Educating for Cultural Sustainability

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As we hurtle into the twenty-first century our changing world places ever-increasing responsibilities on educators. To better focus the intent of this AIJRE Special Issue, *Educating for Cultural Sustainability*, we need to consider the connection between culture and sustainability, and the role played by education.

The importance of sustainability, decision-making and acting in the present to ensure that resources are still available in the future, has been well accepted since before the turn of the twenty-first century. Equally important is the need for educators to take a sustainability worldview, "*seeing and engaging with the world through a lens of sustainability*" (Nodlet, 2015, p. 10). Taking such a view into learning situations helps our future citizens to better appreciate the impact on others, both now and in the future, of their decisions and behaviour, and thus enact a sustainable lifestyle to better preserve the finite resources that are available.

Despite the ever-present strong focus on the environmental aspect of sustainability, since the 1980s three pillars of sustainability have been in use: economic, social and environmental. These three pillars are used to assess whether development is sustainable, but are also useful to broaden our view of sustainability. However, with the turn of the twenty-first century an expended approach to sustainability includes a fourth pillar, culture. A relevant set of beliefs, morals, and practices collected over time as human knowledge, constitutes a culture, which may exist at local, regional, national, or global Levels. There is much diversity in the interpretation of culture and although culture is most commonly thought of as centred around a particular ethnicity, it may also be based on other foci, such as, religion, sport, music, art, or professions. Of particular interest to AIJRE readers is the culture of rurality and its relevance for rural and remote education. Complications can arise when one culture attempts to exist within, or even alongside, another, as evidenced in the abundance of refugees and displaced or dispossessed First Nations peoples.

Everyone has a responsibility to prepare future generations for living in our culturally complex world BUT educators especially must step up and take a pivotal role. For a particular culture to survive, the relevant set of beliefs, morals, and practices that has been collected over time as human knowledge, needs to be passed down through generations. Without such transmission a specific culture, like an endangered animal species, may disappear forever. By necessity then, the very continuance of a culture is dependent on its sustainability, and education has a key role to play in ensuring future generations appreciate the importance of cultural sustainability.

A ground-breaking Finnish qualitative study (Laine, 2016) that sought experts' conceptions of cultural sustainability in education focused on relevant educational values, goals and skills as well as practices, pedagogies and education needs. Importantly, a way forward has been flagged by the focus on a "*culture as*" (Laine, 2016, p. 55) approach and contributes to the development of a "*cultural diversity storyline [which] refers to the recognition of the diversity of values, attitudes and material cultural manifestations*" (Laine, 2016, p. 59).

Each International Symposium for Innovation in Rural Education focuses on the global education community obligation to influence policy aimed at delivering equitable and socially just outcomes for rural students. With a growing awareness of the importance of cultural sustainability, ISFIRE2021 focused on the theme *Educating for Cultural Sustainability: Innovation for the Future*. Educator/researcher interaction was guided by six symposium threads: Preparing teachers for rural schools; Renewing Indigenous languages; Developing cultural responsiveness; Embedding learning in culture; and Building enduring partnerships.

The nine papers selected for inclusion in this AIJRE Special Issue provide the opportunity to share just some of the thought-provoking research and practice that was shared at ISFIRE2021. The first eight of these papers contribute to the academic focus of AIJRE, while the final paper contributes to the rural connections focus. For a broader coverage of ISFIRE2021 content please consider the abstracts at https://www.uhi.ac.uk/en/isfire2021/programme/, which we hope will help you to contact like-minded educators/researchers who can expand your worldview of educating for cultural sustainability.

Complementing these nine papers is a review by Robyn Henderson of a book reporting educational research and schooling across rural areas in eleven different countries in Europe. Readers are encouraged to rethink rural, in particular the importance of place. Importantly, the book draws together this diverse research and considers emergent themes.

The authors of the nine papers have worked diligently at expanding their ISFIRE2021 presentations into thought-provoking papers. They should be congratulated on the important ideas they have presented to extend and challenge our current sustainability worldview, from the perspective of the culture pillar. These papers have a truly international scope, describing educational developments in Canada, Spain, Bhutan, United States of America, Scotland and Australia.

Bringing new perspectives to curriculum is a challenging but effective way of transforming teaching, especially in working towards cultural sustainability. Heather Duncan, Jeff Smith and Laurie Bachewich report a case study, based in one Canadian rural elementary school and its community, to work together towards reconciliation and de-colonisation of the curriculum. The local cultural frameworks of Mino-Pimaatisiwin and the Ojibwe seven sacred teachings of a good life were the basis of the infusion of Indigenous perspectives into the curriculum, resulting in increased staff awareness of Indigenous culture, and more parental and community involvement.

Examining teaching practice and how it connects to culture, generally, and place in particular, can also contribute to such transformation. In an on-going in-depth ethnographic study set in three small rural schools in the Aragón region of Spain Cristina Moreno-Pinillos aims to identify which teaching practices are based on the relationship with context (place), both social and cultural. Of interest, is the role played by rural schools and how teachers can facilitate the inclusion of values, traditions, and cultures within the curriculum. Importantly, these practices demonstrate that the real value of place encompasses community relationships and interactions. There is a clear need for educational policies that allow teachers to follow a flexible and open curriculum.

Education in Bhutan has a unique focus on culture, with the Educating for Gross National Happiness (EGNH) framework underpinning all education policies and decisions. Kaka Kaka, Nadya Rizk and Judith Miller report research designed to test how effectively the Performance

Management System, the only tool used to evaluate school performance, is fulfilling the intended goals of EGNH. Effectiveness was examined through the lens of the theory of practice architectures, which describes what comprises social practices and how they are shaped by the social, cultural and political contexts in which they occur. Indicators demonstrated too much focus on leadership and not enough on teaching, needing a change to better align with EGNH principles.

Changes in teacher preparation are essential to support change in teacher attitudes towards cultural sustainability. Dawn Wallin and Chris Scribe describe the creation the Wāhkōhtowin teacher preparation model on Treaty 6 territory in Saskatchewan, Canada, which aims to decolonise teacher preparation and support reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. The partnership model, responding to the teachings of Nēhiyaw (Cree) Indigenous Elders, comprises four foundational constructs: relationality, ceremony, language, and child-centredness. Teacher candidates are encouraged to be free to be themselves and come home to traditional teachings; and their pedagogical growth and development as teachers is fostered with the focus on relational pedagogies, inclusiveness, and community.

Providing focused professional learning is also recommended to transform teacher perceptions. Dawn Wallin and Scott Tunison report on the findings of a meta-analysis of 11 case studies of public and First Nations-run schools in rural, remote and northern Saskatchewan, Canada. Each school was involved in the initiative *Following Their Voices*, a four-year professional learning cycle for teachers, with the objective to the improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students. Canada's colonial relationship to First Peoples means that the relationship between Indigenous families and the school system is fraught with mistrust and scepticism. Emerging from this meta-analysis were concerns related to collective responsibility, sustainability, and leadership.

An ongoing issue for rural communities is teacher retention and there is a need to better understand how this is interconnected with the rural spaces. Heather Williams, Janet Williamson and Carl Siebert report on a mixed-method study that collected data from a wide range of educational stakeholders in a rural region of the western United States to better understand their perceptions of retaining teachers in rural school communities. Leadership was found to play a critical role, importantly the relationship between rural education policies, leadership practices, teacher recruitment and retention. Recommendations are made to better support both mentoring and rural placements in teacher and leadership preparation programs.

More proactive assistance for teachers to develop a rural sense of belonging (RSOB) could help to retaining teachers in rural areas. Allison Wynhoff Olsen, William Fassbender, Danette Long and Kristofer Olsen examine how English teachers experience and articulate a RSOB, the relationship they have with rurality, while teaching and living in rural communities. Analysis of the teachers' stories adds complexity to the RSOB dynamic by attending to affective intensities associated with the teachers' daily interactions across ruralities. When RSOB is strong, teaching in rural schools was found to become less a matter of resilience and survival, and more about acceptance or acknowledgement, purpose, and value.

Language is an important part of culture and the status of indigenous languages is being prioritised. Ingeborg Birnie reports on a small-scale mixed method practitioner enquiry study to explore the use of blended learning approaches to enhance skill development in the Scottish minoritised indigenous language, Gaelic. The aim was to address concerns over the ongoing language shift from Gaelic to English. Pupils actively engaged in online learning activities had greater confidence and proficiency in Gaelic compared to their peers who did not use the learning-support materials. Importantly, there was an increased involvement of caregivers in the Gaelic homework tasks, supporting use of the minority language beyond the classroom.

Creating appropriate resources to encourage the learning of Indigenous languages is essential. Jaimey Facchin, Saskia Ebejer and Adam Gowen describe three case studies, each sited in a rural

primary school, that are part of an on-going Australian project to engage community entities in collaboration to produce cultural resources in book form. The analysis described provides a guide to increasing community engagement and collaboration by a broad application of the principles: Place, Relationships, and Communication. Nourishing Pedagogy, with the conceptualisation of Country as Teacher, a framework in which both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people can learn from Country, is a crucial element of the project.

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Mino-Pimaatisiwin: Beginning the Journey Towards Decolonisation and Reconciliation

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Abstract

Mino-Pimaatisiwin is an Ojibwe term for life in the fullest, healthiest sense. Grounded in anti-colonial theory, this case study explores the impact of infusing Indigenous perspectives into an elementary school curriculum on students, school staff, parents, and community. With a focus on building self-esteem and cultural connectedness among Indigenous students, it uses the cultural frameworks of Mino-Pimaatisiwin and the Ojibwe seven sacred teachings of a good life. Findings indicate high levels of cultural connectedness and a reduced gap in self-esteem levels between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, an increased awareness among staff of Indigenous history and culture, a greater parent comfort level with visiting the school, and increased involvement from the community.

Keywords: *Reconciliation, Indigenous education, rural, Indigenous curriculum, student self-esteem and belonging*

Introduction

Although Canada was ranked "the No. 1 country in the world" and commended for caring about human rights and social justice in the 2021 Best Countries Report (US News, 2021), it still has a long way to go towards reconciliation with its Indigenous Peoples (Chartrand, 2021). For well over 100 years, education has been 'done to' Indigenous People in Canada. The destructive legacy of residential schools, the last of which closed in 1997, continues to this day, reinforced by recent discoveries of unmarked children's graves at residential school sites across the country. The Canadian residential school system operated from the 1880s into the latter part of the 20th century. It was an extensive system operated by the Canadian government and administered by churches. With a stated purpose of educating Indigenous children, the main thrust was assimilation into White Christian, Canadian culture. Children were taken by force from their families for months at a time, during which they were forbidden to practise their language, culture and traditions (Hanson et al., 2020).

This project, Mino-Pimaatisiwin, conducted in the province of Manitoba. Located in central Canada, Manitoba is the eastern most of the three prairie provinces and is one of the main grain producing areas in the country. This study is a collaboration among university researchers, the staff of a rural school, named here as Prairie Elementary School (PES) (pseudonym), Prairie Fields School Division (pseudonym), and members of the Grasslands First Nation Community (pseudonym), working on systemic educational change by infusing Indigenous perspectives into the school culture, curriculum and community. The project, which is ongoing, was funded in part from September 2017 to March 2019 by Indigenous Services Canada, through the New Paths for Education Program.

Education and Reconciliation

Traditional Indigenous knowledge, as an epistemological fact of life and recognised through ceremony, oral teachings, stories, land-based practices, and ancestral languages, has been disrupted by colonial interventions (Coulthard, 2014; Simpson, 2004). The well-documented problems of Eurocentrism, racism, residential school history, and vast ontological and epistemological differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous worldviews and concepts about learning are major barriers for the provision of culturally competent education to Indigenous People in Canada (Goulet & Goulet, 2014; Regan, 2010).

Traditional Indigenous learning starts in the home (Smith et al., 2018), with family being the first teachers to provide the important skills that young people need to live in this world (Tunison, 2007, 2013). As evidenced by public inquiries such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1450124405592/1529106060525), residential schools and the Sixties Scoop were among the documented colonial interventions that severed this traditional learning arrangement. As explained by Sinclair and Dainard (2016), "*the 'Sixties Scoop' refers to the large-scale removal or 'scooping' of Indigenous children from their homes, communities and families of birth through the 1960s, and their subsequent adoption into predominantly non-Indigenous, middle-class families across the United States and Canada.*"

School boards, administrators, and teachers committed to taking on the responsibility for overcoming our shared colonial history must seek points of connection to rebuild trust with Indigenous Peoples (Regan, 2010). Educational institutions can play a reconciliatory role by maintaining a position of accountability and openness to what First Nations Peoples say they need for the education of their People (Battiste & Youngblood Henderson, 2000). As Senator Murray Sinclair (2016, p. 1), chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, states, "*Education holds the key to reconciliation. It is where our country will heal itself*".

Indigenous Educational Achievement

While Aboriginal is a general term used in the Canadian constitution that collectively refers to First Nations, Métis and Inuit people in Canada, currently the term used most frequently and used throughout this paper is Indigenous. First Nations refers to some 617 different communities, who, for thousands of years before European contact (circa 1500) have inhabited the landmass now known as Canada. The Métis are people of mixed European and First Nations ancestry who trace their origins to the Red River Valley in Manitoba and the prairies that lie beyond. The Inuit is a distinctive group of Indigenous people who inhabit the arctic and subarctic regions of Canada, as well as Alaska (US) and Greenland.

The 2016 Canadian census data (Statistics Canada, 2016) indicate gaps in achievement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in the K–12 system. For example, over 90% of non-Indigenous young adults (aged 20–24 years) have at least a high school certificate compared to 84% of Métis, 75% of off-reserve and 48% of on-reserve Indigenous young adults. Compared to Canada overall (4.1%), the percentage of the population that is Indigenous is higher in Manitoba

(18.4%). Of concern is that Manitoba high-school graduation rates for Indigenous students (36.1%) are lower than the Canadian average (Richards, 2017).

While low graduation rates may not be surprising, given data that show how gaps in achievement appear by income, race, and ethnicity (Johnson, 2002), an emphasis on achievement gaps clouds the complex interactions between issues and underlying structural factors (Fergus, 2016). The focus should be on why the gap exists and how it might be closed.

Addressing Educational Gaps

Educators must abandon the deficit approach to Indigenous learners and dispel the widespread notion that Indigenous students are predisposed to underachieve at school, by ensuring they have high expectations for Indigenous learners (Buxton, 2017; Sarra et al., 2018). As Sarra (2017) noted, "*if we work from the assumption that they [Indigenous students] have strengths; and if we do things with them and their communities, then there is a tendency, ceteris paribus, all other things being equal, for them to succeed in education*" (p. 8).

For learners receiving their instruction off-reserve, the integration of Indigenous and Western ways of knowing becomes the greatest challenge for educators. Creating balance between the two paradigms, by immersing Indigenous teachings within Western teaching frameworks, can create a more positive and welcoming learning environment for Indigenous students. One of the most important contributors to student success is to create schools and classrooms that are caring, trusting and inclusive. An inclusive mindset requires educators and community stakeholders to actively represent the local First Nations communities respectfully, throughout the school culture (Toulouse, 2013). Indigenous students need to feel they belong in the school, be aware of their strengths, gifts and capacities as learners, and become directors of their learning journey (Toulouse, 2008). Honouring of and connection to culture, community and literacy (language) are common threads to success. Community-based, locally developed, and hands-on activities make practices more relevant and engaging to learners (Tunison, 2007).

What is vital in Indigenising our schools and classrooms is an openness to recognise, as teachers, "*the inherent power and privilege upon which our professional practices have been founded*" (Burleigh & Burm, 2013, p. 117), and to transform the way we think, teach, learn and act so that Indigenisation of curriculum is not just a thing we do; instead, it becomes the way we do things (Richardson & Reynolds, 2014). The path to reconciliation requires an intertwining of a Western approach to education with an Indigenous worldview of education as an interconnected pathway to a holistic way of life.

Context

Rural school divisions often experience a distinctive set of challenges, such as isolation, limited resource allocation, community resistance to change, staff turnover, transportation costs, and infrastructure maintenance (Lamkin, 2006). The Prairie Fields School Division faces many of these challenges. This case study focuses on one of its schools, PES, a rural elementary school (K–6) located in a small town, employing 10.5 full-time equivalent teachers, three of whom are Indigenous. Of its 140 students, 62% are Indigenous from Grasslands First Nation, a local Indigenous community. Many of the Indigenous students are struggling readers, come from a low socio-economic background, and face challenges due to inter-generational trauma and despair. Absenteeism, transiency, and late arrival have been reported as ongoing concerns at PES. Other concerns identified include struggles with student self-regulation, negative self-concept, feelings of exclusion, negative perceptions of their own learning, and unfriendly social interactions among peers.

With the knowledge that building students' self-esteem and resiliency skills may impact their academic, physical, and mental well-being (Ciarrochi et al., 2007; Witter, 2013; Yang et al., 2019),

and that weaving culturally and traditionally relevant material and stories into the curriculum might not only strengthen students' resilience, but also increase their literacy skills (Jackson & Heath, 2017), PES staff made a collective decision to weave Indigenous perspectives throughout the school, with a focus on building self-esteem and cultural connectedness within the entire student population. The premise of the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives is that the whole child will benefit and find a way towards the good life—Mino-Pimaatisiwin.

Cultural Framework: Mino-Pimaatisiwin

According to Hart (2012), Mino-Pimaatisiwin is an Ojibwe term for "*life in the fullest, healthiest sense*" (n.p.). Its foundations are wholeness, balance, relationships, harmony, growth, and healing. Hart explains that all aspects of the whole are in relation to one another: "*When we give energy to these relationships we nurture the connections*" (n.p.). Thus, student learning should include how parts work interdependently to create wholes (Bell, 2016). Indigenisation is a transformative process that highlights the importance of centring Indigenous people, cultures, knowledge systems, experiences and priorities in education (Battiste & Youngblood Henderson, 2000; Smith, 2013).

The traditional concepts that form the foundation of the Indigenous way of life are built around the seven natural laws, or sacred teachings. Each teaching honours one of the foundational qualities essential to the full and healthy life (the good life) that is termed Mino-Pimaatisiwin (Hart, 2012). These teachings are respect, love, wisdom, bravery, honesty, humility and truth. Toulouse (2008) embeds the implications of the seven sacred teachings in educational practices.

> 1. Respect: Having high expectations for the Aboriginal student and honouring their culture, language and world view in our schools.
> 2. Love: Demonstrating our belief (as educators) that all Aboriginal students can and will succeed through our own commitment to their learning-teaching styles.
> 3. Bravery: Committing to change our school curriculum through including the contributions, innovations and inventions of Aboriginal people.
> 4. Wisdom: Sharing effective practices in Aboriginal education through ongoing professional development and research that focuses on imbuing equity.
> 5. Humility: Acknowledging that we need to learn more about the diversity of Aboriginal people and accessing key First Nation resources to enhance that state.
> 6. Honesty: Accepting that we have much to learn from one another and reviewing the factors involved to encourage change in the education system.
> 7 Truth: Developing measurable outcomes for Aboriginal student success and using them as key indicators of how inclusive our curriculum and pedagogy really are. (Toulouse, 2008, p.2)

Using the cultural frameworks of Mino-Pimaatisiwin and the Ojibwe seven sacred teachings, the purpose of this study is to explore the impact of immersing an elementary school community in Indigenous perspectives.

Theoretical Perspective

For this project, we adopted an anti-colonial framework. Anti-colonial theory seeks to "*denaturalize the colonial discourse in that it supports and is based upon Indigenous world-views and practices*" (Hart, 2009, p. 37). Grounded in the understanding of Indigeneity and the pursuit of agency, it challenges dominant colonial practices and promotes the "*authenticity of local voice*" (Simmons & Dei, 2012, p. 72). Decolonising education, from an anti-colonial stance, supports reconnecting to Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing both inside and outside the classroom, celebrating lived experiences, and acknowledging the interconnections of all living things to the world we inhabit (Absolon, 2010; Hart, 2002, 2009). Anti-colonial education

provides space for exploration of the lived experience and history of self and other and for unpacking the issues concerning *"interconnections of power, difference and resistance as augured in colonial geographies"* (Simmons & Dei, 2012, p. 68).

The researchers in this study acknowledge their White privilege. Recognition of White privilege, that brings with it accountability and responsibilities, is a crucial component of anti-colonial practice (Simmons & Dei, 2012). Researchers and educators must be cognisant of the racialised foundations that have traditionally grounded educational policy and practice (Rodriguez, 2011). Acknowledging the roles of racism and other forms of colonial dominance that permeate inequity in the education system, challenging assumptions regarding culture and intelligence, and dismantling long standing silos of colour-blindness and meritocracy (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015) that prevail in contemporary reality is difficult work that comes with resistance (Evans-Winters & Twyman Hoff, 2011). Replacing *"cultural estrangement with cultural engagement"* (Simmons & Dei, 2012, p. 102) is critical work that educators and administrators must maintain focus upon in their school sites.

Foundational to anti-colonial theory is the grounding of knowledge in place and spirituality. Indigenous spirituality recognises that all things are interconnected, and that human beings are but a small part of the greater schema. It reinforces the need for living with balance, maintaining good relationships, and respecting all living and non-living parts of a wholistic system (Ritskes, 2011). This perspective complements the cultural frameworks of Mino-Pimaatisiwin and the seven sacred teachings that have guided the project from inception.

Research Framework

An overarching tool that has helped guide us in working with Indigenous and school division partners, and in all the education and research activities performed through this project, is a community research protocol that explicitly outlines the roles, responsibilities and Ownership, Control, Access and Possession Principles [OCAP]. OCAP principles *"assert that First Nations have control over data collection processes, and that they own and control how this information can be used"* (First Nations Information Governance Centre, n.d.).

Grasslands First Nation has been an active partner in the project since its inception; the Chief, Council members, and Elders from Grasslands First Nation, the Prairie Fields School Division, the PES principal, teachers, and educational assistants jointly planned all activities, events and celebrations. Recognising Indigenous ownership, all data and reports were shared with and approved by Grasslands First Nation. Grasslands First Nation members participated in all public knowledge dissemination events of the project findings.

Methods

This project was a case study of how one rural school and community worked towards decolonising its curriculum and its practices. Historically, two cycles of a success indicator survey (2015 and 2016), along with staff dialogue and additional assessment data, provided preliminary evidence supporting the need to create a school and curriculum that focused on the inclusion of Indigenous culture. As the purpose of this project was to bring about and explore change, it used case study as a method because it allows in-depth exploration of an intervention in a specific context (Yin, 2011), in this case the infusion of Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing into the curriculum of an elementary school. This project used mixed methods to collect data in the form of student surveys and interviews with school staff members. The school and community team used Mino-Pimaatisiwin to guide them in determining appropriate courses of action and strategies to meet the needs identified. Regular meetings were held to plan and reflect on progress.

Data Sources

The research team created two student surveys (self-esteem and cultural connectedness) to measure each construct. It conducted staff interviews around the process and impact of Indigenisation.

The cultural connectedness and self-esteem surveys were administered in fall of 2017 at the start of the project and again in fall of 2018. On each survey, students were asked if they agreed or disagreed with a set of statements. The cultural connectedness (K–G6) survey contained seven statements that focused on: others' feelings of respect for their culture; listening carefully to elders; the importance of knowing language and culture; seeing their cultural background in school; learning about Indigenous culture, history, and traditions; acceptance in school; pride in self and culture. The self-esteem survey for K–G3 students consisted of five statements regarding how they felt about themselves, how well they did things, their friendships, relationships with teachers, and their schoolwork, while the G4–G6 survey contained ten statements around these themes. Data were aggregated by grade level and analysed descriptively using IBM SPSS Statistics 21. Data from each year (2017 and 2018) were compared to data from the same students the following year; for example, data from Grade 5 students in fall of 2017 were compared with data from the same students in Grade 6 in fall 2018.

Semi-structured interviews lasting 1–1.5 hours were conducted with four school staff members, including the principal, in spring 2019. The purpose of these interviews was to explore educators' perceptions of the impact of Mino-Pimaatisiwin within the school context and of the Indigenisation of curriculum process. With permission of the participants, the interviews were audio-recorded. The audio files were then transcribed into anonymised, textual data by a research assistant. In the event that participants did not wish to be audio-recorded, the interviewer made field notes of the interview. These field notes were also transcribed into textual data, imported into NVivo software and subsequently analysed and coded by the research team. Several themes emerged.

Ethical Clearance

Ethics approval for this research was obtained from the Brandon University Research Ethics Committee, January 29, 2016, file no #22423.

Findings

Findings are presented, first by exploring the themes arising from the qualitative interviews. These themes were: Beginning the process, Engaging the community, Enacting Mino-Pimaatisiwin, Impact of Mino-Pimaatisiwin and the good life. Second, the findings of the student surveys on self-esteem and cultural connectedness are discussed.

What PES did: Beginning the Process

To start on the journey toward Mino-Pimaatisiwin required a transformative process with the whole PES staff. Self-reflection is a key component in education (Lew & Schmidt, 2011) and an integral part of this project. Educators look beyond their inner conflicts and biases to deeply examine their preconceptions, their predispositions, their beliefs and values, their philosophies of education, their internal responses to their students, their assumptions about families and communities, and the curriculum they teach (Nuri-Robins et al., 2012; Oskineegish, 2018).

Leadership in this process to embed Indigeneity within the school culture was key. The PES principal described how she needed to challenge her own belief system before inviting her staff to be part of a new direction for the school.

> *In the leadership role there are times when things need to be grassroots and move from the bottom. When you are talking about implementation of change, unless your principal*

believes in it and is committed to it, you are not going to have what is required for people to change. When I first came on board, I immersed myself and made First Nations education the focus of my own professional development. I had to challenge my own belief system and I had to really take a look and get clear in my own mind about the direction that I wanted to go. Then it starts with one or two staff and together we started to implement change. They started to attend in-services with me. This then led to a systemic change as opposed to a principal-directed change. In terms of my professional practice, I had a lot of work to do up front before I could even ask my staff to do the same.

Studies show that professional development can have positive effects on teacher learning (Borko, 2004), and, with regard to Indigenous education, professional programs can increase educators' self-awareness of biases and assumptions so that they question their past practices and actions, and look for new ways of doing (Korteweg, 2010). Part of the grant funding was used to help fund division-wide professional development with Nigan Sinclair. Sinclair is an Indigenous leader and educator who is skilled at helping to structure respectful and critical dialogue in Indigenous educational practices. As Borko (2004) noted, professional development is more successful when there is a specific focus on subject matter and teachers are engaged as learners in activities.

As Ledesma and Calderón (2015) noted, dismantling long-standing assumptions and engrained beliefs and acknowledging the impact of colonialism on Indigenous peoples is difficult work. One teacher noted: "*It was not an easy process. The collaboration piece started right away and then the Indigenisation piece was introduced slowly.*" Most teachers were open to acknowledge their own education had not included the history of colonisation (Burleigh & Burm, 2013), and they were supportive of the change in direction and appreciative of their principal's strong leadership, noting: "*Our leader's sense of social justice is phenomenal and how it has changed the culture of this building. When I first started working here there was a visible divide, even with staff.*"

However, not all staff members bought into the new direction. As one teacher commented, "*The challenge is re-educating a generation of people who went through our school system believing what we were told was true. It's hard to undo that.*" For those teachers who did not buy into the new direction, there were hard choices to make. Another teacher commented,

If they [staff members] don't understand, on their own personal level why this needs to be done, not just in our school, but in all schools. They [staff members] are like a big anchor; it threatens to drag things down. That's been part of the challenge. Some people have been transferred and some people have left.

Unsettling paradigm shifts of engrained beliefs, disturbing ingrained racialism and meritocracy, and engaging in critical change is hard work that can be both uncomfortable and painful, and a journey upon which not everyone is ready to embark (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015).

Engaging with the Community

Research highlights the importance of educator involvement and commitment to building relationships in Indigenous communities (Pratt & Danyluk, 2017). The PES school staff introduced the Mino-Pimaatisiwin initiative to the community by way of a Women's night with mothers and women Elders from the community. Together they made supper and ate together and talked about what they hoped to achieve. Engaging students with Elders, parents and local experts better reflects the knowledge, values and practices of traditional life in the local community (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2003). Further activities involving the community occurred throughout the year and included Elders and drummers in the school Remembrance Day service, drummers and dancers at the Christmas lunch, family days, an Indigenous athletics event, winter fun day, and a whole school pottery project in which staff and students created bowls for the whole school feast to celebrate the end of the year.

Enacting Mino-Pimaatisiwin

As Toulouse (2013) suggested, the PES staff held regular planning meetings and professional development activities. Indigenous history became an integral part of the curriculum. Each class reviewed what the good life is and linked it to the school beliefs. Mino-Pimaatisiwin and the seven sacred teachings were an integral part of each classroom. They posted visuals throughout the school. With the grant funding, PES purchased Indigenous artifacts and furniture, as well as many books with Indigenous themes. These books became integral to classroom practice and played a large role in literacy and in developing reading, writing and listening skills.

The Impact of Mino-Pimaatisiwin and the Good Life on PES

Teachers and administrators talked about change processes that had occurred in the system and at personal and professional levels. Several teachers related these changes to the influence of Mino-Pimaatisiwin and the seven sacred teachings. Sub-themes emerging from the interviews were: the influence of Mino-Pimaatisiwin on (a) school culture, (b) relationships among students and school staff, (c) family involvement, and (d) community involvement; and the benefits of Elder involvement with the curriculum, the students, and the staff.

Mino-Pimaatisiwin and School Culture

Teachers described Mino-Pimaatisiwin in several ways: as a felt sense that permeates the school—a sense of safety, belonging and acceptance; as a pedagogy that embraces addressing teachable moments, and as a way of doing and being. One teacher explained: *"I don't teach the seven teachings explicitly in class but rather try to live them in the way I teach … to live in a good way by leading by example, by not just talking, by walking the walk."* Teachers described Mino-Pimaatisiwin as the foundation upon which to address teachable moments: *"If there is a problem that needs to be talked about, I can say: are you showing honesty right now? Are you following the teachings? Is that an example of honesty or trust?"*

Educators talked about tangible and intangible ways in which Mino-Pimaatisiwin had permeated the school culture; for example:

> In terms of the change in the culture of the building, you can feel that. I mean you can see it but those are things on the wall. It's when people feel safe, you can feel something nice in your building. …I feel it when I go into [PES], the kids feel safe and looked after and when they feel that way we have a better chance of educating them.

Staff acknowledged the challenging social circumstances and disruptions present in many of their students' home lives, including foster care and the disproportionate number of Indigenous children in care in Manitoba, and how that made the school so important as a safe space:

> Some of these kids are dealt a shitty hand; basically, some of them don't have the greatest home life and so if we can be a positive place for them to come and forget about what's going on at home, or the fact that they have been moving in and out of foster care. That's one of the reasons we work hard not to have any bullying or abuse at school. We deal with it right away; it starts with the kindergarten teachers.

Mino-Pimaatisiwin and Relationships

Several teachers and staff members observed an ethic of care and valuing of school-based relationships which they attributed to the influence of Mino-Pimaatisiwin. Students now have much more input into what their school looks like. One staff member commented: *"You hear from the kids a lot more than you used to; they have more input into what their school is looking like, with students working in the hallways for example."* Another commented on increased staff/student interaction, saying:

> *[Mino-Pimaatisiwin] starts in the morning and staff are visible in the hallways interacting with the kids. The school [staff] makes a point of speaking with the kids, all of them. We establish a personal connection with students and value getting to know them.*

Feeling that they belong and are valued are key factors in welcoming students in school (Toulouse, 2008). Importantly, teachers noted that students will not ask for help unless they have a relationship with a teacher or support staff member. Staff noted that building healthy teacher/student relationships resulted in less absenteeism, commenting: "*The kids feel safe, they feel trusted. For a small portion of our kids, attendance is an issue, but for the majority of them, they are on the bus every morning and they come in.*" Also important in creating a positive school space is the relationship development between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Although the student surveys indicated several students had difficulty making friends, staff noted a greater openness and acceptance of each other among students. Evidence of replacing "*cultural estrangement with cultural engagement*" (Simmons & Dei, p. 102) was embedded in the following comment:

> *I'm seeing less of a separation, less of an "us" and "them." For example when an Indigenous student teacher got together and did ribbon skirt making with the girls and ribbon vest making with the boys, there were kids who were not Indigenous who chose to participate in those activities. I think that openness comes from what we are doing as a school.*

Teachers noted improvement in student conduct and interactions with each other, commenting: "*You can see it in the smiles, hear it in the laughter. So when you hear someone upset, or arguing, you know that something is wrong because that's not a daily occurrence.*"

Not only was the school more open to student voice and greater positive interaction was noted between staff and students and among students, but there was also more open dialogue among staff at the school. A staff member commented:

> *Other ladies are speaking up here a lot more, sharing their thoughts about being Indigenous, things they probably wouldn't have said earlier when I first started here. Now it's like everyone is speaking pretty openly about their concerns and thoughts.*

The impact of Mino-Pimaatisiwin was not only perceived on the school culture. A non-Indigenous teacher spoke candidly about the transformative effects of the good life on their relationship to life more generally:

> *My understanding of the good life has changed since I have been here. Ten or twenty years ago [my impression of] the good life would have been more materialistic. Through some of my experiences here over the past decade, living and working here with this student population, my meaning of the good life has changed toward things that don't have as much to do with material or monetary things. I am more spiritual and reflective, with a greater appreciation for people and the natural world. Working here has been a life changing experience for me.*

Impact on Family Involvement

In the interviews, teachers speculated about reasons for lower family involvement from families in the Community. They cited poverty as a barrier in the dispersed rural area, saying, "*If your car isn't working and you can't afford a cab it is hard to get from there to here.*" Historical trauma is also a major factor due to the residential school history. For many Indigenous parents, schooling has negative connotations. Another contributing factor that teachers acknowledged was that their contact with parents historically had been about academics or was problem-focused. Recognising this disconnect, PES hosted several special events as a way of re-building relationships between the school and Indigenous families, such as a Moms' night out and a Dads'

evening making button vests. Each spring, PES holds a family fun day. Elders also participate and there is a campfire with Bannock (a flat, unleavened bread, sometimes fried) and story-telling.

Teachers talked about improvements they observed both in parental involvement and staff attitudes since their activities around Indigenising the curriculum and the school. One teacher commented:

> There are a lot more families from [the Community] coming into the school. It never used to be like that. We would talk about it and the attitude was like, "if they are not interested in coming, we can't do anything about it."

Staff reflected on how their own attitudes to Indigenous parental involvement had evolved from indifference to a proactive welcoming of families into the school. With a focus on building positive relationships, staff noted increased attendance at parent/teacher evenings and observed that parents, and mothers in particular, seemed more at ease in the school.

Impact on Community Involvement

Several teachers mentioned how much they valued the collaboration of community members and grandparents from the First Nation in several initiatives designed to involve students in traditional Indigenous activities. Describing an activity with a community member, a teacher noted the value of authenticity and lived experience:

> He knows what he is talking about and is involved. He did some work with our kids when we went fishing. We talked about the basic stuff, the techniques and that sort of thing but then he taught the history of Indigenous fishing and the different things fish are used for.

Another teacher noted the strong involvement of grandparents, who are fluent in Anishinaabe, in their grandchildren's language development. This engagement is very positive and, although Anishinaabe language is taught in school, teachers also talked about being challenged by some fluent speakers from the Community. Just like in many other parts of the world, although the language may be a common one, it is traditionally an oral language, with dialects in different communities resulting in different pronunciations and nuances. And so, if the language is taught by someone from a different community, pronunciation may be seen as incorrect, which can result in criticism by local speakers. The teacher observed that at times this can be discouraging but looked on as an opportunity to learn, noting, "*Fortunately I am resilient. I have family and an Elder supporting me, and I am able to think about it and learn from it.*"

There are many Indigenous communities across Canada with over 70 Indigenous languages and countless more dialects. Just as with language, traditions and ceremony differ among Indigenous people. As a settler community, we need to be aware of this and not place the responsibility for traditional and language knowledge on one small group of people.

Impact of Elder Involvement

Elders are the knowledge-keepers, the carriers of wisdom, story, culture, tradition and history; they are the role models, the teachers (Chiblow, 2020). PES teachers, staff, and the principal reported working collaboratively with Elders, parents, and students in promoting an ethic of Mino-Pimaatisiwin in their school, and indicated their appreciation of the time Elders from the Community spent in the school, the connections they made with all students and teachers, and their openness to provide advice and share their ceremonies.

Student Surveys

After data analysis, PES staff discussed the findings of each of the 2017 and 2018 student surveys on cultural connectedness and self-esteem, and prioritised action areas for the purpose of individual class and whole school planning.

Cultural Connectedness

The K–G3 cultural connectedness survey indicated that the majority of K–G3 Indigenous and non-Indigenous students agreed with the survey statements in 2017 and in 2018 (90% or over for six of the seven sacred statements), and so we can conclude that most K–G3 students do feel connected to their culture in school. Improvement was evident in the students' perception that *"time is spent teaching and learning about Indigenous culture in our school"* (96% in 2017, 100% in 2018), and *"pride in their culture and happy in who they are"* (96% in 2017, 100% in 2018). Similarly, the majority of the G4–G6 Indigenous students also agreed with all the statements on the cultural connectedness survey, both in 2017 and 2018. The average agreement increased from 90.7% in 2017 to 93.1% in 2018. In fall 2018, the greatest increases were seen in *"I think others around me respect my culture"* (85% in 2017, 92% in 2018), and *"I see my culture and background in the school"* (85% in 2017, 92%[in] 2018). It was evident that PES was succeeding in representing Indigenous culture within the school (Toulouse, 2013). As Sarra (2017) noted, such a finding is something to be celebrated, and shows that commitment to infusing Indigenous perspectives into the school is working and being recognised by the students.

The item with the lowest agreement was *"I feel accepted in school for who I am"* (83% in 2017, 80% in 2018). Toulouse (2008) noted the importance of students feeling that they belong in school. PES staff identified this as an area for continued focus.

Self-esteem

Analysis of the K–G3 self-esteem surveys (2017 and 2018) revealed much similarity in the responses of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. The item with the greatest increase in agreement (Indigenous and non-Indigenous students) was *"I can ask my teacher for help when I need it"* (86% in 2017, 94% in 2018), indicating that the efforts the school staff had made in building relationships with students were working, and students felt more comfortable approaching their teachers. As Wilson (2001) noted, having people and space with whom they can connect and feel they belong form the foundations for learning for Indigenous learners. However, the items with which fewest students agreed were *"I can make friends easily"* (78% in 2017, 63% in 2018), *"I am good at my school work"* (83% in 2017, 79% in 2018), and *"I can do things well"* (83% in 2017, 85% in 2017). Conversations with school staff revealed concern that children between the ages of 5 and 7 years already were feeling that they struggled to make friends and that they did not do other things well.

On analysis of the G4–G6 surveys, in 2017 differences emerged in the overall agreement between Indigenous (81%) and non-Indigenous students (97.3%) on the self-esteem survey statements. In 2018, the gap had decreased, and the level of agreement with the survey statements had increased to 89.2% for Indigenous students, compared to 93.3% for non-Indigenous students. As was evident in the K–G3 survey findings, the item with the lowest agreement level for G4–G6 Indigenous students was *"I can make friends easily"* (67% in 2017 and 70% in 2018). Other items with lower agreement from Indigenous students in 2017 and an increase in 2018 were *"I feel comfortable asking my teachers for help"* (75%, 92%), *"I can work peacefully with my classmates"* (70%, 78%), and *"I can express my opinions well to others"* (71%, 83%).

PES staff identified the top foci for students in the upcoming year as continuing to build relationships, making friends, and being able to express personal opinions. They reflected that this may involve more choice for students, ongoing teaching of friendship and social skills, creating more opportunities for students to be in controlled settings where these skills can be modelled and practised, purposeful planning of recess programs or intramurals where friendship skills can be practised, and learning how to accept peers for who they are. Staff noted that it is also important to tackle the topics of social media and friendships, as well as what a healthy friendship looks and feels like. They explained that using their voices can be difficult for many of the Indigenous students. They often need time to process, and the opportunity to share their

opinions in a quiet, calm setting. They may prefer to do it in writing or drawing, rather than in discussion or presenting. Thus, PES staff will explore choice in ways of expressing voice.

Limitations

This research was a case study of a small rural school in central Canada on its journey towards Mino-Pimaatisiwin. It is hoped that some of the findings will be transferable to other locations. Several challenges exist with regard to determining the impact of the Indigenisation of education. First, the process of Indigenisation is so multi-faceted and it is difficult to measure the movements of multiplicities, as Indigenisation is a process rather than an end-point. Second, there are no agreed indicators to measure what constitutes successful Indigenisation; therefore, this project seeks to identify indicators that could be of value in future studies. Third, finding culturally appropriate measures for evaluation will depend upon agreement of the concrete indicators and further training in Indigenous cultural competencies.

Conclusion

Commitment to the Indigenisation of curriculum and school culture was the greatest achievement demonstrated by the PES community. Each person interviewed provided examples of the efforts that they themselves, or other staff they observed, had made to increase their understanding and implementation of the Indigenisation of curriculum.

Community events that were held at the school or in the Community were highlighted in many of the staff interviews. Staff at PES stated that they had seen an increase in parent participation and they equated that to culturally relevant events held at the school (such as button dress workshops for the mothers, grandmothers and aunties, and button vest workshops for the fathers, grandfathers, uncles, etc.). They also mentioned that a Moms' night held at the school led to more regular appearances of Moms at the school, who had not been present prior. Parental and Elder participation at special events at the school (i.e., Thanksgiving and Christmas) were highlighted as significant moments for interviewees.

The cultural framework of Mino-Pimaatisiwin (good life) and the Ojibwe seven sacred teachings appear to have had positive effects on the school culture for both teachers and students, particularly as they related to increased levels of Indigenous cultural competency and inclusion at the school. This finding should be considered an indicator of "enabling conditions" (Oakes, 1989, p. 195) that may continue to facilitate progress toward the goal of improving learning outcomes for Indigenous students in the future. We highlight the importance of Indigenous knowledge, Anishinaabe pedagogy in particular, which utilises ceremony, teachings and stories to nurture spiritual growth; land-based practices to teach the physical; oral teachings about how to maintain an emotional balance between the heart and the head; and ancestral languages and integrative learning to develop mental capacities (Bell, 2016).

A sense of urgency emerged, informed by statements made by Indigenous language teachers on the importance of fluent language speakers for the transmission of knowledge and culture, further intensified by observations about the ages of Elders, mortality, and the fear that, with their passing, important knowledge will be lost. With limited time to develop meaningful partnerships between these Elders and the school, it is hoped that Elders can recommend how to move education forward for their grandchildren and other Indigenous students. Ongoing listening to these voices and making creative and patient efforts to collaborate are needed.

The journey through a history steeped in colonisation and oppression is still a long way from over. As educators we still need to continue to analyse and improve our methods of instruction for all students. For the education of Indigenous students, we need to remain focused on addressing all aspects of their well-being, ensuring that we are presenting materials in a way that is respectful of not just their intellectual being, but also the emotional, physical and spiritual

components of who they are. The integration of the cultural strengths of the local community towards education reform has led to an increased interest and involvement of Indigenous People in education in this rural community (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2003). Although the research part of this study is complete and the grant funding expended, Mino-Pimaatisiwin continues at PES as the staff balance a curriculum rich in Indigenous ways of knowing, doing, and being with the challenges of pedagogy and instruction that are necessary to continue to whittle away at the educational gaps that exist.

Development of identity and a sense of belonging and self-worth are critical in empowering students to learn (Richmond & Smith, 2012); yet measures of academic success too often focus on learning deficits rather than positive learning outcomes. PES has worked hard to develop a safe and trusting learning environment that is culturally rich. In June 2021, a school climate survey indicated 90% of students felt safe in school, 90% of students believed their culture was respected in the school community, and 94% said they had at least one adult in the school they could talk to. Although gaps still exist in literacy and numeracy, these have narrowed, with 93% of students showing one year's progress in reading and writing.

Finally, colonisation took much from Indigenous peoples, and its ongoing effects on the relationships between Indigenous communities and representatives of Euro-Western education institutions continue to challenge understandings of what Indigenisation means and what it looks like in mainstream curriculum. Proceeding with the knowledge that Indigenous education and everyday life are not separate entities (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2003), developing a set of indicators for Indigenisation requires a different framework for measurement than traditional Euro-Western educational indicators. Focusing on a whole child perspective, the framework of Mino-Pimaatisiwin has value for all students and educators, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, as we work together towards providing an education that supports all students.

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School in and Linked to Rural Territory: Teaching Practices in Connection with the Context from an Ethnographic Study

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Abstract

In contexts where social, political, and educational decisions are driven by globalisation, the sustainability and maintenance of rural communities at put at risk. Schools located in rural territories, through their educational practices in connection with the social and cultural context, can promote rootedness and favour sustainability. In this sense, the purpose of this article is to contribute to the knowledge about the role played by schools located in rural areas. Specifically, the aim of the study is to identify which educational practices take place based on the relationship with the context. This paper presents findings from an ongoing in-depth ethnographic study carried out in three small rural schools in the Aragón region of Spain. The study is conducted through semi-structured interviews that are complemented with informal conversations. The results show, on the one hand, that practices in relation to the environment are presented as a naturally occurring resource that facilitate the inclusion of values, traditions, and cultures within the curriculum. Additionally, on the other hand, that through these practices the value of place goes beyond the word 'place', encompassing within itself, the relationships and interactions established within the community. Thus, this study highlights the need for educational policies that make it possible to address the particularities of schools, through a flexible and open curriculum based on community opportunities and context-based learning.

Keywords: *small rural school, place-based learning, community, ethnography, teaching practices*

Introduction and Research Significance

At the present time, major transformations are taking place that have to do with a new political, economic, and social landscape and order. There is a context of globalisation, technological development, and geographic mobility (Gu, 2021). Moreover, we are at a time of extreme concern for economic development. Competitiveness, performance evaluation, and decentralisation have been described as a means to improve inclusion, quality, and efficiency by providing a good service at a lower cost (Beach, 2017). The education system, and therefore schools, do not escape the influence of economic development (Bourdieu, 1986; Massey, 2012). Indeed, schools often suffer the consequences of the implementation of global polices, which see schools as market objects subject to economic profitability (Beach & Öhrn, 2019; Beach & Vigo-Arrazola, 2020).

Rural communities across Europe are currently facing major economic and social challenges because of the implementation of globalist policies. The space where community evolves at different levels–social, economic and cultural–is referred to as territory (Massey, 2012). The decisions taken by the governments, national and local, jeopardise the sustainability the rural territories by promoting an exodus to urban areas (Lethonen, 2021) indirectly causing the closure of schools, which is an international trend (Autti & Hyry-Beihammer, 2014; Cedering & Wihlborg, 2020; Matías Solanilla & Vigo-Arrazola, 2020; Villa & Knutas, 2020) and a factor for depopulation (Lethonen, 2021). School closure often includes discussions and debates about the function of the school, the meaning of the school, and the future of the local community (Villa & Knutas, 2020) and forces local communities throughout Europe to fight for their schools (Amcoff, 2012).

In Spain, school closure has been part of our history since 1970 when the National Government rebuilt the educational system forcing the creation of school groups, which meant the closure of the smallest village schools with fewest pupils (Vigo-Arrazola & Soriano-Bozalongo, 2020). This had a direct impact on depopulation, roots, and the maintenance of local culture (Gristy et al., 2020). On the other hand, we are currently at a time of concern on the part of the political classes about depopulation and school closures, which, in many cases, is an electoral strategy (Abós Olivares, 2020). There is a strong movement in favour of 'Empty Spain', a term coined in 2018 to refer to those regions that suffered massive emigrations in the 1950s and 1960s and are depopulated or in the process of depopulated. However, there is no coherence between the policies implemented and the political, social, and educational discourses in favour of the rural territory. In the educational field, there is beginning to be recognition of the pedagogical value of rural schools, which in many cases is a 'pull effect' for families seeking a new pedagogical option for their children in rural areas (Beach & Vigo-Arrazola, 2020).

In view of the context presented, the role played by the school in the maintenance of the village and the rural territory is emphasised (Tieken, 2014). Schools located in rural areas can be the backbone (everything depends on them) of the territory, but rural schools cannot be approached from a discursive mantra in which rural schools are the heart (everything is connected to them) of the community (Bagley & Hillard, 2011; Hargreaves, 2009). This fact leads us to propose a study that values the particularity of each context, freeing us from this generalised and reductionist idea. We focus on the study of teaching practices, away from the performativity, that enhance the relationship with the environment with the aim of developing a sense of belonging in the fight against depopulation. Thus, in this article, I explore how these teaching practices take place and how local and school culture is valued and reproduced through them; considering and valuing the voices of the participants, families, teachers, and students, as well as political and administrative representatives.

Rural Schools: Policies and Discourses

Numerous studies have highlighted the pedagogical value of schools located in rural areas, as they are identified as schools where social capital and local culture is rebuilt and reproduced through collaboration, participation, and cooperation between the community and the school (Reading et al., 2019). In this sense, school closure is understood as a threat, not only to the school, but also to the community and the locality (Autti & Hyry-Beihammer, 2014). This leads us to highlight different policies that influence rural schools and explain how these policies are based on a mercantilist and metrocentric approach, framed by a discourse that contrasts the rural to the urban.

People who live in rural areas are affected by a huge number of policies such as education, health, transport, justice, welfare, housing, agriculture, among others (Villa & Knutas,

2020). In Spain, there is a national right that is recognised to guarantee equal opportunities and equity. Despite this, depopulation and the difficult consolidation of basic public services are a general trend and a reality. Analysing Spanish rural areas from Bourdieu's (1986) social capital theory, demonstrates the influence that the economy has. In rural areas the economic development is lower and employment opportunities are fewer than in urban areas, causing population movements from rural to urban areas (Vigo-Arrazola & Soriano-Bozalongo, 2020). Rural schools are often impacted by market decisions, particularly in today's world where there are several arguments that highlight the non-viability of small schools, which are viewed in terms of cost-effectiveness, efficiency, and public spending (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2021). In this context, principles such as equality of opportunity and equity remain in the background. In other words, their maintenance and sustainability depend on a market perspective (Beach, 2017; Gill, 2017).

Linked to this argument, local administrations give greater support to schools located in urban environments. This trend has been going on since industrialisation when governments promoted urban development and encouraged the closure of rural schools, a situation which, as we have seen, is still taking place today (Vigo-Arrazola & Soriano-Bozalongo, 2020). A clear example of the invisibility of rural schools in Spain is that there is no reference in the legislation to rural schools, which means that the particularities and idiosyncrasies of these territories and the schools located in them, are not considered (Abós Olivares, 2020).

In this context, the policies seem to ignore important features of the social and cultural situation of the population, or more specifically, the relationship between socio-spatial location, its representation, and the formation of differentiated identities (Öhrn, 2012). Thus, the curriculum promoted is not flexible and does not allow it to be adapted to each of the educational realities (Solstad & Karlberg-Granlund, 2020; Villa et al., 2021).

This metrocentric vision has an influence on how rural schools are defined and understood (Gristy et al., 2020). Traditionally, they have been not only defined, but also organised, from an urban perspective through the creation of '*clusters*' or '*grouped schools*' – organisational systems that allow for the extrapolation of urban organisation to the rural environment (Hargreaves, 2017; Matías Solanilla & Vigo-Arrazola, 2020). In several countries in the study carried out by Hargreaves et al. (2009), it can be observed that there is a persistent political bias towards rural schools, due to a predominantly restrictive and centrist perspective, that causes education to be defined and categorised depending on its territorial location and from the classic characteristics and formats derived from the school with students organised into grades based on age or level (Uttech, 2001).

To this, we must add that the rural context is seen in many cases as a backward and marginal place, as opposed to the urban which is presented as a source of innovation and economic dynamism (Shucksmith, 2019). In this context, the rural school has traditionally been presented as a problematic school, with few resources and poor educational results (Beach & Vigo-Arrazola, 2020; Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2021; Vigo-Arrazola & Soriano-Bozalongo, 2020) defined as a fourth-rate school (denigrated as having low educational quality) and from the stigmatization categorising small rural schools as being of 'special difficulty' in the case of Spain (Vigo-Arrazola & Dieste-Gracia, 2020).

The Role Played: Theoretical Framework

The role of the school in the rural territory is approached in this study from a theoretical framework based on Massey's (2012) theory of spaces and Bourdieu's (1986) theory of social capital.

Massey (2012) interprets space as a social product, in permanent construction and formed from the relationships and interrelationships of the agents that intervene in it and from the experiences lived (Gristy et al., 2020; Massey, 2012). The school from this approach is, therefore, conceived as a space and a social product in which barriers between the 'inside' and the 'outside' are broken down promoting the maintenance of social capital (Autti & Hyry-Beihammer, 2014; Bagley & Hillyard, 2011) and where participation, cooperation, and the reconstruction of local culture and history take place (Villa & Knutas, 2020). In this sense, the school not only plays an educational role, but also plays a role as an enhancer of social and cultural capital, responding to local needs. The actions developed by educational agents in the social context of the locality foster a sense of belonging, rootedness, and identity resulting from the close relationship with the space and among the educational community (Massey, 2012).

Correspondingly, Bourdieu's (1986) theory of social capital reinforces the idea that space is shaped by a dialectical relationship in which the sense of identity is constructed; local culture, sharing, and valuing is at the same time different and heterogeneous. The only way, therefore, to produce social capital is through community action; "*capital is the product of interaction in the community, and cannot be produced by an individual, nor can it be produced by the community itself*" (Bolívar, 2006, p.39). Social capital is, therefore, related to the capacity to establish networks of social relations in and with the environment, which is the focus of this study.

Research Aims

The rural school linked to the social and cultural context is interpreted in this study as a naturally occurring resource that is closely related to the teaching practices that take place in these schools and to the meanings of the development of these practices. These are related to three main aspects: the origin of the teaching practices linked to the context, the different types of practices that take place, and finally, the social relations that are established in the rural school that make up the social and cultural capital and help the knowledge and maintenance of the same. Thus, the objective of the study is to discover what teaching practices take place in rural schools linked to their contexts. In the study, I worked from the premise that the development of teaching practices linked to the context can offer new opportunities for the development of local culture and contribute to the maintenance of the rural school. Our research questions were:

> *What are the context-linked teaching practices carried out in different rural schools?*

> *What has been the origin of these practices? Do they respond to a need?*

This paper reports on a study, conducted in three small rural schools, which examines the role played by small rural schools and teaching practices which value social and cultural capital to promote links with the context (social and cultural). The aims were (1) to identify which teaching practises based on the relationship with the context take place and how these could contribute to the sustainability of the territory and the local culture, (2) to understand the origins of the place-based learning, and (3) to understand the experience and perception of participants (families, students, and teachers) about these practices.

Research Methods

The study presented here is part of a two-phase in-depth ethnographic research project on rural schools that addresses creative teaching practices linked to the context through digital media. From the methodological point of view, the first phase of the ethnographic method was the exploratory collection and analysis of information in small rural schools. In this phase, it was of interest to investigate the rural school, its policies, and discourses, to

arrive at its meanings, as well as its relationship with the cultural and social context. The second phase of the ethnographic method was an ethnographic study of some of three of the schools involved in the first phase.

In line with the proposal and aims presented, the study was developed within the framework of qualitative research and specifically from the use of ethnography. Ethnography was selected due to my interest in understanding the participants' experiences (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1994). In addition, my study focused on social reality, and this enabled me to look for the meaning of the action that took place in this reality. More specifically, the study was carried out through critical ethnography because the critical perspective emphasizes the possibility of mutual transformation through dialogue and the research process (Beach & Vigo-Arrazola, 2021). This created a space of power for those being researched, which implies a co-learning, as well as an opportunity to generate reflexivity and develop a process of rethinking the practices carried out (Maisuria & Beach, 2017).

Considering the importance of place, as addressed in the theoretical framework (Massey, 2012), the study was multi-sited which meant that the educational analysis was well attuned to the nuances of place. In an educational context that is defined by a metrocentric approach the sense of space from a methodological point of view can be lost. Metrocentrism 'traps' rural places, their agents, and their identities in broader structural narratives that do not always fully fit the rural context (Corbett, 2015). Thus, this multi-sited study emphasises the importance of space and place in analysing each educational reality from a contextual perspective.

With the aim of knowing which place-based practices occur in schools located in the rural territory, I used qualitative research techniques that allowed me to understand events, listen to the participants, ask questions, and collect documents from schools. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted a rethinking of the use of global networking and technologies as part of the ethnographic approach (Westman & McDougall, 2019) and encouraged me to consider the online and offline context. Semi-structured interviews, in virtual and face-to-face contexts, were complemented by informal conversations and document review. The interviews and informal conversations were recorded, transcribed, and checked by the participants (families and teachers). I took this action to boost an active role for participants, giving them voice (Denzin, 2018) and promoting a deep process of reflexivity (Maisuria & Beach, 2017) which was dealt with in different meetings between the schools and researchers.

Research Scenario

Context

The context of this study was rural schools in the Aragón region, in northern Spain. Aragón is an autonomous community made up of three provinces, where 97% of the total territory is rural and the capital city, Zaragoza, has 51% of the total population (Instituto Aragonés de Estadística, IAEST). The findings reported here are from three of those schools.

In relation to education, it is significant that 45% of primary schools in the region of Aragón are in rural areas, a total of 136 rural schools of different types (Abós Olivares, 2020). Specifically, there are 74 grouped schools, 53 schools with less than nine units[1], and nine unitary schools. A unitary school is a school which one multi-grade group of students with

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[1] Schools with less than 9 units are those which have less than 9 multi-grade groups, are unique in the locality and embrace the full diversity of the population (Åberg-Bengtsson, 2009; Autti & Hyry-Beihammer, 2014).

just one teacher. The territory in this region is predominantly rural, although there is a strong urban movement and rural depopulation. For this reason, it is a "*fragile and unstructured rural area*" (Vigo-Arrazola & Soriano-Bozalongo, 2020, p. 177).

Moreover, there is the situation of migratory mobility that is having a great impact on the rural context. A large number of migrants have seen the rural territory as an opportunity for work, social and life opportunities. This has led to a high percentage of immigrants in the population, a situation that has an impact on schools, presenting the rural territory with a diversity of origins and cultures (Vigo-Arrazola & Dieste-Gracia, 2020).

Selection and Access to the Field

From the data provided about the rural territory, it is possible to see that rural schools are a reality of our educational system. The selection of the schools was carried out through a non-probabilistic technique of the accidental type, specifically a 'snowball type' (Taylor & Bodgan, 1994). Access to the field is a delicate process where respect for the participants is a priority and even more so in times when COVID-19 is part of the reality. For this reason, access to the field was by mutual consensus, guaranteeing the health measures determined by each centre. An informed consent form was also provided to the participants with the objective of guaranteeing anonymity and ethical treatment of the data provided.

Access was first made through email and telephone calls that later allowed a first meeting to be held online through various platforms. Once this meeting was held, another meeting was offered at the centre where families and teachers were informed of the research process, thus ensuring ethical aspects of access and data collection.

The selection of participants was also guided by inclusion and exclusion criteria, which were drawn from the literature review on rural schools. Given the invisibility to which small, rural schools are subjected and the lack of research in these contexts, the following inclusion and exclusion criteria were chosen:

- *Being a rural school of less than 9 units (inclusion criteria).*

- *Not being a grouped rural school or a cluster (exclusion criteria).*

Considering the purpose and the specific objective of the study, the knowledge of practices in relation to the social, cultural, and natural context was key. This determined the establishment of another criterion for inclusion and exclusion:

- *Developing active pedagogies (inclusion criteria).*

- *Consideration of the local population and families (inclusion criteria).*

- *Pedagogy primarily based on textbooks (exclusion criteria).*

- *Not considering social and community participation (exclusion criteria).*

Small Rural School I was a nursery and primary school with pupils from three to 12 years old, located in the province of Zaragoza, and very close to the capital. The population of the locality showed great heterogeneity, there was a high percentage of immigrant population, around 40% (Instituto Aragonés de Estadística, IAEST), and this was also reflected in the school. There were 39 pupils organized in three classrooms: two in primary education and one in infant education. There was a total of four teachers and only two of them are permanent. The rest of the staff changed every school year, which was one of the biggest difficulties faced by the school. The school's education plan considered families and the local population as the backbone of its teaching practices. Other areas of interest in its practices were information and communication technologies, the natural environment, and coexistence among equals. Although the rural areas have been represented in Spain as

troubled, this school had not only been awarded several prizes by the education authorities for the educational innovation of its teaching practices, but it had also been recognised nationally as a Changemaker School, aspiring to create a world where all children are empathetic leaders, within the national agency of education.

Small Rural School II was a nursery and primary school with pupils from three to 12 years old, located in the province of Huesca in the Pyrenees mountains. The town was the result of a repopulation movement that began in 2015 and the creation of the school was due to the desire of the families to give their children an education rooted in the village. The village had 49 inhabitants and the school had 31 students organized in two multi-grade groups. There were three teachers; two of them lived in the village and the third was a peripatetic teacher who was in charge of teaching specific areas such as English and Physical Education. The school defined itself as a rural learning community and focused its practices on the relationship with the environment, experimentation, and community relations.

Rural school III was also a nursery and primary school with pupils from three to 12 years old, located in the Pyrenees in the province of Huesca. It was a school that was opened in 1940 due to the construction of the railway line. At the time of this project, it was immersed in a process of depopulation; there were only four inhabited houses with only one of them providing students to the school, specifically only one student is local out of a total of 16. The rest of the students come from villages repopulated between 2015 and 2020. The families of these villages had seen in this school an educational opportunity for their children as the pedagogical focus of the school is the participation of families, the rhythms of learning, the free expression of the students, and the natural and social environment. The pupils were distributed in two multi-grade classrooms, one for infant education and the other for primary education. There were two teachers, one for each of the groups. In addition, there was another teacher who oversaw other areas. It should be noted that this teacher taught the local language, which was in the process of being re-established.

Table 1 defines the three schools participating in the study: location, number of pupils, school typology, and defining characteristics.

Table 1: *Participating Schools*

School	Localization	Number of Students	Characteristics
Small Rural School I	Village closed to Zaragoza capital city	39 (three classes)	Cultural diversity 30% foreign immigrants: Morocco Low socio-economic level Special need students
Small Rural School II	Village in the mountains	31 (two classes)	Local population New school created by families Educative community
Small Rural School III	Village in the mountains	16 students (two class)	Local population Medium socio-economic level Special need student

Data Collection and Analysis

As a multi-site ethnographic study, this enabled the analysis of the information through different aspects of different realities (Massey, 2012). The ethnographic data collection reported in this paper took place over a period of the first six months of a planned ten

months, and was organised according to the theorical framework and the review of previous studies. The data was collected by semi-structured interviews and informal conversations. Specifically, to complete empirical data collection, face-to-face and virtual semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight families and 12 teachers, of which two were head teachers, and two government (one local and one regional) representatives. They were asked about the situation of the rural school in the community, how they understood the rural school, and the teaching practices in these contexts. These interviews were conducted as informal conversations during our stay in the field, including being held in classrooms for parents at the school to make the interviewees feel comfortable. In the interviews, I was open to asking additional questions related to the subject as well as following an interview guide.

Table 2: *Semi-structured Interviews*

Participants	Number of participants	Semi-structured Interviews
Families	8	9
Teachers	12	16
Government representatives	2	6
Total	22	31

There were also, informal conversations that took place throughout these months through sporadic visits to schools with teachers, families, and students. A total of 11 visits were made to the different schools. These informal conversations were focused on gaining in-depth knowledge about the practices and the environment. These were recorded in a field diary, where the perceptions of the participants and the researcher were also recorded.

The main areas of interest that emerged were directly related to the study objective. The reading of the data collected through the field diary, interviews and informal conversations, as well as the subsequent rereading of the same, allowed the emergence of categories. These categories were also defined based on the review of the previous research and studies that allowed the organisation and regrouping of aspects within these categories, establishing a relationship between them. This categorisation process was based on the practices are carried out in these schools, in connection with the context and how the participants felt about these practices. This inductive analysis of the data was carried out through the formation of categories as part of the ethnographic method. My intention was to find out what teaching practices take place in small rural schools as well as why and how they take place. This included a review of how these practices were experienced by the participants. Furthermore, I aimed for an in-depth and critically reflexive analysis to reach the critical perspective within the ethnographic method.

As the review of the theoretical framework has shown, space and context do not only imply something on a physical level, but social relations and culture play a major role in shaping the context. In this sense, the following aspects were extracted as aspects of interest: the natural context, the cultural context, and the social context which are complemented with indicators that were the result of the entries and exits to the schools and of a deep process of reflection and shared work with the participants.

For this, the information was returned to the participants through informal conversations and reports. Feedback, from this process, about the information collected was then incorporated into the data analysis process itself, as recommended by Cerletti (2013). The exchange of information between the researcher and participants fostered a process of
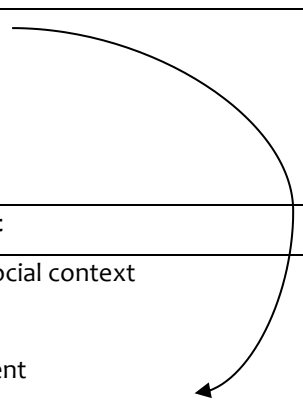
reflection for both. Such benefits have also been observed by other researchers (Maisuria & Beach, 2017). The participants reflected on their own practices and the researcher was critical of the information collected. This process, in addition to being a fundamental element of the collection and analysis of data, is also a way of validating the data collected (Arrazola, 2019).

To summarise, the information gathered during the six months of fieldwork was cross-checked from different approaches. Firstly, by comparing the information provided by the participants and by contrasting this information with previous studies. Secondly, the information was fed back to the participants, analysing whether the information obtained corresponds to reality and their perceptions. Such an approach is recommended by Walford (2009). Thus, the information gathered through the stay in the field and the relationships with the participants, as well as the review of existing research, reinforced a process of triangulation which is fundamental to generate verification and validity to the research.

Table 3 shows the core areas of interest and the items that guided the analysis of the information.

Table 3: *Data Analysis*

Valuing rural schools		
Families	Place where they live	Transmission of local culture
		Development of social capital
Teachers		Bonding
		Participation and engagement

Teaching Practices related to the context	
Cultural context	Social context
Local culture	Participation
Creating school culture	Families' involvement
Cultural aspects in the curriculum	Community engagement

Ethnography Findings and Discussion

The context described and the collection of information led to investigation of what pedagogical practices occur in small rural schools, with the aim of fostering a sense of rootedness, belonging and identity, considering the particularity of the contexts and schools. Specifically, the study focused on pedagogical practices that move away from performativity, valuing practices that are based on the needs of each context. Here the results are presented with discussion to offer a global and reflexive vision of the aspects studied.

The Rural School as a hub in the Locality

Rural schools are more likely to be vital to the social and economic network and sustainability of their local community (Barley & Beesley, 2007). However, "*the idea that small schools, especially rural, are the 'hub' of the community with a readymade bounty of social capital is contextual and contestable*" (Hargreaves, 2009, p.123). A critical point is that it cannot be assumed that the rural school in general is the backbone of the territory or the heart of the community. In this multi-site study, in which the identity of each school and its idiosyncrasies are understood, it would be a mistake to fall into generalizations. As Bagley

and Hillyard (2011) indicate, it is important to consider the particularity of space and contexts.

It is therefore not possible to generalize, either in terms of the structure of the territory or in terms of family-community relations. However, in certain social contexts, as in the case of Rural School II, where local schooling seemed to reinforce identification with a community, *"informal conversations between teachers and with families can be a form of network and bond building"* (Woods, 2006, p.587). In this school, the sense of belonging was very visible among families and students. These showed the important relationship of inclusion that existed between members of the locality linked to their space and the living conditions they experience (Massey, 2012). So, this school building can facilitate the introduction of local culture and social capital within the school in a natural and consensual way with the community.

> *Teachers are also members of our community; they are also families of the school. This indirectly makes the community and our sense of belonging, even of responsibility for what has been created, part of the school and present in the pupils (Father, Small Rural School III).*

In other contexts, as in the case of Small Rural School III, the situation was very different. The fact that the pupils attending the school were from different communities and the teachers were also from different communities made it difficult for the school to foster a sense of community and belonging (Solanilla & Arrazola, 2020). *"This may be one of the great limitations we have. That it is very difficult for students to feel part of the centre and, therefore, their families"* (Teacher, Small Rural School III).

However, as the Headteacher pointed out:

> *There is a feeling of belonging to each of the villages, especially in the repopulated villages, as these are projects that have been motivated and led by the families themselves, who pass on their own history and experiences to their children (Headteacher, Small Rural School III).*

In the case of Small Rural School I, the fact that the pupils came from different origins and cultures, with a high percentage of immigrant population, was a challenge and at the same time an opportunity, as the Headteacher of the school pointed out.

> *We always talk about the local population and immigrant population, but many of the pupils are local, they were born and raised here, although their culture is different. Their cultures enrich our culture, not only that of the village but also that of the school. It gives us the opportunity to come up with teaching practices based on their interests and we listen to what they want to study. Often these are things that are specific to each culture, and that is always a richness for us (Headteacher, Small Rural School I).*

However, despite the school's efforts, community building and the development of a sense of identity was more diffuse. *"We do not achieve community togetherness outside the school"* (Headteacher, Small Rural School I). In many cases, the participation of families, listening to their voices, and the inclusion of local culture in the school curriculum does not always guarantee a sense of belonging (Hargreaves, 2009). However, it does promote a feeling of recognition towards the school (Solanilla & Arrazola, 2020).

School and territorial organisation were themes that emerged in the data collection and the data analysis. These appeared in the research and literature review and were confirmed by the participants. However, when it was addressed, it was mainly related to school closures. The relationship between the members of the community and the school was strengthened when the maintenance of the school was under threat. In a globalised market context,

school closure is a fact of life and is emphasized when talking about small rural schools (Hargreaves, 2009; Vigo-Arrazola & Soriano-Bozalongo, 2020).

> *We understand that the rural school has to be a backbone and develop identity in order to avoid closure. To do this, it is important that we count on the community and families because if families want to close a school, the school will close (Family, Small Rural School II).*

However, analysis showed the great value of the school for families, the community, and the teachers themselves. This value of the rural school, and of each of the schools by their communities, was an aspect repeatedly recorded and addressed both in the informal conversations and in the semi-structured interviews. In the case of Small Rural School I, the value of the school was recognised not only by the families, but also by the governing bodies of the municipality, which emphasized how the pedagogical development has influenced the visibility of the school. "*The school has done a lot to put the village on the map*" (Government representative, Small Rural School I)". Rural School III was a particular example, as the families had been the driving force behind the school. The school was created based on the needs of the pupils and their families.

Both Small Rural Schools I and II have one aspect in common that was highlighted throughout the information gathering process, and that was that teaching staff were part of the locality and lived there. This aspect seemed to have a direct influence on the knowledge of local culture for reflection and transmission in the school, which relates to Massey's (2012) 'sense'. There, the value of the locality and the relationships generated with the school enabled the development of social capital through the creation of cooperation and collaboration mechanisms (Matías Solanilla & Vigo-Arrazola, 2020).

In the case of the Small Rural School III, the voices of the families valued the school for its pedagogical sense, but not in relation to the territory. It should be remembered that this school attracted pupils from other localities, some of them repopulated. The families recognised the pedagogical values of this school because of the teaching practices used and reported trying to propose activities to promote knowledge of the cultures of each of the localities.

> *The reason why we have pupils from different localities is because the families have seen in our centre a pedagogical model that is in line with their beliefs about how they want to educate their children (Teacher, Small Rural School III).*

Throughout the research, it was seen that the schools appeared to be part of a complex social reality that was interactively influenced through social and media representations. It is noteworthy that, at the same time as schools are seen as an essential aspect of the locality, they are also recognised as different and, in some cases, as disadvantaged due to their location in the territory. This view tends to reinforce exclusion (Vigo-Arrazola & Dieste-Gracia, 2019). Thus, the idea of the fourth-rate school referred to at the beginning of the paper continues to form part of the social imaginary.

Teaching Practices Related to the Context

In the study, I had to start from the particularities of the contexts and places; not all schools are the same, so the way in which they develop their practices will not be the same either (Massey, 2012). In this sense, the results are shown in relation to practices but considering the idiosyncrasies of each locality, community, and school.

The study found that the establishment of educational practices was based on promoting knowledge of local culture that motivated pupils and families. These practices also allowed the school to open itself to the voices of families and the community, favouring the inclusion of culture and weaving networks (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

One finding of the study was the influence that the place of residence had on the development of cultural teaching practices. This study reinforces the contributions that *Matías Solanilla* and Vigo-Arrazola (2020) made in their study on participation and rural schools. The fact that teachers or families did not live in the locality where the school was located may make it difficult in some contexts to transmit the local culture. Small Rural School III made use of its environment but did not manage to develop a sense of belonging or local transmission. It was the families who, through their practices, transmitted the culture of each of the localities. The teacher, however, emphasized the value of family participation, which is a vital element in developing school culture.

> *A few days ago, a mother came to me and suggested that, as the pupils come from different villages, we could organize days in each of the villages and prepare activities in which each locality would talk about the legends and myths of the area (Teacher, Small Rural School III).*

The voices of pupils and families were valued at school and were listened to because they are the source of cultural transmission, which coincides with the contributions observed by Vigo-Arrazola and Dieste-Gracia (2019).

In the case of the Small Rural School I, although the families did not live in different localities, there was a great cultural heterogeneity. This cultural diversity, although not integrated outside the school, did occur within the school. In this sense, the school acted as the heart of the village, as a place of meeting and understanding. *"We have a great diversity of cultures in the school, but this diversity enriches us and allows us to build our own school culture" (Teacher, Small Rural School I).*

In those schools where teachers lived in the same locality, the value of relationships and interactions indicated a clear inclusive relationship between all of them. This reinforces the results found by Bagley and Hillyard (2011). This had an impact on the practices they carried out and the way they opened the school to the community, as also observed by Hargreaves (2017). Small Rural School II did not have the aspects of cultural diversity, nor did it have those aspects of discontinuity between the place of residence and the school. It valued the transmission of local history and culture by developing practices in partnership with the community. They were agreed by all (families and villagers) in assembly and planned by the teachers.

> *This school specifically values the people's own history. The expropriation of the land for the construction of a reservoir, the depopulation and repopulation of the village are the focus of conversations with the families and with the pupils. The pupils are fully aware of their history (Notes Field Diary).*

Thus, there was an appreciation on the part of teachers of the space, context, and history. Teachers emphasized their way of doing and used markers such as culture, language, race, religion or ethnicity. This reinforces similar previous findings (Vigo-Arrazola & Dieste-Gracia, 2019). Additionally, they focused on investigating and discovering the values, beliefs, and customs of families inside and outside the school, thus beyond institutional boundaries. Teachers were found to be particularly engaged in trying to learn about families and their values, situating themselves within the local social context.

> *A few years ago, when we saw that there was a large percentage of new students in the school, we decided to start a project for families. The aim was to try to make families from different cultures part of the life of the school. Among some of the activities we proposed to investigate the names of the pupils in order to be able to link them with each of the cultures (Headteacher, Small Rural School I).*

These practices reinforced not only the idea of introducing culture into the curriculum and school dynamics, but also the value that teachers placed on families, as all three schools make constant reference to the need to know their students' families, understand them, and listen to their voices. *"If I can't understand the families, how can I make them part of the community" (Small Rural School I)?*

Each child's culture also shaped the school culture and was heard through teaching practices that were linked to their immediate environment and that allow for free choice and free expression. *"We start from the experiences of the pupils and then approach the elaboration of texts from an approach of freedom" (Teacher, Small Rural School III).*

Conclusion

There is a policy of differentiation between rural schools and urban schools, which favours a metrocentric context that values the urban over the rural, reforming the categorisation and overlapping of some population groups over others (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In the case of rural schools, it is important to recognise that a metrocentric and negative perception of rural schools is deeply rooted in institutions and in social, political, and educational structures (Vigo-Arrazola & Beach, 2018). Thus, this study highlights the need for educational policies that make it possible to address the particularities of schools, as identified by Massey (2012), through a flexible and open curriculum based on community opportunities and context-based learning The voices of families, students, and teachers in the rural schools in this study underline the value of the local space, not necessarily from the point of view of territorial structuring, but rather in recognition of its pedagogical value in relation to cultural transmission and social capital.

Finally, it is important to highlight the limitations and implications of this study for the participants themselves. In this sense, a limitation of the study, and at the same time an opportunity for the future, is the need to propose an ethnographic study in which the time spent in the field is reinforced through participant observation (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004), which represents the second phase of the study, being carried out over a period of 10 months.

Moreover, the study presents implications for both researchers and participants. Maisuria and Beach (2017) have previously identified that this type of ethnographic research, staying in the field, has implications for both the realities investigated and the researchers themselves. Through my study, it has been possible to see how a process of reflexivity has been opened, not only about their practices, but also about the transmission of culture and social capital, generating a change in teaching practices through a process of rethinking and reconstructing them (Vigo-Arrazola & Dieste-Garcia, 2020). Ethnography is understood here beyond the method itself as holding the potential for transformation (Beach & Vigo-Arrazola, 2021).

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Assessing Educating for Gross National Happiness: Applying the Theory of Practice Architectures

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Abstract

Gross National Happiness (GNH) is a central policy, symbolic of Bhutan, which gave rise to Educating for GNH (EGNH). In Bhutan, the school Performance Management System is the sole instrument used by the Ministry of Education to evaluate the performance of schools. To test the utility of the Performance Management System in fulfilling the intended goals of EGNH, two of its key subcomponents—the School Self-Assessment and School Performance Scorecards—were assessed through the lens of the theory of practice architectures. The theory describes what comprises social practices and how they are shaped by the social, cultural and political contexts in which they occur. Content analysis was carried out using Leximancer text-mining software. The findings showed that the sayings and relatings and their corresponding cultural-discursive and social-political arrangements were not as evident in the School Self-Assessment indicators as the doings and material-economic arrangements. The findings also indicated that both the School Self-Assessment's and the School Performance Scorecards' indicators focus more on assessing leadership than teaching. The authors present several suggestions to ensure a closer alignment with the goals of EGNH, to demonstrate a balanced focus on assessing teaching and leadership, and to represent all practice architectures proportionately. Implications of this study should inform the policy and practices of Educating for GNH values in Bhutanese schools. The methods of the study could be adapted to examine educational practices beyond those of Bhutan.

Keywords: *Gross National Happiness, practice architectures, assessment of schools, Bhutan*

Introduction

Gross National Happiness (GNH) is a developmental philosophy of Bhutan (Karma Ura[1] et al., 2012; Kezang Sherab et al., 2016; Pema Thinley, 2016) that is inspired by Buddhist philosophy and practices. GNH is defined by four pillars and nine domains and evidenced by 33 indicators and 124

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[1] Schuelka and Maxwell (2016, p. 3) recommended citing and referencing Bhutanese authors using both given names to accommodate the lack of surnames. Their suggestion has been followed in this paper.

variables (Karma Ura et al., 2012). The Bhutan government uses these indicators to survey the nation and determine the status of national happiness, called the GNH index.

His Majesty the Fourth King Jigme Singye Wangchuck propounded the philosophy of GNH in the 1970s. The first democratically elected government in 2008 identified education as one of the main approaches towards creating a happy society (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2013; Schuelka & Maxwell, 2016). However, GNH did not have an immediate influence over the country's governance practices. The policy of GNH first appeared in government planning in the 9th *Five Year Plan (2002–2008)* and the influence of GNH philosophy on public policy has grown since (Gross National Happiness Commission, n.d.).

Educating for GNH (EGNH) was one of the principal approaches that the first democratically elected government proposed to infuse, integrate and promote GNH values in the school system (MoE, 2013). All educationists—the key ministry officials, the district education officers, principals, and teachers—received a weeklong orientation to carry forward the EGNH initiative. The orientation was rolled out to all teachers in successive years. The focus of EGNH was to infuse GNH values in all school programmes and practices. EGNH is not a new subject. It is about how schools can enrich and give a heartfelt and genuine context, purpose and meaning to all school programmes, activities and learning (MoE, 2013).

Ideally, the outcome of EGNH was for students to graduate with ingrained GNH values which they then carry into the workforce. Thus, the Ministry of Education reformed education monitoring tools, which were previously used to monitor teachers' professionalism, such as academic planning, teaching, assessment, and other co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. This reform gave rise to the school Performance Management System, which has GNH values as one of its key foci (Education Monitoring Division [EMD], 2020; Pema Thinley, 2016). The system comprises three components: the School Self-Assessment tool, the School Improvement Plan and the School Performance Scorecards (see Figure 1). The School Self-Assessment is a tool used by schools to reflect and assess their performance, and the School Improvement Plan requires schools to prepare an improvement plan by setting targets for the academic year, depicted as a GNH progress wheel. Further, the School Performance Scorecards consist of the Academic Learning Scorecard, the Enabling Practices Scorecard and the Gross National Happiness Scorecard.

Figure 1: *The School Performance Management System (from Kaka et al., 2022)*
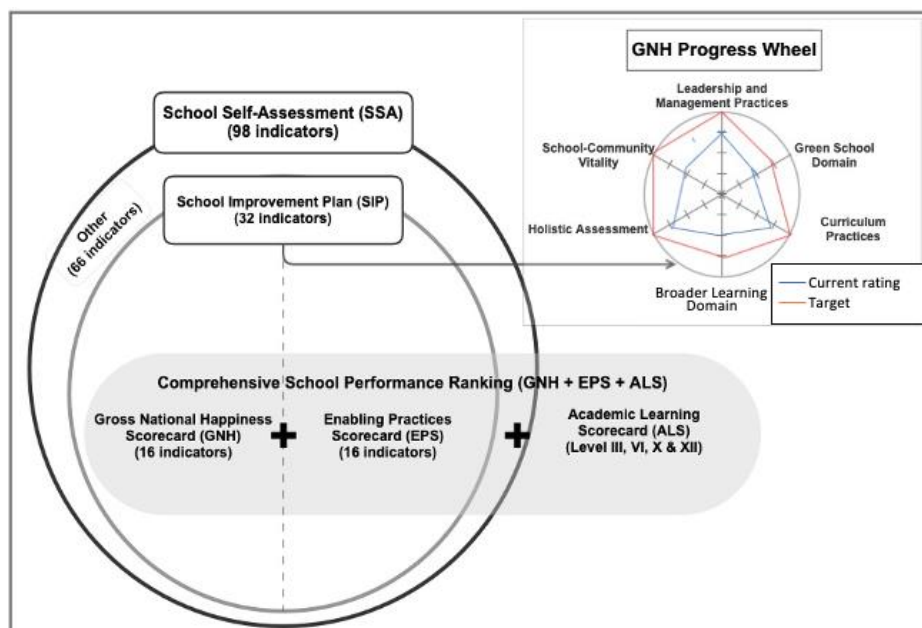
There is no research evidence that the Performance Management System contributes towards fulfilling the intended goals of EGNH, and this is problematic. Kaka et al. (2022) contested the effectiveness of the system, claiming that the key areas of the School Self-Assessment, School Improvement Plan, Enabling Practices Scorecard and GNH Scorecard need to be aligned with the seven standards of the *Bhutan Professional Standards for Teachers* commissioned in 2019 (MoE, 2020). They also argued that the Performance Management System approach was inequitable, and schools with modest facilities, human resources and locations were ranked against well-resourced schools using the same criteria.

To compound the situation, the school performance scores were used by the Royal Civil Service Commission to determine promotions of civil servants, of whom one-third are teachers (Lhawang Ugyel, 2017). This decision did not appear to motivate teachers to improve their practices. Anecdotal information suggests that some teachers are more focused on gathering superficial evidence of their tasks to impress monitors and supervisors than genuinely delivering services for the welfare of students. For example, meditation, one of the indicators of the School Self-Assessment, is practised by schools as a compliance exercise, merely fulfilling the requirements of the policy directive (Kaka et al., 2022). Teachers have expressed disappointment over the absence of specific guidelines and materials to help infuse GNH values into their daily lessons (Sonam Zangmo, 2014).

There is a need for frequent orientation and professional development to integrate GNH values into teachers' daily lessons (Kezang Sherab, 2013; Kezang Sherab et al., 2016). Pema Tshomo (2016) contended that the EGNH initiative appears to have little focus on promoting enabling conditions. Research has also revealed that teachers are, at times, impolite to their students (Kezang Sherab, 2013), providing inappropriate feedback and lacking kindness and compassion; courtesy is not expected of teachers to promote GNH values (Kezang Sherab, 2013; Kezang Sherab et al., 2016).

There is a need for EGNH approaches to include educational aspects, such as access and supportive and enriching environments (Pema Tshomo, 2016). Kezang Sherab et al. (2016) found that assessment practices in schools were overshadowed by cognitive aspects through unit tests and examinations, although EGNH is intended to institute an holistic assessment system. These findings indicate that GNH practices by teachers in schools are yet to be fully established. Therefore, the validity of the Performance Management System, supposedly intended to infuse GNH practices in teachers, is in question (Kaka et al., 2022). Empirical evidence is needed to promote an effective and valid assessment of the EGNH initiative in schools.

The theory of practice architectures by Kemmis and Grootenboer (2008) and Mahon et al. (2017) provides a lens to examine the assessment of EGNH practices in Bhutan. This theory is a resource for understanding educational and professional practice, an analytical tool for revealing the way practices occur, and a transformational resource for finding ways to change education and professional practice (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008; Mahon et al., 2017). The theory has been used widely across educational sites to understand professional practices (see, e.g., Bahdanovich Hanssen, 2019; Edwards-Groves & Grootenboer, 2015; Hemmings et al., 2013; Petrie, 2016; Powell, 2020; Salamon et al., 2016; Sjølie & Østern, 2020; Uchida et al., 2020).

In the following section, we unpack the Bhutanese religious, social, and cultural dimensions of practices that influence educational policies. Furthermore, we apply the theory to analyse the alignment of the Performance Management System indicators to practice architectures in Bhutanese schools.

Theory of Practice Architectures

The theory of practice architectures by Kemmis and Grootenboer (2008) is used in this study to scrutinise the Performance Management System used in Bhutan to evaluate schools'

performances. Figure 2 presents the key concepts that underpin the theory of practice architectures and illustrates how activities mesh within contextual arrangements through three intersubjective dimensions: language, activity and work, and power and solidarity.

In what follows, we apply these theoretical concepts to the context of Educating for GNH practices in Bhutanese schools.

Figure 2: *The Theory of Practice Architectures*
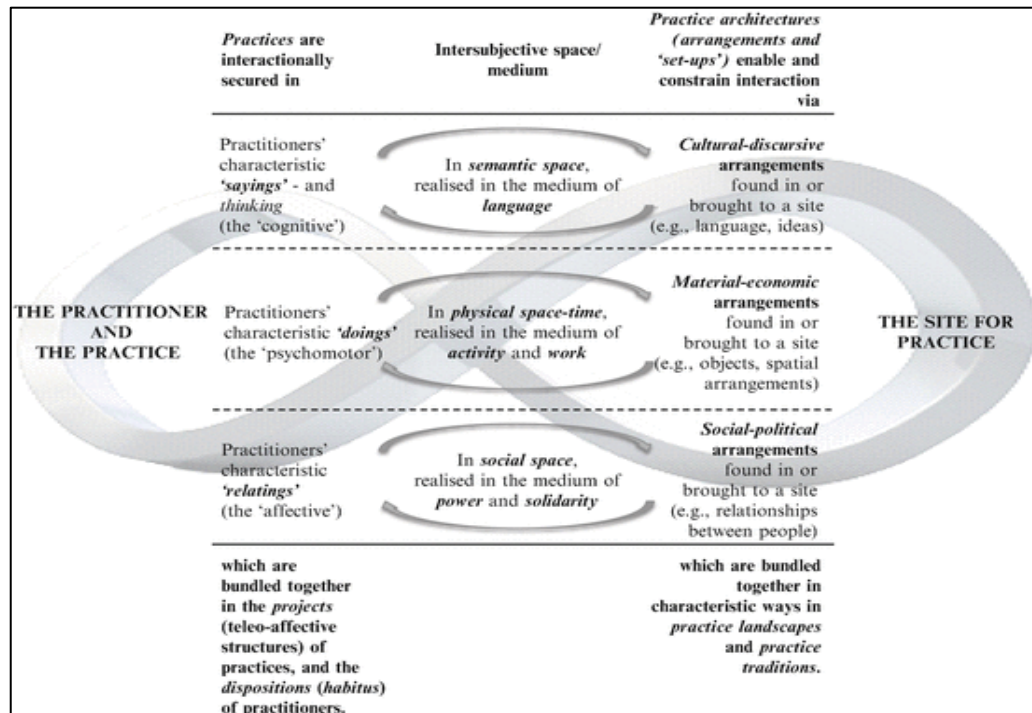
Source: Mahon et al. (2017, p. 13). Reproduced with permission from Springer Nature.

Practices

According to Mahon et al. (2017), practices comprise three socially established practices or activities that happen concurrently: "*sayings, doings and relatings*" (p. 10). The 'sayings' are "*utterances and forms of understandings*"; the 'doings' are "*mode of actions*," and the 'relatings' are "*ways in which people relate to one another and the world*" (p. 8). Practices are also dependent on "*experience, intentions, dispositions, habitus, and actions of individuals*" (p. 9). Mahon et al. explained that "*practices are shaped and prefigured intersubjectively by arrangements*" (p. 9), circumstances and conditions "*beyond each person as an individual agent or actor*," that exist in, or are brought to, particular sites of practice (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008, p. 8).

EGNH practices in Bhutan are shaped by Buddhist values and principles, the culture, and social systems. EGNH was conceived to put the philosophy of GNH into practice, effectively and comprehensively (MoE, 2011). In order to define EGNH practices in schools, we refer to the five EGNH pathways that teachers are expected to implement: "*meditation and mind training, infusing GNH values into the curriculum, holistic assessment of students, broader learning environment, and media literacy and critical thinking skills*" (MoE, 2014, p. 84). The activities of sayings, doings and relatings in relation to education policies and religious, cultural and social dimensions are now explained further.

Sayings

Sayings are utterances and forms of understandings that occur *"in the semantic space, in the medium of language"* (Mahon et al., 2017, p. 11). Sayings are the main form of verbal communication on a day-to-day and one-on-one basis. In the Bhutanese school context, the students and teachers begin the school day by greeting each other, *"Good morning, Sir/Madam."* The school day is full of verbal communication sayings. Therefore, the medium of communication—the language—plays an important role. Teachers are expected to demonstrate strategies that are appropriate for learners' language development (MoE, 2020, 2021). The language subjects of English and Dzongkha are assessed for both writing and speaking skills (MoE, 2014).

The Bhutanese culture, influenced by Buddhist values, has 10 conducts, of which four are speech sayings: (1) speaking the truth, (2) avoiding divisive speech, (3) avoiding harsh speech, and (4) avoiding pointless gossiping (The Dalai Lama, 1995). The *Code of Conduct for Teachers* (MoE Policy and Planning Division, 2012) expects teachers to set themselves as a model for reading, writing, and communicating. Specifically, focus area 2.12 of the code expects teachers to *"refrain from … use of improper language"* (p. 35). Students are also expected to maintain decorum while talking with others, and to use decent language.

Doings

Doings are the mode of actions that occur *"in physical space-time, in the medium of activity or work"* (Mahon et al., 2017, p. 11). Almost all the descriptors of the *Bhutan Professional Standards for Teachers* (MoE, 2020, 2021) contain verbs such as *demonstrate*, *implement*, *develop*, *lead*, *identify*, *apply*, *model*, and *collaborate*. However, it is important to understand that these action words cannot be reduced to actions only (i.e., doings) without words or speeches (i.e., sayings), as they are inextricably enmeshed (Edwards-Groves & Grootenboer, 2017; Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008).

Of the 10 Buddhist conducts, three are related to actions (i.e., doings). They are: (1) not harming and taking life, (2) not taking anything that is not given, and (3) avoiding sexual misconduct (The Dalai Lama, 1995). The rationale for the *Code of Conduct for Teachers* (MoE Policy and Planning Division, 2012) states:

> With the infusion of GNH in school curricula, the demand for teacher professionalism has received even more attention. They are the role model, mentor, and the architect. This places Teachers in a special position of responsibility, which requires [an] exceptionally high standard of behavior and conduct. (p. 34)

Schools also expect students to be punctual and to be present in all school activities, follow a dress code, keep rooms and surroundings clean and green, and display the best behaviours (MoE Policy and Planning Division, 2012).

Relatings

Relatings are "ways in which people relate to one another and the world" (Mahon et al., 2017, p. 8). They occur in social space, in the medium of "solidarity and power" (Mahon et al., 2017, p. 8). A student greeting their teacher in the morning by saying *"Good morning, Sir/Madam"* also bows to the teacher. This is driven by the teacher-student relationships (i.e., relatings). Other forms of body language would accompany this, such as a smile and a caring and loving gesture. If we go deep into the nuances of teacher-student relationships, the language—tone and intonation— and the body language used by both the teacher and students will vary according to the quality of their relationship, such as love and trust between the two. Mahon et al. (2017) suggested that activities of *"sayings, doings and relatings happen together"* (p. 8). It means that activities cannot be reduced to any one of these actions on their own.

Of the 10 Buddhist conducts, three are of the mind that shapes or enables the relationships or relatings. They are: (1) avoiding greedy thoughts, (2) avoiding harmful intention, and (3) avoiding a wrong view (The Dalai Lama, 1995). Indeed, the *Code of Conduct for Teachers* (MoE Policy and Planning Division, 2012) is founded on the principles that teachers have "(1) *an abiding love for children, (2) a deep passion for learning, and (3) a heightened sense of the importance of education as a powerful tool for the transformation of individuals, societies and nations*" (p. 34). Therefore, teachers are expected to "*treat all colleagues fairly and with respect, without discrimination*"; "*work with team spirit and cooperation*"; "*respect students' views and feelings*"; "*cater to the varied needs of diverse students*" (p. 35); "*maintain a harmonious relationship with the community,*" and "*show respect to values, customs and norms of the community*" (p. 36). Similarly, schools also expect students to cooperate with teachers and friends, and expect healthy relationships between teachers/staff and students and amongst students.

The Ministry of Education's (2014) vision aspires to create "*an educated and enlightened society of GNH, built and sustained on the unique Bhutanese value of tha dam-tshig ley gyu-drey*" (p. 63). This traditional value has interdependency as its core value, which addresses not only self-discipline and the conduct of interpersonal relationships, but also defines the responsibility of all sentient beings (Tashi Wangyel, 2001).

Arrangements

The activities of sayings, doings, and relatings are shaped by the "*cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements*" (Mahon et al., 2017, p. 11) that exist simultaneously in any site of practice (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008).

Cultural-discursive Arrangements

The 'cultural-discursive arrangements' make sayings possible in an activity. They consist of resources that can "*constrain and/or enable what is relevant and appropriate to say … in performing, describing, interpreting, or justifying*" the activity (Mahon et al., 2017, p. 9). The *Bhutan Professional Standards for Teachers* (MoE, 2020) have two specific focus areas that enable cultural-discursive arrangements. Focus area 3.6 expects distinguished teachers to exhibit exemplary practice in the use of effective verbal and non-verbal communication strategies to support learners' understanding, participation, engagement and achievement in different learning contexts. Similarly, focus area 3.7 expects distinguished teachers to provide leadership in supporting colleagues to achieve a high level of proficiency in using Dzongkha and English (MoE, 2020). The *Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014–2024: Rethinking Education* (MoE, 2014) makes specific reference to communicative competency as one of the nine student attributes, and demands that students must develop mastery of languages, especially Dzongkha, the national language, and English as the medium of instruction. The Ministry of Education in Bhutan instituted English as a medium of instruction from 1964. Tashi Wangyel (2001), however, argued that English as the medium of instruction in the Bhutanese education system has deterred intergenerational transmission of values in Bhutan.

Material-economic Arrangements

The 'material-economic arrangements' are resources that shape and make doings possible. These arrangements include the physical environment, finance, human and non-human entities. They support or affect what, when, how and by whom something can be done (Mahon et al., 2017). Standard 2 of the *Bhutan Professional Standards for Teachers* (MoE, 2020) is "*Learning Environment*" (p. 40). This standard refers to the physical space and psycho-social ambience that facilitate effective teaching and learning practices (MoE, 2020, 2021). The *Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014–2024: Rethinking Education* (MoE, 2014) has also recommended numerous interventions on teaching-learning materials, teacher competency, infrastructure development, and the learning environment. The Buddhist does not encourage giving too much attention to

the external material aspects of life. However, this is not to deny the importance of material factors to people's wellbeing. Without a certain level of material comfort, people cannot live with the dignity that they deserve (The Dalai Lama, 2011).

Social-political Arrangements

The 'social-political arrangements' are resources that shape how people relate in an activity to other people and to non-human objects. These arrangements are "*organisational rules; social solidarities; hierarchies; community, familial, and organisational relationships*," that enable and/or constrain relationships (Mahon et al., 2017, p. 10). In the Bhutanese educational context, the essence of the vision statement, "*tha dam-tshig ley gju-drey*" (MoE, 2020, p. 11; MoE, 2021, p. 63), guides the overall social-political arrangements in schools. The concept of *ley gyu-drey* (also written as *ley gju-drey)* essentially states that good begets good. The idea of *tha dam-tshig* outlines the sacred commitments to others in society.

Standard 7 of the *Bhutan Professional Standards for Teachers* (MoE, 2020) is "*Professional Engagement and Bhutanese Values*" (p. 50). All four focus areas under this standard aspire to enable social-political arrangements. This standard emphasises "*the importance of teachers collaborating with parents and community*," the "*moral and professional conduct expected of teachers*," the teachers' code of conduct and school policies, and upholding "*the unique Bhutanese values of tha dam-tshig ley gju-drey*" (p. 50). Schools are expected to create an atmosphere of love and care, with every member acting as a part of the family by respecting each other's welfare and interests (MoE, 2017, p. 20).

In summary, GNH practices which are evaluated through the Performance Management System need to be examined. The validity of the Performance Management System, including the School Self-Assessment and School Improvement Plan questioned by Kaka et al. (2022), needs thorough scrutiny. Further, the lack of motivation to create enabling conditions that promote the practice of GNH (Pema Tshomo, 2016) warrants a thorough examination of these assessment tools, which is the focus of this study. The methods for this research are detailed next.

Methods

This research is situated in the pragmatic paradigm and presents the outcomes of a qualitative content analysis carried out on the School Self-Assessment tool and two of the School Performance Scorecards of the Ministry of Education in Bhutan. The research design was framed by the theory of practice architectures (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008) to determine what activities and arrangements supported the assessment of Bhutanese schools. Content analysis was conducted to determine the conceptual and thematic features of the School Self-Assessment. This process enabled the researchers to determine concepts, themes, and conceptual relationships (Weber, 1990). Leximancer facilitated both conceptual and relational analysis (Leximancer, 2021; Smith & Humphreys, 2006). A quantitative analysis based on the frequency of indicators and the corresponding percentage assigned through manual coding was also incorporated.

The data comprised documents from Bhutan's Performance Management System. The first was the School Self-Assessment document from the Ministry of Education, consisting of 98 indicators. The data analysis was carried out in two stages, firstly through manual coding and, subsequently, using Leximancer Version 4.5 text mining software (Leximancer, 2021). For the initial analysis, the 98 indicators of the School Self-Assessment were coded into one of six categories, which represented three activities and three arrangements: (1) sayings, (2) doings, (3) relatings, (4) cultural-discursive arrangements, (5) material-economic arrangements, and (6) social-political arrangements.

Based on the definitions of these themes, the three authors coded the first 15 indicators together through discussions, negotiations and agreement. This process helped the coders establish a common understanding of what constituted each of the six possible codes. The remaining indicators were coded independently. After the individual coding was completed, the researchers came together to share their codes. The differences that arose were negotiated and agreement was reached. Based on manual coding, all the 98 indicators of the School Self-Assessment aligned to one of the six categories of the theory of practice architectures. This allowed the researchers to have overall insight into the relative prevalence of the various activities and arrangements in the School Self-Assessment.

For the second part of the analysis, the first author carried out content analysis using Leximancer version 4.5. Leximancer (2021) identifies concepts as a collection of words that "*travel together throughout the text*" (p. 9). These are represented by dots on concept maps. The size of the dots is an indication of the connectivity or co-occurrences of particular concepts. Based on the co-occurrence of these concepts, the software generates themes. Themes are represented by coloured circles, which are heat-mapped to indicate their relative importance. The most important theme appears in red, while the next most important appears in orange, and so on, according to the colour wheel (Leximancer, 2021). The theme size slider allows researchers to determine the number of themes which is defaulted at 33%. Depending on how broad or tight the researchers determine the themes to appear, the theme size can be adjusted relative to answering the research questions. The Leximancer analysis includes a concept map of the School Self-Assessment, analysis based on the practice architectures, and analysis of the two School Performance Scorecards (the Enabling Practices Scorecard and the Gross National Happiness Scorecard).

Findings

The findings are organised in two sections: the first comprises the manual coding and the second presents the outcomes of the Leximancer analysis.

Manual Coding of the School Self-assessment

Figure 3 displays the percentage of School Self-Assessment indicators for each of the six activities and their corresponding arrangements. Overall, there were 48 indicators (49%) for activities and 50 indicators (51%) for arrangements. Additionally, the sayings and relatings activities and their corresponding arrangements—cultural-discursive and social-political—were not as evident as the doings activities and the corresponding material-economic arrangements.

Material-economic arrangements were the dominant element of the School Self-Assessment Indicators with 36% of the items coded into that category, followed by the doings at 33%. The relatings category (12%) was closely followed by the socio-political arrangements (11%). The sayings and cultural-discursive arrangements categories were each assigned 4% of the School Self-Assessment indicators.

Figure 3: *Percentages of School Self-Assessment Indicators for Activities and Arrangements*
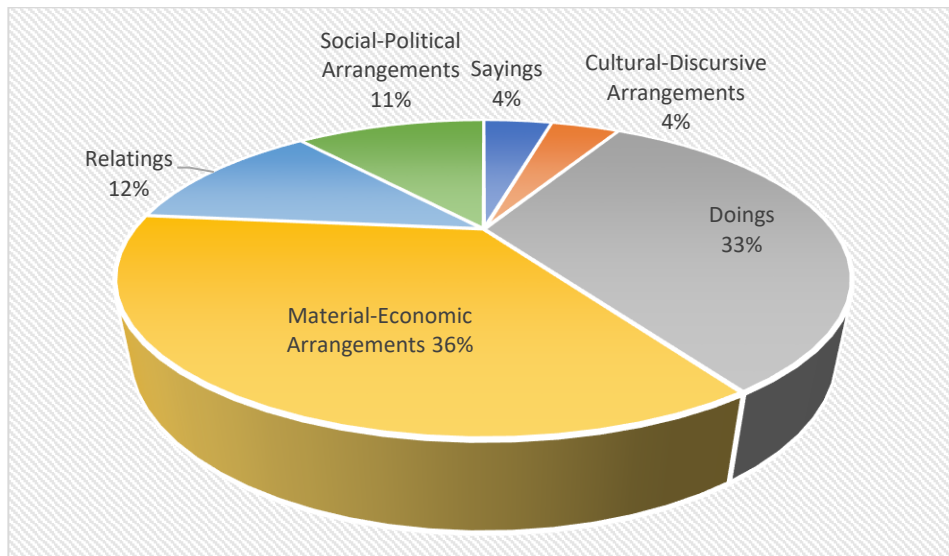

Leximancer Analyses

The Leximancer findings comprised three outcomes. The first was a conceptual map of themes identified in the 98 indicators of the School Self-Assessment. The second comprised six maps corresponding to the three activities and three arrangements categories, and the third consisted of the maps pertaining to the Enabling Practices Scorecard and GNH scorecards.

Conceptual map of the School Self-assessment Indicators

The four prominent themes in the School Self-Assessment, derived by Leximancer at 48% theme size, are displayed in Figure 4.

Figure 4: *Concept Map for the School Self-Assessment*
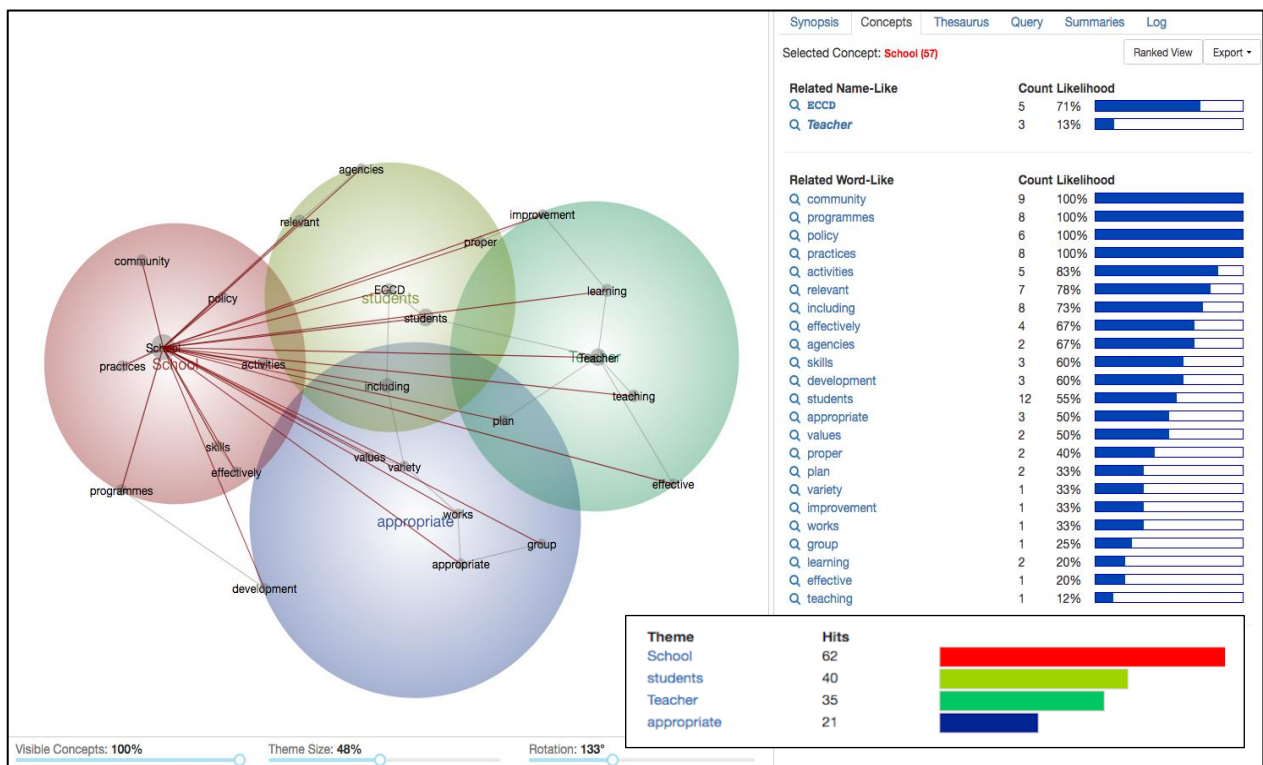
The most dominant theme was 'school', which had the highest connectivity with other concepts. Reading through the linked text (the Related Word-Like list in Figure 4) that matches this theme provided an understanding that it referred to leadership roles that school principals and managers were expected to demonstrate in their school and community. Schools are required to develop policies for effective implementation of curricular and extra-curricular activities and programmes. They are also required to practise healthy food habits, positive disciplining techniques, life skills, conservation ethics, mind training, and inclusiveness.

Similarly, the second theme, 'students', indicates that students are the ultimate beneficiaries of efficient and proper management and support systems, including non-formal education learners, Early Childhood Care and Development children, and Special Education Needs students. Few designated schools in each district cater for students with special education needs. The schools that do have the responsibility to make adjustments for these students.

The third theme, 'teachers', refers to effective teaching and professional practices that teachers are expected to use for improving students' knowledge and learning. Teachers are expected to deliver their curriculum with professionalism by preparing good plans.

The fourth theme, 'appropriate', refers to the appropriateness of leadership and teaching practices that school principals and teachers need to demonstrate. Teachers are also expected to use a variety of strategies and techniques and integrate GNH values in their lessons and school development programmes.

### Analysis Based on Practice Architectures

In the following, we present the analysis of activities (sayings, doings and relatings) and arrangements (cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political). Each activity is followed by the corresponding arrangement that enables or hinders it. The themes are presented in the order of importance as identified by Leximancer. As in the previous section, the examples from the Related Word-Like lists in Figure 5 (sayings), Figure 6 (cultural-discursive arrangements), Figure 7 (doings), Figure 8 (material-economic arrangements), Figure 9 (relatings) and Figure 10 (social-political arrangements) are shown in italic font and underlined.

Sayings

The School Self-Assessment has only four indicators that correspond to the activity, sayings. Due to the limited number of indicators, the researchers decided to view the overall theme at 100% size as shown in Figure 5 (next page).

The major theme, 'home', shows the maximum connectivity within the four School Self-Assessment indicators. Home refers to homework(s) that teachers are expected to assign to students with clear instructions. The principal and staff members are also expected to communicate effectively with students both inside and outside the school. The second theme, 'appropriate', refers to the appropriateness of homework and tasks as per the school homework policy.

Figure 5: *Concept Map for Sayings*
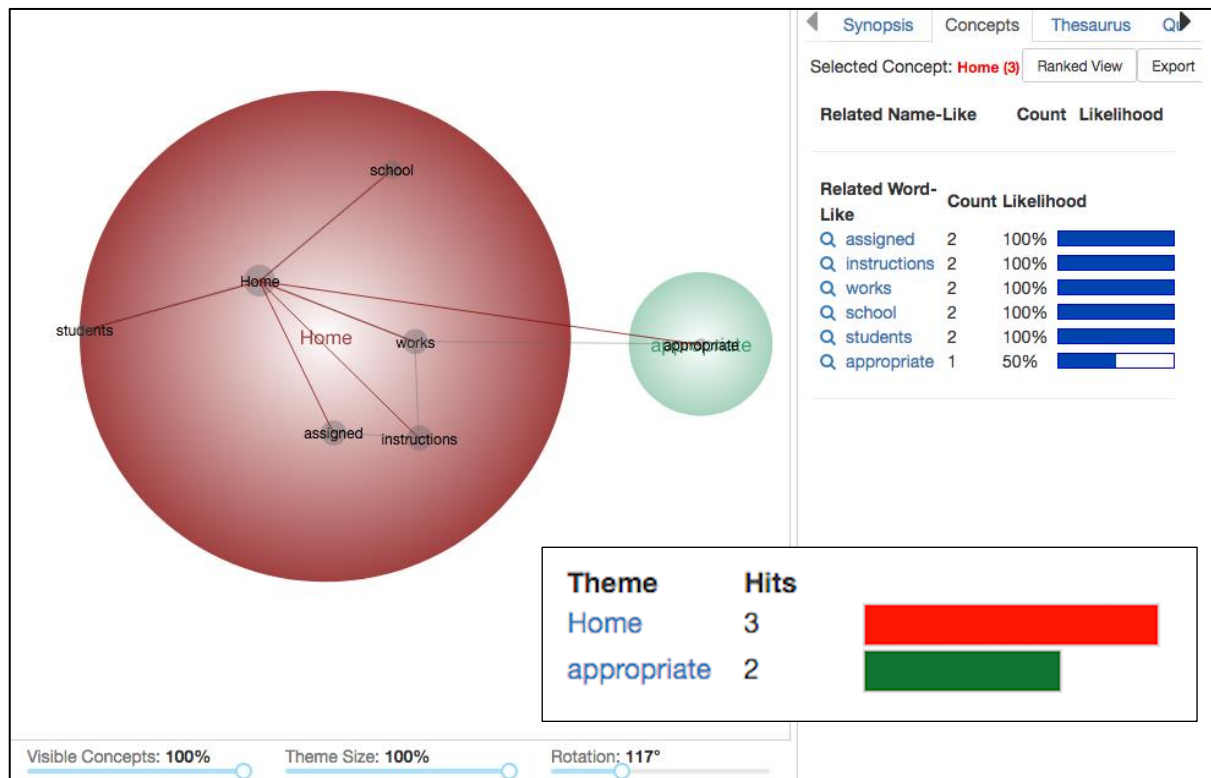
Cultural-discursive Arrangements

The School Self-Assessment had four indicators that corresponded to cultural-discursive arrangements. Due to the limited number of indicators, the researchers set the theme size at 100% as shown in Figure 6. Leximancer identified 'participation' as the only theme. The list of concepts (participation, school, project, promotes, spiritual, researchers and work), are observed with the co-occurrences of the concepts showing that all the concepts are weighted the same (see Figure 6). Leximancer identified only one of the four indicators coded for cultural-discursive arrangements to generate concepts: School promotes the cultural and spiritual dimension through community participation, project works, research, and other event/functions (see Figure 6). No relationships are mapped between students and the other concepts. Referring to the linked indicators, it was found that the other three indicators are disconnected from this indicator.
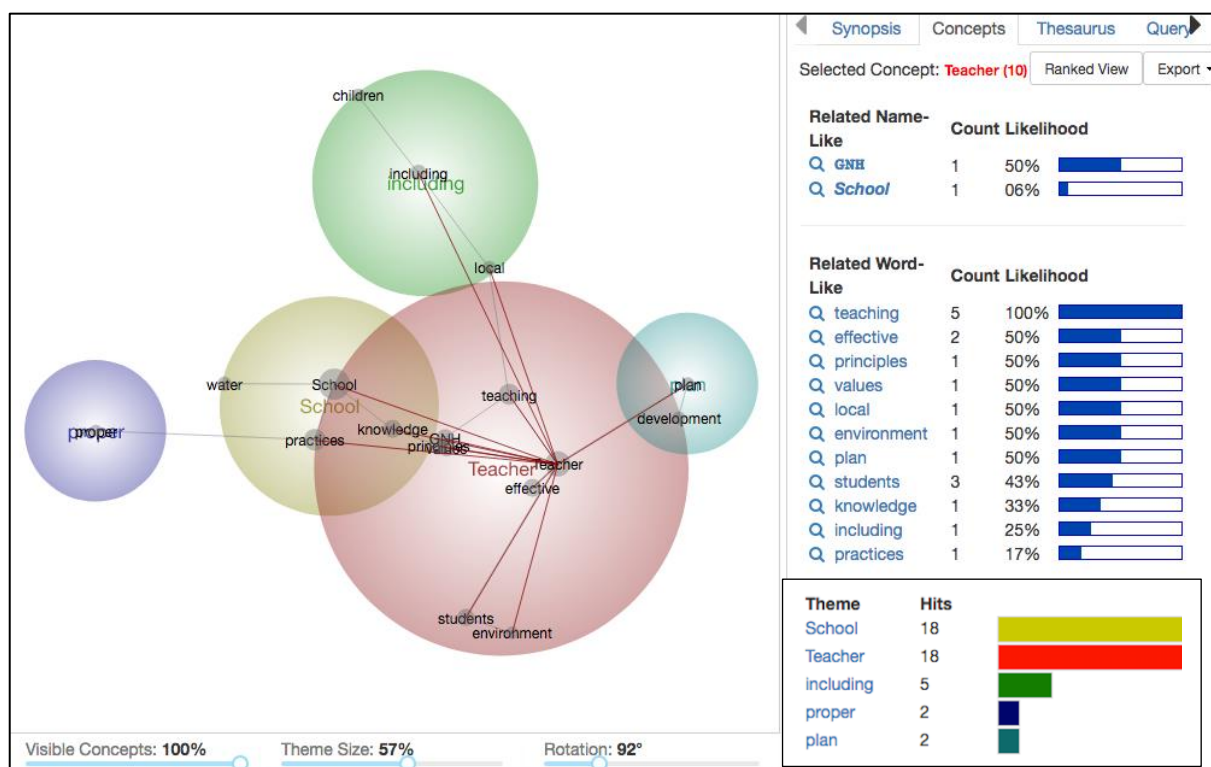
Figure 6: *Concept Map for Cultural-Discursive Arrangement*
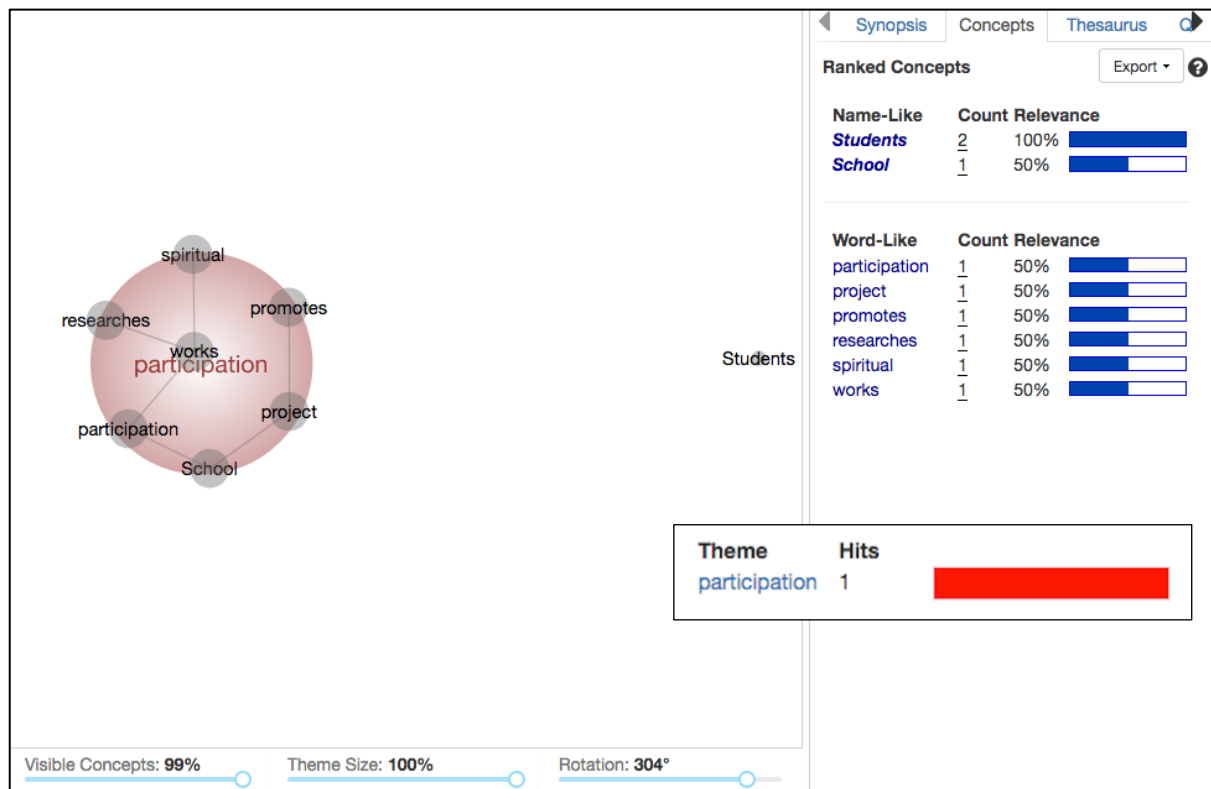
Doings

The School Self-Assessment has 32 indicators that correspond to the activity, doings. Leximancer generated five themes at 57% theme size (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: *Concept Map for Doings*

The major theme, 'teacher', has the maximum co-occurrences with other concepts, making it the most prominent theme. The practices of teaching are related to effective teaching of GNH principles and values and creating a conducive learning environment for students.

The second theme, 'school', refers to the role of school leadership to promote and demonstrate knowledge on eco-literacy, like climate change; and practices of strong conservation ethics such as waste management, water, electricity, rivers, streams and forests. School leaders are also expected to promote mind training and mindfulness practices as a normal part of school life.

The third theme, 'including', refers to the role of schools to include and cater for students with special education needs, children in the Early Childhood Care and Development centres (which, in Bhutan, are managed, supported and monitored by schools) and learners in Non-Formal Education (also managed, supported and monitored by schools). Schools are also expected to include varieties of teaching strategies appropriate to the needs of the learners and the subject.

The fourth theme, 'plan', is interrelated to the first theme, *teacher*. It refers to the need for teachers to have an instructional plan and a professional development plan.

The fifth theme, 'proper', is related to the second theme, school, referring to proper school management practices, such as finance, human resource, materials and school wastes. The authors are aware of the value-laden nature of the term proper. The term was identified by Leximancer as it appeared in the data documents.

Material-economic Arrangements

The School Self-Assessment has 35 indicators that were coded as material-economic arrangements. Leximancer generated four themes as shown in Figure 8 at 70% theme size.

Figure 8: *Concept Map for Material-Economic Arrangements*
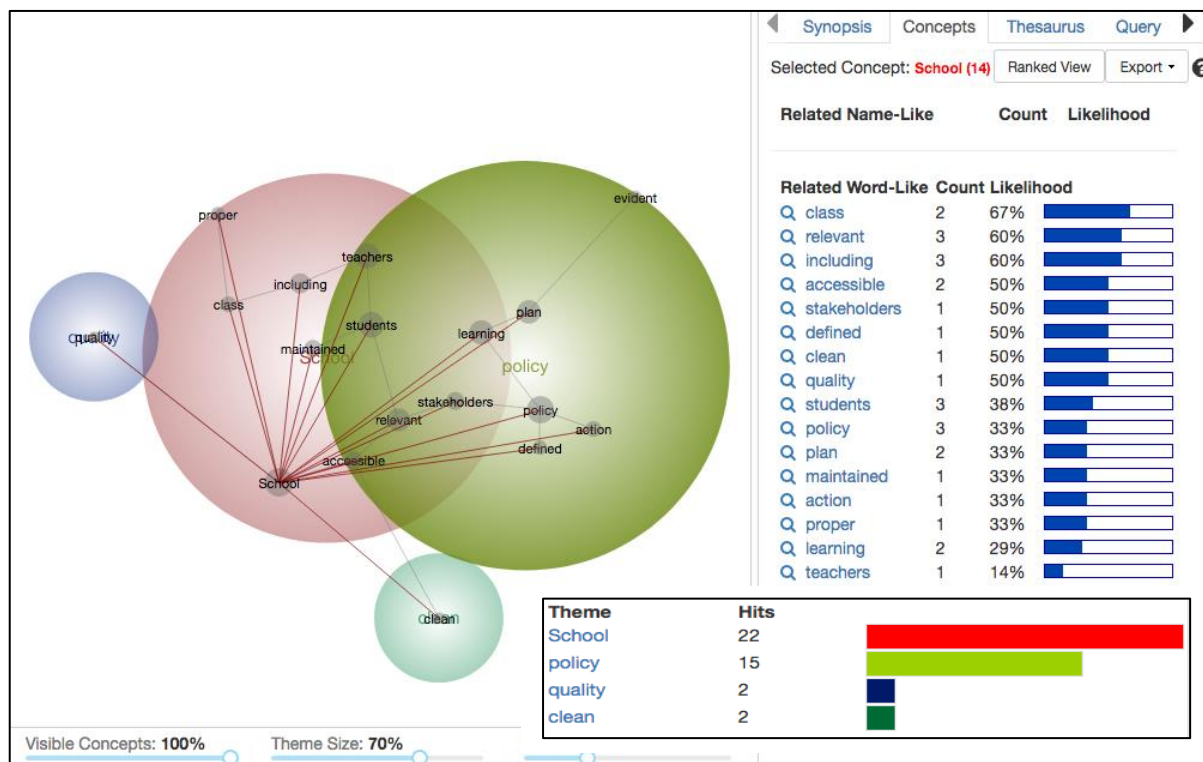
The first theme, 'school', is the most important theme. The theme refers to the concepts of relevant and accessible arrangements that school leaders need to put in place for the benefit of teachers and students. This includes learners and instructors of Early Childhood Care and Development and Non-Formal Education centres. The school leaders are also expected to institute proper monitoring and feedback systems; and maintain facilities and records that are accessible to students, teachers and stakeholders.
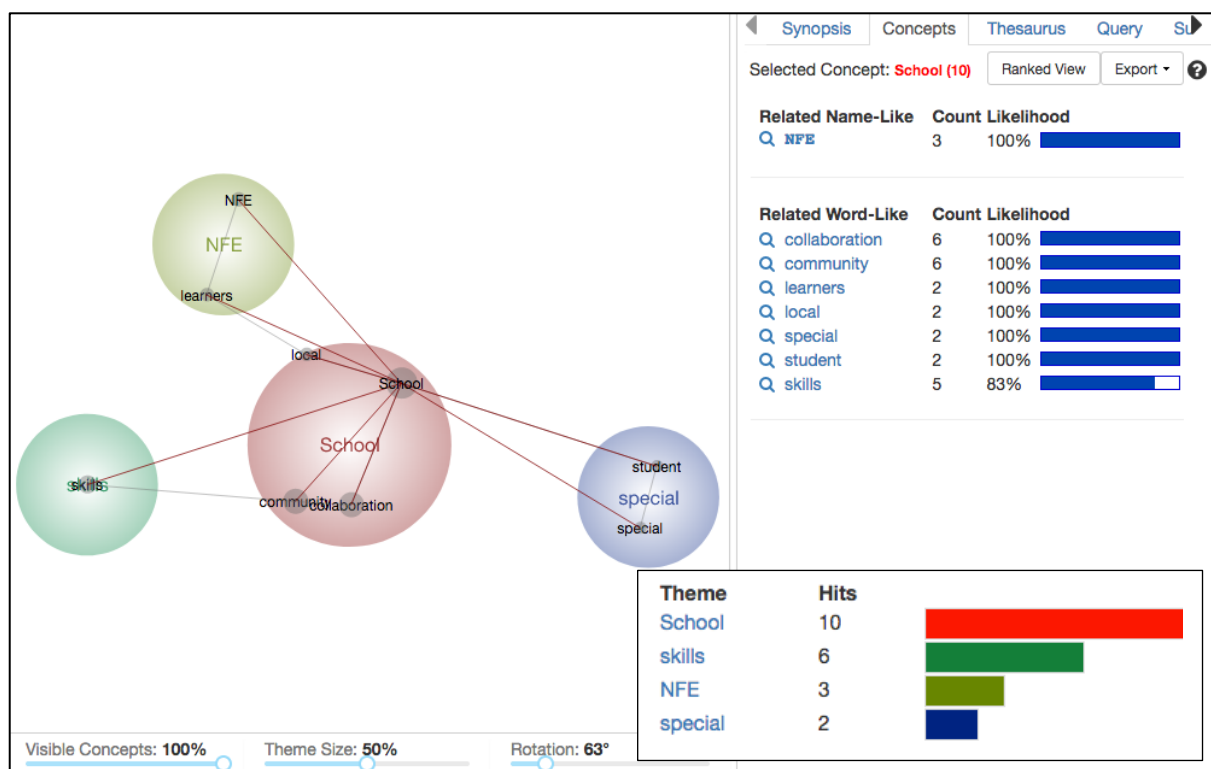
The second theme, 'policy', refers to the role of school leaders to put in place well defined policies in the form of guidelines, action plans, and regulations to enhance students' learning. Schools are expected to develop policies in collaboration with relevant stakeholders.

The third and the fourth themes, 'quality' and 'clean', are related to the first theme, school. They refer to the role of school leaders to provide quality infrastructure and teaching learning materials and to ensure that they are adequate, accessible and clean. However, access and adequate infrastructures and facilities referred only to toilets, classrooms, and sports facilities.

Relatings

Leximancer derived four themes for relatings when the theme size was set to 50%, as shown in Figure 9. The first theme, 'school', had the highest co-occurrences with other concepts and themes. It refers to the role of school leadership to extend education beyond the academics and boundaries of school. Teachers are expected to collaborate with and cater for the communities, as well as promote local and traditional games, advocate environmental education, and promote a healthy lifestyle.

Figure 9: *Concept Map for Relatings*

The second theme, 'non-formal education', refers to the role of school leaders to cater to Non-Formal Education learners, Early Childhood Care and Development centres and parents. The third theme, 'skills', refers to the need for school leaders to strengthen life skills, values and attitudes for students and out-of-school youths. The fourth theme, 'special', refers to the role of school leaders to extend support to students with special needs.

Social-political Arrangements

Leximancer derived two themes at 65% theme size for socio-political arrangements. This is shown in Figure 10.

**Figure 10:** *Concept Map for Social-Political Arrangements*
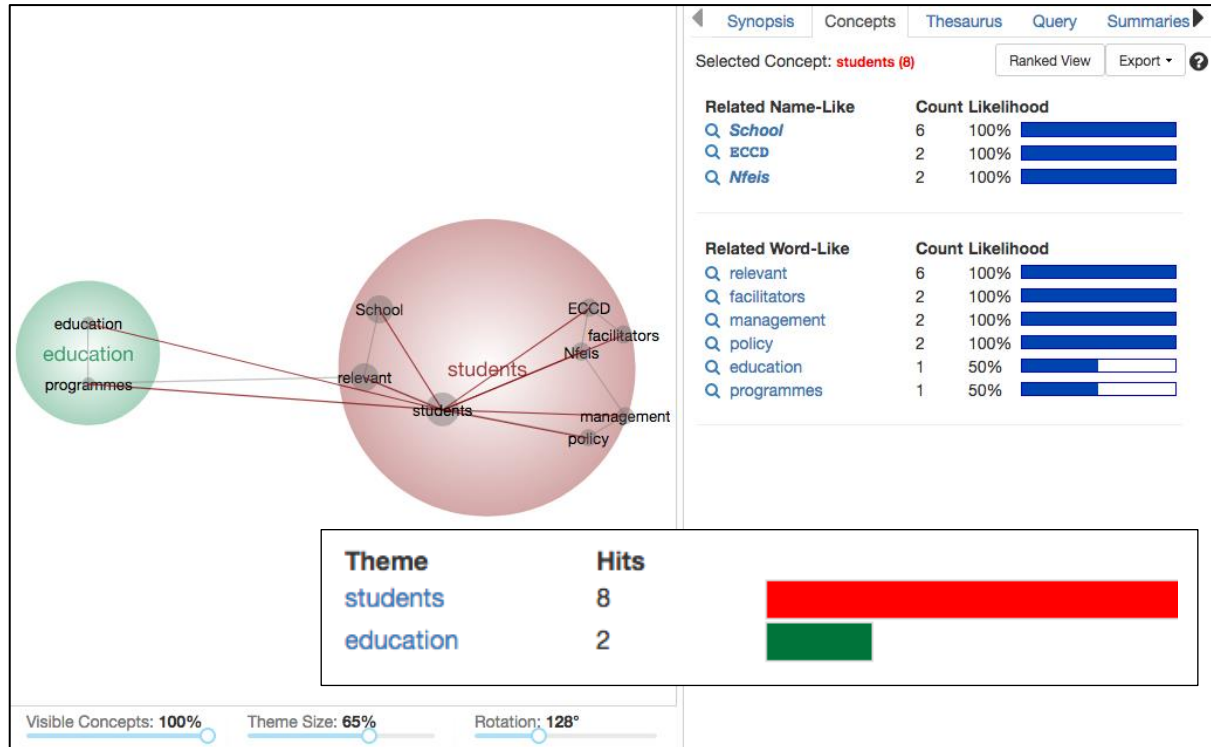
The first theme, 'students', refers to the role of schools to put in place written management policy in consultation with relevant stakeholders. The theme also refers to the role of schools to ensure that teachers, Non-Formal Education instructors, Early Childhood Care and Development facilitators and Special Education Needs Co-ordinators are provided relevant and effective support. The second theme, 'education', refers to ensuring educational programmes that are beyond academic curriculum, such as scouting, and education pertaining to citizenship, life skills, values and parenting.

In the following sections, we explore two of the three scorecards that are used as part of the Performance Management System: the Enabling Practices Scorecard and the Gross National Happiness Scorecard. Each comprises 16 indicators. These scorecards are analysed using the theory of practice architectures.

Enabling Practices Scorecard

Based on our manual coding, five of the sixteen indicators (31.25%) were coded as doings. This was surprising as the name of this scorecard, Enabling Practices, suggests that these indicators are more about arrangements than activities. Interestingly, Leximancer derives students as the most important theme, referring to the classroom practices of teachers who will have learning impact on students. The theme included teaching strategies, assessment practices to gauge student progress, and the use of ICT, lesson planning, and remedial programmes by the teachers. This theme had the highest co-occurrences with other concepts, making it the most important theme, as shown in Figure 11. The remaining 11 indicators (68.75%) were material-economic arrangements (9 indicators) and social-political arrangements (2 indicators). There were no indicators for cultural-discursive arrangements.

Figure 11: *Concept Map for the Enabling Practices Scorecard*
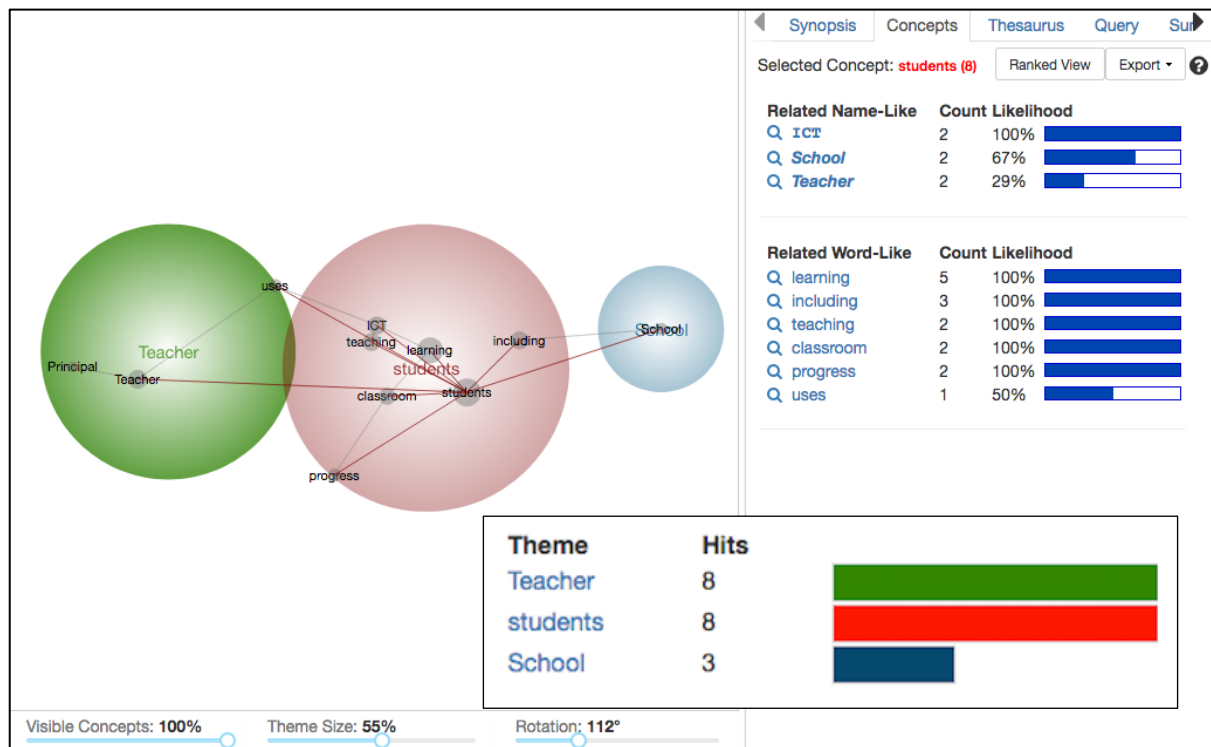
The Leximancer analysis derived three themes: 'ICT', 'teacher' and 'school'. The theme teacher refers to the concepts that identify the support that the school principals will need to provide for the teachers, Non-Formal Education instructors and Early Childhood Care and Development facilitators in terms of teaching-learning materials and professional development. It also refers to role of teachers to use quality teaching-learning material and ICT for day-to-day teaching-learning purposes.

The third theme, 'school', refers to the leadership practices of schools that warrants arranging facilities that would indirectly enable or contribute to teachers' teaching and curriculum practices and/or enhance the school ambience. They include: arrangements of adequate, accessible and clean toilets; adequate, safe and sufficient drinking water; and arranging relevant remedial programmes for students scoring less than 45% in test scores.

Gross National Happiness (GNH) Scorecard

Based on the manual coding, seven of the 16 indicators (44%) were coded as activities. Ideally all the GNH indicators should be activities as they are supposed to be indicators of GNH practices. It is interesting to note that all 16 GNH indicators assess the leadership performances of schools in non-academic educational domains. The Leximancer analysis triangulated these findings (see Figure 12).

Figure 12: *Concept Map for the Gross National Happiness (GNH) Scorecard*
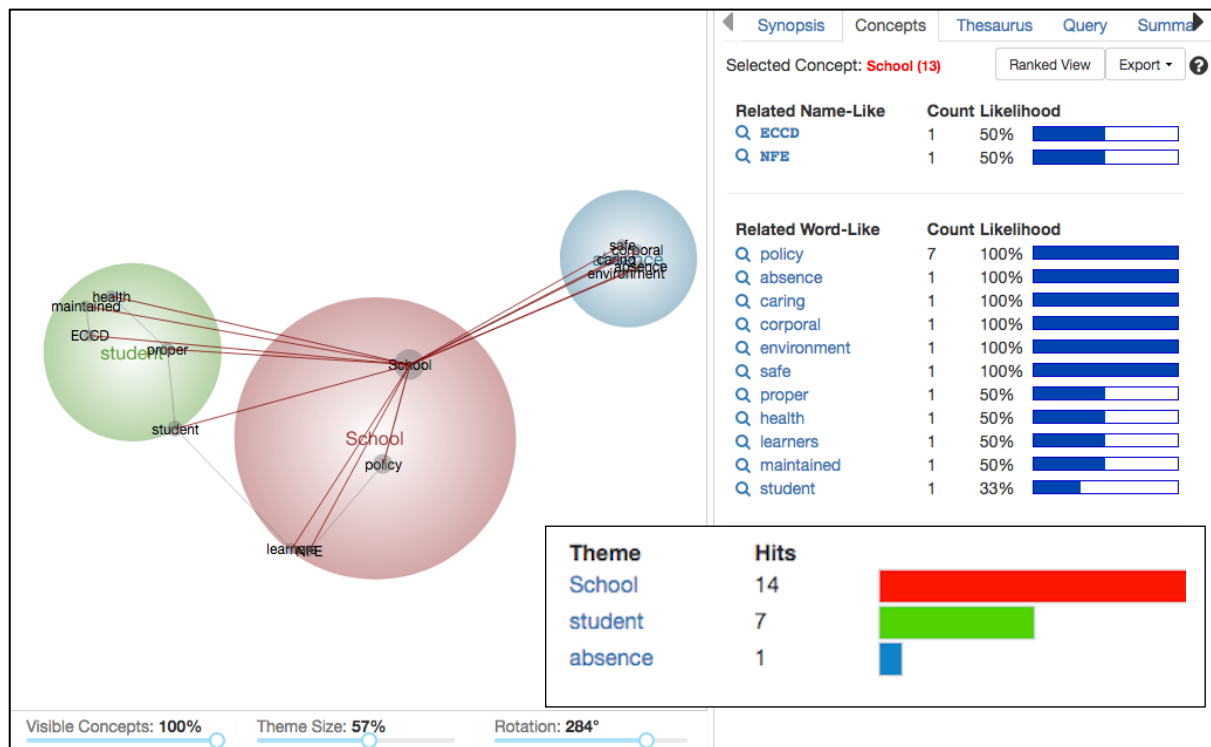
The first theme, 'school', referred to concepts of school leadership practices in order to enhance other educational domains besides academics and curriculum. The concepts ranged from policies related to physical and psychological ambience to health, discipline, life skills, GNH values, cultural and spiritual practices, mindfulness practices and co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. Schools are also expected to extend and involve education to parents and non-formal education learners in the community.

The second theme, 'students', referred to school leadership practices that would empower students and student leaders, including non-formal education learners, Early Childhood Care and Development children, parents and community for school development affairs, and social and cultural events. The school leadership practices also need to ensure that proper health records for students are maintained. There were also indicators requiring schools to be litter free with proper waste management practices and to maintain beautiful flower gardens, hedges and plants in the school campus/environment.

The third theme,' absence', refers to the role of school leaders to create a safe, caring and supportive environment, such as making sure there is an absence of abuse, bullying, corporal punishment, humiliation, and harassment.

Discussion

The theory of practice architectures offered three key insights into the assessment of Educating for Gross National Happiness (EGNH) practices in Bhutan. First, the indicators were not equally represented in terms of practice architectures; second, the indicators under-emphasised the centrality of teachers' role in EGNH practices; and finally, the GNH scorecard did not holistically assess GNH practices. These three findings are discussed next.

Unequal Representation of Practice Architectures

The number of indicators for activities and arrangements indicated that the School Self-Assessment has placed most importance on the doings (33%) and its corresponding material-

economic arrangements (36%). The sayings (4%) and relatings (12%), as well as their corresponding cultural-discursive (4%) and social-political (11%) arrangements, are underrepresented compared to doings and material-economic arrangements. The disregard of sayings and cultural-discursive arrangements is surprising in the context of Bhutan, which has a culture rich with oral traditions and given the extent to which Bhutanese cultural perspectives and worldviews are influenced by Buddhist values and principles. Indeed, the ethics of speech (Tashi Wangyel, 2001; The Dalai Lama, 1995) and language are quintessential cultural pillars in Bhutan. Similarly, core Bhutanese values (*tha dam-tshig ley gju-drey*), as stated in the vision statement and other policy documents of the Ministry of Education (2014, 2017, 2020, 2021), mandate stronger representation of activities and arrangements for relatings and social-political arrangements.

There is an absence of relationships between the indicators of sayings and cultural-discursive arrangements. The four indicators of sayings relate to how appropriately teachers communicate with students and whether homework and assignments were provided, which is limiting the essence of sayings of the theory of practice architectures. While cultural-discursive arrangements should make sayings possible (Mahon et al., 2017), the four indicators of the cultural-discursive arrangements in the School Self-Assessment do not relate to the indicators of sayings in those ways.

These findings suggest that the School Self-Assessment does not align with the aims set out by the Ministry of Education (2014), stipulating that teachers should exhibit exemplary use of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies to support learning. The School Self-Assessment deviates from the recommendations of the *Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014–2024: Rethinking Education* (MoE, 2014) that declares communicative competency as one of the nine student attributes and declares that students develop mastery of Dzongkha and English.

The Ministry of Education (2014) in Bhutan also overemphasises the importance of Dzongkha and English, to the extent that some schools penalise students for using their own local dialect in the school. The researchers view this practice as culturally and socially damaging. English as the medium of instruction since 1964 (Kezang Sherab, 2013) has proven to be of benefit to the Bhutanese, but there are challenges when it comes to the preservation of unique Bhutanese culture and traditions (Kezang Sherab, 2013; Tashi Wangyel, 2001). Tashi Wangyel (2001) also asserted that the Bhutanese value English language more than Dzongkha, and Kezang Sherab (2013) suggested there is a need for teachers to model effective classroom use of language and feedback.

The lack of emphasis on sayings is also apparent in the Enabling Practices Scorecard. The themes derived for the Enabling Practices Scorecard were mostly concerned with academic and instructional indicators (12 indicators). The two indicators on infrastructure were for drinking water and toilets. Academic infrastructure like classrooms, library, and laboratories appeared to be missing. We contend that the Enabling Practices Scorecard should address indicators that enable GNH practices. These could include plans and policies, infrastructure and physical environment, finance, human and non-human resources, and organisational rules and regulations. While eleven of the 16 indicators were coded as arrangements, there was no indicator for cultural-discursive arrangements, indicating a lack of support or importance for practices of language sayings.

The School Self-Assessment appears to have provided considerable emphasis on doings and material-economic arrangements (69% of the 98 indicators). From an academic and a management perspective, the indicators under doings and material-economic arrangements appear comprehensive. The arrangements also appear to correspond to the activities of doings. The dominance of doings and material-economic arrangements can be partly attributed to the influence of the modern education system, economic modernisation and materialism that have drifted focus away from traditional values, attitudes and expectations (Tashi Wangyel, 2001).

The activities on relatings and social-political arrangements comprised 23.4% of indicators, compared to 68.4% of indicators coded as either *doings* or material-economic arrangements. The relatings (12 indicators) and social-political arrangements (11 indicators) were underrepresented in the School Self-Assessment. This unequal allocation of indicators does not align with the vision of the Ministry of Education (2014) with *tha dam-tshig ley gyu-drey* as the core values of interdependency and relationships.

The standards of the *Bhutan Professional Standards for Teachers* (MoE, 2020, 2021) articulate the need for teachers to collaborate with parents and community. Therefore, there is a basis to balance the number of indicators from the practices of sayings and relatings and their corresponding arrangements, since *"Bhutan's development philosophy based on the idea of enhancing GNH requires that development must be both economically as well as socially sustainable"* (Tashi Wangyel, 2001, p. 106). The themes derived by Leximancer for both relatings and social-political arrangements were dominated by themes of leadership and management practices. The researchers also argue that the School Self-Assessment could benefit by including additional indicators to assess teachers' roles for relatings and social-political arrangements.

Underemphasis of the Centrality of Teachers' Roles

The two most important themes of the School Self-Assessment were school and students, referring to the leadership roles of schools, and students as the ultimate beneficiaries of the school system. The theme, *teacher,* received the third importance. This implies that the School Self-Assessment indicators are more focused on the leadership and management practices of schools. While the importance of leadership cannot be denied, effective teaching and learning are directly impacted by teachers. Considering 35 indicators out of 98 (35.7%) were of material-economic arrangements, this finding is strengthened, as the resource management of schools is predominantly the role of school leaders. It is timely to consider how to improve the School Self-Assessment to include more indicators for teachers, to balance the focus between school leadership and teachers.

The teaching practices by teachers was the dominant theme under doings. However, we found that the emphasis is on school leadership and management activities. Four of the five themes under doings were related to leadership and management. To fulfil EGNH goals, without denying the need for effective leadership, the focus on teacher-activity doings—to bring positive impacts to student-practice doings—could be given equal emphasis.

All the themes under material-economic arrangements are related to school leadership and management, as per the interpretation of the indicators identified by the Leximancer software in the original data. While it is understandable and appropriate to see that all indicators under material-economic arrangements could be achieved through leadership and management practices, more indicators or emphasis on doings through teaching and its related practices may be more promising and may bring more positive outputs, since teachers play a significant role in infusing GNH values to students in all domains of school programmes.

It is also worth noting that, although the indicators through the theme overview appear to be comprehensive, on closer examination of the specific indicators, quality of infrastructure and cleanliness referred only to sports facilities and toilets respectively, and not the academic infrastructures, which may be equally important to enable the activities of doings. There is also room to include indicators of doings based on Bhutanese values (MoE, 2014), such as role modelling physical conduct based on cultural and traditional etiquettes of the country, as these should not be ignored in order to fulfil the goals of GNH.

Limited Scope of the GNH Scorecard

The GNH scorecard is designed to measure achievement on GNH values and practices in schools (Education Monitoring Division, 2020). It includes co-curricular activities, stakeholder

involvement in schools, student health, cultural and spiritual promotion, school-community relations, student personal development, and school environments. The Leximancer findings aligned with the purposes of the GNH Scorecard. The three themes, *school*, *student* and *absence* indicated leadership practices for enhancing other educational domains, such as health, discipline, life skills, GNH values, cultural and religious values, mindfulness, and co-curricular and extra-curricular programmes.

We argue that the GNH Scorecard could comprise additional indicators to assess principals' and teachers' GNH activities in terms of sayings, doings and relatings. The GNH Scorecard could contain indicators that mandate, encourage, promote and enhance school principals' and teachers' (1) educational and communication activities (sayings), (2) educational actions or doings in terms of their daily habits (doings), and (3) relationships within school, outside and in the wider environment (relatings) (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008; Mahon et al., 2017).

Conclusion

Using the theory of practice architectures, we examined the Performance Management System, the main tool for assessment of EGNH practices in Bhutan, and two of the School Performance Scorecards. The study has provided valuable insights into reviewing the educational practices of Bhutan. The School Self-Assessment indicators were outnumbered by doings and material-economic arrangements, which was possibly the result of economic modernisation, industrialisation, the modern and secular education system, democratisation and mass media (Tashi Wangyel, 2001). While policies and practices concerning economic development are important, the Ministry of Education needs strategies and interventions to equally ensure prosperity of the other practice architectures, namely, the sayings and relatings, to ensure social sustainability in disseminating GNH values.

Tashi Wangyel (2001) proposed reviving earlier Dzongkha courses with modern teaching pedagogy based on Buddhist philosophy and promoting Buddhist values emphasising virtues like altruism, reciprocity, and interdependence among others. Alternatively, Tashi Wangyel's (2001) proposal may be repackaged to introduce a subject called GNH Value Education, as recommended by Pema Thinley (2016), to provide time and space for students to deepen their understandings of GNH Values as they live their lives. While these suggestions among others may seem promising in terms of improving GNH infusion within schools, our research suggests that any such initiative must first and foremost address all three practices—sayings, doings and relatings—which should be embedded in the initiatives and their monitoring plans.

This study identified areas for future development to ensure that the Performance Management System enhances GNH practices. This is imperative for Bhutan to enable cultural sustainability which is one of the pillars of GNH. The analysis techniques of manual coding and Leximancer revealed that the major focus of the School Self-Assessment indicators is on school leadership. The Ministry of Education commissioned the *Bhutan Professional Standards for Teachers* in 2019 (MoE, 2020), recognising teachers as the most important factor contributing to the quality of education. The review of the School Self-Assessment indicators could benefit from being aligned with the teacher standards. There is also potential value in ensuring that assessment involves all stakeholders, including managers, teachers, students, and community members. The methods employed here could be used to examine educational practices beyond those of Bhutan.

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

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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 (*kīwēwin*). 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) Acknowlegement:

ninanâskomânânak nêhiyaw-ânisko-wahkômâkanak kâ-kiskinohtahikowahkwâw ôma atoskêwin. nipakosêyimonân kita-wîcihikocik okiskinwahkamâkêwak kwayask kita-nêhiyaw mâmitonêyihtahkwâw.

namôya nitipêyihtênân ôma kiskinwahamâkêwin mâka mâmawi-okâwîmâw, kisê-manitow, êkwa awâsisak tipêyihtamwak.

nipakosêyimonân mîna kita-mâmawi-atoskêcik okiskinwahamâkêwak.

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 Kinosaeo 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 responsivity 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 *sĩtoskãtowin*, 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)*
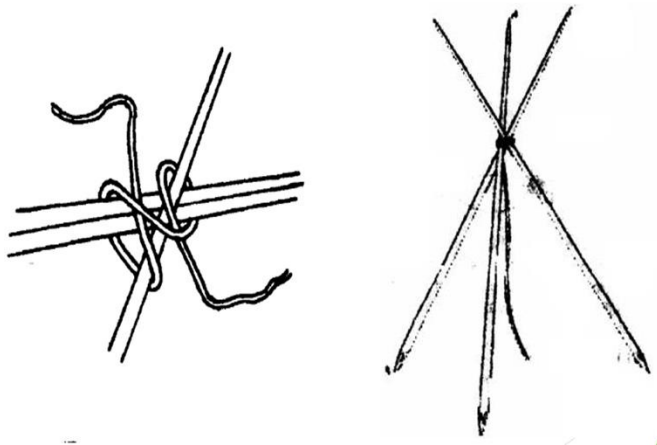
Sītoskātowin represents the binding on the structural poles of the *mikiwhap*. Each of the poles represents the partners that bring their own strengths, ideas and ways of knowing to the partnership, but together support the common goal of strengthening Indigenous education. The poles are grounded in 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 māmitonēyicikan*, 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 *sītoskātowin*, 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 spirt 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.

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

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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 responsivity, 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 responsivity 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 responsivity 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 that 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 responsivity. 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 responsivity, 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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Exploring Perceptions Related to Teacher Retention Issues in Rural Western United States

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Abstract

The rural setting is one that must be better understood because of the broader discussions of changing demographics, growing diversity, the need for economic development, and community engagement. Additional research is needed to understand the interconnection of rural spaces and teacher retention. The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of educational stakeholders in a rural region of the western United States as they relate to retaining teachers in rural school communities that are experiencing shifts in the community due to limited rural opportunity and underdevelopment, ageing populations, poverty, out-migration, and shrinking economies. The study collected data from teachers, administrators, parents, patrons, legislators, students, and other educational stakeholders through a survey instrument (n= 806). Data were collected from October of 2017 to January of 2018. The methodological approach was a mixed qualitative and quantitative inquiry. The mixed-method approach was due to several open-ended questions on the survey, along with quantitative, closed-ended survey questions. The findings illuminate the critical role leadership plays in retaining teachers, and the significant need for robust mentoring and support programs for new teachers. Findings also consider the relationship between rural education policies, leadership practices, teacher recruitment and retention, and broader issues related to rural development. In addition to finding ways to better support mentoring, there are several implications for teacher and leadership preparation programs to better support rural placements.

Keywords: *teacher retention, rural education, teacher recruitment, leadership*

Introduction

During the global pandemic a spotlight has shone on the important role of the classroom teacher, and teacher shortages have continued to become more prevalent and widespread. Often the burdens and the abilities for school systems and communities to deal with the turnover in educators —both teachers and leaders—and the shortage of applications may not fall equitably across demographics or geographic locations.

Rural schools have faced their own pandemics for a good many years—adequate human and fiscal capital—that has led to disproportionate shortages of teachers in rural areas (Tate, 2020; Williams et al., 2021). Educational leaders and policymakers have been concerned about recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers into high-needs schools and certain subject areas, but these concerns have increased in recent years as the labour market for all workers has intensified and the job opportunities available to prospective teachers have increased. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, rural schools and communities across the globe were facing challenges. In the United States, there have been concerns that many rural communities were turning into ghost towns. When a place is left without a school, it is left without a population (Gristy et al., 2020). However, Mueller et al. (2020) found that the COVID-19 pandemic had wide-reaching impacts on rural well-being, especially for those in the expansive, rural American West. Again, these impacts have not been equitable across geographic areas or communities.

During the pandemic, many rural communities across the United States (U.S.) experienced what has been labelled the 'ZoomTown' effect (Florida & Ozimek, 2021; Sherman, 2021); real estate booms fuelled by remote workers buying second homes in and/or relocating to smaller cities and rural communities. We are currently experiencing a shift from a time when rural people and rural schooling were not valued as much in an urban-centric, globally networked workforce (Corbett, 2009, 2013) to today when highly educated and mobile knowledge workers are fleeing the high-density cities in search of simple lives, healthy environments, or being closer to nature (Florida & Ozimek, 2021; Sherman, 2021). Although rural places vary, a common feature among them is the role of their school in the community, as Schafft (2016, p. 139) states, they "*function as the centres of the community*".

We also know more today about the education profession than ever before. Marzano's (2003) research has been cited thousands of times and shows teachers' actions in classrooms have twice the impact on student achievement as do school policies regarding curriculum, assessment, staff collegiality, or community involvement. Teacher quality has been consistently identified as the most important school-based factor in student achievement (Rivkin et al., 2005; Rowan et al., 2002). Yet as important as teachers are, on average more and more of them are leaving their positions each year and fewer are entering into teacher preparation programs (Sutcher et al., 2019). Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2019) report that an 8% annual teacher attrition in the United States is noticeably higher than in other high-achieving countries where teacher attrition is half that rate or less. More than two thirds of this attrition is due to reasons other than retirement. The bulk of teacher turnover is labelled as movers and leavers, meaning either a move to another school or district, or departure from the profession altogether. The most disadvantaged students often confront the highest rates of teacher turnover, such as those found in rural communities.

The rural setting for educators is one that must be better understood because of the broader discussions of these changing demographics, growing diversity, the need for economic development, and community engagement. Additional research is needed to understand the interconnection of rural spaces and teacher retention. Given the variety of local contexts and conditions of rural communities this study examines perceptions of various stakeholders related to teacher retention in one western state of the U.S.—Idaho. In this study survey data is used to explore widespread perceptions in the rural school community context, including those of teachers and leaders. This study seeks to add to the existing literature by addressing the research question: What are the perceptions of various educational stakeholders related to retaining teachers in rural communities in the western U.S.? In this study we are interested in exploring perceptions related to the intersection of leadership and educational policies to support teacher retention at the local level.

The sections that follow provide a brief context on teacher retention in a specific geographic area of the rural American west known locally as the 'Magic Valley'. Then a discussion of the literature on teacher identity in the rural context, broader issues related to teacher retention, as well as leadership and their role in retaining teachers. Followed by a description of the methods used in the study and conclusion of the findings and implications.

Teacher Retention in Rural Idaho: The Magic Valley Context

The quality of the educator workforce will improve if low-performers leave and are replaced with higher-performing individuals. However, as Katz (2018, p. 3) points out, "…*both of these conditions must be met for turnover to yield a net benefit with respect to teacher quality*". And the degree to which teacher turnover is a problem is a matter of perspective and is a nuanced discussion that takes into account mobility, access to higher education and teacher preparation, and policies to increase teacher retention, as well as other factors including teacher attributes and school/community attributes. According to a report by the Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest, "*Idaho's Educator Landscape: How is the State's Teacher Workforce Responding to Its Students' Needs?*" (Hanson & Yoon, 2018), longitudinal data from 2012 to 2017 reveals more than 20 percent of Idaho's teachers did not return to low-performing and high-poverty schools. On average, 22 percent of novice teachers, 19 percent of early-career teachers, and 18 percent of teachers with four or more years of experience did not return to their schools the year following data collection. Across Idaho, 30 percent of teachers leave the profession by their fourth year (Hanson & Yoon, 2018).

Hanson & Yoon (2018) point out that these trends have placed a unique and tenuous strain on those Idaho school districts that have the largest growth of economically, disadvantaged students; the highest percentage of students who are identified as English language learners; and the largest number of schools that are identified as Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) schools. CEP is a United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) provision that allows the nation's highest poverty schools and districts to serve breakfast and lunch at no cost to all enrolled students because of community wide indicators of poverty.

The area of Idaho perceived by policymakers and school leaders alike as being most impacted by the teacher shortage is rural, south-central Idaho—aka the Magic Valley. The region serves approximately 39,000 public school students distributed across nine counties and throughout 22 traditional school districts and 4 charter school LEAs (Local Education Agency).

The local economy of Magic Valley is predominantly driven by agriculture. In addition, the region has a strong, internationally recognized tourism economy. The world-famous, Sun Valley ski resort is located in Blaine County and other natural conditions of Magic Valley bring countless tourists to the area. Magic Valley also has the highest percentage of Hispanic and Latinx families – 24.2 percent, double the state-wide percentage of 12.02 percent and five percentage points higher than the nation based on data from the Idaho Commission on Hispanic Affairs. The area continues to struggle with overall educational attainment. Levels remain below figures for the rest of Idaho and the U.S.

Previous studies highlight the growing concern that students from low-income and minority backgrounds have relatively less access to teacher quality, and the lack of enough teachers systematically short-changes the most vulnerable learners (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Glazerman & Max, 2011; Isenberg et al., 2013; Office for Civil Rights, 2014). To add to the context of this area, according to data publicly reported by the Idaho State Department of Education, in 2016-2017 Magic Valley led the state in filling teaching positions with alternative and non-traditional routes to certification teachers. The area accounted for about 25 percent of all the alternative authorizations to certifications in Idaho; 24 percent of all provisional authorizations for teachers without certification in Idaho; and about 17 percent of teachers

seeking non-traditional routes to certification (American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence - ABCTE) in Idaho. Research indicates that the pathway to certification also plays a role in turnover rates. Teachers who enter the profession through alternative certification programs are more likely to turnover relative to teachers who follow a traditional preparation route (Boyd et al., 2005; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Kane et al., 2008). Further, teacher preparation is one of the strongest links between student achievement in reading and mathematics, regardless of socio-economic and language status (Darling-Hammond, 2000).

Rural Context and Teacher Identity

Schafft (2016, p. 138) states, *"Although a quarter of American public-school students are classified as rural, about one third of all schools and 57% of school districts are considered rural"*. However, rural-specific literature (Collins, 1999; Hammer et al., 2005) identifies three challenges related to recruiting and retaining teachers in rural areas: (1) lower pay; (2) geographic and social isolation; and (3) difficult working conditions, such as having to teach classes in multiple subject areas. In addition, remoteness is especially unattractive to young, beginning teachers (Proffit et al., 2002). Researchers (Collins, 1999; Harris, 2001) have suggested those teachers who stay in rural areas are more likely to have grown up in rural communities or are committed to living in the area. On the other hand, conditions cited by teachers as contributing to their decisions to leave rural teaching positions include: lack of basic resources and materials, lack of a strong professional community, ineffective leadership, and discipline issues (Crews, 2002; Harris, 2001).

In a landmark study, Goodlad (1984) pointed out the issue of teacher isolation and the lack of opportunities to collaborate with peers as being an important and influencing factor to teacher attrition in rural schools. The rural context often compounds teacher retention issues because in rural communities the school is the heart of the community. White and Reid (2008, p. 2) describe it as the *"focal point of external economic and social influences, as well as political requirements for change and renewal, and therefore functions as the barometer of community well-being"*.

The growing number of studies on factors contributing to the formation of teacher identity in preservice teachers suggests that the development of a teacher identity is an important process in becoming a teacher and believing in the ability to teach well. Identity building helps beginning teachers gain a sense of control and have a sense of resilience (Bieler, 2013). Encouragement and support, open communication, and feedback were the three main components identified by National and State Teachers of the Year as ingredients of a good mentoring relationship (Izadinia, 2015). These factors also contribute to teacher retention, and lack thereof leads to teacher stress and burnout (Bieler, 2013).

Geographic isolation, weather, distance from family, and inadequate shopping facilities are among the reasons teachers give for leaving rural areas (Collins, 1999). Similarly, for preservice teachers, fears about access to resources, isolation, and cultural differences are the main reasons associated with not wishing to teach in rural areas (Sharplin, 2010). Page (2006) asserts that securing quality teachers for rural and remote schools should be the responsibility of teacher education. As preservice and early career teachers work to form their professional identity, it is important that teacher education programs provide contexts for candidates to experience the benefits of rural schools consistent with those cited by Osterholm et al. (2006) such as: fewer disciplinary issues, lower cost of living, and heightened status within a tight-knit community.

Teacher Retention

There is substantial evidence of teacher recruitment, retention, and mentoring challenges overwhelming school systems. Economically disadvantaged and rural schools, often face these issues at higher rates. Discussions of teacher shortages across the nation have been prevalent for

several years (Aragon, 2016; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Ingersoll, 2001), concerns have continued to build that there are not enough educators to meet school and district hiring demands. To add to the trend, Carroll and Foster (2010) claim the rate at which new teachers leave the profession has been increasing over the last 15 years. Furthermore, attrition rates are higher among high poverty schools, teachers with higher test scores, those with more experience, and teachers that serve minority and lower-achieving students (Boyd et al., 2005; Hanushek et al., 2004; Ingersoll, 2001, 2003; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Johnson, 2004; Johnson et al., 2005; Loeb et al., 2005; Simon & Johnson, 2015).

Research suggests it takes three to seven years for a beginning teacher to become experienced enough to be considered highly qualified (Long, 2010). More than one-third of teachers leave the profession within the first five years (Shaw & Newton, 2014). Many new teachers abandon the field of teaching, often feeling defeated. According to Hughes (2012), experienced teachers are better teachers, and able to produce higher rates of student achievement. A study of teachers in New York (Boyd et al., 2008) found that student achievement gains were most enhanced by having a fully certified teacher who had graduated from a competitive university program, had a strong academic background, and had more than two years of experience. In the same study, student achievement was harmed most by having an inexperienced teacher on a temporary licence, which is the teaching profile most common in high-minority, low-income, and rural schools with ongoing teacher turnover.

Researchers in education report that teacher retention is the greatest challenge facing schools today (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). In comparison, teaching has a relatively high turnover compared to many other occupations and professions, such as lawyers, and engineers. (Ingersoll, 2003; Ingersoll & Perda, 2010). Research findings shows that 14% of new teachers leave by the end of their first year; 33% leave within three years of beginning teaching; and almost 50 % leave within five years (Ingersoll, 2003). These turnover rates translate into students learning from inexperienced teachers and the fact that schools suffer higher economic costs of hiring and training new teachers. Some research findings point to the issue that school staffing problems are largely due to a 'revolving door', whereas large numbers of teachers depart teaching long before retirement (Ingersoll & Perda, 2010; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Ingersoll & Strong (2011) note that beginning teachers report that one of the main factors behind their decisions to depart is a lack of adequate support from the school administration.

Role of Leadership

Prior studies have shown that school leadership typically emerges as a noticeable factor in teacher retention (Boyd et al., 2011; Grissom, 2011; Johnson, 2006; Katz, 2018). In this study, we did not confine leadership only to school administrators, as we believe it also includes teacher leaders and mentors. During the past 20 years, numerous studies provide support for the hypothesis that "*teachers with mentors from the same field were less likely to leave after their first year*" and districts that "*bundled or packed supports*" were more successful in increasing the job satisfaction, efficacy, and retention of new teachers (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004, p. 38). High-quality induction and mentoring have been linked to first-year teachers showing student performance gains equivalent to those of fourth-year teachers who did not have this support (Strong, 2006).

Factors such as workload, school situation, and salary affect teachers' decisions to leave, early positive experiences in teacher induction, leadership support, and clinical training have been considered strong motivational forces in teachers' decisions to continue to teach (Ewing & Manuel, 2005). For instance, feeling valued, self-perception of success as a teacher, and a sense of self-worth correlate with teacher retention (Blase, 2009). Adequate supervision, evaluation, mentoring, and induction programs help give new teachers the confidence they need to be successful in the classroom. Research has indicated that instilling confidence in new teachers

directly correlates with their decision to stay in the teaching profession during the first few years of teaching (Kini & Podolsky, 2016). Research also indicates that self-identity is a determining factor in teacher motivation, satisfaction, and commitment to work (Izadinia, 2015). Also, quality leaders help teachers connect with parents (Allensworth et al., 2009), develop classroom autonomy (Kukla-Acevedo, 2009), share decision-making (Allensworth et al., 2009), and support teacher development (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016). All these strategies improve teacher retention.

Methods and Data Collection

This study utilised survey data to investigate perceptions of stakeholders related to the area's teacher shortage. This study targeted stakeholders from the geographic area that is identified as Magic Valley. This geographic area encompasses twenty-two (22) traditional school districts and four (4) charter schools. A link to an anonymous online questionnaire was widely distributed to survey teachers, administrators, school board trustees, K-12 students, community college students, parents, and patrons about their beliefs/perspectives related to the teacher shortage. The survey link was provided to regional school districts and charters, the regional leaders of the Idaho School Boards Association, the Idaho Association of School Administrators, and the Idaho Education Association with a message to distribute it widely to stakeholders within the area. This distribution strategy resulted in 806 unique responses over the period from October of 2017 to January of 2018. The questionnaire followed a mixed-method approach by including both qualitative and quantitative inquiry to develop a better understanding of the beliefs and perceived issues related to teacher retention.

The questionnaire was formatted into four sections to better organise responder thoughts while answering posed questions. In total the survey consisted of 54 questions. Prior to distributing the survey link, the survey design was reviewed and edited by three faculty peer members and ten public school superintendents who worked in rural Idaho school districts. As suggested by Willis (2005) the survey underwent cognitive pretesting and question wordings were subsequently changed to eliminate misinterpretations and minimize respondent confusion and lack of clarity of meaning.

The survey included questions about participants' roles as they relate to: education (i.e., teacher, principal, parent, school board member, etc.); past experiences and certifications (if any) in education; questions about their local school community; questions about their perceptions related to teacher preparation, recruitment and retention; as well as reasons why people leave the teaching profession. Demographic data were also collected. The survey was designed to take approximately 30 minutes of the participants' time. In addition, if participants needed to stop for any reason, they could restart the questionnaire where they left off.

Data Analysis

Informal feedback indicate that the survey link was shared with district personnel and educational leaders and presented on school websites. After the close of the survey, responder data were collected and organised using an Excel spreadsheet resulting in one data file with single-file scores for each survey question. Next, the captured data were cleaned and examined for errors and missingness. Frequency distributions were used to examine the range and possible clustering of scores for each question. The research team used statistical software to calculate summary statistics, including the percentage of respondents who selected each option and the associated standard errors for the multiple-choice and rating scale items.

Descriptive analysis was then used to examine trends in the data and measure central tendencies and variability. Finally, the open-ended survey questions were coded using a qualitative coding process as described by Creswell (2018). The word length of the corpus of the open-ended responses was small and varied between 1 to 895 words per question. First, the text was read

through to get a sense of the whole, and then codes were assigned based on in vivo codes and text segments. In vivo coding as discussed in Saldaňa (2012) places the emphasis on the verbatim words used by participants instead of coding to pre-established codes. This structure of coding was used to highlight the voices of participants to gain a greater understanding of the regional culture. Similar codes were clustered into themes to construct a narrative description of the survey data.

Findings

To review, the study considered the following research question: What are the perceived issues held by educational stakeholders that relate to retaining teachers in rural communities in the western United States? Participant comments demonstrate that local stakeholders are invested in solving the teacher shortage and retention issues locally and the sample favoured traditional teacher preparation over alternative certification routes. The biggest perceived influencers related to teacher retention continue to be administrative support, compensation, collegial support, facilities, and the ability to manage or address student behavioural and academic needs. Table 1 provides an overview of how participants self-identified their primary role in the community.

Table 1: *Primary Role of Participants in the Community*

Primary Role	Number
Preschool -12 grade (P-12) teacher	362
P-12 administrator	63
Parent of P-12 student	202
P-12 support staff (paraeducator)	47
Education other (university, private sector, etc.)	18
Policymaker (legislator, school board, etc.)	9
Other stakeholder (including students)	105

Perceptions Related to Retaining Teachers in Rural Communities

We start by analysing just those responses from school administrators about their perceptions related to the teacher shortage in their area. The results of those completing the survey included:

- Seventy-six (76) percent of school administrators agreed or strongly agreed that in general, a certified teacher is more qualified than an alternative or non-traditional route certified teacher.
- Only 6 percent agreed or strongly agreed that hiring provisional authorization teachers is an effective way to improve student outcomes.

Those participants identifying themselves as teachers, including those certified through alternative routes, agreed that traditionally prepared teachers were better able to handle the classroom and improve outcomes for students, than alternative certification teachers. Example quotes included:

A million times yes. The person literally has no idea what the job entails and ends up bringing needless drama and churn.

I do believe it is more challenging than a traditionally certified teacher because they have not had the supervised experience they gain during their final semesters at the university.

Yes, I am struggling with how to set up my classroom to be successful and manage student behaviours.

However, there were other statements that seemed to point to the issue being more about the individual, than perhaps the system or type of certification:

Depends on the individual. Some with education and training are not well equipped for the profession.

For me, it wasn't a problem stepping into the classroom and things have gone well. For others, it has been overwhelming, and they don't make it a full year. It is very individual and past experience, that is telling.

No, I don't believe certification or how one obtains a certification, or type of certification is at all related to the problems within education.

Beyond how teachers are prepared and a commitment to solving the teacher shortage in Magic Valley, perceptions vary widely and are best explained by a few categories that emerged from the data: major challenges keeping schools from recruiting or retaining teachers (see Table 2); strategies schools are perceived to be using to recruit or retain teachers (see Table 3); as well as policy and leadership themes (see Table 4 in the next section) that emerged from the study.

Table 2: *Major Challenges Related to Recruiting or Retaining Teachers in Rural Communities*

Themes	Example Quotes
Lack of social opportunities for young adults	"... this is a remote rural community that lacks fun things for young adults."
Geographic location- lack of support (childcare, resources for schools, medical care, technology infrastructure, other services)	"Location makes it hard to find childcare and internet for our homes, so most people do not want to live here."
Lack of teacher pipeline	"... not enough education majors in our state."
Lack of administrative support	"Principals and administrators need to enforce policies – especially when it comes to high-needs families."
Low pay and high responsibilities	"... too much stress in the job, teachers get blamed for many problems in society today, and it's not worth the hassle."
Competition from neighbouring districts	"We are next door to one district that pays more and to several districts with a 4-day week. We cannot compete with either."

Table 3: *Strategies Schools are Perceived to be Using to Recruit or Retain Teachers in Rural Communities*

Themes	Example Quotes
Create a positive culture	"Try to support teachers and make it a fun place to work."
Grow-your-own to get high school students into education or paraeducators certified	"Helping paraeducators who already work here and like it become certified."
Professional development and mentoring	"Make sure new teachers and those new to our community get some help to be successful."
Lower barriers for application process	"Streamline the application process so it was just easier to apply."

| Increasing compensation, benefits, and community support | *"Offer good benefits and increase the pay for teaching in rural schools. Provide loan forgiveness to teach in rural schools."* |
| Partnering with higher education and alumni to bring people back to the community or allow them to stay and get traditionally certified | *"Recruit former students back and partner with higher education programs so students can come back home easier, or not leave the area to begin with."* |

Policy Themes and Perceived Role of Leadership in Retaining Teachers

There were some comments related to issues of housing and community conditions for teacher belongingness. Many believed that improved HR practices would help, including recruitment materials that identify the work-life balance benefits of working in rural spaces. Stakeholders were aware that they needed to create social opportunities for new teachers early on, both within the school and with the community. Table 4 provides a comparison of perceptions of school employees to three key questions related to mentoring new teachers.

Table 4: *Perceptions of School Employees*

Survey Question	Strongly Agreed or Agreed
Do schools have the expertise to mentor new teachers?	Superintendents: 82%
	Principals: 88%
	Teachers: 75%
Do schools have the resources to mentor new teachers?	Superintendents: 22%
	Principals: 44%
	Teachers: 39%
Do teachers have the bandwidth to mentor new teachers?	Superintendents: 50%
	Principals: 40%
	Teachers: 44%

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate perceptions related to teacher retention in the western U.S., and specifically focused on one area of rural Idaho. Results identify salient categories and themes defining challenges and strategies that stakeholders perceive related to retaining teachers in their local schools. Each of these are important considerations and provide further insights into the existing literature. Findings also suggest the need to consider underlying beliefs about teacher preparation pipelines in rural communities. Findings should be held in the context of this study. This sample is from one survey and given at one distinct point in time. Many things have changed in the world and in education since the data was collected. Future research could examine the impact of providing preservice teachers from traditional preparation programs with rural experiences that include travel allowances and/or housing incentives to see if this helps with recruitment and retention to the area. In addition, the field seems ripe for a deeper understanding of community conditions necessary in post-COVID-19 ZoomTowns to understand teacher belongingness in rural schools.

Several policy themes emerged from the data in this study including the need for loan forgiveness programs, as well as incentives for higher education partnerships to streamline, or bring in traditional teacher preparation programs to place bound students. Our analysis suggests the number of teachers with alternative and non-traditional routes to certification are

widespread across grade levels and content areas; and there is a significant need for robust mentoring and support for district induction programs.

The data analysis exposes the need for resources to support and mentor new teachers and those seeking alternative routes to certification. Training effective mentors and fostering a school culture that values the expertise of veteran teachers is a critical first step. A school culture that appreciates the resources required to develop and maintain a strong mentoring program is also a key element that comes from strong and visionary leadership. Teachers' perceptions are at the heart of this study, and teachers made up the largest group of respondents. Conditions wherein teachers feel enabled to succeed with students—including administrative support, strong colleagues, and opportunities to participate in decisions all stem from an administrative staff that is committed to instructional leadership and research-based practices. A poll by the Public Agenda Foundation found that almost 80% of teachers would choose to teach in a school where administrators supported them, as opposed to only about 20% at one where there were significantly higher salaries (Rochkind et al., 2008). Dee and Goldhaber (2017) also found that teacher salaries would have to increase significantly to impact teacher retention decisions. However, Feng and Sass (2018) found that modest amounts, such as $2500, in direct payments were more effective than loan forgiveness programs to early career teachers who taught in critical shortage areas or subjects.

In addition to finding ways to better support mentoring, there are several implications for teacher and leadership preparation programs to better support rural placements. The authors agree with Hanson & Yoon's (2018) claims that Idaho must explore policies to support teacher recruitment and retention because they estimate it costs the state $6 million each year to replace the teachers who leave. Recent research has debunked the notion that the teacher shortage is due to low numbers of students graduating from the teacher preparation programs in Idaho. Data indicates that teacher shortage problems are due to the 'revolving door' syndrome where large numbers of teachers depart teaching long before retirements (Ingersoll & Perda, 2010).

Our findings also support the Ingersoll and Strong (2011) study showing that beginning teachers cite the main factor behind their decisions to depart is a lack of adequate support, which may include orientation sessions, faculty collaboration sessions, meetings with supervisors, developmental workshops, extra classroom assistance, reduced workloads, and especially, mentoring. Our study provides insight on teacher perceptions about district support. The perception differences between the findings presented in Table 4 are profound. It is perceived by principals and vice principals that schools have the expertise but not the resources to support and coach up new teachers which might include time for collaboration, time for research and training, access to good training materials or materials for use in the classroom, and access to experts in the field of mentoring and support. It is important to note, willingness of a district or district leader to give support and what is actually given might not be the same. Nor did the study investigate the barriers for teachers to engage with supports – whether those barriers are created by the district, school, or teacher. Policy makers must also dedicate themselves to the promotion of successful school culture-building. To build the culture and capacity for needed reforms, schools must in turn, build the culture and capacity of teacher identity and a sense of professionalism through strong mentoring relationships. This takes time, and the attrition rate of newly hired teachers makes this an even more difficult and tough process to build a successful school culture.

Rural spaces are complex in nature and so are their schools. There appears to be a tension between teacher belongingness and fitting in with the school community while also having autonomy in their classroom and work. Leaders are key to helping them navigate this landscape. In order to procure the changes needed to create high quality and firm devotion to student achievement, it requires a dedication to the success of the classroom teacher. According to Shaw

and Newton (2014, p. 101), "*If the most precious product developed in education is the student, then our most prized commodity should be the classroom teacher*". In order to make the changes needed to public education in rural western America, there must be collaboration between rural communities, education systems (including higher education and P-12 systems), as well as policymakers that results in a deliberate and calculated process for developing and retaining highly qualified teachers.

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Schools, Communities, and Teachers:
How Rural Sense of Belonging Holds Impact for English Teachers in Place

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Abstract

This paper examines how English teachers experience and articulate a rural sense of belonging (RSOB) while teaching and living in rural communities. Given that rurality is a social construct, teachers' inclusion in this study occurred through meeting nuanced rural criteria. RSOB is a relationship people have with rurality that helps English teachers consider how they experience and feel about their work and lives in place. This study adds complexity to dynamic RSOB by attending to affective intensities associated with teachers' daily interactions across ruralities. Data include survey responses from 30 participating teachers with varied experience, in rural schools within the United States. Using a narrative methodology, authors analyse teachers' stories, invested in how their experiences living and teaching rural shapes their work as English teachers. Findings focus on how (if) participants self-identify as rural English teachers and/or rural community members, how participants experience teaching, and how participants navigate schools and communities. Findings offer a richer understanding of how English teachers persist or depart in rural spaces, and how an evolving RSOB (or lack thereof) plays a part. When RSOB is strong, teaching in rural schools becomes less a matter of resilience and survival and more about acceptance or acknowledgement, purpose, and value. Teachers expressed a bifurcation between how they feel valued in schools versus how they feel valued in communities. Implications recommend more open dialogue with rural stakeholders to reconsider the roles of rural teachers inside and outside of schools.

Introduction

Sense of belonging (SOB) is *"a unique element of interpersonal relatedness"* (Hagerty et al., 2002, p. 794) that takes into account how individuals *"feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment"* (Hagerty et al., 2002, p. 794). SOB foregrounds an individual's psychological experiences and, importantly, their subjective evaluation of the level of integration in a particular context (Strayhorn, 2018). Additionally, belonging is relational, as community *"is a feeling of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through commitment to be together"* (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 6).

This paper examines the impact of rural sense of belonging (RSOB) (Strayhorn, 2018; Wynhoff Olsen et al., 2022) on English teachers' decisions to teach in rural American schools as well as how/if RSOB shapes the discipline itself. What it means to be rural, like other geographical categorizations, is a social construct. Given competing definitions of rural and a vast array in participants' responses, we developed criteria for defining rural more discreetly for our study. We [four educational researchers] provide our full criteria in the Ruralities section of our Methodology.

Given the focus on English teachers in particular, we define RSOB as a *"recursive relationship between participants and rurality that helps English teachers determine congruency with personal (e.g., values, lifestyle) and professional (e.g., curriculum, class size, technology) considerations in place"* (Wynhoff Olsen et al., 2022, p. 212). RSOB is bidirectional and the parties involved may lack agreement regarding one's belonging; thereby, people are likely to question acceptance, value, or respect in varying degrees. How people respond to a possible deficit is attributable to the stability of one's RSOB. For some, belonging holds. For others, it arrests. We anticipate fluctuation within individual teachers, over time, as well as fluctuation with how teachers in the same career phase experience RSOB.

Exploring RSOB opens dialogue for how teachers participate in their lives as adults, teachers, and community members in rural places. Considering one's belonging across these roles is substantial and relational. And yet, *"Belonging is not a function of one's developing identity as much as a relationship between participant and place"* (Wynhoff Olsen et al., 2022, p. 199). Finding purpose in one's place and trust in one's abilities, both from the individual and also, from those within the organisation, impact RSOB. RSOB shifts as people grow, age, and interact in place: *"Just as place-based pedagogy looks to connect children to their local communities in meaningful ways that cross school/community boundaries, SOB opens the door . . . to find personal values and meaningful connections with rurality"* (Wynhoff Olsen et al., 2022, p. 200). Teachers, by nature, seek purpose and aim to make a difference; when they are acknowledged as someone doing that, their SOB heightens.

We did not set forth to examine RSOB *"...against a backdrop of political and ideological chaos"* (Brown, 2017, p. 35) during a global pandemic, yet, since this is our context, we recognise that the stress under which teachers currently live has potential to impact RSOB. Political and ideological chaos may also be more pronounced in rural spaces due to sheer numbers; for example, in a more populous place, people may be more likely to find others with similar beliefs. Many of these stressors impact teachers' feelings of value and appreciation for the work that they do every day; therefore, a look at teachers' RSOB would be incomplete without acknowledging the socio-political climate in the United States surrounding teachers and education.

Early on during the COVID-19 pandemic teachers were lauded as heroes; as the pandemic continues and stress is compounded, that heroism has waned. In addition to the effects of COVID-19 on teaching and learning, the current climate around public education in the United

States is rife with strain, accusations, and controlling efforts to diminish teachers' professional decision making. Examples related to English teachers include the recognition that *"[p]arents, activists, school board officials, and lawmakers are challenging books at a pace not seen in decades"* (Harris & Alter, 2022, para. 4). These bans are politicised and litigious. One participating English teacher offers perspective to this contextual backdrop:

> *It seems like there has a been a shift in student behaviour, demeanour, and value of education … that has made it harder and harder to feel fulfilled and respected as a teacher. The radicalization of … opinions has left teachers at the intersection of … fiery debates… teachers are valued less and less as the general public becomes more … vitriolic.*

Teachers in all settings are stressed and beyond the point of breaking. Their students are academically behind, yet their district grade-level rubrics that define student expectations remain the same (King, 2021). Teachers are burned out from working overtime to make up for labour shortages (Heyward, 2021), and they are concerned for their own mental health (Klecker, 2021) given the level of stress and exhaustion they experience every day. Resignation seems one of the few areas of control left to teachers, many of whom are beginning to exercise that control (Heyward, 2021; Walker, 2021), *"leaving behind hard-earned licences and dreamed-of careers because they just can't do what's being asked of them"* (Thomas, 2021, para. 4). Issues of teacher strain and burnout are echoed across rural America, adding to teacher shortages (Oyen & Schweinle, 2020).

Even amidst this general backdrop, when RSOB is strong in personal and professional spheres, teaching in rural schools becomes less a matter of resilience and survival and more about acceptance or acknowledgement, purpose, and value. We know that some English teachers flourish in rural spaces and others determine they are better suited elsewhere (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021). Hagerty et al. (2002) also assert that a *"strong sense of belonging is associated with better psychological and social functioning"* (p. 800). In this socio-political moment in the United States (and likely, across the world), taking care of rural teachers and their mental health is paramount. We must pay attention to affective feelings of belonging, find opportunities to sustain a positive sense of relationality and value between teachers and community, and create space for dialogue and repair for those who are struggling in place. The construct of RSOB is one way for us to articulate the strength in rural teachers' experiences and to mark the dissonances that can occur when one does not achieve congruence.

The Power of Affect in Rural Spaces and on Teachers' RSOB

Scholars have called for greater attention to affect in school spaces (Noddings, 1996) and in the English classroom (Boler, 2019; Smith et al., 2015). Recent attention has been paid to affect and teacher embodiment (Mandalaki et al., 2022) and the affective responses to school leadership (Balwant, 2017). Similar to this project, other studies have put affect theory to work in order to look at job satisfaction in education (Burić & Moè, 2020; Hamama et al., 2013). These studies, drawn predominantly from fields of psychology, understand affect as a close synonym to emotion.

While various fields and scholars have offered divergent conceptualizations of affect, we are drawing on a Spinozan-Deleuzian approach; one that understands affect as an ability for a body to affect and be affected (Deleuze, 1970/1988; Spinoza, 1677/1996). We are cautious not to conflate affect with emotion, understanding that *"feelings are not the same thing as affect"* (Brennan, 2004, p. 5) as affect and emotion are situated on different corporeal registers. We consider the ways in which literacies scholars have theorised the impact of affective intensities and charge of embodied interactions with teachers and students (Boldt & Leander, 2017; Ehret, 2019). Furthermore, we concur with Boldt's (2021) argument for students' critical need to experience *"connection and vital mattering in their encounters with curriculum, pedagogy, and*

classroom belonging" (p. 218) by extending the value of vitality and belonging to teachers and their experiences, both in and outside of rural schools. Stated differently, we recognise the need for teachers to engage in personal and professional experiences that bring about a sense of agency that positions them as vital (e.g., important, mattering to the places they inhabit) and provides them with vitality (e.g., energy, productive force).

We understand affect as intensity that circulates and registers through the body as something preconscious and pre-personal (Massumi, 2002). We also recognise the difficulty of pinning down affect as "*it is not objectifiable and quantifiable as a thing that we then perceive or of which we are conscious*" (Colebrook, 2002, p. 39). Throughout this study, we attempted to ask probing questions to invite participants' consideration of seemingly banal experiences of teaching as 'ordinary affects' (Stewart, 2007); mundane daily events that may appear at first glance unremarkable but carry fleeting intensities that offer powerful and more durable insight upon further retrospection. By asking teachers about their feelings of value and acceptance and to express their teaching joys and stresses, we encouraged our participants to reflect upon and attune themselves to the day-to-day moments that contribute to how they self-identify and orient toward their communities and teaching profession.

Spinoza's concept of conatus is of particular interest to us in this project. Conatus is associated with desire and, for Deleuze (1970/1988), power or appetites. According to Deleuze, "*the appetite is nothing else but the effort by which each thing strives to persevere in its being, each body in extension, each mind or idea in thought (conatus)*" (p. 21). It is the tendency toward perseverance paired with passions, such as joy, that leads to the increase of one's ability to affect and be affected. When one's ability to act is diminished by external forces, passions like sadness might set in. Stewart (2007) describes power as "*a thing of the senses . . . We do things with power, and to it*" (p. 83). As a result, it is the natural inclination of individuals to strive for power, desire, and appetite, not for domination over others, but in seeking productive passions over those that diminish our power to act. Power, thus, impacts the felt experiences and associations with a given place, experience, or in the case of this study, the intersection of a profession and community. It is this relationship to power and the resulting visceral, corporeal, affective responses, we argue, that contributes to one's broader sense of belonging.

This study is an attempt to make sense of the surplus of affect responses and to investigate the residues, those that leave a trace, and to better understand the vitality of rural English teachers. Affective intensities are received and felt through bodily sensations. In the subsequent sections we attempt to underscore the sensorial when considering RSOB. While we concede that SOB as conceptualised by Strayhorn (2018) might be considered a more representational and humanistic theory for understanding inclusion or exclusion within communities, we believe that pairing Strayhorn with Spinoza and Deleuze offers a means to investigate the ways in which affect circulates in rural spaces and how teachers' conatus—their power, appetites, and desires—is increased or diminished in ways that impact human flourishing in a meaningful way and the impact that conatus can have on one's SOB.

Methodology

For this study, we developed a survey to investigate how one's self-identification, sense of value, acceptance, and support as teachers and rural community members influence a rural sense of belonging. Our study consists of two phases. We developed the concept of RSOB (Wynhoff Olsen et al., 2022) in Phase One, a qualitative study on pre-service and first-year rural English teachers in one western state of the United States. In Phase Two (this study), we complexify our understanding of a RSOB for rural English teachers (*n=30*) with varied experiences, in eight states within the United States.

We created survey questions that invited open, qualitative responses regarding how teachers were engaging with the profession, their school, and their communities. Asking teachers to be vulnerable was necessary for our continued research and served as an act of reciprocity in an exhausting stretch of teaching: a way to offer teachers time to reflect and be heard. We developed quantitative survey questions using key terms related to RSOB from phase one—specifically, value and values, belonging, support, acceptance, respect—both in schools and in communities. We created both yes/no statements and questions on a 5-point Likert scale. Readers can request access to our full survey by emailing the lead author.

Participants Selection

We used convenience, purposive sampling and invited 116 English teachers (via email and our university's social media page) to our survey. All invited teachers were graduates from our university's undergraduate program in English Teaching, MA program in English, and/or as members of our local writing project (a regional site of the National Writing Project). As a research team, we have developed and sustained collegial relationships with the teachers over the last 3-12 years, allowing us to ask affective questions and have teachers respond with candour.

Thirty-five English teachers completed our survey. We moved 30 participants forward in our study based on our described rural criteria (see Ruralities). Participants have a range of teaching experiences: twelve taught 1-3 years, eleven taught 4-7 years, six taught 8-12 years, and one taught for 24 years. The teachers vary in location; 22 live and teach in the same western, frontier state where they earned their teaching credentials and eight live in eight other states within the United States. Participants' relational status ranges from single to partnered, with 11 actively parenting.

Ruralities

Rural classification involved three criteria: home and/or school located in a Rural-Remote or Rural-Fringe area, as classified by National Centre for Education Statistics (NCES); participants teach in secondary schools with student populations ranging from 1-306 students; and participants identify as a rural English teacher and/or a rural community member. Participants had to meet at least one criterion during their teaching career to remain in our study. While there are participants whose rural affiliations were present in multiple criteria, we did not value multiplicity more nor did we value one criterion over others.

First, we analysed participant demographics (home and school) using NCES (2006) categories for location: City, Suburban, Town, Rural, determined by proximity to urban centres. Town and Rural further subdivide into town/rural fringe, distant, or remote. Towns exist within an urban cluster yet *"rural areas do not lie inside an urbanised area or urbanised cluster"* (NCES, 2006, para. 3). Twenty-four participants live and/or teach in Rural-Distant or Rural-Fringe areas. It is important to note that NCES designations are complicated. For example, one participant's school is categorised as Town-Fringe, yet NCES offers competing definitions of rural within the town borders, designating Rural-Fringe and Rural-Remote areas across the street or in another neighbourhood. Additionally, at the local level, NCES designations of town are often interchanged with rural. Our corpus has several instances where teachers in the same school district do not agree with the NCES categorization nor with one another; one names their school and community rural and another names that same place suburban or large because of comparatives with their place of origin or previous teaching assignment.

The United States does not have a unified school classification system related to student population. Since we have participants teaching in nine states, with 22 teaching in the same frontier state, we used the classification system from that majority state. The breakdown follows:

Table 1: *School Classification*

School size	AA	A	B	C
Secondary Student Population	779+	307-778	108-306	1-107

Class C and Class B schools are positioned as rural by locals and by our university. Sixteen respondents' have experience teaching in equivalent sizes to Class C or Class B. Looking at student populations also gave us a consistent view into teaching experiences that ranged across public middle/high schools, public school charters, private schools, and a therapeutic and educational facility for girls court-ordered to attend.

Finally, an aspect of rural sense of belonging includes how people self-identify. Thus, our final criterion is personal; seven participants self-identified as a rural English teacher and/or a rural community member. To clarify, we are not conflating self-identification with professional identity work. Rather, self-identification indicates who people feel that they are in relation to self. How one self-identifies plays a role in how/if one belongs, but more so, RSOB indicates who people feel that they are in relation to others. Self-identification extends from expectations, values, and attitudes; as these characteristics are unique to each individual and play a large part in whether one develops a sense of belonging in any given context (Strayhorn, 2018). Strayhorn further posits, *"Although the need for belongingness is universal and applies to all people, it does not necessarily unfold for all people equally"* (p.37). How one self-identifies will vary and intersect with one's sense of belonging.

Data Analysis

Our guiding research question asks: How do English teachers experience and represent a rural sense of belonging (or lack thereof)? Using narrative case methodology (Becker & Renger, 2017; Hall et al., 2021), we examined 30 surveys completed by rural English teachers. In this section, we offer analytical steps, yet our process was recursive.

To begin, we reviewed each survey as it was completed and conducted member checks. We emphasised open-ended responses that yielded extended stories and an affective array. Using in vivo codes, we developed themes. Next, we organised themes into categories, merging like categories together and setting aside outliers. In so doing, we placed participant voices in conversation with each other to gain a deeper perspective of teachers' rural sense of belonging. We wrote individual data memos and came together twice to review the findings we found salient. We collectively reviewed outliers, connecting them to patterned themes when they offered a diverse perspective or setting them aside for individual, further analysis when the respondents' experience was vastly different. Specifically, we drew connections between aspects of value, support, trust, visibility/acknowledgement, place, and belonging; aided by how our teachers wrote about their experiences and bolstered our understanding of RSOB.

Then, to check alignment with respondents' closed prompts, we set our recurring themes alongside the survey's quantitative *yes/no* and *to what extent* statements. We were selective in which statements we analysed for this paper; to make our decisions, we re-read our quantitative questions/statements and looked for any traces in the language and/or what was indexed. Teachers' written responses held tracings to four survey statements: I feel valued in my current school; I feel valued in my community; To what extent do you feel accepted at school?; and To what extent do you feel accepted in your community?. These four created a foundation for emerging qualitative themes. We tallied frequency of use and calculated percentages. To aid our thinking across types of responses, we built analytical tables to show how a participant responded, writing into their experiences via open-ended questions. We also examined how the overall percentages and affective stories aligned, or not (both within an individual and across teachers).

In addition, we wrote found poems as a way to represent the collective stories teachers were sharing with us. Found poems are created using words or phrases from other sources (e.g., our open-ended survey responses) that are sequenced and layered together by a listener or arranger. To create our found poems, we maintained teachers' phrasing from the two discordant prompts: *Describe a Teaching Joy*; and *Describe a Teaching Stress*. For each prompt, we layered participants' responses together, culling and organising phrases that illustrate patterns and showcase emotions across teachers and across ruralities. In doing so, we maintained our goal to amplify teachers' voices and offer a cacophony from a typically marginalised group (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021), rural English teachers.

Throughout our process, we resolved data inconsistencies and returned to participants for member checks. Narrative case methodology allowed us to maintain space for teacher participants to tell their stories and reflect on how they felt (Kinsella, 2010) with regard to living and teaching in rural schools and communities.

Findings

How Participants Self-identify as/not Rural

Of the 116 teachers invited, 35 completed the survey. Using our rural criteria, 30 have rural affiliations; their responses constitute our findings. Of our 30 respondents, 73% (n=22) self-identify as rural English teachers, and 67% (n=20) self-identify as rural community members and feel a sense of belonging in their community. Across the 30 respondents, data indicate that belonging to the profession of rural teachers is distinct from belonging to a rural community, and how one perceives rural matters. Sixty-seven percent (n=20) of respondents taught/lived in one area and 33% (n=10) experienced varied teaching experiences in different schools and locations.

To illustrate how participants met rural criteria, we offer Table 2. Table 2 provides micro detail on 10 of our teachers: 5 who have held one teaching job and 5 who have taught in multiple schools and communities. For those with a rural teaching repertoire, we provide two lines of data. The first provides classifications on where participants currently teach/live. The second line classifies previous rural experiences. We use only one line for self-identifications because we asked respondents to self-identify with regard to how they felt in their current teaching placement. Respondents used qualitative responses to indicate how their full rural repertoire impacts their belonging. In selecting these 10 respondents, we deliberately included all who are mentioned by name in this paper. Due to space constraints, we do not provide micro detail on all 30 respondents.

Table 2: *Select Participant Teaching/Living Demographics and Self-Identification*

Teacher Pseudonym	NCES School Classification	NCES Home Classification	Student Population	Rural Self-identification Teacher/Community

Ada	Rural-Distant	Rural-Distant	91	Yes/No
Gemma	Rural-Remote	Rural-Remote	69	Yes/Yes
Grace	Rural-Remote	Rural-Remote	289	Yes/Yes
	Rural-Remote	Rural-Remote	140	
Harper	Rural-Distant	City-Midsize	258	Yes/No
Henry	City-Large	City-Large	309	No/No
	Town-Remote	Town-Remote	35	
Justin	Rural-Remote	Rural-Remote	140	No/No
	Rural-Remote	Rural-Remote	20	
Kali	Town-Remote	Rural-Remote	485	Yes/Yes
	Rural-Distant	Rural-Distant	94	
Kate	Town-Remote	Town-Remote	618	Yes/Yes
	Town-Remote	Town-Remote	310	
Natalie	Rural-Distant	Rural-Distant	18	No/Yes
	City-Small	Rural-Distant	201	
Phillip	Rural-Remote	Rural-Remote	24	Yes/Yes

Analysis indicates there is not a simple pattern regarding who self-identifies as rural. For example, not everyone teaching in a Rural-Remote school/community self-identified as a rural teacher and community member nor did those living in areas considered non-rural by NCES not self-identify; in fact, some participant's data showed ambiguity. Data further illustrate that layering teachers' stories across ruralities helps avoid fixed notions of rural by leaning into daily interactions and feelings from a person in place, across participants. We offer three stories to illustrate the rich complexity in teachers' stories.

Harper is in their third-year teaching and offers a telling case of someone who self-identifies as a rural teacher but not as a rural community member.

> *I am the only teacher of colour K-12. I am also out as bisexual and gender questioning…I am not comfortable in my community and often choose to wait to fill up on gas or grab food …because I'm nervous to see students or parents outside the school…I'm afraid I'll be confronted.*

Harper offers mixed feelings of acceptance and writes that positive experiences in their classroom affirm they are a rural English teacher. Yet, Harper's RSOB arrests due to deprivation of belongingness that has moved beyond the classroom and into daily routines, which over time, could lead to "*loneliness, self-hatred, disengagement, and divestment*" (Strayhorn, 2018, p. 41). Harper is persisting in rural, but with hesitation.

Natalie did not experience RSOB when teaching and living in her Rural-Distant community; therefore, she left her job (and does not self-identify as a rural English teacher) and now commutes (from her Rural-Distant community to which she self-identifies as a member) to a school in a nearby City-Small. Natalie explains that she "*is not always comfortable*" in her community and prefers "*the outskirts*" because "*it gives me more freedom*". She is able to live rural but not teach/live rural. She needs that separation to be only herself (and not teacher) in her rural community.

Henry adds further complexity. While Henry's survey responses show he does not currently self-identify as a rural teacher/community member due to the extreme shift between his two

teaching positions (see Table 2), his narrative tells a different story. When he lived "*right in town–minutes away from Main Street*" he "*loved it more than anything*"; during that first job, he self-identified as a rural teacher/community member. Given his previous belonging, Henry hopes to return to a rural area in his new career as a social worker. Henry's storied nuances indicate there is more complexity to his experiences than a simple choice on a survey and relays that how one self-identifies is not a predictor for one's RSOB.

How Participants Experience Teaching: Respect, Joys and Strains

Ninety-three percent (n=28) of our participants self-identify as a member of their school communities, yet only seventy-three percent (n=22) of participants feel valued in their current school. When asked, Who or what has made you feel respected in your school?, most named 2-3 people as sources of respect; a few wrote 4-5 sources. The people mentioned comprise five categories of respect: 67% (n=20) of teachers reported colleagues, 50% (n=15) students, 47% (n=14) administration, 23% (n=7) parents, and 10% (n=3) school board.

Respondents' rich descriptions indicated gratitude for people within their school community, an important finding since RSOB pertains to how one feels in relation to and with others. Respondents wrote about colleagues who "*make time for me*" and "*value my insights just as I respect theirs*". One used the title "*mentor teacher*" and another described multiple staff members "*mentoring her*" because they have taken her "*under their wing,*" making her feel respected. Others focused on trust, noting reciprocal trust among colleagues. A teacher in one of our smallest schools foregrounded mutual trust because it "*makes for a very strong staff and work culture*". One teacher directly wrote that professional and personal bonds with colleagues allow her to persist in teaching and living rural, "*We … text each other and keep in touch even if we just saw each other at school. If I didn't have their friendship and support, I'd probably leave my current district*".

Teachers also feel respected by the rich relationships built with students over time, a respect that was heightened through student advising (e.g., Gay-Straight-Alliance) or coaching (e.g., Speech & Debate). Repeatedly, teachers used the possessive pronoun "*my*" to describe their students, indicating a relational connection and influencing a positive RSOB.

Responses to the prompt, Describe a Teaching Joy, further describe positive teacher-student relationships. We present the findings in a found poem, layering teachers' voices together to showcase passion for students across ruralities.

Teaching Joys

My kids.
I love their ideas, joys,
personalities, and creations.

Those organic moments of true engagement with the curriculum are joyful.
I love exposing kids to new authors, places, ways of thinking.
Watching a student who 'hates' reading,
find THE book.
Taking off with that confidence.

Relationships! Making kids laugh,
Connecting, building rapport.

The fact that I made his list of people
that he wants to remember
is as great of a joy as I can feel.
I love my kids

I find joy in getting to be a part of students' lives:
opportunity
to affect real and lasting and positive change
on the lives of my students.

And none of these comments are about me
as much as they are about students
enjoying learning.
THAT
is the greatest teaching joy.

The participants' words, together, illustrate how relationships with students–both a teaching joy and a key source for respect–feed into how teachers feel in relation to those with whom they spend their workdays.

To add another nuance to how students make teachers feel respected, we share a final pattern, visibility. While many respondents' desired to shed their teacher identity while in town, others found visibility a sign of respect. Kate, new to her community, feels respected when *"acknowledged by students outside of the school setting (i.e., at extracurriculars, at the store, etc)"*. Teacher visibility in town was the foundation of respect for Henry as well: *"I was the only 9th and 10th grade English teacher at the school in which I taught, so I was known around town as 'the English teacher', which made me feel a sense of belonging"*. To explain how visibility in town intersected with his RSOB, Henry explained his contrasting experience in a city: *"I did not feel respected at all when I taught; instead, I felt like I was completely replaceable, had no autonomy, and was never given the freedom to make my own instructional decisions in the classroom"*. Henry's

experiences suggest that teacher visibility in town can be a sign of respect that impacts the teachers' work and agency in school; they also suggest that RSOB can fluctuate.

Respondents also specifically attributed visibility to parents as another source of respect. Respondents wrote about parents approaching them with gratitude for teachers' "*dedication to the school*" and "*the way I engage their child*". A few respondents wrote that parents offered accolades regarding curricular choices. In these responses, it was clear that parents have access to teachers and the teacher's work in the classroom/school is visible, leading to respect and a feeling of mattering. Grace offers another connection:

> *I find that in my mind I'm equating being respected with being appreciated, ... which is not the same thing, right? But I think I feel disrespected when all the hours I put in go unnoticed and unappreciated, so then the noticing of my efforts feels like respect.*

Collectively, respondents appreciate being seen and having their work acknowledged, both of which play a role in RSOB.

When asked to note, Who/what makes you feel respected?, respondents provided mixed experiences with administration and school board members. These were the only two areas of respect that also triggered stories of disrespect within participants' responses to this prompt. Teachers' contrasting stories for administrators (principals and superintendents) indicate that there are moments when administrators advocate for teachers and articulate "*I am an educator they want*"; there are moments where teachers "*sometimes*" feel respected; and there are respondents who mark administration as a source of disrespect due to sparse communication. Participants indicated that how administrators speak about and support them (both in the building and in the community) impact how and if teachers feel respected. Data indicate that teachers in our smallest schools feel trusted and welcome to "*talk through challenges and find solutions*".

In terms of school boards, three respondents shared that they felt supported. The majority of respondents expressed that they do not feel respected by their board, they lack trust, and "*morale is low*" due to board decisions.

Attuned to the stresses noted when we asked teachers to offer their sources of respect, we reviewed responses to questions about barriers and teacher stress. Analysis across the data indicates key stressors: teacher roles, conflicting expectations, personal/professional balance, curriculum/grading, student behaviours/home lives, parents, and school boards. Similarly to how we shared respondents' joy, we present teaching stress as a found poem in our teachers' language. Unlike teaching joys that focus inward on teachers' relationships with their students, teachers' composite voice locates stressors that extend out into school districts and communities.

In many ways, I felt like a foot soldier in someone else's army;
all the expectations and guilt that you feel just trying to survive.

Intense, defensive parents… they see absolutely no value in English education.
I am never teaching just one thing to a group.
I hate being mediocre.

I'm always 'on' and have little personal time
or headspace for anything but teaching.
It's so hard with two small children;
I'm sacrificing other important tasks.

[Screams internally]

What do we do?
The ever-growing demand to not only be the academic teacher,
but also the parent, therapist, and interventionist;
all while being extremely flexible.

I am not sure I fully bought in.
I haven't mastered the art,
I'm not sure it's possible.

The patterns noted across our respondents' stressors tie in well to the field of teaching in general; and yet, we remind readers that our participants are rural English teachers, albeit in a pluralistic form of ruralities. They are teachers in rural places, in rural schools. It is here, in place, that their RSOB fluctuates and is dependent on their lived experiences.

How Participants Navigate School and Community

The bifurcation between how teachers feel valued in schools versus in communities was pronounced. Seventy-three percent (n=22) of respondents indicated, I feel valued in my current school. Fifty-seven percent (n=17) of participants noted, I feel valued in my current community. Seventy-three percent (n=22) of respondents shared that they are not equally comfortable in school and community; they are more comfortable at school.

Those who are equally comfortable point to "*a key group of people in both,*" a deliberate attempt to be "*a present educator and community member*". Teachers who experience more comfort in school explained that "*[s]chool is my domain; I know what I'm doing, and I know the expectations. I understand the social cues of school*". Teachers wrote about having friends in school, interacting with students, and having a voice. In their communities, teachers explained that the role of a teacher is heavy and "*up for speculation*"; "*I try to stay as invisible as possible and shop 'over the hill'*"; "*[p]eople watch more closely the behaviours of school personnel, and I am very cognisant of how I present myself in public*"; and "*I would definitely not go into the bars here, even to just grab a burger by myself*". One respondent wrote how closed he experienced rural communities to be:

"*It mostly seems to be people who want to do their own thing and be left alone*". He expressed disappointment for the lack of welcome. A few respondents noted that they need more time to take part in the community because they are still "*feeling the new kid vibe*".

Sixty-seven percent (n=17) of participants feel SOB in their communities; yet 35% (n=6) of these respondents defined community as school. Thereby, only 37% (n=11) of all respondents offered experiences and belonging in communities outside of school. Analysis of respondents' written stories showcase the stories that respondents attributed to belonging and offer insight into how they connect comfortability and value to belonging.

Some who feel belonging have dual-roles: teacher-coaches who also attend students' games and performances, and teacher-parents who have "*another tie to the community – my kids*". One wrote that he worked summers in a coffee shop, so "*The post office folks know my name. The bank calls me to see if I have holidays planned. Local businesses… ask me questions about teaching and life*". Another remarked that she belongs to the yoga, hunting/fishing, and horsemanship communities. Two noted that they felt valued and connected because they grew up in the town where they teach, and one explained that her partner's employer welcomed their family immediately; one explained his belonging as a "*general feeling… a wave*".

Overwhelmingly, those who said that they lack SOB in the community explained that their values are out of sync: "*I am automatically seen as liberal because I don't go to church and I'm a teacher. Those two ideas condemn me in the eyes of many*". Respondents also said they are not valued. They have heard neighbours express that teachers "*make too much money*" and they feel that "*many teachers are targeted by negative feelings and lack of support from community members*". Given these community challenges, some respondents lacked RSOB or experienced fluctuations to it.

Kali's frustrations illustrate the fluctuation possible with RSOB, even for those who teach and live near home:

> *I'm so grateful that I* don't *live in my school/community. I'm able to leave all the crap and destruction that are my current community and go home to a separate space. I really think it is saving my mental health.*

Similar to Natalie's story earlier, Kali needs to remove herself so she can be a community member in a place where she is not the teacher. Often, teachers expressed weariness that they are not afforded opportunities to just be community members; rather, they are sorted out as teachers and face pre-existing assumptions that can be exclusionary.

A more severe case of not belonging showed up in Justin's story. Justin, with two years of Rural-Remote teaching and living experiences, no longer self-identifies as a rural English teacher or a rural community member. During his first-year teaching, Justin identified as a rural English teacher and was drawn to small communities in which to raise his family. He was not welcomed by his neighbours and struggled to offer curriculum to which his students did not object. While he did not find belonging in his first school, Justin maintained an overall (albeit damaged) RSOB and sought out a new teaching job in another Rural-Remote community. Justin mused that since his first job occurred during a presidential election and the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, his more liberal political views were perhaps more pronounced, causing loneliness and dissatisfaction.

When Justin took a new teaching job in a different Rural-Remote community, his move indicated an issue of normative congruence, which "*suggests that individuals seek environments or settings that are congruent with their own expectations, values, attitudes, and positioning*" (Strayhorn, 2018, p. 36).

Unfortunately, as Justin's responses indicate, he was not finding job satisfaction in his new school. Justin did not feel valued or supported. When asked what led to his feeling of not belonging, Justin shared:

> Students make regular comments, both passive and aggressive, about my perceived beliefs and observed behaviours, and how they deviate from their own. Many students have made passive comments about violence being directed towards people who share my beliefs.

Justin remarks that his visibility (for who he is and what he stands for) in school is a problem. In addition to clashes with students related to personal values, Justin is required to teach district-required curriculum and feels pressured by parents and community members regarding pedagogical decisions. Justin also shared, "*I might feel a little more comfortable in the community, because fewer people know me by sight,*" but he now lacks RSOB. He is leaving his job and the profession. He will continue living in a rural area due to financial constraints related to moving.

As teachers live and work in place, they pay attention to what extent their values align with the community and how and if they are welcomed. Strayhorn (2018) found that people generally, "*strive to be accepted by others, valued, and respected as competent, qualified individuals worthy of membership in a defined group or particular social context*" (p. 35). Our data suggest that feeling valued and accepted matters to one's rural SOB and to how one feels, in general, in place: school or community.

Discussion

This study analysed survey responses from 30 English teachers, in eight states within the United States. Their stories complexify RSOB while foregrounding teaching and communities in place.

Findings indicate that respondents' feel belonging in schools. For some, that's enough to build RSOB. Those who also asserted "*I am a rural English teacher*" (e.g., Phillip) yielded a positioning of respect, awe, and awareness for teaching English in rural schools. As data indicate, rural schools were classified in a range of places and of varying size. Others did not belong in school, as a lack of respect, value, acceptance, and/or support in place arrested their RSOB. We saw patterns of teachers connecting with colleagues and students, building relationships and feeling needed, seen, and valued. Teachers know their role and expectations in school; yet, when they move into the community as adult members, they are less sure of themselves. English teachers have a historied role that comes with a weight our participants feel across rural places, regardless of teaching duration. It was more typical for respondents to belong in school; if they experienced incongruence, stories point toward clashes within the community. Thus, for some (e.g., Justin), self-identification was a way to mark a lack of RSOB.

Teachers generally noted the sense of importance they feel toward their students while some also sensed a misalignment with their community and the political and bureaucratic systems that govern their classroom. They believed that they were important to their schools and yet underappreciated by those outside of the school. Such dissonance between school and community demonstrated the ways in which a teacher can view their job as vital to the young people in their classrooms, while at the same time, lack the vitality and energy they could exhibit due to constant criticism. In other words, vital mattering is not enough to sustain a teacher when vitality is absent.

Additionally, teachers shared stories rich with mundane experiences associated with teaching and being in a community which we would classify as ordinary affects (Stewart, 2007). So much of teaching is routinised by patterns and rhythms that get repeated Monday through Friday, particularly through daily schedules bookended by bells which make for a repetitious and predictable daily profession. Life outside of school is filled with its own banalities and rhythms as well. Teachers noted aspects of their RSOB heightened through interactions with their kids and

an appreciated visibility within their communities that manifested itself in grocery stores, restaurants, and school activities. When participants mentioned feelings of discomfort and fear when going to a local bar, getting gas, or buying groceries in their school communities, they underscore the seemingly mundane moments with important affective implications. Their senses—these bodily intensities—anticipate the potential for conflict with community members which reifies a lack of RSOB. For our data set, these stories overwhelm those who expressed alignment with community.

In terms of affect, their conatus demonstrated a desire to strive and persevere. Within the classroom, teachers offer stories of working with students over time, remarking how rewarding it is to take on a concept and due to sheer time together (sometimes years), be a part of maturing students and growing concepts. And yet, there are forces, often that reside outside of the classroom, that contend with their ability to affect and be affected. Moments where professional choices were challenged by community members, administrators, or school board members brought about negative passions and resulted in a diminishing of our participants' ability to act. When power is diminished in these ways negative passions set in, which has a lasting impact on the affective response teachers have toward their profession and the rural stakeholders that actively work against their ability to act, causing fluctuation in RSOB.

Teaching is a lonely profession, despite the social nature of classrooms. Given the often-isolated areas in which rural schools are located, RSOB offers a way to bring understanding to the beauty and strain of living and teaching rural. RSOB acknowledges the importance of paying attention to how teachers feel and how we, as community members, consider ourselves in relation to them. A willingness to consider how English teachers are experiencing their jobs in place also invites them into a larger collective of rural stakeholders whose stories "*can be recognised and shared*" (Brown, 2017, p. 44) so as to infuse stories of rural education by those who are experiencing it.

Implications

This study recommends RSOB as a way to examine teachers' affect to better understand teachers who persist and teachers who leave rural areas; a response to Oyen and Schweinle's (2020, p. 22) call to "*examine what helps teachers persist over long periods of time in rural locations*". Given our knowledge of our respondents' teacher preparation and high percentage of belonging in schools, we recommend continued emphasis on disciplinary knowledge, place-conscious pedagogies, and field experiences in rural communities and schools. Together, these components emphasise good teaching in place.

Once placed, however, those who struggle are challenged by their ascribed and lived roles within communities. This study indicates a need for more dialogic opportunities across stakeholders: teachers, administrators, and community members. We recommend conversations to articulate teacher roles and expectations. Listening across perspectives, with slowed attention on dissonances and affirmation for areas of alignment, could provide opportunity to make hidden ideologies explicit, update historied expectations if necessary, and work to bring the people in place in closer alignment.

Often, affective lived experiences of belonging are felt but invisible to many; drawing forward, articulated expressions of expectations and intent would go a long way toward healthy community relationships. Speaking to the multi-layered reality of visibility, participants noted the role of ordinary affects on their RSOB. Conversations allow these everyday but important events to also become visible; seeing the influences on teachers' conatus leads to further means of support and sustenance in areas that often experience teacher turnover. We believe that examinations and articulations of RSOB offer a way toward creating space for loving, intentional dialogue for teachers and community members. Given that teaching is a felt profession and should respond to time and place, such dialogue is exciting to consider.

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Blended Learning to Support Minority Language Acquisition in Primary School Pupils: Lessons From the 'Taking Gaelic Home Study'

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Abstract

Gaelic is a minoritised indigenous language of Scotland, with its traditional heartland in the rural north-west of the country. The education system, and in particular Gaelic Medium Education (GME), has been recognised as an important strand of the language maintenance and support initiatives. The provision of GME has grown significantly since its inception in the early 1980s, it remains on the '*periphery*' of the education system, with around 0.9% of all primary school pupils enrolled in GME settings. The ongoing language shift from Gaelic to English, a process that has been particularly pronounced in the traditional heartlands of the language, and the resulted decline in the use of Gaelic as the language of the home, the family, and the community, raises the question of how GME can contribute to a sustainable future for Gaelic.

This article will discuss the findings of a small-scale mixed method practitioner enquiry study, which incorporated parental questionnaires, classroom observations, class-based language assessments and focus groups, to explore the use of blended learning approaches to enhance the development of language skills. The results of this study, conducted initially to evaluate the impact of the Covid-19 school closures on the linguistic proficiency of children in Primary 1 to Primary 3 enrolled in GME, show that pupils who were actively engaged in online learning activities showed a greater confidence and proficiency in their use of Gaelic compared to their peers who had not used these materials to support their learning, as well as increased involvement of caregivers in these Gaelic homework tasks. These findings allow for a re-imaging of approaches to homework in minority language immersion contexts to support the acquisition and use of the minority language beyond the classroom.

Keywords: *minority language immersion education; Gaelic; parental engagement; homework; blended learning; language acquisition*

Introduction

Gaelic in Scotland

Scottish Gaelic (Gaelic) is an indigenous heritage language of Scotland. Although once widely spoken across Scotland, over the centuries both the number of speakers of the language, and the areas where the language is spoken by the majority of the population, has significantly reduced (McLeod, 2020), with English becoming increasingly the dominant language across the country. This language shift meant that by 2011 only seven parishes remained where over 50% of the population self-reported to be able to speak Gaelic, all of which were in Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, the most north-westerly of Scotland's 32 local administrative regions (Mac an Tàilleir, 2010).

The dramatic decline in speaker numbers from 254,415 in 1891 (Thomas, 1998) to 57,375 in 2011 (National Records of Scotland, 2015a), coupled with changes to the way the language is used, especially in the home, family and community, by those that can speak Gaelic, has resulted in the language being categorised as a '*definitely endangered*' language (Moseley, 2010). One further consequence of the changing sociolinguistic profile of Gaelic has been the reduction in children acquiring Gaelic in the home and the family through intergenerational language transmission, even in households where one or more caregivers[1] are able to speak the language (Birnie, 2018; National Records of Scotland, 2015b). This has moved the focus of language acquisition in children to the education system, and in particular Gaelic Medium Education

Gaelic Medium Education

Gaelic Medium Education (GME), in its current format, was established in 1984, with 24 children in two settings, one in Inverness and one in Glasgow (MacLeòid, 2007). GME is based on the principles of minority language immersion established in the 1960s in Canada (for the teaching of French to speakers of English) (Genesee & Jared, 2008), and aims to ensure that children achieve equal fluency and literacy and Gaelic and English and feel equally confident in using both languages in a range of situations and domains (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education [Scotland], 2011). The availability of GME expanded rapidly until the first decade of the 21st century after which the availablity of GME in Scotland has remained broadly the same, although the number of enrollments have continued to show a year-on-year increase (for a discussion of the challenges that GME has faced in terms of growth, see Birnie, 2021a).

In academic session 2020 / 2021 (the period that this study was conducted), GME primary education was available in 15 out of the 32 local authorities, with 3,801 children enrolled (Morgan, 2021). Children can enter Primary 1 (P1) aged 5, either directly or after attending (Gaelic medium) pre-school provision, with limited or no knowledge of the language, and the GME model has been conceptualised with a focus on developing language skills, especially in the first three years of primary school. This stage has been described by Education Scotland (2015) as the total immersion phase, where Gaelic is the medium of instruction for all the curricular content, this is then followed, typically for the remaining four years of primary education, by an immersion phase, where all the curricular content continues to be delivered through the medium of Gaelic but where the children are also introduced to English (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education [Scotland], 2011). The expectation of this phase is that the majority of teaching and learning in GME will take place through the medium of Gaelic, although the extent to which English is included can vary significantly (O'Hanlon, 2010), with an overall aim of ensuring that children achieve equal fluency and literacy in English and Gaelic as well as feeling equally confident in using both languages in a range of situations and different domains (Education Scotland, 2015). This, therefore, raises the question how effective GME is in ensuring that children reach this '*equal fluency*', which, in itself, might be considered an indicator for later language use (Dunmore, 2015) and thus the future of Gaelic as a spoken language in Scotland.

Minority Language Immersion

Language Learning Outcomes

Hickey (2007) has suggested that minority immersion language education often involves teaching children who already speak a majority language, a second language (L2). This teaching is based on the implicit assumption that children will resemble monolingual children in developing their language skills, and language outcomes can, therefore, be evaluated against that expectation

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[1] Throughout this article the term 'care-giver' will be used in recognition of the varying home contexts of the children and be taken to mean the person or persons having the primary care of the children.

(Hermanto et al., 2012). Ó Duibhir (2018), found that the immersion minority language classrooms are not acknowledged as being a language learning environment, but that, instead, the target language is delivered as if children are acquiring their first language (L1), with the aim to promote the acquisition of, and fluency in, this language in a naturalistic way (Ellis & Shintani, 2013). However, as identified by Pinter (2011), children in immersion programmes such as GME, already speak and '*know*' one language and the way that a second language is learned is different from the way in which they acquired first language (or languages) – the L1.

The context in which the target language of the immersion programme is acquired is very different from that of the L1. The L1 is typically acquired in the home and the family, and in many circumstances, this will also be the language of the community. According to Doughty and Long (2005) children will typically be using their L1 processing skills and strategies in their comprehension of the target (minority) language that is used for instruction. This means that when children receive input in the target language, they might not focus on the structure and forms available to them and may not always use these correctly, although their understanding of the target language can be more strongly developed. Hermanto et al. (2012) have suggested that there is a disassociation between children's home language(s) and the language of schooling in terms of linguistic and metalinguistic skills, with skills in the target language (the language of instruction) being significantly lower than the home language(s). This is also the case for many children enrolled in GME, with Landgraf (2013) in her research on the linguistic competences of GME pupils finding that children made many grammatical and syntactical errors in speaking and writing Gaelic, where the influence of English on Gaelic was very clear and where Gaelic vocabulary was imposed on English grammatical structures rather than the idiomatic Gaelic constructions. These results, mirror the findings by Hermanto et al. (2012) in the Canadian context, and Ó Duibhir (2018) in Ireland, that immersion education might not result in '*native-like*' proficiency.

To acquire the correct grammatical constructions, children have to be provided with opportunities to develop these in both languages (Conboy & Thal, 2006). This is made more complicated by the nature of most (early) primary classrooms, with teachers providing most of the input (and children passively receiving the instructions), thus further developing their comprehension skills without much opportunity for production of the language especially in spoken contexts. (Ó Duibhir, 2018). Furthermore, children will also be surrounded by their peers in the classroom. These peers will be at (approximately) the same level and will be making the same linguistic errors without any mechanisms for natural corrections of mistakes made (Ellis, 2008). Children's peers have a great influence on the level of acquisition and language use, especially where the language of the social settings and peer culture is not the same as the language of the education setting (Baker, 2003).

In the case of GME, this is evident when the language used in the playground is analysed; research has shown that even in settings where all the children are able to speak Gaelic (and are enrolled in GME), the language of peer-to-peer interaction outside of the classroom, where the teacher acts as the language gate-keeper and there is an implicit Gaelic language policy, will be English (Nance, 2020). This is (further) amplified through the way GME provision is typically set up. GME classes are frequently multi-composite, with children from different years groups being taught together in one or two classrooms in an otherwise English-medium school. This means that the language of the playground and the school social life, as well as the wider (school) community is English. Baker (2003) has suggested that the limited use of the language in other domains, and its links to the formal domain of school rather than peer culture affects the children's perceptions towards the language. In the case of Gaelic, research has shown that children perceive using the language as an act of performance rather than a communicative tool (Smith-Christmas, 2016). These perceptions towards the overall usefulness of Gaelic have

implications for the wider ideologies of children towards the language and their perceptions around the 'usefulness' of Gaelic to their (future) lives (Makihara, 2013; Oliver, 2006).

The Home Environment

A further complication that affects the outcomes of GME and influences the opportunities for Gaelic use in Gaelic Medium educated children is the linguistic home environment. To support language acquisition and foster positive ideologies towards Gaelic, Dunmore (2017) has suggested that a greater focus needs to be placed on children's language socialization within the home and the community. This has been made more complex by the changing sociolinguistic profile of the language, where, even in the Gaelic heartlands and communities where most of the population can speak the language, Gaelic has (mostly) disappeared as a tool for daily communicative functions (Birnie, 2021b). This leaves the home and family domains – named by Fishman (1991) as the *sine qua non* of language revitalisation efforts. However, as an analysis of the data from the census (National Records of Scotland, 2015a) has shown, the majority of children enrolled in GME live in households where the caregivers do not speak Gaelic. Indeed, GME (where provided) is available, and indeed promoted by language support agencies such as Bòrd na Gàidhlig and Comunn nam Pàrent, to all children regardless of their prior linguistic exposure to Gaelic or family connections to the language.

Ule et al. (2015) have identified that the decisions made around education are based on parental choices rather than children's agency. This is particularly the case for GME. GME is a parental choice (Johnstone, 2002), with caregivers actively having to opt-in, with the exception of children starting their education in Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, who are since 2020 enrolled in GME, with caregivers being asked to opt-out. O'Hanlon et al. (2010) identified that there are several reasons why caregivers opt to have their children educated through the medium of Gaelic, which might include associations with heritage, with personal links to the language (for example older family members speaking the language), but also links to local and national identity. Other reasons cited by caregivers are not related to Gaelic but linked to the wider associations of the (perceived) benefits of bilingualism and the associated cognitive advantages (O'Hanlon, 2014; O'Hanlon et al., 2010). Further, caregivers also identified more localized drivers for opting for GME, including the availability of GME in their area, the reputation of the school (O'Hanlon et al., 2010) but also the (potentially) smaller class sizes (Birnie, 2018; Stephen et al., 2011) can play a role in the decision making process. The choice for GME is complex; with many caregivers not being Gaelic speakers themselves, but even where they can speak the language, the choice is not always a straight-forward one. Where caregivers can speak the language they frequently question their own ability to support their children's learning through the medium of Gaelic (O'Hanlon, 2014), mirroring the findings by Kavanagh and Hickey (2013) in the Irish context, where it was identified that a lack of (literacy) skills in the language of schooling acted as a significant barrier to enrollment.

Epstein and Sheldon (2002), building on the ecological framework of Bronfenbrenner, have identified that there are three contexts in which children develop and learn: the family, the home, and the community, and that partnerships must be developed between these three areas to meet the learning needs of the child. Children's educational outcomes are influenced by parental involvement supporting both motivation and achievement, with Howard et al. (2003) identifying these as particularly important to support the target language outcomes of immersion programmes. As identified by Epstein and Van Voorhis (2012), homework can act as a natural connector between the school learning environment and the home, with Katz et al. (2014) suggesting that homework is unique in that it involves the interplay between home and school.

Caregivers consider homework to be one of the main ways in which they can engage with their child's education (Rudman, 2014) and if they feel that they are unable to support their children with these tasks, they are more likely to avoid contact with the school (Fitzmaurice et al., 2020).

According to Ule et al. (2015) caregivers can play different roles in supporting homework, which might include the supervision of children, providing additional support or equipment, but also providing the psychological and mental support to accomplish the tasks. Green et al. (2007) have suggested that caregivers' perceptions of self-efficacy and competence about their capacity to make a contribution to their children's learning outcomes will also influence their level of involvement, mirroring the findings by Kavanagh and Hickey (2013, p. 440) that a lack of parental confidence could result in *"feelings of invalidation as an education partner"*, particularly in contexts, such as GME, as Fitzmaurice et al. (2020) have identified that teachers expect caregivers to support their children's literacy and language skills through listening to reading or spelling, which might be particularly challenging where the language of schooling is not a language the caregivers are proficient in. This, in turn, can result in negative parental attitudes towards the homework tasks. Attitudes of the caregivers towards homework are important (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011) with any negative attitudes impacting on the child and their motivation to complete any home-learning tasks (Hutchison, 2012) (Head, 2020) with Patall et al. (2008) suggesting that the way caregivers are engaged, as well as the children's ability and age, resources, and parental attitudes also contributing factors to children's engagement.

Epstein and Van Voorhis (2012) have suggested that homework tasks that actively require parental engagement have a more positive effect. One such way to support parental engagement is the use of digital technologies (Head, 2020), which, as identified by Reay (2005), have the opportunity to bring the demands of the school more directly into the home, especially for younger children where parental support to access these might be required. The use of digital technology has increased, especially during the school closure period, and this was particularly the case at the time of the study where there had been a rapid development of different online resources to support Gaelic language skills in young people, as well as general resources in the language for supporting other aspects of the curriculum. This increase in online materials, coupled with a greater familiarity of teachers, children and their caregivers with these resources, coupled with the challenges of supporting minority language acquisition, formed the basis of this study which aimed to evaluate whether blended learning could be used as a means to encourage greater involvement with the homework tasks, and whether this would, in turn, result in an increased opportunity for children to practise, use and develop their Gaelic language skills at home, and thus support their proficiency in the language.

Study

Ethical consent for this study was provided by the School of Education ethics committee at the University of Strathclyde and permission granted by the headteacher of the school for this study to be conducted. The study itself was shaped by the circumstances at the time of the research, namely the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and the accompanying disruption to learning for all school pupils in Scotland, which also impacted on the provision of GME. In March 2020 all Scottish schools closed their door to face-to-face teaching and learning for most children (with exceptions made for children of caregivers who were both working in government assigned essential roles, or where welfare concerns meant that children were looked after in a school setting). The schools remained closed until August 2020, when they re-opened, only to be closed again after the winter-break in January 2021. This second closure was shorter, with most pupils returning to face-to-face classes in the middle of March, although the younger age groups (P1 to P4) only returned in their classrooms in the middle of April. This second school closure period was, in some respects, different from the first one, with teachers and children being more familiar with the opportunities and limitations of tools and resources that could be used to support the learning process remotely.

The school closures and the move to emergency remote teaching (Hodges et al., 2020) were accompanied by further measures to reduce the impact of the pandemic on Scottish society, including limited opportunities for social contacts and to participate in (organised) leisure

activities. There have been concerns about how these school closures might have impacted on learners and their educational progress and development (UNESCO, 2021), with the Scottish Government recognising that children "*have not benefitted from learning in Gaelic while learning at home, as would be the case when educated in school*", as a result of caregivers not being able to speak Gaelic, and to support their children's learning in the language (Scottish Government, 2020, n.p.). This was (and continues to be) an unprecedented period in Scottish education and a period where teaching and learning strategies had to be reimagined: away from the traditional model of children attending school to participate in live learning activities, towards a more asynchronous model, with activities and tasks for completion but without the (direct) supervision of the class teacher. What is, perhaps, overlooked in the discourse around the pandemic and its impact on educational achievement and progress, is that this was also a period of innovation and an opportunity for educators to assess their teaching and learning strategies and whether any of the lessons learned from the move to online and blended teaching approaches could also support classroom practices, and, in the case of GME, be used to support language acquisition and use beyond the classroom.

This study was framed within the practitioner enquiry paradigm, which, according to Baumfield et al. (2012,p.4), "*is a step in the process that begins with reflections and leads to sustained research*", situated within the professional context of the researcher themselves and with a focus on practice (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006). The focus of the study was to evaluate exactly such an innovative approach developed during the second school closure period and was designed based on the observations and evaluations of the teaching and learning activities provided during the first period of school closures and restrictions. The research adopted a multi-modal approach which included the evaluation of baseline data, gathered as part of the normal classroom teaching and learning processes, on the children's Gaelic skills and proficiency and their engagement with homework tasks, this information was supplemented with parental questionnaires and learning journey conversations with the children. This study spanned a period of six months, starting in September 2020 and finishing in February 2021 and was situated in an English-medium school where GME is provided in two multi-composite classes: one class covering the total immersion phase (P1 – P3) and one class covering the immersion phase (P4 – P7). The study was focussed on the eight P2 children in the total immersion phase (P1 at the time of the first school closures) as this was the group that was thought to have been particularly affected, in terms of Gaelic language development, by the lack of direct teacher input and the opportunity to be immersed in the language in the classroom.

Research Instruments

Parental Questionnaires

The parental questionnaire consisted of 18 questions, 13 of which required participants to select from a range of options with a further five open-ended questions designed to invite participants to elaborate on their answers given. All questions were optional, and caregivers were free to not provide a response to any of these if they so wished. These self-administered questionnaires meant that caregivers could complete the survey at a time that was convenient to them (Bryman, 2012) and that the responses remained anonymous (McNeill, 2005). This is particularly pertinent in this context as the researcher, as one of the classroom teachers, was known to the caregivers, and this allowed the respondents to be less self-protecting (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2009). The questionnaire was designed to be completed in a short time (about 10 to 15 minutes), identified by Dörnyei and Taguchi (2009), together with the extent to which participants feel that they are invested in the topic, as contributing factors to ensuring a high participation rate.

The questions included in the survey were categorised according to four themes: general questions around the use of Gaelic in the home; engagement with homework prior to the school

closures, access to online resources (including the availability of internet-enabled devices and access), and engagement with online learning during the school closures. These questions aimed to gain an overview of the context in which the children were situated in terms of both their language use at home, and the engagement with schoolwork and how this might have been affected by Covid-19. The parental questionnaire was distributed via the normal school information channels to all caregivers with children in GME (n = 19) with a response rate of 68% (13 parents), evenly split between caregivers who had children in the GME primary 1 to primary 3 class, and those who had children in the primary 4 to primary 7 class, with a small number of caregivers having children in both the classes.

Pupils' Assessments - In-class Tasks and Observations – and Learning Conversations

Data was also collected from the children themselves, through in-class observations of talking and listening activities during routine classroom teaching and learning. These observations were further supplement by listening and talking assessments which were conducted at the start of the term in August 2020, and then repeated at the end of the term in the beginning of October 2020. This assessment had previously been used, both in this school and in other schools, to evaluate the children's linguistic progress and were designed to align with the curricular guidelines (Curriculum for Excellence) in Scotland in terms of literacy at the first level (see Learning & Teaching Scotland, 2008). This listening and speaking assessment consisted of the researcher, who was known to all the children in the class, reading out a question in a one-to-one session, with the pupils being asked to respond verbally. The researcher then noted whether the children understood what was being asked, and if so, whether the child responded in Gaelic or English. If pupils responded to the prompt in English or with an incorrect answer, the correct answer was provided and modelled by the teacher, in line with the advice given to teachers on addressing language related errors (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education [Scotland], 2011). This data provided the baseline information on the pupils' linguistic skills and progress in the period immediately after the school closures.

Two further listening and speaking assessments were carried out with all the pupils in term 2, leading up to the winter break: one at the start of term after the autumn break and one at the end, just before the winter break This was the period in which planned blended learning activities were introduced, defined by Garrison and Kanuka (2004, p. 96) as the "*thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experience"'*. This consisted of the children being given access to online learning tasks to compliment the total immersion language experience in class. Children (and their caregivers) were provided with a grid which listed the different videos and activities, either created by the teachers or by external Gaelic educational organisations, which were linked to the classroom language focus at the time and were asked to indicate which of these they had engaged with during the week and asked to share their learning in class and at home at the end of each week. Children were also invited to participate in learning conversations with the researcher. During these learning conversations they were asked about their engagement with home learning during the school closure period, their use of Gaelic at home and their engagement with the blended learning activities in term 2.

Findings and Discussion

Although this study only involved a small group of children and their caregivers, the findings from the parental questionnaire indicate that the linguistic competences of the caregivers in this research broadly mirror those across Scotland (McLeod, 2010; National Records of Scotland, 2015a) with the majority of caregivers not being proficient in the language, although 47% of the respondents indicated that they had some knowledge of the language. This 'capacity' for caregivers to use the language (Lo Bianco & Peyton, 2013) did not necessarily relate to *de facto* Gaelic language use in the home: only half the caregivers that reported to be able to speak Gaelic

used the language at home. Where Gaelic was used in the home, this was often limited, as acknowledged by the caregivers, who all indicated that the language was 'not used enough' or not at all.

The questionnaire also elicited information about the wider linguistic proficiencies in the social networks of the children, for example extended family members or friends. Around 32% of the children in this GME location had an adult outside their caregiver with whom they could speak Gaelic. The restrictions on social contacts meant that opportunities for (spontaneous) interactions with other family members or acquaintances in Gaelic was limited and this meant that during the school closures the main opportunities to communicate in the language were those provided by the teacher through the online platform, these included online class teacher-led conversation circles which were provided four days a week to all pupils (from P1 to P7). Access and use of the provisions made on the online platform was not universal however, with some caregivers reporting that there were difficulties accessing these sessions. Reasons for this might include limited access to internet-enabled devices or that their children did not feel comfortable using the online platform as a means of communication. Some caregivers had also actively sought out other opportunities for their children to continue to use their (spoken) Gaelic skills through online playdates or conversation circles organised by Gaelic organisations.

Caregivers were also asked to provide information about their children's engagement with homework. Starting with engagement before the Covid-19 closures, most caregivers (84%) reported that their children engaged with the homework. Caregivers indicated that they not always feel confident enough to support their children in completing the homework tasks, the main reason being their own (perceived) lack of proficiency in Gaelic, mirroring the findings by Green et al. (2007) and Kavanagh and Hickey (2013). Invalidation was sometimes expressed as stress, with one parent commenting that they found "*Gaelic homework very stressful, which is not helpful for my child*".

Although participants in this study were aware of the additional sources of help (for example the online homework help service called Gaelic4Parents), only 31.6% had used these. Most caregivers (68.4%) indicated that they used further digital resources to support their children's (Gaelic) learning at home, although this was dependent on the availability of internet enabled devices in the home and access to broadband.

During online learning because of the school closures 74.0% of the caregivers reported that their children engaged with the daily activities, although difficulties were also identified, including those already mentioned associated with access to internet enabled devices that could be used to access online content. As with the homework before the Covid-19 closures, some of the caregivers reported that they found it challenging to support their children in literacy, for example phonics and reading in Gaelic. Some caregivers, as a result, chose to support their children's learning by teaching them the English phonics (even though these are not part of the GME lower primary curriculum), citing that this was "*easier*", with Gaelic reading books considered difficult especially "*compared to early learning English books*". Although a free online homework help was available (Gaelic4Parents - provided by Gaelic educational resource organisation Stòrlann), 68.4% of the caregivers reported that they had not used this service, with some indicating that they had not tried to use it even though this same group of caregivers indicated that they struggled to support their children with the Gaelic homework. This would suggest that there is a barrier to asking for support, either from the teacher or from an outside organisation.

The ability of caregivers to support their children's learning was particularly highlighted during the Covid-19 school closures. During this period schools were providing work using online platforms, with an expectation that children would be supported in their learning at home. This is also where the complexity of the situation in which GME operates was highlighted, especially for

the youngest pupils in primary school who might only have been exposed to Gaelic for the 26 school weeks before the closures. This group of primary pupils would still be in the total immersion phase of their learning, but with limited expectations around full proficiency in both comprehension and production. Furthermore, with a focus on Gaelic language acquisition, these pupils would not have been fully able to read (by themselves) instructions posted in Gaelic (or in English as English literacy is not introduced until P4 although typically acquired before this stage), resulting in the teacher having to provide (written) instructions in English for the caregivers, further weakening the link between the use of Gaelic and the children's overall learning. Findings from this research showed that caregivers often opted to offer English-medium resources to their children, especially during the periods of school closures as these were deemed to be '*easier*' and more readily accessible than Gaelic, which also affected the ideologies of the child towards the language. This was coupled with an acknowledgement that Gaelic was not used in the home and a realisation, on the part of the caregivers, that this would affect their children's language acquisition.

The results of the children's language skills assessment were initially analysed to provide a measure of individual pupil performance before being used to calculate the mean average change, using the two-sample t-test to measure significance. The children's average attainment was 42.9% immediately after the school closures and the summer holiday period. The return to the immersion setting between August and October resulted in an overall 16% increase in these results although this improvement was not universal; with the overall scores of two pupils remaining unchanged (although both pupils had opportunities to use Gaelic at home) and three pupils' result showing a slight regression in their skills. The slight regression is not statistically significant and can be explained by the timing of this second phase of assessment: immediately after the two-week holiday period. The implementation of a trial of blended homework learning started in October 2020, a period where restrictions meant that paper copies of homework could not be sent home and returned for marking. At the end of term two (just before the winter closures which were the start of a second period of Covid-19 related school closures), the assessment was repeated. This time the results in proficiency showed an overall increase from the first assessment in August of 24.1%. The overall increase in proficiency, as measured through these one-to-one assessment sessions with the researcher, over term 2, the duration of the planned blended homework learning period, was 8%.

The group of pupils involved in this study had all engaged with learning at home to a different extent, although the learning conversations indicated that most of the pupils who engaged with the tasks provided had enjoyed the online homework. Pupils particularly enjoyed the learning videos produced by the teachers themselves, indicating that they had watched these repeatedly, in some cases with their caregivers, with some pupils feeling confident and encouraged to produce their own learning videos or pictures for sharing with the teachers and their peers. The findings showed that those pupils (50%) who engaged fully and completed all the online homework tasks made 14.3% more progress than they did in term 1 when there was no homework provided and the Gaelic input was limited to the classroom immersion setting (see Table 1). Furthermore, the pupils indicated that their parents actively engaged in supporting their children with the online learning tasks, despite the 75% not speaking the language at all.

These results stand in sharp contrast to pupils who engaged only in 50% or less of the online homework tasks, who, on average, only progressed by 8.8%. The pupils reported, through the engagement of caregivers with learning in this group, as reported by the children, was more limited despite their language proficiency being higher, with 75% of the caregivers able to speak Gaelic. A further important difference was that only 25% of the children scored full marks in the assessment at the end of Term 2, standing in sharp contrast to the children who fully engaged with the homework tasks and who all scored full marks in the final assessment.

Table 1: *Mean Improvement in Early Years Language Assessment Test*

	Improvement during Term 1	Improvement during Term 2	Overall improvement between start of Term 1 and end of Term 2
Full engagement with homework (100% tasks completed)	17.8 %	32.1 %	14.3 %
Limited or no engagement with homework (50% or less)	14.3 %	23.1 %	8.8 %

Children in this study who engaged with the homework tasks reported that they enjoyed learning together with their caregivers and that the online materials could be readily accessed repeatedly. The provision of online materials did not need to focus on language skills but could also cover other areas of the curriculum, for example mathematics, delivered through Gaelic, providing an immersive linguistic soundscape in Gaelic at home. Although passive exposure, for example through videos or other materials, does not necessarily lead to better language learning outcomes by itself (Oh et al., 2020), it does create an environment where Gaelic is included and part of the environment: it takes Gaelic out of the classroom and into the home in such a way that it does not require linguistic proficiency on the part of the caregiver and reduces some of the anxieties associated with homework. Parental proficiency was not required to support the children in engaging with the homework tasks, resulting in fewer stress-related episodes and children experiencing the homework as more pleasant, in line with the findings by Patall et al. (2008).

Not only was there a greater level of completion of the home-learning tasks when this involved clear, direct instructions or input from the teacher through pre-recorded videos, but this increased involvement with Gaelic at home also resulted in higher levels of language attainment in those children who routinely engaged with these tasks compared to children who did not, or only engaged to a limited extent. Higher levels of Gaelic language acquisition will mean that children are able to better access other areas of the curriculum (which are also delivered through the medium of Gaelic) and will feel more confident and competent in their use of the language. Furthermore, these online materials created opportunities for Gaelic to permeate into the home, allowing for the gap to be bridged between the school and the home, and act to support linguistic confidence in caregivers, especially those who indicated that they had some proficiency in the language.

Conclusions

GME has been recognised as the main mechanism for Gaelic language acquisition in children (Bòrd na Gàidhlig, 2012). However, most children enrolled in this minority language immersion education model do not have caregivers who are able to speak the language, nor the opportunity to use the language in a range of social domains outside of the educational domain. This means that the classroom teacher is the main source and model for Gaelic language input and support, not only ensuring that the children are immersed in the Gaelic language, but also responsible for correcting mistakes, especially around grammar and pronunciation (Macleod et al., 2014). This relatively limited input has implications for the language learning outcomes (Hickey, 2007; Ó Duibhir, 2018) but also for the ideologies towards the language (Makihara, 2013), which, in turn, are an indicator for later language use (Dunmore, 2017) and thus the overall sustainability of Gaelic.

This small-scale practitioner-enquiry study, set in a typical GME setting where the children are surrounded by English outside of the classroom, both within and outside of the educational domain, has shown that carefully planned and designed blended learning activities which complement the language learning in the classroom can support language acquisition and increase the proficiency of children by creating opportunities to see, hear and engage with, the language in the home environment. This study showed that the use of online blended materials resulted in greater level of completion of the home-learning tasks when this involved clear, direct instructions or input from the teacher through pre-recorded videos, but this increased involvement with Gaelic at home also resulted in higher levels of language attainment in those children who routinely engaged with these tasks compared to children who did not, or only engaged to a limited extent. Higher levels of Gaelic language acquisition will mean that children are able to better access other areas of the curriculum (which are also delivered through the medium of Gaelic) and will feel more confident and competent in their use of the language.

Although this study was set in the context of GME, which involves a relatively small number of children, the findings have implications for how the links between parental engagement and the classroom can be strengthened in other situations where the language of the class is not the language of the home, and in the wider context of supporting learning. The school closures because of Covid-19 have shown that new technologies can be used, not to replace face-to-face learning, but to enhance the overall learning experience and support a holistic approach towards learning, acknowledging that learning takes place across many domains outside of the education system and recognising the role of caregivers in supporting this learning.

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Community Book Projects: A Case Study of Place-Based Collaborations

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Abstract

This case study centres on projects instigated by the University of Wollongong's Batemans Bay campus which engaged other community entities in collaboration to produce a cultural and educational resource in book form. These projects occurred between 2017 and 2019 with more planned for the future. While this work is not a how-to guide, the analysis contained within will allow a broad application of principles in other contexts to increase community engagement and collaboration. The broad principles for success of such projects are identified as Place, Relationships, and Communication. These key elements are evaluated from a researcher/participant perspective and the inter-play between these crucial elements in an educational framework is described as Nourishing Pedagogy. The conceptualisation of Country as Teacher, a framework in which both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people can learn from Country, was a crucial element as the On Country Learning (OCL) experiences were the primary sites where the Nourishing Pedagogy practice was manifest. While there are many factors that contributed to the success of the projects it was clear that the privileging of Aboriginal perspectives and the yielding of institutional power, taking the form of the decampment of institutional buildings for the purpose of participating in the projects, was critical.

Keywords: *collaboration, place, Aboriginal knowledges, education*

Introduction and Background

The University of Wollongong Batemans Bay campus (UOW Batemans Bay) is situated on a regional coastal site that is significant to the local Walbunja Aboriginal community, within the larger Yuin Nation on the South Coast of New South Wales. Over the last 10 years the Batemans Bay campus has been involved in a number of community projects, including the installation of an Interpretive sign on the campus site, a Possum Skin Cloak project, and more recently the book projects, with three local primary schools in the region, all of which have a high population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

The book projects have involved a range of stakeholders that include local primary and high schools, Local Aboriginal Land Councils, NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (AECGs),

Community Elders, a Cultural Consultant, and local university staff and students. Drawing inspiration from other book projects Australia wide that centre local Aboriginal knowledge, we have published a number of children's books written in both English and language that showcase this knowledge and can be used as teaching and learning tools. This paper will evaluate three of these book projects, Mogo and Mudji, Cullendulla and Commee Nulunga, offering an opportunity for us to reflect on our collaborative processes while also seeking to learn lessons that will assist us in future partnerships. This is not a step-by-step guide to working with Aboriginal communities, it is however a sharing of what we consider the non-negotiable elements of successful collaborations within educational settings.

As the organising team, made up of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal UOW Batemans Bay staff, we undertook a reflective cycle to review the book projects and find the links between each project that provide the most significant learnings. These were organised into case studies based on each book project that wove the literature and experiences together. By doing this we hope to share insights into place-based collaborations, providing guidance to other organisations who may be considering similar ventures.

Method

Case studies allow complex phenomena to be analysed and understood in the context in which they took place (Woodside, 2010, p. 1). They provide the opportunity to revisit events, places and experiences for the purposes of creating deeper insights. The case study approach assists in reviewing the events and processes (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This approach allows us to focus on what actually occurred, how this impacted and to understand the space between the event and the impact. Viewing each element provides us with the opportunity to understand it uniquely, while also acknowledging the links that exist between them.

As part of the reflective and reviewing processes, at the conclusion of each project, the stakeholders were asked to evaluate the project through a participant survey and an informal evaluation meeting. The data collected was then analysed using a thematic approach and common themes identified. Themes such as culture, On-Country, story-telling, collaboration, participation, generations, youth and sharing emerged. From this, three elements, place, relationships and communication were utilised to consolidate and classify the emerging themes.

Furthermore, place, relationships, and communication formed the central foundations of the three case studies which surround each book project, Mogo and Mudji, Cullendulla and Commee Nulunga, as they are important factors for success in working with communities. Vignettes were also extracted from the evaluations to include in this research. As a constructivist and interpretivist approach, Stake (1995) recommends case studies use vignettes—episodes of storytelling—to illustrate aspects of the case and thick descriptions to convey findings.

As researchers we were also participants, hoping to capture our experience of the events (Kearns, 2005). In writing up each case study, we worked together and discussed each project, taking notes and listening actively to the experiences of each, while also reviewing the photographs, related documents, media coverage, and University of Wollongong accolades (Woodside, 2010). In seeking understanding and meaning, the researcher is positioned with participants as a partner in the discovery and generation of knowledge, where both direct interpretations, and categorical or thematic grouping of findings are used (Grbich, 2003).

Discussion

The present study was aimed at identifying and sharing the non-negotiable elements of successful collaboration within an educational setting, with a particular focus on engaging Indigenous communities. As previously indicated, this paper is not intended to provide a step-by-

step guide to collaboration, therefore discussion will focus on the three emergent themes, place, relationships and communication, and provide a background framework only.

Place

The book projects were generated out of a desire for the Batemans Bay campus of the University of Wollongong to engage with our local communities and the Country on which our campus and communities are situated. Engaging with Yuin Country as place, which holds narratives and necessarily involves reciprocation, is a key tenet of Yuin worldviews. Rose (1996, p. 32) supports this positioning in observing that "*knowledge, in all Aboriginal systems of information, is specific to the place and to the people*". To tap into the knowledge held by Country and perpetuate a nourishing pedagogy,[1] we adopted the positioning proposed by McKnight (2017, p. 59) of "*Country as teacher*" whereby the participants of these projects could explore and develop a "*personal relationship with Yuin Country in order to have a respectful reciprocal professional knowledge relationship*" (McKnight, 2017, p. 246). This is an important principle that could not have been replicated by substituting the On Country Learning (OCL) experience with a classroom-based lesson (Jackson-Barrett & Lee-Hammond, 2018).

This positioning alters the power dynamic whereby Aboriginal knowledge holders are empowered and university and education professionals are obliged to vacate the physical locations of the institutions in which much power is imbued (Dovey, 2015). In stepping off campus and onto a site of cultural significance participants were able to move from a relationship *to* Country to a relationship *with* Country (Gowen, 2018). One aim of these projects was to educate people within frameworks of Indigenous intelligence, as such it was necessary to reinsert "*people into relationships with and on the land as a mode of education*" (Wildcat et al., 2014, p. ii; Simpson, 2014).

Learnings about Yuin Country, and Yuin culture were made by participants in a way that respected (and continues to respect) Yuin worldview/s so as not to constitute cultural invasion (Freire, 2005). A predominant part of this process involved the centring of Country, not as resource or landscape to be consumed, but as preeminent educator with which to engage in relationship (McKnight, 2017). The process of leading the negotiation of relationship with Country was assumed by various stakeholders across the three projects. These stakeholders were always Traditional Custodians of the places on which the experiences unfolded. This pedagogical design allows for learners to deeply engage with Country in the way Uncle Max Dulumunmun Harrison (2013, n.p.) encourages:

> See the land… the beauty;
>
> Hear the land… the story;
>
> Feel the land… the spirit.

These lead educators are positioned to facilitate this pedagogical experience as they "*hold unique knowledge and knowledge systems which are foundational and fundamentally important to Australia's intellectual, social and cultural capital*" (Universities Australia, 2017, p. 11).

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the significance and role of place in teaching younger generations is paramount (Figure 1). Although these projects could have been developed from the classroom, the impact and significance of being On Country is key to its success. Country is filled with stories from previous generations and it sustains Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people lives in every aspect.

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[1] This terminology brings together Debra Bird Rose's (1996) concept of nourishing terrains in an educational sphere.

Figure 1: *Quote from Budawang Elder on the Purpose and Importance of Place*

COMMEE NULUNGA

Most importantly we hope you walk away with a new found respect for this ancient culture.

[F]or thousands of years the old people's footprints trod gently on this land and everything they needed was here. - Budawang Elder

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Relationships

Mindful of Chris Sarra's (2013, p. 340) mantra: "*doing things 'with' people, not 'to' them*", a renewal of relationships was hoped for through the book projects. The projects provided an opportunity to reinvigorate our relationships with the various communities involved by facilitating opportunities for Traditional Custodians to lead in knowledge sharing.

Relationships are often fraught with challenges (Wright et al., 2012). These include the time it takes to develop strong, sustainable ones, the power structures, the decision-making and clarity of priorities. For each of the book projects, the multifaceted partnerships were unique and developed their own dynamics. The stakeholders were involved differently, and directed or stepped back dependent on the context in which the project took place. University staff were certainly mindful of how crucial relationships with community were developing, but were also aware of the relationships within communities (Harrison & Greenfield, 2011). In particular those who can speak and share knowledge of sites and practices.

The complex systems that are the relationships within communities incorporate Country, kinship and local knowledge. With such diverse range of involvement it was difficult at times to know who was organising, directing and communicating the project outcomes and logistics across participants, however all the while understanding that the relationships would help navigate the challenging path ahead. As Wright et al. (2012, p. 42) state "*These encounters are not 'knowable' in the conventional sense; rather, they constitute the actual production of knowledge*".

These relationships are local relationships that involve university staff, school students and communities, all participants having a vested interest in the local area. For example, for Mogo and Mudji, the Land Council played an integral part in each facet of the project. Working together helped to develop a strong sense of what Yuin Country means to non-Aboriginal participants (McKnight, 2017). This place specificity contributed to the project's success as it allowed the development of trust and sharing of knowledge over time. The site visit provided an opportunity to share the experience (Figure 2) while incorporating many levels of involvement in the day's activities. This openness of having extended community present, enriched the enjoyment and engagement of participants.

Figure 2: *Quote from Mogo Local Aboriginal Lands Council*

MOGO and MUDJI

We finished off the day with everyone participating in a dance which we believe had not been done for well over one hundred years. It was a spiritual healing experience…the young ones from all walks of life coming together and sharing in this amazing experience. - Ranger (MLALC)

Communication

Effective communication is an essential component of any collaborative project work. The success of this project relied heavily on strong, clear and respectful communication between all stakeholders, with a particular emphasis on the communication practices of the Project Officer. Employed by the university, the Project Officer was integral to the success of all three projects as they were the liaison between all stakeholders involved. To achieve effective communication, it was crucial that the Project Officer took the time at the beginning of the project, to build an authentic two-way relationship with stakeholders, definitively understand their objectives and acknowledge the collaborative ownership of the project. This approach emphasises the work conducted by Dr Janet Hunt (2013), which acknowledges that meaningful engagement, clarity around the purpose and effective communication creates a multi-layered approach which presents the opportunity to co-create with Community.

When working with Community it was important to first identify and prioritise the Community's needs. Each school was given space to articulate their aspirations for the project. Out of this articulation a space opened for Aboriginal participants to assume a generative role. Whilst this approach was critical to the success of all three projects, each project required the Project Officer to reflect and adapt the way they communicated with the stakeholders such as face-to-face or via digital communication. This adaptation coincides with Giles et al. (1991) theory on communication accommodation that situates adaptive strategies as paramount to successful partnerships. By adapting their communication style, the Project Officer was able to negotiate mutually beneficial partnerships with schools, Local Aboriginal Lands Councils, Community and businesses.

Whilst negotiating mutually beneficial partnerships with all stakeholders was one of the biggest successes of the project, it was not without its challenges. Yawuru man and academic Mick Dodson (2007) adds that one of the key elements of every successful model of Aboriginal education is *"intense Community involvement"* (p. 4).

As each project was unique, each required a different, more tailored communicative response when engaging community. For project one, communication with the Indigenous Community and Local Aboriginal Land Council was channelled through the school. This was a strength of the project as it further developed existing relationships (Figure 3). For the Cullendulla Project, communication focused heavily on engaging a local Aboriginal Cultural Consultant. Whilst this allowed for a rich cultural experience for the students, the level of wider Community involvement varied. For Commee Nulunga, a broad range of communication challenges existed. Identifying the key contact amongst the stakeholders proved to be difficult as this project was the largest and had multiple stakeholders, which made the process of communication a dynamic evolution.

Figure 3: *Quote from Principal of Participating School*

MOGO and MUDJI

...UOW Batemans Bay's success with other Indigenous projects ensures that they are best placed to work with a vast array of stakeholders, in an appropriate and respectful way. - Principal

Communication between key stakeholders was important for all three projects, but communication between those sharing the stories of place (Elders, Cultural Consultants, Community members) and those creating the books (the school children) was crucial. Children aged 5 years to 12 years old participated in these projects and were tasked with listening to members of the Aboriginal community share the significance of places such as Grandfathers Gully (Mogo and Mudji), Cullendulla Camp Ground (Cullendulla) and Commee Nulunga, and then using their own drawings and language to recreate these stories. Below are three examples (Figure 4,

Figure 5 and Figure 6) of how students' used images (their drawings) and language to communicate the stories they were told by Elders.

Figure 4: *Excerpt from Cullendulla Book (Child Aged 7 years)*

Warigala gwiyala dhabaga waraawaradha.

Mullet and stingray are caught on fishing lines.

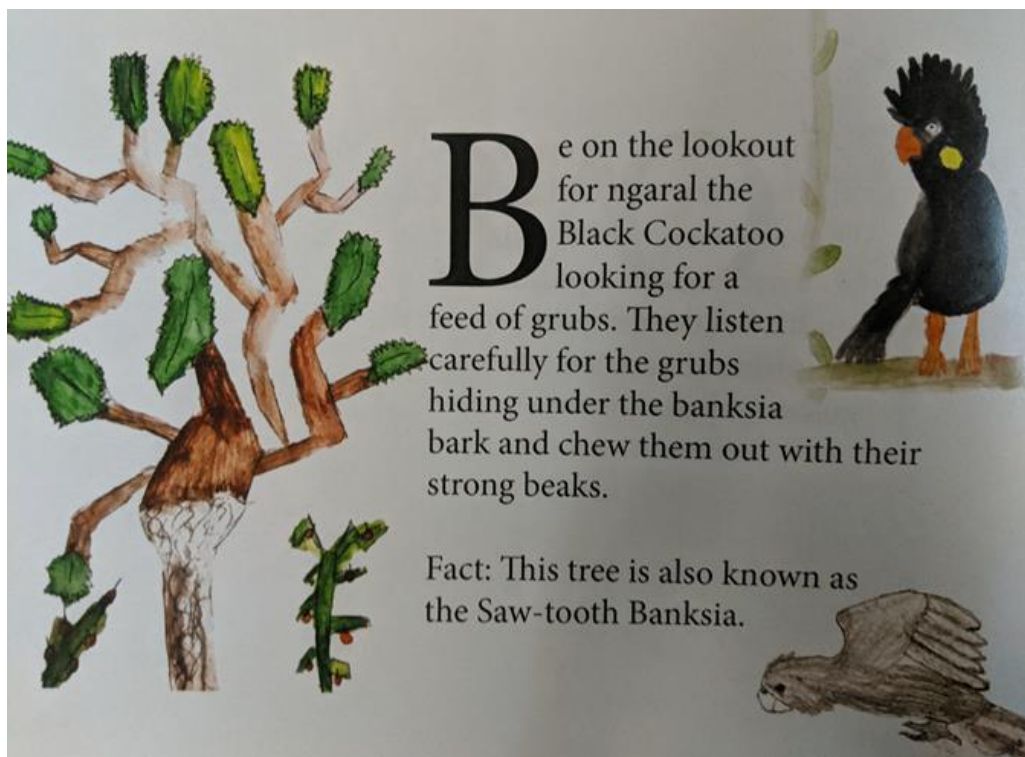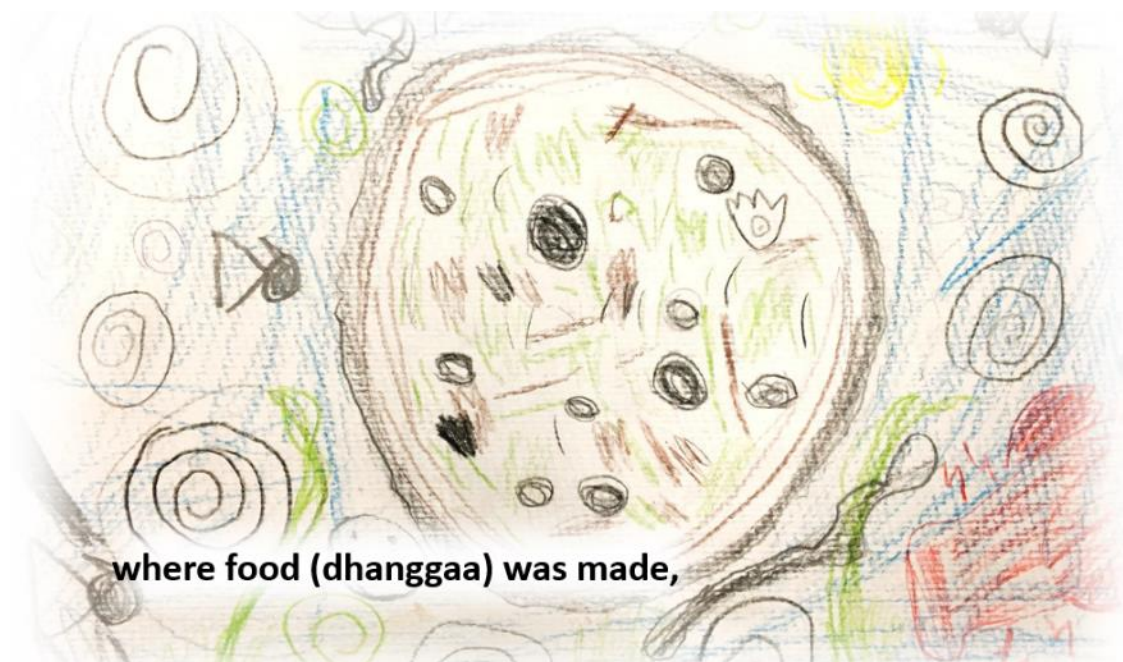**Figure 5:** *Excerpt from Mogo and Mudji (Child Aged 11 Years)*

Be on the lookout for ngaral the Black Cockatoo looking for a feed of grubs. They listen carefully for the grubs hiding under the banksia bark and chew them out with their strong beaks.

Fact: This tree is also known as the Saw-tooth Banksia.

Figure 6: *Excerpt from Mogo and Mudji (Child Aged 5 Years)*

where food (dhanggaa) was made,

Conclusion

The key to fruitful collaborations is a centring of place, relationships and communication. For the success of our book projects these were the non-negotiable elements that underpinned our partnerships with schools and communities. The case studies discussed allowed us as both participants and stakeholders to journey through the project events and revisit those aspects of importance to the project-place, relationships and communication. We do not offer a road map of clear and defined steps and instructions for working with communities, we do however offer a framework for collaborations that are respectful and centre knowledge of Country. For us, the opportunity to step outside of our teaching environment and experience being a student On Country allows an inversion of power structures and knowledge systems. This contributed to the renewal of the relationships and has opened up opportunities for future collaborations. Perhaps even hint at future book projects already begun or in the pipeline?

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Book Review

Gristy, C., Hargreaves, L., & Kučerová, S. R. (Eds.). (2020). Educational Research and Schooling in Rural Europe: An Engagement with Changing Patterns of Education, Space, and Place. Information Age Publishing.

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Rethinking "the rural" in Rural Europe

This review focuses on a book about educational research and schooling in rural areas of Europe. Edited by Cath Gristy, Linda Hargreaves and Silvie R. Kučerová, *Educational Research and Schooling in Rural Europe: An Engagement with Changing Patterns of Education, Space, and Place* foregrounds "*the rural*" in a world where the rural is so often marginalised. In mapping out this important focus, the book brings together authors with a wide range of perspectives from 11 European countries: Austria, Czechia, Finland, Hungary, Italy, The Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Serbia, Spain, and the United Kingdom. In all, the book contains contributions from 25 authors. This breadth, along with the depth that comes with it, is one of the book's strengths.

The book was spawned in the productive environment of the annual European Conference on Educational Research (ECER), organised by the European Educational Research Association (EERA), which fosters dialogue and collaborations amongst researchers from many countries. The three editors are stalwarts in EERA's Network 14, which brings together researchers interested in communities, families and schooling. Research about place, including the rural, fits under the network's umbrella, and that is clear in the book's content and how it is organised.

Indeed, the book is clearly structured. The context of "*far-reaching political, economic, and societal changes*" in Europe over the last half century (p. ix) is clearly established in the Preface, which states the book's purpose as a sharing of information across borders as well as across multiple social science disciplines. This is followed by Rune Kvalsund's Foreword, which lays down what I think is an imperative and critical goal: to debunk and refute "*the hegemonic and lasting perspective of rural schools as deficient schools—deficient versions of larger urban schools in formal as well as informal learning*" (p. xiii).

The chapters are book-ended by the editors. Linda Hargreaves authored Chapter 1, which provides insights into the guiding questions given to the contributing authors and reinforces the deliberate move to avoid deficit constructions and focus instead on "*rural advantage*" (p. 7). This is followed by a two-chapter section (Part I) that conceptualises and maps rural spaces of Europe. In the first of those two chapters, editor Silvie R. Kučerová teamed with Petr Meyer and Petr Trahorsch to consider some of the factors, including historical, geographical, physical and sociocultural influences, that have shaped the spatial organisation of schooling in rural Europe.

All three editors contributed to the book's final two chapters, Chapters 15 and 16, which consider *"change, innovation, and hope"* (p. 321). These two chapters, respectively, identify emergent themes, along with issues, challenges and complexities of European rural places, and consider what rural education research moving forward might look like.

In the middle of the book are two sections. The first (Part II) contains nine chapters and explores *"changing patterns of education, space, and place"* (p. 77). These chapters consider rural education and research in particular European countries, with each author, or team of authors, providing contextual information—the lay of the land, if you like—of a country: a historical overview of education, significant educational and policy changes that have occurred, insights into policy documents and political factors, and relevant rural research.

This part of the book was informative and I learnt a lot. I was introduced, for example, to the complex contextual factors relating to ethnicity in Hungary, the post-socialist decentralisation of Poland and the impact on education in rural areas, changes that occurred in the post-socialist countries of Serbia and Czechia, the manifesto for small schools developed in Italy, to name just a few of the ideas and issues that were new to me. In fact, while reading the nine chapters, I experienced many *"I didn't know that"* moments. These included the following: there were 65,000 small schools in Spain in the 1960s; primary/elementary schooling in Austria comprises only four year levels, compared to six in most other countries; and, because of religious diversity in The Netherlands, two-thirds of schools are privately governed. These were just a few of the ideas that piqued my interest.

Indeed, every chapter presented me with information that demonstrated the diversity of the European countries represented in the book. Yet, at the same time, there were themes that seemed to weave in and out of many, if not all, chapters. The following is not an exhaustive list, but it indicates some of the emergent themes raised by authors, in their own words: *"the neglect of rural education in strategic and other relevant … documents"* (Pešikan, Antić, & Ivić, Chapter 7, p. 148); the *"evident gap between the wishes (the legal level, i.e., the constitution, laws, etc.) and the reality"* (Pešikan, Antić, & Ivić, Chapter 7, p. 149); small schools help to build stability and operate *"as a defence against social vulnerability"* (Canella, Chapter 10, p. 221); *"one-size-fits-all"* approaches to schooling do not work across different contexts; the importance of understanding *"the significance of the multiplicative effects of school changes and closures to local communities and contexts"* (Tantarimäki & Törhönen, Chapter 12, p. 277), the negative effects of *"capitalist, neoliberal, market-oriented economic systems"* on schooling (Gristy, Hargreaves, & Kučerová, Chapter 15, p. 325), and the need for *"new thinking, new smart and place-based solutions, and new co-working futures inside individual municipalities, from rural to urban environments, from local to national levels"* (Tantarimäki & Törhönen, Chapter 12, p. 278).

Across these chapters, there is definitely a call for action: for reconsiderations of rural schooling with accompanying research, across the European context. Part III takes up this call explicitly, beginning the process of *"developing and deepening theoretical engagement"* (p. 77). This is based on the advocacy of Kvalsund and Hargreaves (2009, 2014) and Corbett (2015) for theorised rural research, and recognition of the inherent tensions in research footprints: *"the disturbance created by researchers and their instruments"* and *"the lasting ripples and repercussions"* (Gristy, Chapter 14, p. 305).

In talking about theory, this section of the book comprises two chapters: one by Carl Begley and Sam Hillyard (Chapter 13), examining primary school leadership through the use of Bourdieu's work, and the other by Cath Gristy (Chapter 14), one of the editors, advocating the usefulness of Lefebvre's *"spatial triad"* to consider conceived, perceived and lived spaces (p. 308). I found both of these chapters inspiring, in part because their arguments for theory resonated with my

reading of the nine chapters in Part II and, in addition, because they provided ways of revisiting and rethinking those chapters.

Part IV, the book's final section, draws together all the previous chapters by considering emergent themes (Chapter 15) and the "where to from here" (Chapter 16). After reading these final chapters, I was left wanting more. Indeed, to me, that is a sign of a good book. The editors have paved the way for ongoing, interesting and relevant discussions. They have argued strongly for considerations of theory and have highlighted the complexities, plurality and diversity of rural Europe. In raising awareness of "the diversity, the resource, and potential of rural school contexts in Europe" (p. 352), the discussions need to continue.

Interestingly, the book includes an appendix, written by Libor Jelen, that considers "*the migration crisis and the status of immigrant children in educational systems*" in Europe (p. 357), a topic that receives only a few mentions in the book's chapters, much to the editors' surprise. In light of ongoing humanitarian crises, including the recent and current Russian invasion of Ukraine and the associated movement of people including children across borders, the appendix has also paved the way for future discussions about how rural schooling and educational research in Europe might respond.

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