



Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

Wāhkōhtowin: Decolonizing Teacher Preparation for Rural, Urban and First Nations Schools

Dawn C. Wallin

University of Saskatchewan

dawn.wallin@usask.ca

Christopher Scribe

First Nations University

cscribe@firstnationsuniversity.ca

Abstract

This paper stories the creation of the Wāhkōhtowin teacher preparation model on Treaty 6 territory in Saskatchewan, Canada. The model was created out of an educational partnership that responded to the teachings of Nēhiyaw (Cree) Indigenous Elders. We describe the theoretical framework of this Professional Development School (PDS) teacher preparation model that is designed to: decolonize teacher preparation in order to foster student learning and engagement; develop Nēhiyaw teacher identity and proficiency; and support reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. The foundational constructs of the Wāhkōhtowin model of teacher preparation include: relationality, ceremony, language, and child-centredness. The spirit of Wāhkōhtowin teacher preparation is premised on three intents. Firstly, teacher candidates are encouraged to be free to be themselves and share the gifts they bring to the school setting (*tipéyimisowin*). Secondly, they are encouraged to ‘come home’ to traditional teachings as they engage in cultural learning and identity formation (*kiwēwin*). Thirdly, their pedagogical growth and development as teachers is fostered with the focus on relational pedagogies, inclusiveness, and community (*mamáwi kiskinomāsowin*). We complete our paper by discussing the implementation of the Wāhkōhtowin model. We discuss the ways in which the model has had to shift to be responsive to: the unique relationships and contexts of different school systems; provincial budget cuts; the opportunity to expand the program into secondary schools; working with/through teacher turnover; the provision of language and cultural activities; land-based programming; professional development sessions; differing comfort levels and knowledge regarding Indigenous history and traditions; and the impact of COVID-19.

Keywords: *Indigenous education; teacher education; culturally responsive pedagogy*

Acknowledgement

We wish to acknowledge Treaty 6 and Treaty 4 territories on whose lands we are situated, and the First Nations and Métis peoples whose ancestors have stewarded these territories since time immemorial. We pay respect to the Indigenous peoples and lands wherever readers may be situated and affirm our relationships with one another.

We wish to acknowledge the Elders and Knowledge Keepers from whom we have received the teachings that have grounded this important work in Nēhiyaw māmitonēyicikan, or Cree thought and philosophy.

Nēhiyawak (Cree) Acknowledgement:

ninanāskomānānak nēhiyaw-ānisko-wahkōmākanak kâ-kiskinohtahikowahkwâw ôma atoskêwin.
nipakosēyimonân kita-wîcīhikocik okiskinhwahkamâkêwak kwayask kita-nēhiyaw
māmitonēyihthakwâw.

namôya nitipēyihthânân ôma kiskinhwahamâkêwin mâka māmawi-okâwîmâw, kisê-manitow, êkwa
awâsisak tipēyihthamwak.

nipakosēyimonân mîna kita-māmawi-atoskêcīk okiskinhwahamâkêwak.

English (rough) Translation:

We acknowledge the Cree ancestors who made this work possible.

Our hope is that this work helps teachers think Cree.

This knowledge does not belong to us. It belongs to Mother Earth, the Creator and our children.

The goal for us is to create a family of teachers.

(We acknowledge Ede Venne, Nēhiyaw Language Keeper, for this translation)

Wāhkōhtowin: Decolonising Teacher Preparation

One of the most important pillars of any teacher preparation program is the design and delivery of experiences in schools that weave together theory and practice. However, as evidenced in the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC, 2015a), Canada's colonial history led to the creation of education systems that were designed to 'kill the Indian in the child', in order to assimilate Indigenous peoples into Canadian society. As a consequence, scholars have critiqued teacher preparation programs as privileging whiteness and reifying colonial assumptions that continue to perpetuate inequitable experiences for Indigenous peoples (Beardsley & Teitel, 2004; Cottrell & Orlowski, 2014; Pratt & Danyluk, 2017; Wallin & Peden, 2014). The Indian Teacher Education Program (ITEP) at the University of Saskatchewan has worked for decades to deconstruct this Eurocentric model of education, and to create spaces and places where Indigenous knowledge, and Indigenous teacher candidates, can thrive (<https://education.usask.ca/itep/>). To that end, ITEP has continuously worked with educational partners to create safe spaces for Indigenous teacher candidates to complete learning experiences that support their identities as First Nations peoples as well as their identities as becoming teachers.

This paper describes the conceptualization of an innovative Indigenous teacher preparation model developed in partnership with the Indian Teacher Education Program (ITEP), Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools (GSCS), and Saskatoon Tribal Council (STC). Implementation of the model has expanded to include elementary and secondary schools in Saskatoon Public Schools

and a preK-12 school in Kahkewistahaw First Nation. The model was informed by Indigenous community Elders and designed to decolonize teacher preparation in order to respond to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) *Calls to Action*. The model was named by the Elders as *Wāhkōhtowin*, which is a Nēhiyaw (Cree) word representing the sacred laws of kinship. Nowhere else have we found a teacher preparation model responsive to public, Catholic, and First Nations education systems that is built upon and sustained by an Indigenous epistemology. This paper tells the story of the creation of the *Wāhkōhtowin* model and discusses how its conceptualization supports First Nations teacher preparation. This conceptualization is based on a Nēhiyaw (Cree) worldview situated within Treaty 6 territory and does not claim to represent the linguistic and/or cultural traditions of other Indigenous peoples and territories.

Situating Ourselves

Dr. Chris Scribe, Nakota/Nehiyaw (Assiniboine/Cree) is from Carry the Kettle Nakoda Oyade and Kinosao Sipi Cree Nations. He firmly grounds himself in his Indigenous culture, language and tradition built on the life teachings of his father and Grandmother. Chris was born into an intergenerational family legacy of advocates for Indigenous education. He received his Bachelor of Education through the Indian Teacher Education Program at the University of Saskatchewan, and eventually became the Director of that program that is the largest and most successful Indigenous teacher education program in Canada. He has served as teacher or administrator in international, national, provincial and First Nation education systems, and currently is an Assistant Professor with First Nations University. He also is the lead of a Not-For-Profit organization called *Think Indigenous*. This is an organization that supports and gives back to the educational community, offering support for Indigenous events, cultural and linguistic initiatives and teacher professional development on issues related to Indigenous pedagogy.

Dr. Dawn Wallin describes herself as a “*farm kid from Saskatchewan*” with a mixed cultural heritage of Scandinavian and Slovakian backgrounds. She grew up with a settler Canadian historical perspective, learning little about First Nations and colonial history other than stereotypical and discriminatory attitudes. Her educational journey led her to become a faculty member in Texas. It was at the University of Texas-PanAmerican where she first recognized the power of white privilege as a Canadian white minority woman in the Latinx setting on the United States-Mexico border. Upon her return to Canada she began to work with a number of Indigenous colleagues, friends and Knowledge Keepers who led her down the often painful path of decolonizing her own, and the education systems ideologies, in order to lead change in schools and post-secondary contexts that support Indigenous education.

Back (Story)

The Indian Teacher Education Program (ITEP) at the University of Saskatchewan is half a millenia old and focuses on the preparation of First Nations teachers for First Nations and public schools. It began in 1972-73 as a means of responding to the National Indian Brotherhood's 'Red Paper' entitled, *Indian Control of Indian Education* (1972). This policy paper was created in response to the Canadian government's attempts to abdicate its fiduciary responsibility to Indigenous peoples through a policy paper called, *Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy* (Government of Canada, 1969), commonly called the 'White Paper'. The resultant contention between the federal government and Indigenous peoples ultimately led to the devolution of control of federally-run, First Nations school systems to First Nations communities, though never to the extent of autonomous First Nations self-government as was advocated in the Red Paper.

The ITEP program has a long history of shaping-shifting to fulfill the educative needs of First Nations students and communities. It prides itself on working with First Nations Elders and communities to incorporate and support traditional and cultural knowledge, language

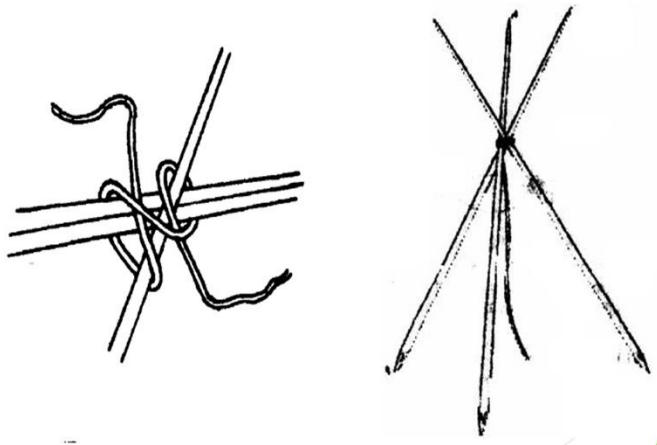
development and teaching, treaty teachings, and decolonizing teaching practice. Graduates of ITEP have taken on leadership roles in teaching, administration, Indigenous and non-Indigenous governance. Not surprisingly, however, as an Indigenous program situated in a colonial western university, ITEP has faced many challenges to funding, programming, and staffing over time. The program is currently administered and staffed by First Nations peoples and plays a lead role in helping the University of Saskatchewan foster reconciliation efforts for post-secondary education.

Although teacher candidates have been highly successful in ITEP, the results have not necessarily translated into increased academic success for Indigenous children and youth, nor have they translated into increased recruitment and employment prospects for Indigenous teachers, particularly in public school systems. The national and provincial data on Indigenous student achievement rates indicate that Indigenous children remain significantly behind their non-Indigenous peers on western standards of academic success (Howe, 2017; Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2018; Statistics Canada, 2013). Rather than attributing the causes of this achievement gap to the inability of Indigenous children to achieve academically, the TRC (2015a) demonstrated that the causes of this gap are largely systemic and structural and linked to a colonial past that designed systems to ensure Indigenous peoples would not be successful. Researchers have attributed the achievement gap to a variety of factors that are beyond the scope of this paper but must be mentioned because they have led to the partnership and teacher preparation model discussed in this paper: (a) narrow definitions of what constitutes achievement (Wotherspoon, 2014); (b) a lack of cultural responsiveness in curricula (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Gunn et al., 2011); (c) a lack of Indigenous teacher role models (Kanu, 2005); (d) lowered expectations for Indigenous children (Jensen, 2009); (e) a lack of linguistic sensitivity to Indigenous languages or language speakers (Demmert, 2011; Kovach, 2009); (f) a lack of student engagement and self-confidence as lived experience and worldview go unacknowledged (Brayboy & Castagno, 2009; Julien, 2016; Kirkness, 2013; Tuck, E., & Yang, 2012); (g) institutionalized racism and white privilege within the school system (Battiste, 2013; Hansen & Antsanen, 2015; Madden, Higgens, & Korteweg, 2013), and; (h) the effects of intergenerational trauma on families that have experienced the residential school system (Castellano, Archibald, & DeGagné, 2011; TRC, 2012; 2015a) or the Sixties Scoop (McKenzie et al., 2016; Menzies, 2008) during which thousands of Indigenous children were scooped from their families and placed into non-Indigenous foster care.

At a local level, even though ITEP has a 50-year history of graduating Indigenous teachers, these teachers remain under-represented in Saskatchewan schools (Howe, 2017), particularly in public school systems. There exists significant need to increase the numbers of Indigenous teachers who can serve as cultural and pedagogical role models for Saskatchewan's increasing Indigenous population. In recognition of these concerns and in light of the *Calls to Action* (TRC, 2015b), leaders and educators from ITEP, Saskatoon Tribal Council and Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools came together to discuss ways they could work together to share resources and knowledge that could support the decolonization of current practices, increase the recruitment and retention of First Nations teachers, and create educational spaces that acknowledge and are premised upon First Nations worldviews.

It was apparent from the beginning that if the partnership was to exist in the spirit it was intended, the work had to begin in ceremony and rely heavily on the teachings of Elders. To foster that spirit, the groups engaged in appropriate cultural protocols to invite Elders who represented different linguistic and cultural groups to meet over time in sacred spaces and in ceremony to discuss the nature and potential name of the partnership. After the Elders shared their thoughts, they named the partnership *sītoskātowin*, which translates in English through the analogy of the tipi (*mikiwhap*) that represents traditional knowledge, support systems, and the wisdom passed down from the Creator (Figure 1).

Figure 1: *Sītoskātowin Binding on a Tipi (Mikiwhap)*



Sītoskātowin represents the binding on the structural poles of the *mikiwhap*. Each of the poles represents the partners that bring their own strengths, ideas and ways of knowing to the partnership, but together support the common goal of strengthening Indigenous education. The poles are grounded in Mother Earth, which forms spiritual identity and provides the foundation for growth. The rope that binds the poles ties partners to the earth and to each other and carries within it the intent to work together harmoniously and with good intent. It demonstrates the support each provides to other partners, and their reliance on one another to make the partnership strong. Without each partner, the structure cannot flourish. However, it is also the case that more poles (partners) make the *mikiwhap* stronger, and therefore, more partners have always been welcomed to the partnership. Over time, the partnership has grown to include Saskatoon Public Schools as well as Kahkewistahaw First Nation.

While working with educational partners on the design of culturally fulsome teacher preparation programming, ITEP staff members learned of a Professional Development School (Buzza, Kotsopoulos, & Mueller, 2010; Dresden et al. 2016) model supported by the National Association of Professional Development Schools (NAPDS, <https://napds.org/>) that exists in the United States. This model privileges the merging of teacher preparation coursework and field experiences within a school-based setting. After attending the annual conference of the NAPDS and considering its mandate, ITEP staff determined that the overall structure of the model could be built upon as an experimental model for ITEP teacher candidates. What was clearly missing in the model, however, was a cultural lens through which teacher candidates and educational partners could work to decolonize teacher preparation and align with First Nations worldviews related to the education of children and youth. Once again, partner members requested the support from Elders to help design a conceptual model for teacher preparation that was premised on a Nēhiyaw (Cree) worldview. The Elders named the model *Wāhkōhtowin*, representing the sacred laws of kinship.

What came out of these teachings is a framework for teacher preparation that blends university coursework and field experiences (theory and practice) in a culturally responsive manner within a school setting. The following section describes the conceptual framework of the *Wāhkōhtowin* teacher preparation model.

Wāhkōhtowin: Conceptualizing Teacher Preparation

The *Wāhkōhtowin* teacher preparation model is conceptualized from a worldview supported by *Nēhiyaw māmitonēyikan*, or Cree thought and philosophy. The ideas utilized in its creation come from oral teachings provided by First Nations Elders. Cultural traditions such as mentoring and relationships with Elders are considered to be integral to teacher preparation (Restoule, Gruner, & Metatawabin, 2013), and are governed by *Nēhiyaw Law* (Innes, 2013). As one of the *Nēhiyaw*

Elders explained in the talking circles during its development, “Nēhiyaw māmitonēyicikan is based on a spirit that has been present for a long time. The trickster was our teacher, providing us teachings from the Creator, the universal mind. We are akin to Creator’s mind. We think in a way that is holistic. He has many names, but the trickster represents our Nēhiyaw conceptualization of teaching” (Elder Delvin Kanewiyakiho). Given the prairie territory of Treaty 6 on which the model was developed, the Nēhiyaw conceptualization is represented visually and conceptually by the teachings of a 3-dimensional tipi (*mikiwhap*) found in Figure 2. The land grounds the model in the protocols, teachings, and language of the particular territory in which it is centred.

Figure 2: Wāhkōhtowin Teacher Preparation Model



The Wāhkōhtowin model centres on love, respect and humility (the three poles of the partnership) with the intent that the partners work together in this spirit for teacher candidates and students. At the top of the tipi, the poles are bound together. It is this binding for a common purpose that embodies the support of each partner and their reliance on each other. Hence, the Elders named the partnership *sítoskātowin*, or supporting one another. Without the three poles’ connection, there cannot be a solid foundation for Wāhkōhtowin to flourish. The foundational constructs of the Wāhkōhtowin model include: relationality, ceremony, language, and child-centredness.

Relationality

This construct rejects hierarchical power relationships, noting that everyone is equal in the circle (Kirkness, 2013). Partners, instructors, teachers, teacher candidates, and students are equally respected, and are all related. Knowledge systems have been passed on through intergenerational relationships, consequently empowering learners and continually extending knowledge (Oskineegish, 2015). All voices are respected in this intergenerational, continual process of learning, and each person brings a skill or knowledge that makes the circle stronger. The teacher/student relationship is sacred, mutually supportive and exemplifies reciprocity. Teacher candidates are taught to consider themselves as kin to students, working as if they are aunts/uncles who have a responsibility to ensure each student’s success. The medicine wheel teachings help teacher candidates understand the need for holistic teaching that focuses on the

physical, mental, social, and emotional development of themselves and the children they teach (Cherubini et al., 2010).

Learning and Teaching as Ceremony

The Elders teach that all homes have a fire that supports life, and therefore all ceremonies have fire associated with them. The fire spirit gives life like the sun (*iskotew*). This fire is related to the woman (*iskwew*) because central to any home is a strong, loving woman who is a warrior protector of the family, lands and waters (*okiciitaw iskwewak*). Ceremony teaches teacher candidates to understand the fire and the importance of each person around that fire. It affirms our first teachers, our mothers, who teach us language and culture, and who set us on life's path. In the Nēhiyaw language, the child is called *awasis*, which refers to a light being or spirit being. Attempts to decolonize education therefore must include helping Indigenous youth understand who they are, and how they fit into the circle (Oskineegish, 2015). They must come to recognize themselves as spiritual beings deserving of love.

In ceremony, song, dance, and the Elders' teachings, truths are revealed within the circle that were once suppressed (Wilson, 2008). The Elders use the term *weyi* which means get ready. Ceremony helps Indigenous peoples get ready for the future, to have faith in a creator, faith in community and faith in doing what they can to support the circle. Decolonizing teacher preparation includes ceremony so that teacher candidates can come back to those sacred teachings (Oskineegish, 2015). As they become culturally grounded, they gain the self-confidence necessary to contribute to the community.

Language

The spirit inherent in the Nēhiyaw language becomes a guiding philosophy for teaching, for caring for the child/learner, and for clarifying how teachers should conduct themselves. Language fosters identity, and shapes worldview (Demmert, 2011). The Nēhiyawak language is action-oriented, verb-based and descriptive of what is going on in the world around the speaker. The words imbue all aspects of the world with spirit and life. Therefore, for example, the language that shapes thinking about the land as Mother Earth also shapes people's relationship to the land. Such thinking would never lend itself to the concept of private ownership, because families do not sell their mother, nor do they own her. Including Nēhiyaw language within the teacher preparation program helps teachers and teacher candidates decolonize their thinking about what it means to teach, and how to re-imagine relationships with each other, their students, and the world. They become able to critique the colonial assumptions upon which school systems, teaching preparation, and teacher conduct are based because the language helps them conceive of alternate ways of understanding the world (Battiste, 1998; Demmert, 2011).

Student/Child-centredness

In the Nēhiyawak culture, being able to create and raise children is a great honour that entails much responsibility (Cherubini et al., 2010). Children represent the continuity of creation, and they advance our ancestral humanity into the future. According to the Elders, the child is inherently intelligent, loving and respectful. Parents need to model these values so that the child can live them and express them daily. The notion of kinship relationality (Innes, 2013) moves this responsibility to teachers who act as proxy parents or relatives to the child. Because of this sacred relationship, teacher candidates are taught that if they are going to teach, they must do so with love and respect, and acknowledge the gifts each child brings to the circle of the classroom.

Spirit and Intent of Wāhkōhtowin Teacher Preparation

The Wāhkōhtowin teacher preparation model is designed to help Indigenous teacher candidates feel comfortable in the school setting (*tipéyimisowin*), to support them in cultural learning and identity (*kīwēwin*), and to foster their pedagogical growth and development as teachers (*mamáwi kiskinomāsowin*).

Tipéyimisowin: The State of Being Free to be Ourselves

In many colonial school environments, Indigenous people have had to prove themselves as learners and as teachers. By virtue of their racialized identities, they are not granted immediate legitimacy as capable knowers in a system that privileges whiteness and colonial assumptions (Pratt & Danyluk, 2017). *Tipéyimisowin* is the state of being in charge of one's self or being sovereign/free. In this understanding, individuals are self-determining, and power is shared amongst all people equally. Students and teacher candidates are honoured for what they contribute to the circle. Space is created for them to be seen and heard (Kirkness, 2013). Teacher candidates are able to walk into a school building and 'be' without first having to defend their identities as Nēhiyawak people. As a consequence, teacher candidates develop a strong sense of their own efficacy from the beginning of their time in schools. They are empowered to think of themselves as contributing professionals whose experiences and knowledge are gifts they bring to the teaching and learning environment. Because it takes significant time, energy and care to establish spaces that foster *Tipéyimisowin*, ITEP and the partners were deliberate in choosing which schools would take part in Wāhkōhtowin. These schools already have histories of working towards inclusive environments for First Nations communities, have larger numbers of First Nations teachers on staff, and offer First Nations culture and language programming as part of their academic and extra-curricular opportunities.

Kīwēwin: The State of Going Home

After a break during ceremonial gatherings, the criers call *pekiwek*, which means come home all of you. The Wāhkōhtowin teacher preparation model is designed to call Indigenous teacher candidates home to their Indigenous cultures as they learn to teach in spaces where Indigenous thought and relationships are honored. They are asked to return to the teachings of their ancestors that were and continue to be disrupted by colonialism (Battiste, 2013). Teacher candidates come home to the fire, to the ceremony of learning and teaching that is developed with each piece of wood (idea, practice) that is added to their learning. They are placed in settings where they can find elements of their identity, culture and language (Cherubini et al., 2010). As they work with their peers, ITEP alumni, and Indigenous teachers who role model success, their confidence in their identity as Indigenous people and as Indigenous teachers grows.

Mamáwi kiskinomāsowin: Reciprocal Learning and Teaching in Community

Throughout our life, we learn from people who become our teachers, our relations. After we learn, we pass on those teachings to others who are on similar journeys. Therefore, learning is not an individual endeavour; we learn by observing, experiencing, thinking, and doing in relation to other beings, the land, or thought. It is only when teacher candidates understand that they are in a space where their identities are supported that they can focus on teaching and learning (Cherubini et al., 2010). In the Wāhkōhtowin teacher preparation model, teacher candidates learn to rely on each other to build their knowledge, focusing on relational pedagogies, inclusiveness, and community, similar to that developed in the Te Kotahitanga Project in Māori schools in New Zealand (Bishop, Ladwig, & Berryman, 2014), but centred in the land and teachings of Treaty 6 and Treaty 4 territory. The classroom becomes a place where teacher candidates engage in new and innovative teaching and learning strategies that foster and support the gifts that each person brings to the circle. Teacher candidates learn to teach children at the same time as they

learn from them. In this understanding of reciprocal teaching and learning, teachers and learners are able to take risks together and find ways to approach educational and other challenges.

From Spirit and Intent to Practice

The Wāhkōhtowin model is premised on the idea that teacher candidates, instructors, collaborating teachers and students will work together in a school setting to decolonize their thinking, teaching practice and relationships in order to: (a) foster student learning and engagement; (b) develop Nēhiyaw teacher identity and proficiency (professionally, culturally and linguistically); and (c) work towards understanding our shared colonial truth in order for reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to become a reality. The privileging of field-based experiences is key to an Indigenous epistemology centred on experiential embodied learning whereby individuals learn through observation and hands-on experiences and then have opportunities to reflect on and ask questions about those experiences with knowledgeable others in the moment. Teacher candidates are placed in Wāhkōhtowin partner schools where they engage in professional growth opportunities led by an ITEP instructor for part of the school day, after which they work with collaborating teachers in classrooms to enact what they have learned with children/youth and to reflect on their experiences. These experiences are grounded in cultural teachings, language and ceremony. Teacher candidates are collectively supported by Indigenous program facilitators who are employed by the partner school divisions as First Nations, Métis and Inuit consultants, as well as an Indigenous Field Experience Coordinator employed by the College of Education who facilitates placements and moderates any concerns between students, teachers, and partners. Elders and Knowledge Keepers are as integral to the program as teacher mentors, offering leadership during ceremonies, facilitating land-based education practices, sharing knowledge and teachings, and serving as role models and guides for Indigenous education. Partners touch base regularly with each other, sometimes as a formal collective, and sometimes in localized division or school-based settings to ensure that regular communication with all who are integral to the success of Wāhkōhtowin is privileged, concerns can be addressed, and improvements to our collective efforts can be made.

Of course, clearly articulating a model, and implementing it, are quite different things. Each school system has a unique culture, different ways of organizing schools, teachers and students, and different capacities and priorities for addressing First Nations education. To that end, ITEP has had to regularly be responsive to different, or changing, needs within and across schools and systems. ITEP staff regularly work with principals, teachers, and system leaders who have very different views of what (and how) initiatives should take place. Taking care of relationships and being open to contextual needs while also maintaining some semblance of consistency in the model can be difficult. However, it has been gratifying to note that even if the territories on which the model rests have different protocols or ways of being, commitment to its conceptualization has allowed the model to be enacted in practice even if it looks different across sites.

A significant hurdle occurred in our first year of implementation when the provincial government drastically cut spending on public education. Both of our public school system partners had to massively reduce spending across all units, including those dedicated to First Nations, Métis and Inuit learning supports. In the initial design, local system facilitators were supporting the ITEP Wāhkōhtowin field placements as well as an extended practicum placement. It became impossible for the local system facilitators to find time for school observations, planning for cultural events, and handling concerns for all of these placements in addition to their increased system responsibilities. A related hurdle occurred when the partners advocated that high schools become involved in the project. Although this was an idea supported by all partners, the change added logistical complexity for all involved as students were dispersed across more schools, and

impacted the ways in which relationality manifests itself, particularly since high schools remain organized in a highly bureaucratic, compartmentalized model. In response to these two realities, ITEP re-organized its field placement process to ensure that local system facilitators were focused on the Wāhkōhtowin school placements only, and moved back to a model of acquiring out-of-system facilitators for the extended practicum. ITEP also continues to work to find ways to ensure that high school teacher candidates (and teachers) do not feel isolated. To that end, expectations are shifting to create more discussions between teacher candidates and teachers in high school placements, and so that there is more ability to visit other high school classrooms or with staff who have responsibilities beyond the classroom (special education, English as Additional Language, etc.).

Although the schools within the project were selected because of their emphasis on First Nations learning, changes in staffing and school priorities necessitate that ITEP regularly communicates the distinct nature of the Wāhkōhtowin model and its differences from other teacher education program routes. Although ITEP has tried to ensure that there is a commitment to local teacher development and understanding of the model, the fact remains that teacher turnover is high in these school communities. Teachers are excited about the model once they have been part of the effort and understand its beauty; the more difficult challenge is helping them avoid teacher burnout as they support communities affected by the traumas perpetuated by Canada's colonial history.

The nature and extent of the provision of language and cultural opportunities has to be sensitively undertaken even as they are greatly appreciated. Partners recognize the diversity of Indigenous peoples who are enrolled in Saskatchewan schools, and do not want to promote a pan-Indian approach to First Nations education. Given that there are seven different Indigenous languages spoken in Saskatchewan, as well as great differences in protocols across the vast territories of this land, it can be difficult to offer language or cultural opportunities without creating perceptions of inequitable treatment or cultural appropriation. The Wāhkōhtowin model is premised on Nēhiyaw (Cree) language and culture of the local Treaty Six territory around Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Cree is the most widely spoken Indigenous language in the territory, but there is constant recognition that there are different dialects, languages, and protocols that also should be represented in order to be respectful of the diversity of peoples who are enrolled in the ITEP program and in schools.

Although land-based education is a cornerstone of Indigenous pedagogies, it can be challenging to organize or provide these opportunities given liability, financial and geographic concerns. To that end, the partners have worked with ITEP to share responsibilities, but recognize that this is an area where more opportunities need to occur. Many teachers who support Wāhkōhtowin engage in regular urban land-based activities, but there is always a need for more traditional cultural land-based practices. Fortunately, both Saskatoon Public Schools and Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools have land-based education sites outside of the city that open up possibilities for this programming. Kahkewistahaw First Nation is well situated for offering land-based programming that is part of its community tradition. In addition, although all schools in the project have access to Elders and Knowledge Keepers, there are not yet enough of them (or funding to respectfully remunerate them) given the large numbers of classrooms and students who need direct contact with these wisdom carriers.

Over time, the nature of the content of the professional development sessions offered by the ITEP Instructor has shifted to address areas where partners or students suggest improvement. This includes more emphasis on traditional areas of teacher education (unit planning, teacher professionalism), but also more emphasis on how to incorporate First Nations pedagogies, worldviews and pedagogies into classrooms that need to be decolonized. There have also been more events planned outside of regular courses or school days to make space for additional learning (language classes, culture camps, time with Elders and Knowledge Keepers, etc.).

Discussions are deepening around topics such as anti-racist and anti-oppressive theories and pedagogies as teacher candidates claim their identities as Indigenous teachers who want to create spaces of learning that are different from many of their own, or their families', experiences.

The fact that one partner is part of the Catholic system has brought with it conversations related to the role of the church in the residential school experience, and the extent to which teacher candidates need to be granted choice in their placements given the potential of triggering intergenerational trauma. It is also the case that teachers and students are in different places in their personal journeys, understanding and comfort levels with Indigenous knowledge, protocols, and traditions. Navigating these spaces of difference is no easy task, and necessitates much open discussion, support for diversity, and care.

Finally, COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the implementation of the model as relations with schools and partners changed completely from what they were before. Although partners remained true to the spirit and intent of the Wāhkōhtowin model, the size and number of ceremonial gatherings, school-based events, and leadership team meetings were reduced. How individuals engaged in Indigenous protocols changed from the ways that Elders and Knowledge Keepers had expected in the past. Some Elders and Knowledge Keepers were comfortable moving to virtual environments, while others were not. The ability to provide teacher candidates with opportunities to work with multiple classrooms, teachers and students was removed as schools reorganized for reduced contact. Facilitators and ITEP staff were unable to visit schools for entire terms and were unable to meet with partners in a face-to-face manner. Although the core of the Wāhkōhtowin model was protected in that the education and training of teacher candidates remained at the centre of all efforts., many of the additional value-added, relational and cultural spaces were deeply impacted. Never-the-less, partners remained (and remain) deeply committed to this work, and graciously hosted ITEP teacher candidates despite the fatigue, anxiety and changes that had to occur. It is this commitment to the spirit and intent of Wāhkōhtowin amidst such adversity that offers the hope that together, all of our relations will achieve the ultimate purpose of this teacher education model.

Conclusion

It is our belief that the Wāhkōhtowin teacher preparation model offers a means of privileging Indigeneity within teacher preparation programs and supports teacher candidates as they learn to decolonize school spaces to support Indigenous learners. In order to achieve this goal, the *sītoskātowin* partners decided that it was important for us to regularly collect information to help us ensure we are achieving our intent. We were able to acquire a four-year Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council research grant that allows us to study the design, enactment and efficacy of the model. Although the purpose of this paper is to report on the conceptualization and implementation of the model, we have aligned our research into the effectiveness of the model within an Indigenous relational framework, employing a qualitative mixed methods approach (Merriam, 2009) of interpretive description that utilizes Indigenous, qualitative and quantitative approaches. As hinted at in the above implementation glitches, we anticipate that we will face “*jagged worldviews colliding*” (Littlebear, 2000, p. 85) given that we have conceptualized the Wāhkōhtowin model from a Nēhiyaw perspective but are conducting the research in colonial institutions that have historically marginalized Indigenous worldviews (Pratt & Danyluk, 2017; Wallin & Peden, 2014). We frame the research study as practice research (Goldkuhl, 2011) in which operational practices are studied for the purpose of theorizing and for contributing to the development of effective local and generalized practices. We hold to a spirit of research as ceremony (Archibald, 2009; Wilson, 2008) and we will analyze data from a Nēhiyaw perspective (Nēhiyaw māmitonēyicikan).

As Kovach (2009) notes, “[t]he purpose of decolonization is to create space in everyday life, research, academia, and society for an Indigenous perspective without it being neglected, shunted aside, mocked, or dismissed” (p. 85). The Wāhkōhtowin teacher preparation model creates a decolonized space for teacher preparation in ways that privilege Indigenous perspectives and shed light on reconciliation efforts within public, Catholic and First Nations school systems. Implementation has not been without challenges, and we continue to shift when necessary, but the commitment of the partners to the model has been outstanding. The next phase of research conducted on the model will contribute to the body of knowledge of teacher preparation generally, and specifically to the knowledge related to Professional Development Schools. Practically, the model offers possibilities for reconceptualizing teacher preparation from a culturally responsive and anti-racist position (St. Denis, 2007) that helps heal the colonial soul wound (Battiste, 1998) created and perpetuated by Canadian school systems. It will extend the body of knowledge that focuses on the key role that teachers play in student learning (Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008) by acknowledging the role that cultural identity plays with regard to teacher efficacy and teaching proficiency. It offers potential means of reducing the achievement gap for Indigenous students as what is meant by success is reconsidered and reconceptualized through the offering of counter-stories that detail the lived racialized truths of learners in Canadian schools (Carmen, 2018; Kariwo, Asadi, & El Bouhali, 2019; Marom, 2019). The model also has significance for the design of teacher preparation programs that are culturally responsive to the educational contexts within which teachers work, and that necessitate a focus on anti-racist pedagogies and leadership (Diem & Welton, 2021). Ultimately, it is our contention that this model will help to decolonize teacher preparation, programming and policy through the development of partnerships that support reconciliation, strengthen cultural identity, foster teacher growth, and improve student learning outcomes.

Funding and Support

We acknowledge our partners from Greater Saskatoon Schools, Saskatoon Tribal Council, Saskatoon Public Schools, and Kahkewistahaw First Nations who work with us to ensure the Wāhkōhtowin teacher preparation model is enacted with its true spirit and intent.

We acknowledge the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada that has funded the research for the study of this decolonizing teacher education professional development school model.

References

- Archibald, J. (2009). *Indigenous storywork: Educating the heart, mind, body and spirit*. UBC Press.
- Battiste, M. (1998). Enabling the autumn seed: Toward a decolonized approach to Aboriginal knowledge, language, and education. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 22(1), 16-27.
- Battiste, M. (2013). *Decolonizing education: Nourishing the learning spirit*. Purich.
- Beardsley, L. V., & Teitel, L. (2004). Learning to see color in teacher education: An example framed by the professional development school standard for diversity and equity. *The Teacher Educator*, 40(2), 91-115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08878730409555354>
- Bishop, R., Ladwig, J., & Berryman, M. (2014). The centrality of relationships for pedagogy: The whanaungatanga thesis. *American Education Research Journal*, 51(1), 184-214. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831213510019>
- Brayboy, B. M. J., & Castagno, A. E. (2009). Self-determination through self-education: Culturally responsive schooling for Indigenous students in the USA. *Teaching Education*, 20(1), 31-53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10476210802681709>
- Buzza, D., Kotsopoulos, D., & Mueller, J. (2010). Investigating a professional development school model of teacher education in Canada. *McGill Journal of Education*, 45(1), 45-61. <https://mje.mcgill.ca/article/download/3104/4463/23474>
- Carmen, L. (2018). *A critical race theory analysis of Métis teachers' counter-stories*. Doctoral Dissertation. University of Saskatchewan.
- Castagno, A. E., & Brayboy, B. M. J. (2008). Culturally responsive schooling for Indigenous youth: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 78(4), 941-993. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654308323036>
- Castellano, M. B., Archibald, L., & DeGagné, M. (2011). *From truth to reconciliation: Transforming the legacy of residential schools*. Aboriginal Healing Foundation.
- Cherubini, L., Niemczyk, E., Hodson, J., & McGean, S. (2010). A grounded theory of new Aboriginal teachers' perceptions: The cultural attributions of Medicine Wheel teachings. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 16(5), 545-557. <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/aprci/308>
- Cottrell, M., & Orłowski, P. (2014). Racialized poverty and the promise of schooling. In E. L. Brown, P.C. Gorski & G. Lazaridis (Eds.), *Intersection of Poverty, Class, and Schooling* (pp. 257-279). Information Age Publishing.
- Demmert, W. G. (2011). What is culture-based education? Understanding pedagogy and curriculum. In J. Reyhner, W. S. Gilbert, & L. Lockard (Eds.), *Honoring our heritage: Culturally appropriate approaches to Indigenous education* (pp. 1-9). Northern Arizona University.

- Diem, S., & Welton, A. (2021). *Anti-racist educational leadership and policy: Addressing racism in public education*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Dresden, J., Blankenship, S., Capuozzo, B., Nealy, A., & Tavernier, M. (2016). What is a PDS? Reframing the conversation. *School-University Partnerships*, 9(3), 64-80.
<https://3atjfr1bmy981egf6x3utg20-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/93-dresden.pdf>
- Goldkuhl, G. (2011). The research practice of practice research: Theorizing and situational inquiry. *Systems, Signs & Actions*, 5(1), 7-29. <http://liu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:480214/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- Government of Canada. (1969). Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian policy. Available at <https://publications.gc.ca/site/eng/9.700112/publication.html>
- Gunn, T. M., Pomahac, G., Striker, E., & Tailfeathers, J. (2011). First Nations, Métis and Inuit education: The Alberta Initiative for School Improvement approach to improve Indigenous education in Alberta. *Journal of Educational Change*, 12(3), 323-345.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10833-010-9148-4>
- Hallinger, P. (2011). Leadership for learning: Lessons from 40 years of empirical research. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 49(2), 125-142. <https://doi.org/10.1108/0957823111116699>
- Hansen, J. G., & Antsanen, R. (2015). *Urban indigenous people: Stories of healing in the city*. Charlton Publishing Ltd.
- Howe, E. C. (2017). *SUNTEP: An investment in Saskatchewan's prosperity*. Gabriel Dumont Institute. Available at <http://gdins.org/me/uploads/2017/09/GDI.SUNTEPHoweReport.2017.pdf>
- Indian Teacher Education Program. (n.d.). Available at <https://education.usask.ca/itep/>
- Innes, R. A. (2013). *Elder Brother and the Law of the People: Contemporary kinship and Cowessess First Nation*. University of Manitoba Press.
- Jensen, E. (2009). *Teaching with poverty in mind: What being poor does to kids' brains and what schools can do about it*. ASCD.
- Julien, R. (2016). Change now! A call to reform education for Canada's Aboriginal youth. *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, 36(2), 129-148.
- Kanu, Y. (2005). Teacher's perceptions of the integration of Aboriginal culture into the high school curriculum. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 51(1), 50-68.
<https://doi.org/10.11575/ajer.v51i1.55100>
- Kariwo, M. T., Asadi, N., & El Bouhali, C. (Eds.). (2019). *Interrogating models of diversity within a multicultural environment*. Palgrave MacMillan.
- Kirkness, V. J. (2013). *Creating space: My life and work in Indigenous education*. University of Manitoba Press.
- Kovach, M. (2009). *Indigenous methodologies: Characteristics, conversations, and contexts*. University of Toronto Press.

- Leithwood, K., & Jantzi, D. (2008, Oct). Linking leadership to student learning: The contributions of leader efficacy. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 44(4), 496-528. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X08321501>
- Littlebear, L. (2000). Jagged worldviews colliding. In M. Battiste (Ed.), *Reclaiming voice and vision* (pp. 77-84). University of British Columbia Press.
- Madden, B., Higgens, M., & Korteweg, L. (2013). "Role models can't just be on posters": Re/membering barriers to Indigenous community engagement. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 36(2), 212-247. <https://journals.sfu.ca/cje/index.php/cje-rce/article/view/1213>
- Marom, L. (2019). Under the cloak of professionalism: Covert racism in teacher education. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 22(3), 319-337. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2018.1468748>
- McKenzie, H., Varcoe, C., Browne, A., & Day, L. (2016). Disrupting the continuities among residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, and child welfare: An analysis of colonial and neocolonial discourses. *International Indigenous Policy Journal*, 7(2), 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.18584/iipj.2016.7.2.4>
- Menzies, P. (2008). Developing an Aboriginal healing model for intergenerational trauma. *International Journal of Health & Education*, 46(2), 41-48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14635240.2008.10708128>
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research*. Jossey-Bass.
- National Association of Professional Development Schools. (n.d.). Available at <https://napds.org/>
- National Indian Brotherhood. (1972). *Indian Control of Indian Education*. <https://oneca.com/IndianControlofIndianEducation.pdf>
- Oskineegish, M. (2015). Are you providing an education that is worth caring about? Advice to non-Native teachers in Northern First Nations communities. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 38(3), 1-25. <https://journals.sfu.ca/cje/index.php/cje-rce/article/view/1770>
- Pratt, Y. P. & Danyluk, P. J. (2017). Learning what schooling left out: Making an Indigenous case for critical service-learning and reconciliatory pedagogy within teacher education. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 40(1), 1-29. <https://journals.sfu.ca/cje/index.php/cje-rce/article/view/2349>
- Restoule, J.-P., Gruner, S., & Metatawabin, E. (2013). Learning from place: A return to traditional Mushkegowuk ways of knowing. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 36(2), 68-86. <https://journals.sfu.ca/cje/index.php/cje-rce/article/view/1570>
- Saskatchewan Ministry of Education. (2018). Ministry of Education Plan for 2018-19. [Government of Saskatchewan]. <http://publications.gov.sk.ca/documents/15/106266-EducationPlan1819PRINT.pdf>
- St. Denis, V. (2007). Aboriginal education and anti-racist education: Building alliances across cultural and racial identity. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 30(4), 1068-1092. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20466679>
- Statistics Canada (2013). The educational attainment of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 99-012-X2011003. Ottawa.

- Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2012). *They came for the children*. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.
[http://www.myrobust.com/websites/trcinstitution/File/2039_T&R_eng_web\[1\].pdf](http://www.myrobust.com/websites/trcinstitution/File/2039_T&R_eng_web[1].pdf)
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015a). *Honouring the truth, reconciling for the future: Summary of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*. Truth and Reconciliation of Canada.
http://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Final%20Reports/Executive_Summary_English_Web.pdf
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015b). *Calls to action*. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.
http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf
- Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2012). Decolonization is not a metaphor. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1(1), 1-40.
<https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/18630/15554>
- Wallin, D., & Peden, S. (2014, Spr). Touring Turtle Island: Fostering leadership capacity to support First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners. *In Education*, 19(3), 47-68.
<https://doi.org/10.37119/ojs2014.v19i3.150>
- Wilson, S. (2008). *Research is ceremony: Indigenous research methods*. Fernwood Publishing.
- Wotherspoon, T. (2014). Seeking reform of Indigenous education in Canada: Democratic progress or democratic colonialism? *AlterNative*, 10(4), 323-339.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/117718011401000402>