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A narrative inquiry into experiences of Indigenous teachers during and after teacher preparation

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Abstract

This narrative inquiry is informed by a concern to increase the number of Indigenous teachers in Canadian classrooms. While the Indigenous population is younger and growing faster than the non-Indigenous population, educational attainment gap remains between the two groups of Canadians. The gap is widening at the university level. This study explores the experiences of two Indigenous teachers during and after teacher education in an Indigenous teacher education program and attempts to reframe teacher education to enhance the meaningful engagement of pre-service Indigenous teachers. We conducted interviews as conversations with the study participants as guided by open-ended unstructured research questions and employed relational ontology because we believe that ethical relationships are paramount in conversations with participants. Four major common themes emerged from the participants' stories: decision to attend Indigenous teacher education program, Indigenous identity, positive learning environments, and the importance of Indigenous teachers in the schools. Implications for teacher education are presented.

Keywords: Narrative inquiry, Métis, Indigenous education gaps, Teacher preparation, Indigenous teacher education programs

Introduction

Several studies have shown that there are significant gaps in the educational attainment of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians at all levels of education (Gillies 2018; Statistics Canada 2016; Timmons and Stoicheff 2016). While the education gap has been continuously quantified and strategies presented to narrow it (see, for example, Howe 2017; Toulouse 2013), the gap still remains albeit recorded improvements (Ottmann 2017). The long-term effects of Indigenous education gaps include lower employment rates and lower incomes (Richards 2014). This study examines the impact of one such strategy, namely, an Indigenous teacher education program (ITEP) in western Canada by exploring experiences of two Indigenous teachers who graduated from the ITEP and presents implications for teacher education. For decades, the four-year bachelor of education program has been training Indigenous teachers thereby contributing directly to increasing representation of Indigenous teachers, and indirectly to narrowing the Indigenous education gap. For example, about 1,300 Indigenous men and women have graduated from the ITEP to date with 78% of the graduates working in the K-12 school system as teachers and administrators. This is in a province that had less than 20 self-identified Indigenous teachers in two of its largest urban centers in the 1980s (Bird- Wilson 2011).

There are several ITEPs in western Canada including the Indigenous Teacher Education Program at the University of British Columbia, Aboriginal Teacher Education Program (University of Alberta, 2017), Niitsitapi Teacher Education Program (University of Lethbridge), and Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program (Gabriel Dumont Institute). Others include Indian Teacher Education Program (University of Saskatchewan), Yukon Native Teacher Education Program (University of Regina), and Community-based Aboriginal Teacher Education Program (University of Winnipeg). As stated on their websites, these programs aim to increase the number of Indigenous teachers in various jurisdictions across western Canada. And while progress has been made to attract more Indigenous Canadians to the teaching profession, more still remains to be done. By way of example, 14% of students in public schools in British Columbia are Indigenous, while only 1.5% of teachers are Indigenous (Todd 2018).

Indigenous teachers have a positive impact on Indigenous students for reasons such as role models (Huffman 2016) and understanding unique experiences of Indigenous students (Howe 2017). Indigenous teachers also have an impact on the lives of non-Indigenous students because the latter are able to see Indigenous peoples in positions of authority (Gillies 2018). Further, research (SUNTEP Saskatoon & Gabriel Dumont Institute, 2012) shows that,

> (Indigenous) teachers are making schools welcoming and they dispel the intergenerational fears instilled in the children's caregivers by another generation of school masters. They are providing children with safe refuge from the sometimes chaotic lives they live. . .. This is especially true for the students that may be more susceptible to social risk factors such as substance abuse, gang influence, and family dysfunction. (p. 1)

According to the 2016 Canada Census data, Indigenous populations have a significantly higher proportion of young people compared to the non-Indigenous population. Almost 3 out of 10 (28.1%) Indigenous peoples are under 15 years old compared to 16.4% of the non-Indigenous population (Statistics Canada 2017). Yet, as Orr, Salom, and Paul (2002) remind us, 'the education of Aboriginal children still tends to be characterized more by the ways of the dominant white society' (p. 332). Orr, Salom, and Paul write about 'limitations which are placed upon the education of minorities by these teachers if they do not overcome the low expectations, limited understanding of family contexts, and cultural ignorance they often have for minority students' (p. 332). While many commendable strides have been made in teacher education programs, more still needs to be done because, as Hookimaw-Witt (1998) suggests, 'When we do not change the basis of the education of Native people, the process started by residential school will still continue' (p. 160) (for more on residential schools, please see Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015).

In discussing the gaps in educational outcomes between Indigenous and non- Indigenous students in British Columbia, Gillies (2018) suggests that strategies that have enhanced the success of non-Indigenous students are not always as successful for Indigenous students. A fair question then would be how to prepare teachers to more effectively

work with Indigenous students. Santoro et al. (2011)[1] point out that while 'there is no single, unitary way of being Indigenous, teachers who have grown up and completed their schooling as "Indigenous" learners have a wealth of experience and knowledge about pedagogies that are likely to be successful for Indigenous students' (p. 66). Further, as Milne (2017) points out, teaching practices that work for Indigenous students do benefit non- Indigenous students too. Thus, Indigenous teachers can play a key role not just in the K-12 system, but also as educators and mentors to both Indigenous and of non-Indigenous teachers and pre-service teachers.

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the experiences of Indigenous teachers during and after teacher education, and to determine how teacher education programs, including ITEPs, can assist in the development of skills that could enhance educational outcomes for Indigenous students. As Bodkin-Andrews and Carlson (2016) remind us, there is 'need for the continual acceptance, respect, and promotion of Indigenous voices and identities within the educational environment' (p. 784). Indigenous peoples of Canada or Aboriginal Canadians refer to Métis, First Nations, and Inuit peoples. In this paper, we utilize the term 'Indigenous' throughout. However, when drawing on the work of others, the original terminology remains. As such, the terms Aboriginal, Native, and Aborigine are also utilized. Also, you may notice that we have made several references to education 'gaps' in this study. This is part of the dominant framing of the gaps in Canada's Indigenous versus non-Indigenous socio-economic outcomes including education (Anderson and Richards 2016; Cherubini 2009; Drummond and Rosenbluth 2013; Richards 2008). For a critical discussion of Indigenous 'gap talk,' please see; Pholi, Black and Richards 2009; Rigney and Hemming 2014; and others.

Education is a provincial jurisdiction in Canada. While this study speaks to gaps in Indigenous disadvantage, including in the area of educational outcomes, it is important to note that there is heterogeneity within Indigenous nations, between On-reserve and off-reserve communities, as well as across provinces (Ottmann 2017; Richards 2014;

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1. The study by Santoro et al. (2011) was conducted in Australia. While there may be similarities in Indigenous educational experience in Canada and Australia based on the histories of the two nations as part of the British monarchy, the educational context, circumstances, and historical experiences of Indigenous populations in the two jurisdictions are not synonymous.

Toulouse 2013). Similarly, our reference to international research, such as Huffman (2016), Bodkin-Andrews and Carlson (2016), and Santoro and Reid (2006) and others, is not intended to make a claim that Indigenous education and socioeconomic outcomes are the same across international borders.

Literature review

Evidence shows that attainment of higher levels of education has a positive relationship to improved standard of living (Howe 2017). As such, educators and Indigenous leaders have referred to education as 'the new buffalo' (Graham 2013; Stonechild 2006). Arnault-Pelletier (Graham 2013) asserts that, 'There's the saying, "Education is the new buffalo," because historically the buffalo gave us food, clothing and shelter, and now as First Nations and Métis people, we need to look to education to give us those things' (n.p.). That is, education is key to the modern-day well-being of Indigenous peoples.

The proportion of Indigenous Canadians with post-secondary education credentials has been increasing over the years (Statistics Canada 2016). However, a gap remains between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples who have completed university. Among self-identified Indigenous Canadians aged 25 to 64 years, about one-half (48.4%) had a post-secondary qualification in 2011, including 14.4% with a trades certificate, 24.1% with a certificate or diploma, and 9.8% with a university degree as their highest level of educational attainment (Statistics Canada 2016). In comparison, close to two-thirds (64.7%) of the non-Indigenous population aged 25 to 64 had a post-secondary qualification in 2011, including 12.0% who had trades certificate, 26.2% with a certificate or diploma, and 26.5% had a university degree. While proportionately more Indigenous peoples aged 25 to 64 had qualifications in trades (14.4% compared to 12.0%), the biggest gap in educational attainment between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians was in the proportion of university graduates (at 9.8% for Indigenous versus 26.5% for non- Indigenous Canadians) (Statistics Canada 2016).

Several factors have been identified as contributing to the education gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians. These include the legacy of residential schools (Hookimaw-Witt 1998;

Stonechild 2006), funding deficiencies (Timmons and Stoicheff 2016), and experience with racism and marginalization which have led many Indigenous people to view schools with mistrust (Gillies 2018). Intergenerational effects of Canada's residential school system continues to impact many Indigenous students to date (Hookimaw-Witt 1998). The system stripped Indigenous peoples of their language and heritage, and many families continue to view schooling as perpetuating colonization (Stonechild 2006). This, according to Whitley (2014), tends to inhibit the development of collaborative relationships between Indigenous students (and families) and school administrators and teachers.

Other factors include a lack of awareness among teachers and schools of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students' learning styles, cultures, histories, and perspectives (Anderson and Richards 2016; Ontario Ministry of Education 2007); and the fact that educators and public school administrators are 'generally unequipped to employ pedagogy and curricular practices culturally appropriate for Aboriginal students' (Cherubini 2009, 9).

Strategies aimed at recruitment, retention, and graduation of Indigenous students should take into account such social class issues. This is currently happening, for example, attempts have been made to increase partnerships between universities and Indigenous communities in western Canada to enhance access to teacher education programs. The most recent example includes the signing of a new agreement between the University of Saskatchewan and the Kahkewistahaw First Nation in July 2018 to offer the former's Indian Teacher Education Program, a community-based Bachelor of Education program, in the Kahkewistahaw First Nation (University of Saskatchewan 2018).

Indigenous education gaps have led to a suggestion by Richards (2008) that a 'marginalized community, such as Aboriginals, living in a modern economy can only escape poverty through an educational transformation' (p. 1) that prioritizes a 'successful mastery of knowledge and skills imparted by a good primary and secondary education' (p. 2). Teacher education programs and Indigenous teachers can play an important role in such an educational transformation.

Partington (2003), on the other hand, suggests that for policies targeted at bringing positive educational outcomes to succeed, 'it is essential that teachers change first' (p. 46). Partington's suggestion is

plausible if you consider evidence that shows teacher resistance towards including Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum (Scott and Gani 2018; Ianniciello 2014), teachers' attributions and expectations that limit Indigenous student success (Riley and Ungerleider 2012), potential challenges faced by non-Indigenous teachers to effectively teach Indigenous students (Milne 2017), or what Gillies (2018) refers to as 'racism [that] continues to operate in . . . schools through various practices and policies legitimized by deficit, essentialist, and liberal ideology' (p. ii). Such a change could be targeted at both pre-service and in-service teachers. And Indigenous peoples and teacher education programs have an important role to play in enabling this change because Indigenous peoples have sometimes been positioned as 'objects' or the 'known' rather than the 'knowers' (Gillies 2018; St. Denis 2010).

Blimkie, Vetter, and Haig-Brown (2014) write that teachers' knowledge and understanding of Indigenous cultures and pedagogical approaches can impact student academic outcomes. Yet, as Dion (2007) found, 'one way or another, teachers, like many Canadians, claim the position of "perfect stranger" to Aboriginal people' (p. 330). Blimkie, Vetter, and Haig-Brown call for opportunities for meaningful understanding for both pre-service and in-service teachers. Teacher education programs have a major role to play in creating such opportunities. Indeed, today, teacher education programs across Canada offer Indigenous Studies courses, both elective and mandatory, in order to enhance teachers' knowledge of Indigenous histories, cultures, and principles of living and learning (Oloo 2007). While this is a positive step, it is not without challenges. As Battiste (2010) points out,

> The initial educational struggle for Indigenous educators, then, has been to sensitize the Eurocentric consciousness in general, and educators in particular, to the colonial and neocolonial practices that continue to marginalize and racialize Indigenous students. This does not come easily to Eurocentric-educated White people, for it requires their unlearning as well – challenging their meritocracy and superiority myths to learn how their privileges were constructed and maintained in a racist society. (p. 17)

Milne (2017) found that some non-Indigenous educators were unaware of Indigenous cultures and histories, were 'afraid' of saying or doing the wrong thing, or had difficulty using Indigenous curricular resources. This, she pointed out, resulted in some students 'completing high school . . . knowing very little about Indigenous peoples in Canada' (p. 4). Milne calls on school systems to be safe spaces for non-Indigenous teachers and preservice teachers can listen to, and be open to learning from their Indigenous colleagues. That is, Indigenous teachers not only reaffirm and enhance Indigenous student success (Howe 2017), but they also play a key role in sensitizing both non-Indigenous students and non- Indigenous teachers on the unique strengths and pedagogical preferences of Indigenous students.

In a study of experiences of Indigenous students in a pre-service ITEP program, Duquette (2007) writes that the program provided an opportunity for students to 'reconstruct their identity to include being a role model' (p. 387). But it is not just Indigenous students who could benefit from having Indigenous teachers. 'Native teachers can also be role models for others, which involves teaching the culture, modelling pride in being Native, involvement in community activities, and showing others that it is possible to create a better life for themselves' (Duquette 2007, 387).

Papageorge, Gershenson, and Kang (2016) found that teacher expectations have a causal effect on students' educational outcomes, and that teacher expectations tend to differ by racial groups in ways that put some students at a disadvantage and potentially widen racial achievement gaps. Riley and Ungerleider (2012) describe teachers' expectations as 'the inferences teachers make regarding students' potential to achieve in the classroom' (p. 304) and assert that teachers tend to have low expectations of their Indigenous students. Such low expectation, Riley and Ungerleider found, have a negative impact on Indigenous student educational outcomes. Similarly, a report of the Auditor General of British Columbia (2015) states that Indigenous students face 'racism of low expectations' (p. 37).

On the other hand, as Figlio (2017) found, "minority students often perform better on standardized tests, have improved attendance, and are suspended less frequently (which may suggest either different degrees of behaviour or different treatment or both) when they have at least one same-race teacher" (para 5). While having a 'diverse

teaching force' that includes Indigenous teachers is desirable for its "promising potential to help minority students attain greater educational success" (Figlio, para 7; see also Carver-Thomas 2018; Egalite and Kisida 2018; Goldhaber, Theobald, and Tien 2019), we do not, in any way, minimize the impact of white (or non-Indigenous) teachers on the educational success of all students.

Methodology

We, the authors of this paper, are non-Indigenous, immigrant-origin educators who have worked with Indigenous students in pre-service teacher education programs in western Canada (James) and in the American Midwest (Lydiah). While we are familiar with barriers faced by Indigenous students, we are also aware of the commendable work being done by teacher education programs and the growing number of Indigenous teachers who are graduating from teacher education programs including ITEPs. We, therefore, sought to understand what it is about teacher education at ITEPs that attracted and enabled the Indigenous students to persist and complete their degree programs, and prepared them for their teaching careers.

This study employs a narrative inquiry methodology to examine personal and professional knowledge landscapes of two Indigenous teachers when they were students in an Indigenous teacher education program and after they graduated and became teachers. Such experiences, we believe, have implications for teacher education. We reached out to study participants through a call for participants on LinkedIn and Twitter. In total, we contacted four potential study participants who were all self-identified as Indigenous. Two of the four participated in the study. The two, Sheena and Wanda (aliases used to protect their identity and right to anonymity), are Indigenous women who are public school teachers in western Canada. Sheena graduated with a Bachelor of Education degree through an ITEP program in the early 2000s and has been teaching Grades 1 and 2. Wanda also earned her Bachelor of Education degree through the same ITEP program in mid-2000s and later graduated with a Master of Education. Wanda is a high school teacher.

The gender dimension of the teaching profession in Canada is such that women are the majority of teachers. In 2016, for example, 79.6%

of practicing teachers in the country were women (Statistics Canada 2016aa). A study of an ITEP program in western Canada (Howe 2017) noted that just 18% of the total number of graduates of the ITEP over a 40- year period was men.

We decided to explore the experiences of ITEP graduates rather than current students. The former, who continue to regard themselves as part of ITEP (both study participants mentioned the ITEP program on their LinkedIn and/or Twitter profiles), are better placed to take a critical look at their experience during their tenure as students at the ITEP as well as how that experience continues to impact their personal and professional landscapes.

Clandinin and Huber (2010) describe 'narrative' as 'an approach to the study of human lives conceived as a way of honouring lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding' (p. 437). That is, people make sense of their lived experiences through stories. Kim (2015) suggests that stories cannot be separated from societal influence; hence, researchers should consider the historical and social layers that stories bear. Such historical and social layers include the impact of government policies on Indigenous peoples such as residential schools (Timmons and Stoicheff 2016) and the 'sixties scoop' (Hookimaw-Witt 1998). They also include over representation of Indigenous population in the criminal justice system (Martel, Brassard, and Jaccoud, 2011) and higher proportion of Indigenous children in government care (Statistics Canada 2016a), as well as funding gaps between on-reserve First Nations schools and provincially funded schools (Gillies 2018; Drummond and Rosenbluth 2013). We concur with the notion that telling one's own story is both a consciousness-raising (Kiramba 2018) and empowering act (Oloo 2016) in and of itself.

Narrative commonplaces

Connelly and Clandinin (2006) identified three commonplaces – temporality, sociality, and place – in the narrative inquiry that specify dimensions of an inquiry space. Temporality refers to the notion that human experience is in a continuous process of negotiation and change and is neither static nor frozen in time. Sociality refers to the personal

and social conditions, as well as the relationship between researchers and the study participants that form the context for the participants' stories; while place is the physical location(s) from which stories emerge. The three narrative commonplaces of temporality, sociality, and place inform the research design of this study. We established an ethical and positive relationship with the participants that enabled us to have very effective and fruitful conversations about their experiences. The interviews as conversations were held at locations that were chosen by the participants. Follow up conversations occurred over the phone and by Skype.

Data collection

We employed interview as a conversation to explore experiences of the study participants (Oloo 2016). In so doing, we embarked on the interview process with the view of 'tap(ping) into the tacit knowledge available to the insiders' of the study participants' experience and 'to learn from them rather than to study them' (Berger 2016, 476). We engaged with the participants in one-on-one dialogic conversations shaped by unstructured research questions that were geared toward understanding their lived experiences. We invited the study 'participants to chronologically reconstruct their lives through the best of their recollections and according to their own relevancies' (Berger 2016, 477).

Research questions

This narrative inquiry is informed by a concern to increase the number of Indigenous teachers in Canadian classrooms. While Indigenous population is younger and growing faster than non-Indigenous population (Statistics Canada 2017), educational attainment gap remains between the two groups and is widening at the university level (Statistics Canada 2016; Timmons and Stoicheff 2016). Subsequently, this study explores the experiences of two Indigenous teachers during and after teacher education in an ITEP program, and attempts to reframe teacher education to enhance meaningful engagement of preservice Indigenous

teachers. The study is guided by two broad questions: 1) what are the experiences of Indigenous teachers during and after teacher education, and 2) how does ITEP support the success of Indigenous pre-service teachers and enable them to develop or reinforce qualities they regard as being important for Indigenous student success.

Data analysis and interpretation

Data analysis in the naturalistic inquiry is often an iterative process that begins before the process of data collection is complete (Kim 2015). In this study, we used methods drawn from Clandinin, Lessard, and Caine (2012) and Berger (2016). We transcribed the recorded interviews and 'negotiated them with each participant until each [study participant] felt [we] had an account that represented something of who they were and were becoming' (Clandinin, Lessard, and Caine 2012, 9). We identified the central meanings in each of the study participant's story; as well as the common threads across individual participant narrative accounts.

Ontological and epistemological commitments

We adopted relational ontology in our interaction with study participants because it 'validates and privileges the experiences of participants, making them experts and therefore . . . collaborators' (Boylorn 2008, 600) in the inquiry space. It also enables 'safe places for stories to exist and be told and inquired into' (Cardinal 2011, 85). Our epistemological assumption draws on Dewey's (1933) view that people 'learn from reflecting on experience' (p. 78). Caine, Estefan, and Clandinin (2013) suggest that relational ontology 'underpins a central epistemological commitment of narrative inquirers that experience is knowledge for living' (p. 6). The narrative accounts of the participants are presented below. We express gratitude to Indigenous teachers who participated in this study and to Indigenous educators and researchers whose work has helped shape this paper.

Narrative account of Wanda

Wanda graduated with a bachelor of education degree in the mid-2000s through an ITEP. She holds a master of education and is a high school teacher at an urban public school. Wanda started the conversation by honoring her Mother. She recalled her childhood, thus, 'Growing up, I knew that I was Métis.' However, 'I never understood what it meant to be Métis, nor did I know anything about Métis culture.' This began to change when Wanda, who was then working as an Educational Assistant at a public school, heard about the ITEP from friends who were teachers and ITEP graduates. Wanda applied and was accepted into the ITEP program. She stated that

> I was attracted to the low student to teacher ratio and the opportunity to be educated with other Indigenous students who shared my culture. Plus, the support I received – both financial and non-financial – was second to none. Without the support and encouragement, I most likely would not have completed my studies at [ITEP], and the outcome for my life and my family might have looked very different.

Wanda noted that

> It wasn't until I started by studies at [the ITEP] that I was able to really delve into Métis history and culture. In fact, my Grandmother encouraged me to put together a portfolio regarding my experience and what I had learned in the teacher education program, and I was able to share it with our entire extended family.

Wanda regards her time at the ITEP as a turning point in her life. The 'most inspiring part of being in [the ITEP] is that it helped my extended family grow closer together, through my research on Indigenous culture and my family lineage and history. [The program] reconnected and educated more than just myself.' Wanda became the 'first person on [her] Métis side of the family to obtain a university degree.' She described how ITEP not only enabled her to learn her history and to develop pride in her Indigenous heritage, but it also

helped her 'build self-confidence and courage to speak up against injustice and to be a strong advocate for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.'

Wanda maintains that 'Attending [the ITEP] was one of the best decisions I ever made. The faculty and staff were extremely knowledgeable and supportive. We were like a family.' This was especially important to her and her friends who were new to the city and did not have close friends or families. She continued, 'I commuted daily to attend my [ITEP] classes while raising young children.' The commute from Wanda's home to the university was about one hour drive each way. Despite the student population at the university where ITEP is housed being over five times larger than the population of her home town, Wanda asserted that '[the ITEP] was a place where we all felt at home, we belonged.'

A teacher since graduating from the ITEP, Wanda stated that

> My employment secured a better life for my family. I am also proud to model the importance of post-secondary education for my children and students. I often speak of ITEP and university in general as a career pathway to my high school students including Indigenous students, who like me, may be from families where no one has ever been to university before.

Wanda also described aspects of ITEP that contributed to her success. 'First of all, [the program] provided us with several practicum opportunities in the K-12 school system. This allowed us to develop a hands-on experience that in turn gave us an advantage in securing employment after graduating.'

Wanda stated that as an Indigenous teacher, she is 'confident and able to incorporate Indigenous perspectives' into the curriculum. 'I feel blessed to be able to give the excitement and knowledge back to the youth in my community, and more specifically connect closely with our Indigenous students.' Wanda noted that for Indigenous students, having an Indigenous teacher has many advantages that lead to positive educational outcomes.

Commenting on high school graduation gaps between Indigenous and non- Indigenous students in her school division, Wanda emphasized her belief that

All students have the ability to learn. But teachers should reach out and know their students. They should have positive, empathetic and respectful relationships with all students and parents but especially Indigenous peoples given the past histories and unique barriers they face. This will foster learning, build confidence, and promote student success. While all teachers should be able to do this, deliberate attempts should be made to enable preservice and practicing teachers develop skills and confidence to teach Indigenous histories and cultures in the classroom.

Narrative account of Sheena

Sheena is a grades 1 and 2 teacher at a public school. She states that she has always enjoyed working with children. Although she considered becoming a teacher, Sheena's plans went in a different direction after high school. She completed a medical assistant program after which she worked in the health-care sector. Sometime after that, Sheena's desire to work with children peeked and she became interested in an early childhood education program with the hopes of opening a childcare facility.

It was then that a relative, who is a teacher and graduate of an ITEP program, encouraged Sheena to consider career as a teacher via an ITEP. She did and graduated with a bachelor of education in the early 2000s, becoming one of only two members of her immediate family to graduate with a university degree.

For Sheena, joining ITEP brought two sets of unique and related experiences. It meant going to university, something she had never considered before, and was never presented to her as an option in high school. It also meant joining 'the ITEP family.' The latter was a welcome surprise because until then, Sheena was not aware of a teacher education program that would not only respect and affirm her Indigenous identity, but would also enable her to learn more about her history and heritage. 'Growing up,' Sheena reminisces, 'there was no emphasis on integrating Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum.' Plus, 'I was struggling with my own identity and finding a place to belong, something many Métis people, I'm sure, can relate to.'

Sheena was raised by her mother and grandmother. However, 'I had no Indigenous role models at school and experienced difficulties fitting in,' says Sheena. Things changed for the better when she joined ITEP and 'discovered a Métis community. I felt like I was home. There were people like me, and they were proud to be Métis.' Sheena pointed out that ITEP 'resembled being at home in the comfort of family and loved ones.'

Sheena says, 'I see myself in many Indigenous students. The ones who are struggling with their identity, have no role models at school, and who suffer from low expectations by their teachers.' She continued, 'Many Indigenous students live in poverty and are sometimes being ignored or misunderstood.' Sheena asserted that

> Students are unique, they come with different strengths, and different ways of knowing, and it is important that as teachers we meet them at their levels and build on their strengths and interests. However, too often, Indigenous students are forgotten in the classroom and that needs to change . . . some teachers have unhelpful bias against Indigenous students and their families. I experienced it when I was a student, and I can see it today as a teacher and it is not right.

Sheena credits the ITEP for enabling her to 'begin exploring cross-cultural and anti-oppressive education and implementing it' in her work. Noting that 'I have spent my career in schools with high Indigenous student enrollment,' Sheena described how

> Growing up, I had just one Indigenous staff member at my school. I was in grade 2 and I remember feeling particularly connected to her and the extra care and attention I received. I certainly did not realize at that time it was because I was the only Indigenous student in my class. But thinking back to those memories, I now appreciate that it was through her support that I found my confidence and pride in being different from my non-Indigenous classmates who were all white. This experience made me realize how important it is to have more Indigenous people in our schools. It is absolutely important that Indigenous children

can see themselves in the people that are in the school in all roles, but it is especially critical that they see Indigenous teachers and administrators.

Sheena suggested that

> Educators need to be aware of the history of Indigenous peoples, including how intergenerational trauma continues to impact families. They need to recognize that perceptions that they may have about our Indigenous students may be false. It is critical for educators to be aware of the biases that they may bring into the classroom.

Sheena asserted that, 'All children can learn, they should be told that they are capable to being successful. They should be viewed individually and not judged by the family or community they come from. I bring a sense of family to my classroom so every student feels welcomed and appreciated.' Sheena continues, 'Every student, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, deserves to be at school, even if they come in late.' She says,

> As teachers, we are sometimes unaware of what children bring with them to the classroom. If a student comes in late, we need to thank them for even showing up! That's so important. They need to feel they belong and that they are missed when they are not there.

Sheena believes that the relationship between the teacher and students does not have to be hierarchical where the teacher is the authoritative all-knowing figure, and the students are passive recipients of knowledge. 'Rather, I offer guidance and facilitate learning, and encourage all students to learn and question everything. Students and teachers are actually partners in knowledge creation and learning.' Such a pedagogy that empowers the student is very important; something that Sheena says many Indigenous residential school survivors such her Grandmother would agree with. She concluded that,

I always have this advice for high school students. Post-secondary education is important, and if you have the opportunity to go through ITEP program you will not regret it. The support and reinforcement of identity as well as the connections to a close-knit community will help you throughout your journey toward your degree.

Discussion

Common themes in the participant stories

There are four main common themes in the narrative accounts of the two study participants: decision to attend ITEP; identity and Indigenous teacher education programs; positive learning environments; and importance of Indigenous teachers in the K-12 school system. These are briefly discussed below.

Decision to attend ITEP

Both study participants had non-degree post-secondary education credentials before they joined the Indigenous teacher education program. While both Indigenous women described their interest in working with children (Sheena as an education assistant at a public school, and Wanda as an aspiring early childhood educator and daycare owner), their decisions to apply to ITEPs was influenced by other Indigenous people they knew and whose opinions they respected. For Sheena, it was a family member who had herself graduated from an ITEP and was working as a teacher. In the case of Wanda, the decision to become a teacher was influenced by her friends and colleagues who were ITEP graduates and were working at the same school as teachers. None of the participants had the opportunity to hear about university education or Indigenous post-education programs such as ITEP while in high school.

Gillies (2018) argues that Indigenous students often have fewer opportunities than their non-Indigenous peers 'to use and enjoy academic counsellors in empowering ways' (p. 103). Gilles writes that several Indigenous teachers who participated in her study reported

leaving high school feeling 'unintelligent or without the prerequisites needed to attend post-secondary institutions. [Many] became teachers because of encouragement by family members and others. None of the participants were told about (ITEP) while they were high school students' (p. 103).

The decision by the study participants to attend university and graduate with teacher education degrees is important in the Canadian context where the educational attainment of Indigenous peoples lags those of non-Indigenous peoples. For example, a report by the Auditor General of Manitoba (2016) noted that 'only 55 percent of Indigenous students are graduating from high school, compared to 96 percent of non-Indigenous students; a gap that has widened since 2010' (p. 1). The educational gap is even wider between non- Indigenous peoples in Manitoba and their First Nations counterparts who live on-reserve. Among those in the 20 to 24-year age-group, '9 of 10 non-Aboriginals have at least high school [diploma]. In stark contrast, only 4 in 10 First Nation young adults living on-reserve graduated from high school' (Anderson and Richards 2016, 3).

It is worth pointing out that despite the move across Canada to Indigenize educational institutions (Gillies 2018) and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) Calls to Action, the relationships among Indigenous peoples that involves watching out for, mentoring, and empowering one another remains as relevant and effective as ever. Hence, the study participants acted on the advice of other Indigenous people to go to university and earn their teacher education degrees. The participants themselves continue to present university education as a viable opportunity for their students and relations.

Identity and indigenous teacher education programs

Please note that our intention is not to essentialize Indigenous identities. Indigenous peoples, including Métis, First Nations, and Inuit, are diverse peoples with rich and diverse cultures and histories. The study participants described their identities as Indigenous or Métis women and talked about the importance of their identities to their well-being, and how the ITEP enabled them to discover or know more about their individual identities. Wanda, for example, pointed out that

'Growing up, I knew that I was Métis . . . but I never understood what it meant to be Métis, nor did I know anything about Métis culture.' In the teacher education program, Wanda had the opportunity to 'delve into Métis history and culture.' This was of benefit not just to herself and future students, but to her family as well. As she aptly puts it; the ITEP 'helped my extended family grow closer together, through my research on our lineage and history. It reconnected and educated more than just myself.'

Similarly, Sheena described how growing up, 'I was struggling with my own identity and finding a place to fit in.' Referring to the ITEP program as 'family,' Sheena states that 'I felt like I was home. There were people like me, and they were proud to be Métis.' The notion of enabling the students to feel at home when they are in school continues to influence Sheena's relationship with her students. As she noted, 'I see myself in many Indigenous students; the ones who are struggling with their identity, academic success, and family issues, yet are sometimes being ignored or misunderstood.' Sheena stated that she 'bring[s] a sense of family to [her] classroom so every student feels welcomed and appreciated.' Both study participants used the word 'family' to describe the ITEP that they attended, emphasized the fact that it was the first educational environment where they felt at home as students, and expressed their commitment to making their classrooms be a welcoming space for their students. The participants noted the importance of reaffirming identity of the students and a welcoming school environment as being key to success of Indigenous students.

In a study by Cherubini et al. (2010), novice Indigenous teachers highlighted a commitment to 'self-identify as Aboriginal peoples first, and then as new Aboriginal teachers' (p. 550). The study reported that participants 'strove to establish their identity in order to better cultivate their students' identity formation as Aboriginal peoples' (p. 551). Toulouse (2013) identifies a positive link between an educational environment that honors Indigenous identity of its students and student success. As such, she submits that Indigenous students 'require schools in all aspects to honour "who they are" and "where they have come from"' (p. 2).

In the same vein, James (2017) submits that identity frameworks 'are not just a vehicle for anti-discrimination claims, but also a positive social good' (p. 127) for 'resisting the lure of universal equality

frames . . . augment[ing] the resilience of minoritized identities . . . and enhanc[ing] our responses to enduring inequality' (p. 189). For an in depth analysis of Indigenous identity in the Canadian context, please see St. Denis (2010), Frideres (2008), Toulouse (2013), Stonechild (2006) and others.

Positive learning environments

Another common theme in the participants' stories was the importance of learning environments that are safe, supportive, caring, and challenging. While most teachers will likely agree that such learning environments could lead to better educational outcomes for all students, how they apply to Indigenous students is something that teacher education programs could pay close attention to. Wanda describes her experience at the ITEP as 'a turning point' in her life, adding that it was a turn for the better, and that joining the teacher education program was 'one of the best decisions I ever made.' She used words like 'extremely supportive,' 'belonging' and feeling 'at home' to describe her experience. Similarly, Sheena stated how at the ITEP, 'I felt like I was home.' Sheena spoke of the importance of having an educational environment that makes 'students feel welcomed and appreciated,' while letting the students know that they are 'capable to being successful.' Sheena's views reflect a suggestion by Herbert (2005) that 'there is clearly a case for changing the discourse that surrounds Indigenous education from one of deficit and failure to one of success and achievement' (p. 22).

These views were influenced, at least in part, by the participants' experience at ITEP. As stated earlier, Wanda drove over 1 h each way to attend ITEP classes at a campus that had more people than her home community, and she did not know anyone in the city. For Wanda and many Indigenous students, having a welcoming and friendly learning environment is therefore important for success. However, for too many Indigenous students, learning does not always occur in friendly and welcoming environments (see, for example, Clark et al. 2014). Across Canada, Indigenous students are often suspended in disproportionately high numbers compared to non-Indigenous students (Greflund et al. 2014). A study in Nova Scotia (Woodbury 2017) found that Indigenous students accounted for 20.3% of out-of-school

suspensions (that is, students sent home for a maximum of 10 days), but represented just 6.0% of the total student population.

The 'student support' identified by the study participants include academic support such as planning, advising, and arranging for tutors, as well as financial support. Sheena stated that her professors were 'always available for consultation.' The small classes and cohort structure of the ITEP enable students to bond and build close personal connections. Further, they benefited from individual and social support which can be very important for students who are sometimes the first in their family to attend university, or to whom the size of the university can be overwhelming. Both participants used the word 'family' to describe their experience at ITEP. As pre-service teachers, they had cultural support that included Indigenous Elders and facilities that affirmed their Indigenous heritage. The ITEP arranged for at least one visit to a historical site of significance to Indigenous peoples. These included trips to the Hudson's Bay Company Archives and the Centre du Patrimoine in Manitoba, and Batoche, Saskatchewan.

Importance of indigenous teachers in the schools

Sheena stated that as a student in grade school, she had no Indigenous role models, and that she sees herself in many of her Indigenous students. Huffman (2016) also found that 'Many Native students do not have successful role models to emulate' (p. 24). Both participants said that the ITEP program they attended enabled them to reconstruct their experience to include being role models for their Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

The study participants speak to the importance of having Indigenous teachers in Canadian classrooms in improving educational outcomes for Indigenous students and giving non-Indigenous students the opportunity to see Indigenous people in positions of authority. Wanda, for example, noted that 'As an Indigenous teacher, I'm confident and able to incorporate Indigenous perspectives into most of the curriculum I teach. I feel blessed to be able to give the excitement and knowledge . . . [to] connect closely with our Indigenous students.'

Incorporating Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum can enhance the success of Indigenous students because 'when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into

a mirror and saw nothing' (Gair, Miles, and Thomson 2005, 179). However, as Milne (2017) found, there are non-Indigenous teachers who would like include Indigenous cultures, world views, and Indigenous experience in residential schools, however, 'they don't feel confident enough and are nervous about saying the wrong thing' (p. 11). Based on the participant narrative accounts above, we submit that schools and teacher education programs could partner with ITEPs, Indigenous educators, and Indigenous communities as needed to share ideas on how to more effectively include Indigenous perspectives in their classrooms.

Implications and conclusion

As Goodson (1992) reminds us, we as researchers have a responsibility to 'assure that teachers' voice is heard, heard loudly, heard articulately' (p. 112). In this study, we heed Goodson's call by amplifying the voices of Indigenous teachers. Both study participants, like Indigenous teachers across Canada who participated in a study by St. Denis (2010), 'valued the opportunity to be heard . . . and to be part of an effort that hopes to promote change' (p. 7). A change that would not only result in higher graduation rates among Indigenous students, but also more Indigenous teachers in the classrooms across western Canada.

Both participants had post-secondary education credentials below an undergraduate degree – a medical assistant and educational assistant – respectively, and had careers before they enrolled in the ITEP. Both stated that they had not considered university until other Indigenous people recommended ITEP to them. Wanda said that the decision to attend ITEP 'was one of the best decisions [she] ever made.' Sheena pointed out that through ITEP, her 'childhood dream of becoming a teacher' became a reality. Perhaps a future study could investigate the role of family and peers in decisions by Indigenous peoples to attend ITEPs and university in general.

While the two participants attended the same ITEP years apart, with Sheena graduating in the early 2000s and Wanda in mid-2000s, and live in different cities, there were remarkable similarities in their experiences at the ITEP. Both said that the ITEP provided them with a positive learning environment which they referred to as 'family'

and 'home.' The ITEP was a space where their Indigenous identities were affirmed and celebrated. What was evident from the participants' stories was the sense of humility and gratitude. Both said they were 'thankful' or 'grateful' for the 'opportunity' to complete their studies and for the support they received.

The participants were not made aware of the university or Indigenous post-secondary education programs such as ITEPs as a viable career pathway when in high school. To help narrow the university attainment gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, it is suggested that universities partner with high schools and make a concerted effort to reach out to Indigenous high school students and give presentations about university education as well as inviting the students to the university campus.

Sheena stated that while there is a growing number of Indigenous teachers in many school divisions, 'some schools have relatively few Indigenous teachers, including schools with large Indigenous student enrolment. We are only three Indigenous teachers in my school.' We note that the issue of Indigenous education gap is complex, and while it 'can be partly addressed at the level of teacher education . . . it will never be resolved simply through graduating more [Indigenous] teachers' (Burnett, Lampert, and Crilly 2013, 164). Rather, a multi-thronged approach that enhances Indigenous student success is needed beginning at early childhood education.

We have suggested the importance of listening to and learning from the experiences of Indigenous teachers. We would like to reiterate that there is not one single magic bullet to resolve the complex issue of Indigenous educational gap and limited number of Indigenous teachers in schools across western Canada. We also want to acknowledge that there are non-Indigenous teachers who have been very effective teachers of Indigenous students.

This study highlights some of the strengths of ITEPs that have been identified by the study participants as having enhanced their success. The strengths, including smaller cohort-based classes, student supports, which took such forms as financial support, personal and social support, academic support, as well as cultural support, should, where possible, be made available to Indigenous students in other academic areas of study including mainstream teacher education programs, not just ITEPs.

Using narrative inquiry, we have created a space for Indigenous teachers to tell and relive critical stories of personal and professional experience, as well as what they continue to become as teachers. As Lewis (2011) writes, 'it is through story that we may come to know, through the story of the other' (p. 506). This study explored the experiences of two participants during and after their teacher training. The study participants spoke about their lived experiences as students at ITEP and as teachers, including the challenges and opportunities they encountered. They also identified what enabled them to be successful in the teacher education program and in their careers as teachers. Our goal is not to make generalizable claims. Rather, we wanted to understand the experiences of the participants and to explore the implications of such experiences for teacher education.

From their narrative accounts, the Indigenous teachers chose to become teachers because of their commitment to students and the teaching profession.

> They believed that good teaching involves loving and caring for their students, communicating with the whole child, helping to find their students' gifts, developing pride and self-worth in their students, and creating a safe learning environment. They emphasized the importance of all teachers working to establish respectful, positive and encouraging relationships with their students. (St. Denis 2010, 10)

Connelly and Clandinin (2006) refer to teachers as 'knowledgeable and knowing persons' (p. 381) and St. Denis (2010) suggests that the 'concept of teachers' knowledge emphasize[s] the importance of experience, and especially personal and practical experience in developing and shaping professional knowledge' (p.13). Indigenous teachers who participated in this study were willing and eager to share stories of experience across their professional and personal landscapes. They 'regard[ed] their profession as a call to service rather than a convenient occupation' (Huffman 2016, 21). As researchers, we are honored that the teachers bequeathed their stories to us. 'So the moral of [our] story is for you to tell your stories . . .. And while you think and work, listen to the poetry as ordinary people tell you stories of their lives' (Charmaz 2016, 54).

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