits and therefore limited participation of some groups. When this occurred, our research team did its best to work with local people to get the message out and to invite as many people as possible to join with us in conversation.

A final limitation concerned data challenges, whereby in certain cases data were insufficient or unavailable for secondary analysis, either due to timing of delivery or uploading of data by school or ministry personnel, or in some cases low response rates in smaller centres where there was a concern over anonymity. This was compounded in each school by differing sophistication levels of understanding and using data effectively. In order to offset this, we standardized the data on which we reported to local school groups and limited the questions we would ask to focus on these data specifically. We also ensured that we took an educative role when asking questions so as not to assume that individuals understood the data they had at hand. We sought ways to help them build new skills and enhance existing ones so that we could support them in sorting through the data they will collect in the future as they continue to be part of the initiative.

Findings

This paper focuses on three over-arching themes that developed in the meta-analysis of the 11 school-based reports. There were many additional themes that came through in the individual case studies, but they are not the focus of this paper. The themes of the meta-analysis speak to the circumstances under which schools were more (or less) successful in the implementation of FTV processes, and/or making head-way on FTV indicators and outcomes. Given that schools were about half-way through their second year of a four-year initiative, we were not expecting drastic changes in school-based outcomes that were the source of secondary data analysis in phase one of the project. However, we were expecting to see demonstrated changes in teaching pedagogy, a more intentional focus on teacher/student interactions, and increases in cultural responsiveness within classrooms, schools and relationships with community. The extent to which these changes were facilitated were framed by constructs of collective responsibility; sustainable practice; and leadership focus.

Focused Collective Responsibility

FTV was most successful in schools where goal setting was integrated across individual, school, division/educational authority, and provincial priorities, and linked to specific outcomes. In some schools, facilitators messaged clearly that differentiated instruction, cultural sensitivity and student-teacher relationships were important for all learners, and therefore the goals teachers established for the initiative were important for improving their teaching practice generally. They also worked closely with school administration to ensure that the individual goals of teachers found touchstones within school plans that in themselves were nested in division/educational authority and provincial plans. In contrast, when goal-setting was fragmented, highly individualized, or viewed as an add-on to existing plans or ways of working, teachers tended to feel that the initiative was time-consuming and a complicated make-work project that was outside the scope of their own teaching or system plans. In addition to this, if plans for evaluating or measuring goal attainment were unclear or non-existent and/or not linked to specific outcomes, individuals became frustrated with the cyclical process of FTV that appeared to not have clear direction. In relation to data-informed decision-making, when staff members did not appreciate or accept the implications of particular data, they had a tendency to dismiss the results by critiquing the data or offering outside explanations for them (usually blaming respondents or leaders with deficit thinking) rather than reflecting critically and responding with open minds to what those data may suggest.

A second important factor of school success was the extent to which school staffs took collective responsibility for change. In schools where the SCLTs could inspire collective motivation for engaging in the FTV effort, teachers worked collaboratively to share stories of pedagogical change and success in their classrooms; of how they were building positive relationships with families outside of school; and how invitations to Elders and Traditional Knowledge Keepers were helping them to create spaces for improved student engagement in school. We noted that these conversations invited others into these innovative spaces for change, and energized teachers as they saw their efforts being rewarded in tangible ways. In a handful of schools, however, and particularly in larger schools where staff members were distanced from each other or where school leadership was less intentional in its efforts to ensure time was available to the school-based facilitator to meet with teachers and to make people accountable to the initiative, FTV floundered because local facilitators and/or a handful of committed teachers were expected to lead all or most of the FTV work.

A third aspect of setting the stage for success included the need for teachers to engage in both pedagogical change and cultural responsiveness in their efforts. Most teachers aligned themselves with FTV processes because they wanted to learn how to better differentiate instruction. To that end, the ability to participate in observations of peers, walk-throughs and shadow coaching with facilitators appealed to their desire for professional growth. However, not all teachers had the same desire (or felt a need) to focus on cultural bias, whiteness, or anti-racist practice. Taking collective responsibility for the initiative was reduced for some teachers when it meant having to take collective responsibility for the endemic nature of racism in schools and the ways in which teachers have been complicit in its systemic forms. For non-Indigenous teachers in particular, or even Indigenous teachers who were not connected to cultural teachings, this area was complicated with socialized biases, or fears of misappropriating or misrepresenting cultural knowledge. More work has to be done to ensure teachers feel comfortable being vulnerable (or uncomfortable) in these spaces as they learn from cultural Knowledge Keepers and start to privilege cultural knowledge as an integral part of teaching knowledge, content, and pedagogy.

The point above leads into the fourth aspect of fostering collective effort by explicitly connecting Elders and Knowledge Keepers to the FTV initiative. In some spaces, Elders and Knowledge Keepers were employed by the school division/education authority as staff members, educational assistants, cultural liaisons, etc. Where this occurred, teachers were more apt to request their

expertise in classrooms as personal relationships developed in and outside of the classroom setting. In settings where Elders and Knowledge Keepers were relegated to the periphery of the school environment or engaged only when land-based education or highly visible cultural events took place, there was less investment in the cultural aspects of learning and/or changes within pedagogical or curricular innovation.

Finally, the initiative unapologetically places an emphasis on Indigenous student learners, changing teacher/student relationships and being culturally responsive. To that end, collective responsibility was fostered when the entire school community (parents/caregivers, students, Elders/Knowledge Keepers, teachers, staff, etc.) understood what the FTV initiative was intended to accomplish and why it had been implemented. Conversely, FTV floundered in places where communication of this nature was inconsistent, incomplete, or non-existent. A key data source for FTV schools are the surveys (used as secondary data in this study) that provide students and their parents/families with an opportunity to comment on changes that occur over time. However, when schools had not done a thorough job of communicating FTV's conceptualization or intent, survey respondents did not always understand why/how certain events or initiatives were implemented and/or how they were connected to each other or to FTV. To that end, parents in schools with ineffective communication, in particular, had little basis on which to offer input – making teacher critiques of data veracity a self-fulfilling prophecy. Furthermore, teachers/students in these schools could not always tease out outcomes of FTV from other initiatives or programs going on in the school, making their survey responses less helpful than they might have been if communication had been clear and consistent.

Sustainable Practice

Many of the comments in conversation circles linked back to the extent to which FTV could be sustainable over time. In the schools where implementation had been most successful, school leaders and staff had found ways to create space, time and mutual expectations for change and improvement. Some staffs used staff meetings to conduct break-out sessions for the initiative to differentiate support for growth and improvement based on teachers' goals and other relevant data. Some schools had creatively scheduled timetables to ensure that teachers who worked together on the initiative had common preparation times to be able to collaborate efficiently and observe each other's teaching. It was least successful in environments where staff were more or less left to their own devices to figure out how to make the initiative work, or were expected to conduct all meetings outside of the regular school day. It also did not work well in places where staff did not embrace the FTV work as a collective responsibility, leaving it to the committed few to create systemic change and/or resisting engagement in those changes themselves.

In many of the schools in the study, teacher turnover was relatively high. This often included turnover in key positions of the initiative, such as the school facilitators or lead teachers. The sustainability of the initiative was more promising in sites where facilitators were consistent over time, and were well-supported with time and resources to do their work. In the schools where there had been turnover, new facilitators were typically expected to have the same knowledge and training as those who had come before but were not provided with either the training or the time to pursue it. These individuals often lacked the support (and the institutional memory) to carry on with the group of teachers who were originally involved in the project. Similarly, teachers who had received training and had been part of the goal-setting, training and professional growth opportunities often took that training with them, leaving those left behind in the school to re-start the work with teachers new to the building and the initiative. Finally, some facilitators noted that school leaders did not always offer the pressure and support necessary for teacher engagement in the initiative. Since teachers typically pay attention to what school leaders emphasize, much of the sustainability of the initiative rested in school leaders' efforts to support the necessary culture for change.

Participants noted that the initiative was more likely to be sustainable when they viewed the professional learning involved with it (professional learning days, huddles, co-construction of goals, and classroom observations) as being worthy, timely and productive. This included the professional learning offered by provincial facilitators to school-based SCLTs. In a few cases, teachers or local facilitators felt that the professional learning opportunities had “*too many moving parts,*” that it was more time-consuming than it had to be, or that local input was minimized at the expense of being “*talked at*” by those who had particular agendas that did not always align with local need. It was also the case that the initiative had not yet offered professional learning opportunities for participating school principals to learn how to facilitate courageous conversations on racialization and cultural responsiveness. In many of the rural, remote and northern communities in which FTV is implemented, there exist long histories of racially-based tensions embodied in the systemic marginalization of Indigenous peoples. It cannot be assumed that school leaders are equipped to deal with these complex histories without professional training, yet without such training, the initiative could be lost due to a preference to avoid conflict.

The initiative was more likely to be sustained when collaborative capacity was built across all levels of the school system; locally, division/educational authority, regionally and provincially. When the initiative was supported within and across school sites, when division/educational authority messaging clearly demonstrated the value of FTV, and when initiatives and ideas were shared across the province, sustainability was supported. Local facilitators acknowledged their own professional growth in their capacity to support teachers; school teams built networks of connections for professional development purposes; ideas for future initiatives blossomed; and strategies for handling conflict or resistance were shared.

Leadership

Although many of the findings in this section link back to commentary related to the other two themes, the importance of intentional leadership of the FTV initiative cannot be minimized. The initiative was most successful in schools where school-based leaders took explicit and vocal responsibility to provide pressure and support for teacher engagement and change. Furthermore, we noted that in settings where district/educational authority leaders were actively and vocally supportive of local school efforts and were active agents in the messaging of the value of this work to other schools and within the community, schools were more successful in effecting the changes required and creating the culturally-affirming learning environment to which FTV aspires.

The school environment seemed to be most conducive to supporting Indigenous students and their families when leadership was viewed as a collective and collaborative responsibility of all, not just by formal leaders and/or the school facilitator. In schools where the initiative was successful, not only did leaders take initiative to regularly connect with Elders and Traditional Knowledge Keepers, but often Indigenous peoples were leading the FTV effort as administrators, facilitators, teachers, etc. In schools where the FTV effort was less successful, school administrators were essentially absent from the work. This literal and metaphorical absence of principals allowed teachers to question the validity of FTV and prompted us to question their commitment to improving outcomes for Indigenous students or, for that matter, reducing the systemic racism prevalent in some of these colonized school settings. As a consequence, teachers were not held accountable to engage and participate in the professional learning associated with FTV, or to use FTV-style discursive and relational strategies regularly. This abdication of leadership also tended to result in unclear or inconsistent expectations and communication which led to questions on the value and direction of FTV.

Discussion and Conclusion

Meta-analysis findings highlighted the level of collective responsibility necessary for success with an initiative of this scope. It also underscored the importance of developing shared purpose and vision and fostering alignment across the entire school between that purpose/vision and the actions educators, leaders, and others take in service of achieving the goals explicated in them. “*Nothing about us, without us*” was reinforced repeatedly in the need for shared vision and action between all those involved. Moreover, we noted that FTV’s perceived importance by groups it is intended to support, and its ability to take root in the participating schools directly affected the extent to which any particular school successfully changed both teacher practice and Indigenous student outcomes for the better. As a consequence, we offer a number of recommendations that stem from our findings.

First, in order for FTV to be sustainable, there must exist demonstrative, courageous, and consistent school-based and district-level commitment and support. Synergies that may support this engagement can be found within three other provincial initiatives currently underway in Saskatchewan—renewal of Inspiring Success (Government of Saskatchewan, 2018), the development of the Framework for an Education Sector Plan (Government of Saskatchewan, 2019), and Leading to Learn, which is a collaborative effort between educational leadership groups in the province focused on leadership professional growth to foster First Nations, Métis and Inuit educational success. Rather than viewing these important initiatives as separate, they should build upon and refer to each other to strengthen the message that the will, responsibility and effort to improve Indigenous education is a collective one, driven by and through existing provincial mandates that have developed through the efforts of activists, commissions, educators, and leaders from Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

A second recommendation is the need to improve and explore strategies for communicating the value and intent of FTV within and across initiative personnel, schools, division/educational authorities, communities, and regions of the province. There remains a tendency to silo information in local areas, and/or within the different systems. Being more intentional about messaging this important work across systems and to the general public would help local schools and districts become more strategic about telling their FTV stories which may lead to further improvements. It also necessitates considerable additional effort toward building data literacy within school teams for facilitating collaborative and proactive conversations that can inform practice.

We recommend more intentional, systemic and visible inclusion of Elders and Traditional Knowledge Keepers in all aspects of the FTV initiative. These individuals have been involved throughout FTV development and implementation at the provincial and system levels but, at the local level, they should have a larger role as a representative and knowledgeable presence on SCLTs, in classrooms, and in curriculum development. Their modeling and representation allow for more regular cultural teachings, protocol learning, and relationship building as they become part of the educative and relational culture of schools. Their presence may serve to offset some of the stigma and mistrust held in many Indigenous communities in relation to the value and impacts of western schooling. Their presence can also help to shift discourse and open up relational possibilities that otherwise might be stymied in rural communities that have been built on settler colonial assumptions of white privilege.

Of particular importance to the scholarship of educational administration and leadership were findings highlighting the impact of committed and courageous leadership. At the time of study, each school was at a different place in its journey toward implementation of the FTV instructional and leadership structures – despite the fact that all of them began their journeys at the same time. We found that the schools in which the principal actively participated in professional learning activities alongside teachers, transparently allotted resources (e.g., dedicated space for

professional discussions, released key in-school facilitators from classroom duties to lead school improvement efforts, etc.) in service of improvement, and publicly acknowledged both the vision of the FTV initiative and the efforts of teachers to change were much more successful in transforming instruction and improving outcome for students overall and for Indigenous students in particular.

We also found that, despite substantial resistance to pedagogical and relational changes underpinning the FTV initiative, authentic Elder and Knowledge Keeper involvement and creative professional development was inspiring many teachers to make sincere efforts to change their practice to better serve students. Furthermore, we noted modest early success in outcomes related to improvements in Indigenous high school students' course completion and engagement in their learning.

In conclusion, it was an honour to speak with Elders, children and youth, teachers and leaders who are committed to making their local learning environments reflective of the spirit and intent of the FTV initiative. Although FTV cannot fix all the issues that compound their effects on Indigenous student learning, it is the hope that the direct attention and focus on cultural responsiveness, relationality, and the creation of safe environments in schools will help to offset some of these factors and shift the focus in these rural, remote and northern schools to issues of how race and privilege impact on learning success. Systemically, our research found that resistance to change remains, and very real challenges exist; but we also found that those who are committed to FTV truly are making a difference, one relationship at a time.

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