

kehcinahiwewin (ensure) tapwewin (truth)=CREE
choyerh gihnusta (to make sure it will happen) wezacubi (truth)=STONEY
Ensuring Truth: Exploring an Indigenous-focused Graduation Requirement in Alberta

EDPS 900: Educational Policy Studies Capping Exercise

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Abstract

In the 2023-2024 school year, the British Columbia Ministry of Education implemented a new Indigenous-focused graduation requirement (IFGR) for all secondary/high school students throughout the province. To date, the Alberta Ministry of Education (Alberta Education) does not include a same or similar requirement for its secondary/high school students. This paper is aimed at examining and exploring the implementation of an IFGR for all Alberta secondary/high school students in order to achieve an Alberta Diploma, Certificate of Achievement, Grade Equivalency Diploma or other related completion of secondary education. The paper explores history and policy related to Indigenous education in Alberta as well as applies theoretical and methodological approaches to the implementation of an IFGR in Alberta.

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kehcinahiwewin tapwewin/choyerh gihnusta—Ensuring Truth: Exploring an Indigenous-focused Graduation Requirement in Alberta

1) Introduction

a) Positionality: Personal/Professional Work

Personally and professionally, I am dedicated to both serving and working with Indigenous communities in my home of St. Albert, Alberta, as well as my place of work, Stony Plain, Alberta. To position myself, I am a Métis woman on my mother's side and white, European on my father's side. My Métis relatives were originally from Red River, Manitoba and moved west to the Prince Albert settlement and resided in small communities surrounding Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. I have been on a learning journey alongside my Métis grandmother, Jeanne Lemieux, to explore our Métis identities. In our journey, we have learned about both the colonial harms, specifically through the taking of Métis scrip that our family experienced, as well as the beauty and richness of Métis culture. Furthermore, in learning that my great-great grandmother, Priscilla Spencer, was identified as "Cree Scotch Breed," I have come to a desire to honour and learn more about Cree history, ways of knowing and language, as well. While I acknowledge an Indigenous identity, I too wish to recognize the privilege that I have been afforded as a racially white woman and am dedicated to learning about and acknowledging white privilege, historical and current racial oppression as well as antiracism in my personal and learning communities.

The role that I serve in the educational system at this time is that of Indigenous Education Facilitator at Parkland School Division in Stony Plain, Alberta. Formerly, I was an Indigenous Graduation Coach at Memorial Composite High School in Stony Plain, Alberta. In

both of these positions, I serve and work with Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and families from Paul First Nation, surrounding nations and those in the Parkland area. In these roles, I do my best to support teaching and learning that honours Indigenous history, knowledge, perspectives and current realities as well as anti-racist education within my learning community. This paper on the requirement of an Indigenous-focused graduation requirement (IFGR) is of importance for Parkland School Division as well as all school divisions in the province in order to examine the professional responsibility that Albertan teachers have to ensuring that Indigenous history, knowledge, perspectives and current realities as well as antiracist education are components that are valued in knowing and understanding as requirements for high school completion and equivalent accreditation.

With respect to the use of both Cree and Stoney language in the title of this paper, I do so to honour and respect the communities that I have served in my professional work, and who have served me in both my learning and growth with respect to Indigenous ways of knowing and being. I also wish to support Indigenous language revitalization in the honouring and learning of the languages of my ancestors and of the land that I live on, learn with and benefit from. I was told that with respect to Indigenous languages, they were never “lost” like one would lose a set of keys or a personal item, where the individual is the one responsible for that loss. But, rather, the language was taken through attempts to eradicate, assimilate and destroy Indigenous ways of knowing (Rebecca Sockbeson, personal communication), and therefore the educational system must take efforts to reclaim, revitalise and celebrate Indigenous languages. Most importantly, I wish to acknowledge the Cree, Stoney, Métis, Dene and Blackfoot Elders, Knowledge Keepers and friends as well as my own family who have guided me, answered my questions and taught me so much about connecting to the land, connecting to Creator and

connecting my head to my heart in order to serve the students and communities and my professional, academic and personal life in the best ways possible.

b) Literature Review Question/Topic

This literature review question/topic was inspired by a 2022 announcement that all secondary/high school students in the province of British Columbia would be required to complete Indigenous-focused coursework in order to attain a British Columbia Certificate of Graduation (“Dogwood Diploma”) (Government of British Columbia, 2023). Since then, British Columbia has implemented the requirement for the 2023/2024 school year and has included resources for families, an implementation guide as well as a “Requirements and Procedures Guidebook” (2023) to support students and families in the process of this change. In exploring this shift in graduation requirements in British Columbia, I was curious about how an IFGR could manifest in an Albertan context. Therefore, the question being explored in this paper is: how could an Indigenous-focused graduation requirement (IFGR) be implemented in order to ensure that Indigenous knowledge is included and valued in what all Albertan students are required to know for high school completion?

Before moving on, addressing the term “Indigenous knowledge” is foundational to understanding what would be included and addressed in an IFGR. According to Marie Battiste (2013), Mi'kmaw educator from the Potlotek First Nation, Nova Scotia, Indigenous knowledge:

contains webs of relationships within specific ecological contexts; contains linguistic categories, rules and relationships unique to each knowledge system; has localised content and meaning; has established customs with respect to acquiring and sharing of knowledge...and implies responsibilities for possessing various kinds of knowledge. (p. 96)

Furthermore, Jo-ann Archibald, also known as Q’um Q’um Xiiem, Indigenous scholar from British Columbia (2020), points out that “scholars in academe and educators in formal

educational systems use the term Indigenous knowledge systems, which usually includes the meaning of culture but implies more, such as forms of epistemology, ontology, pedagogy and methodology” (p. 4). Therefore, in honouring these definitions of Indigenous knowledge (which are not limited to these two scholars but which are foundational to an understanding of the term) an IFGR would not be limited to solely knowledge of Indigenous cultures and content but could and should include Indigenous ways of knowing (epistemology), being (ontology) and doing (pedagogy and methodology) that are unique, localised and rooted in relationality and responsibility. However, it is important to note that the passing on and sharing of Indigenous knowledge (in reference to these definitions) may not always be attainable in a secondary learning environment. In my experiences as a student and educator, much of the Indigenous knowledge that has been passed on to me has been on the land, in ceremonies or in the various communities who have invited me to engage and learn. This knowledge has been rooted in relationship to self, others, land and Creator and embodies a uniqueness to place and personal responsibility for possessing that knowledge referenced in Battiste’s definition. Therefore, while it would be ideal that Indigenous knowledge systems be at the foundation of an IFGR, it may take time and a shift in the colonial structures of the education system to make it happen for all students.

Specifically, this paper focuses on graduation requirements in Alberta as well as policy frameworks and mandates for Indigenous education. It moves on to explore considerations for and of the implementation of an IFGR in this province with respect to methods and approaches, the use of and response to mandates or requirements, as well as the content that should be considered for an IFGR. Ultimately, this paper does not only aim to justify a binary consideration of whether or not an IFGR *should* exist in Alberta, but rather the considerations in

the creation and implementation of this requirement. I think that there *could* be a tendency to discuss whether or not Alberta is “ready” for this type of consideration in a change to graduation requirements or if the “time is right” for an IFGR, and these considerations are valid ones. And, while my findings in the literature do provide theoretical insight into whether or not an IFGR might make sense, ultimately, the paper is aimed at exploring the context of Indigenous education in Alberta and *how* an IFGR could fit into this context.

2) Indigenous Education

Equally important to addressing the term “Indigenous knowledge” is addressing the term “Indigenous education” as a foundation for discussing an IFGR in Alberta. According to Archibald (2020), “Canadian Indigenous education includes education for Indigenous learners at all levels and ages and learning about Indigenous peoples’ history, cultures, knowledges, and languages for all learners in educational systems” (p. 1). Archibald’s definition is foundational due to the fact that it includes a two-fold consideration that acknowledges both Indigenous learners and all learners.

This distinction pertains to an IFGR due to the fact that a required course for graduation must include Indigenous knowledge for the benefit of Indigenous learners with respect to feelings of belonging and representation in the Alberta education system. It must also exist for all learners in the understanding of Indigenous foundational knowledge with respect to (but not limited to) building and nourishing relationships, connecting to the land and the addressing of antiracism. Archibald highlights Indigenous education from 1972 to 2018 where Indigenous people took leadership and advocacy to “improve the education that Indigenous learners received in formal educational institutions and education for all learners about Indigenous peoples’ history and contributions to Canada” (p. 3). With respect to Indigenous learners

specifically, Archibald references the Indian Control of Indian Education Policy (1972) which states, “We want education to give our children a strong sense of identity, with confidence in their personal worth and identity” (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972, as cited in Archibald, p. 5).

At the same time,

The importance of learning about Indian culture, history and values was not limited to Indian children. The ICIE document stated, ‘it is essential that Canadian children of every racial origin have the opportunity during their school days to learn about the history, customs and culture of their country’s original inhabitants and first citizens (NIB, 1972, as cited in Archibald, p. 7).

While the educational system must redress oppressive policies through informed practice specifically for Indigenous learners, there is also an important role in the educational system to support Indigenous education for *all* learners so that learning communities can not only become informed about Indigenous culture, history and values, but grounded in ethical relationality, a concept influenced by “ethical space which constitutes the area between two entities” (Ermine, 2007, as cited in Scott & Gani, 2018, p. 169). This space holds the potential of “becoming a meeting place where Indigenous peoples and Canadians can ‘revisit and deconstruct their shared past, and engage critically with the realisation that their present and future is similarly tied together” (Donald, 2012, p. 44 as cited in Scott & Gani, p. 169). However, “ethical space only becomes possible when Indigenous and Euro-western knowledge systems and worldviews are treated as distinct” (Donald, 2012 as cited in Scott & Gani, p. 169), which is something that would need to be considered when implementing an IFGR.

In my experience as both an Indigenous Graduation Coach and teacher at a school and an Indigenous Education Facilitator at a school division that serves a large number of Indigenous

students within a predominantly non-Indigenous population, these definitions are consistent with how I understand the term “Indigenous Education”. The ways in which we (as a school and a school division) serve the student population and community are two-fold, like two branches coming off of the same tree.

On one branch, we honour and recognize that there is broken trust and relationships between Indigenous communities and the school system. Many Indigenous families, due to the effects of Residential Schools and the mistreatment of their children in the educational system, have experienced an erasure of identity, ways of knowing, language and culture. Therefore, in aligning with the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action (2015) (#10), the educational system must work towards identifying achievement gaps for Indigenous students, improving success rates, providing culturally relevant curricula, protecting the right to Indigenous languages and enabling and supporting parental and community control and participation (p. 2). While Indigenous people and ways of knowing have been previously ignored in the Alberta education system, the Calls to Action require that Indigenous voices are included in the creation and process of a better understanding of what Indigenous education means for Indigenous students.

On the second branch, I understand Indigenous education as the inclusion of Indigenous history, knowledge, perspectives and current realities for all students. As was mentioned earlier, Indigenous knowledge implies much more than an understanding of culture, but ways of knowing, being and doing which is important for all Albertan students to be exposed to, learn about and engage with. In my opinion, this branch is reaching toward a building of kinship and relations and, ultimately, a shared understanding and “walking alongside one another” (personal communication, Elder Bob Cardinal). Ultimately, with the presence of an IFGR for all

secondary students in Alberta, the system places value on Indigenous education and relationality for the benefit of all students in their completion of high school.

3) *Methods and Approaches*

a) *Critical Race Theory/Tribal Critical Race Theory*

Alongside the consideration and eventual implementation of an IFGR is the need to reflect on Critical Race Theory (CRT). Ladson-Billings (1998) states that “CRT begins with the notion that racism is ‘normal, not aberrant, in American society’ (Delgado, 1995, p. xiv), and, because it is so enmeshed in the fabric of our social order, it appears both normal and natural to people in this culture” (p. 11). With respect to Alberta Education’s consideration of an IFGR, a predicted response might be: why is Indigenous content receiving attention for a graduation requirement in Alberta?

While this type of response presents a multicultural discourse (discussed later in this project), it also reinforces the centering of whiteness in the current policy for graduation requirements (which makes no mention of race, or the perspectives of racialized people). By placing limited value on race or the perspectives of racialized people, it normalises and naturalises white-centred positionality. Ladson-Billings asserts that “Critical race theory sees the official school curriculum as a culturally specific artifact designed to maintain a White supremacist master script” (p. 18). The presence of an IFGR in Alberta, however, as well as a shift in the policy that informs graduation requirements could move toward focusing on “the role of ‘voice’ in bringing additional power to the legal discourses of racial justice” (p. 13). Even more distinctly in the considerations of an IFGR is that of Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit). TribalCrit is “rooted in the multiple, nuanced, and historically and geographically-located epistemologies and ontologies found in Indigenous communities” (Brayboy, 2006, p. 427)”. In

using a TribalCrit which is a “more nuanced analysis and guiding theoretical framework that takes into account ‘Indians’ liminality as both legal/political and racialized beings’ (p. 427)”, an IFGR in Alberta can be more critically aware and intentional in its creation and implementation within the Alberta system for graduating students.

b) Indigenous Research Methodology

Additionally, is the necessity for Alberta Education to approach this topic using an Indigenous Research Methodology (IRM), specifically in researching and collaborating with Indigenous communities, academics and educators in order to establish relationality and obtain information on best pedagogy and practice for the use of an IFGR in this province. Rebecca Sockbeson (2017) states that “Indigenous Research Methodology (IRM) and its rootedness in Indigenous epistemology, challenges the ongoing colonial project of epistemicide, the intention to eradicate Indigenous ways of knowing and being” (p. 2-3).

For the purpose of exploring the implementation of an IFGR, there is a need to examine epistemicide within Alberta’s educational system and the effects that it has had on students, families and communities historically and presently. The policy-makers and educators who would be responsible for creating and implementing an IFGR must be informed on the effects of the denial and eradication of Indigenous knowledge within the provincial education system in order to understand how to locate the topic and to place value on an IFGR as a form of Indigenous knowledge mobilisation with respect to what secondary students must complete prior to graduation.

Furthermore, Sockbeson refers to principles outlined by Cora Weber-Pillwax in IRM which frames Sockbeson’s work. Specifically, Sockbeson mentions “the impact of motives and intentions on person and community’ [which] is a guiding value in ensuring that [her] research

contributes to Indigenous knowledge mobilisation and the community as a whole” (p. 4). In this context, while research done on the topic of an IFGR may benefit the non-Indigenous students and community in the eventual implementation of the requirement, ultimately, the research must include, work *with* and benefit *for* the local Indigenous community and students that it serves. If research serves the researcher or the institution and not the students, families or communities, it further perpetuates a colonial perspective.

a) Deficit Thinking

As this paper explores educational policy in the province of Alberta, including the Native Education Project (1987), the First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework (2002) and the Alberta Education Teaching Quality Standard (2023) (all explored in more depth later in this paper), it is important to consider why these policies and frameworks exist and have been created. With this, I feel it important to address the theory of “deficit-thinking” due to the fact that many policies and frameworks are created in response to the perspective that students have a deficit which is causing their lack of success in school. For this, I will draw on Chapter One of “The Evolution of Deficit Thinking” edited by Richard R. Valencia (1997), entitled “Conceptualizing the Notion of Deficit Thinking”. In this chapter, he explains that:

Deficit thinking is a person-centered explanation of school failure among individuals as linked to a group membership (typically, the combination of racial/ethnic minority and economic disadvantage). The deficit thinking framework holds that poor schooling performance is rooted in students’ alleged cognitive and motivational deficits, while institutional structures and inequitable schooling arrangements that exclude students’ learning are held exculpatory (p. 9).

In the context of an IFGR, this approach could allude to the fact that Indigenous students are lacking foundational Indigenous knowledge and the implementation of such a requirement for graduation would increase success in the learning environment. Therefore, if the

educational institution creates and implements Indigenous cultural content in the form of an IFGR, students will feel more connected and succeed. However, it is important to note that “a culture framework for analysis is partial and inadequate on its own for explaining Aboriginal educational failures and...culturally-based solutions can inadvertently contribute to future problems” (St. Denis, 2011, 178 as cited in Gebhard, 2018, p. 757). When a disconnect with Indigenous culture is used to explain inequality or lack of success in school for Indigenous students, it alludes to the student as having a deficit as opposed to a deficit on the part of the learning environment as to why race must be discussed (p. 759). This is why discussions on race, racism and antiracism must be a component of an IFGR, something that will be discussed later in this paper. Overall, deficit thinking is an approach that must be considered when creating and implementing an IFGR in Alberta.

b) Allyship

The terms “ally” and “allyship” are those that require much reflection and critique in the field of Indigenous education. The following words were shared with me: “you do not decide yourself if you are an ally, the community decides if you are an ally”. These words have stayed with me and guide a lot of my thinking and work with Indigenous students and communities. While I identify as Métis, I acknowledge that I have been afforded white privilege and must be mindful of how self-fulfillingly identifying myself as an “ally” can “protect and reinforce [my] own white fragility” (Di Angelo, 2011 as cited in Burm and Burleigh, 2022, p. 185). Some of the current tensions around allyship/solidarity work focuses on “problematizing the performative and binary approaches to allyship [which are] increasingly propagated across academic institutions and social groups” (p. 177). The findings support the “tension that exists in relation to the title of ally being claimed rather than designated” and that allyship is “not a

self-appointed identity [but] requires you to show your understanding through actions, relations and recognition by the community” (Montreal Urban Aboriginal Community Strategy Network, n.d., p.2 as cited in Burm & Burleigh, p. 178).

With respect to teaching Indigenous content and engaging with Indigenous knowledge specifically in an IFGR, reflecting on allyship is critical. To me, the creation and implementation of an IFGR must align with the aims of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the Calls to Action (CTAs) and therefore must be “approached as an ‘ongoing process of establishing and maintaining respectful relationships’ (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, p. 35 as cited in Burm and Burleigh, p. 179)”. Furthermore, those who are creating and implementing an IFGR must do so not from a place of “surface level activism or performative allyship” and for the purpose of “maintaining a positive public image”, but rather as “an intrinsic need to rectify years of structural inequities” (p. 178) by placing value on Indigenous knowledge as a requirement for high school completion and the process required to do this meaningfully.

c) Multicultural Approach

In response to the presence of an IFGR for high school students in Alberta, and in response to several frameworks and mandates for Indigenous education is a multicultural approach, which is rooted in the idea that there are many cultures in Canada and all require a similar focus and attention. On the surface, multiculturalism is rooted in the intention “to acknowledge the need for increased understanding between ethnic groups, and the need to address racial discrimination” (Fleras and Elliot 1992, p. 75 as cited in St. Denis, 2011, p. 307). And while a multicultural approach may appear inclusive and neutral, it actually has the potential to diminish and dilute the meaningful incorporation of Indigenous perspectives in education (p. 306-307). With respect to an IFGR requirement, the key word here would be

“focused”. The course/s that would be included and considered for the IFGR would need to be focused and founded in a specificity to the unique perspectives of Indigenous people and the land on which they reside and the refusal to reduce Indigenous people to a “minority” or “ethnic” group in Canada or the inclusion of Indigenous history and culture as sources of “enrichment” (p. 311, 314).

3) Graduation Requirements in Alberta: Past and Present

In order to graduate in Alberta with a Diploma, Certificate of Achievement, Grade Equivalency Diploma or other related completion of secondary education, students need to complete a mandated set of requirements outlined by Alberta Education (Government of Alberta, 2024). Since the 1980s, Alberta Education has specifically outlined and addressed changes to Alberta high school diploma requirements in order for student success. In June of 1985, the policy statement “Secondary Education in Alberta” outlined “some initiatives taken to change and improve senior high school programs and diploma requirements in Alberta, Canada” (AB Dept of Education, 1987, p. 1). Ultimately, this policy statement indicated that programs must prepare students “with the necessary skills and understandings to function in and shape tomorrow’s society” and that “consequently, educational programs and learning opportunities must be more innovative, challenging and future-oriented” (p. 11).

While the recognition for growth in educational programming in Alberta is important, nowhere in the policy is there mention or recognition of Indigenous people, history or knowledge. While this is not surprising considering the context of when the policy was written, it does allude to the importance of responsible citizenship, cultural interests and the importance for students to act in ways they will improve their communities (p. 6). The policy statement also outlines the important goal that “students learn about themselves and develop

positive, realistic self-images” (p. 6). One can imagine how a secondary Indigenous student must have felt during this time when the policy indicated a requirement to learn “about themselves” when there was no reference to “themselves” as Indigenous people. How were secondary Indigenous students meant to “develop positive, realistic self-images” of themselves when there is no mention or acknowledgment of who they are in the policy for high school completion requirements?

Based on the Alberta Education documents that are available to the public, there was another review/shift in graduation requirements in the 1994/1995 school year. While no major changes occurred at that time, there was still no mention or recognition of Indigenous history, people or knowledge and to date, there still is not. With the exception of the “10 credits in Secondary Languages” requirement for graduation, which could include Indigenous languages (i.e. Cree Language and Culture 30) or the “10 credits in any 30-level course” requirement for graduation which could include Indigenous-focused courses (i.e. Aboriginal Studies 30), there is currently no graduation requirement for secondary students in Alberta that exclusively pertains to Indigenous history, knowledge or perspectives. Gunn, Chorney and Poulsen (2009) address the attempts in programming committed to providing students with a sense of belonging, flexibility and support (p. 19). They specifically pinpoint projects related to high school completion for Indigenous students and state that “there is no question that more projects focusing upon Aboriginal student retention need to be created, supported and deployed” (p. 23) in order to address systemic gaps that contribute to a lack of success for Indigenous students in the learning environment. This being said, an initiative like an IFGR could contribute to Indigenous student retention by placing value on Indigenous knowledge as a requirement for high school completion.

4) Indigenous Policy Frameworks in Alberta

a) Native Education Project and First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Policy

Framework

The Native Education Project of Alberta, which was mandated in 1987, aimed at “increasing Native student achievement and attendance and of increasing the awareness and appreciation by all students in provincial schools of Native peoples” (p. 1). In working with other agencies outside Alberta Education (i.e. Métis Nation of Alberta, Indian Association of Alberta, Native Friendship Centres, federal and provincial government agencies, universities and colleges as well as publishers and union associations), the Native Education Project outlined several priorities aimed at improving Native education in Alberta (p. 5). In the spring of 1999, “a review of the 1987 Native Education policy was initiated” which ultimately laid the foundation for the First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework (FNMIEPF) (Progress Report, 2004, p. 3). The FNMIEPF, which is the current policy framework, includes:

integration of ‘First Nations, Métis , and Inuit governance, history, treaty and Aboriginal rights, lands, cultures and languages’ (Alberta Education, 2002b, p. 10) in all core classes from Kindergarten to Grade 12 and (b) the creation of culture classes: Aboriginal Studies 10-20-30 (Prete, 2021, p. 97).

Prete (2021) explores the need to address race and racism in the public school system in Alberta by specifically commenting on Alberta’s FNMIEPF. She says that “Research across Canada has found that while policy frameworks are in place, very few school districts, administrators and teachers are implementing the policy framework and objectives (Blood, 2010; Kanu, 2005; Shaw, 2002 as cited in Prete, p. 97). Prete addresses that the presence of anti-Indigenous racism in schools is a contributing factor in early departure for Indigenous students and that ultimately “Neither the NEP nor FNMIEPF address such an issue” (p. 98), a reminder of what

could and should be included in an IFGR (discussed later in this paper). Furthermore, Prete “observed that in order to graduate from high school, [she] was not required to know anything about Indigenous peoples” which “did not prepare [her] to face the world as an Indigenous person” and “influenced the way in which we [Indigenous people] are presently perceived and treated” (p. 98). Prete’s personal experiences and observations highlight the importance of the critical evaluation of Indigenous policy frameworks in Alberta and the effects that the gaps in policy can have on Albertan students.

If the FNMIPF was to guide an IFGR in Alberta, there would have to be ongoing consultation and consideration with Indigenous communities to ensure that race and racism are concepts that are valued in the curriculum for this requirement for high school completion. Educators and policy makers must rectify the gaps in policy in the creation and implementation of new programming, like an IFGR, and work to improve what is valued in what is required to know for high school completion.

4) Indigenous Education in Alberta and Canada: Mandates and Frameworks

a) Truth and Reconciliation Commission-Calls to Action on Mandatory Education

In discussing the implementation of an IFGR in Alberta, what must initially be reflected upon is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) which “reiterated the need for reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people” and which “emphasised the key role of education in reconciliation as both concrete action and instituting societal change” (as cited in Archibald, 2020, p.11). One of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action (2015) (#62) states that:

We call upon the federal, provincial and territorial governments, in consultation and collaboration with Survivors, Aboriginal Peoples and educators to:

i) Make age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools, Treaties and Aboriginal peoples' historical and contemporary contributions to Canada, a mandatory education requirement for Kindergarten to Grade 12 students. (p. 7)

In adhering to and honouring this call to action outlined by the TRC, “a mandatory education requirement for Kindergarten to Grade 12 students” is being called upon by the province. Currently, while teachers are expected to meet a “Teaching Quality Standard”, which is a “framework for the preparation, professional growth, supervision and evaluation of all teachers” (Alberta Education Teaching Quality Standard [TQS] 2023, p. 1) with respect to foundational knowledge for First Nation, Métis and Inuit, there is no mandated graduation requirement for high school completion with respect to Indigenous Indigenous history, knowledge or perspectives. If the educational system in Alberta is committed to honouring the calls to action set forth by the TRC where “education must remedy the gaps in historical knowledge that perpetuate ignorance and racism” (TRC, 2015, p. 117), an IFGR would demonstrate the placement of value on Indigenous Indigenous history, knowledge and perspectives in ensuring that all students engage with a mandatory educational requirement prior to their completion of secondary schooling.

b) Teaching Quality Standard #5-A Framework for Application of Indigenous Knowledge

The framework outlined in the “Alberta Education Teaching Quality Standard” (2023) is met through teaching pedagogy that addresses certain “competencies and indicators” such as “fostering effective relationships” (TQS 1), “engaging in career long learning” (TQS 2), “demonstrating a professional body of knowledge” (TQS 3), “establishing inclusive learning environments” (TQS 4), “applying foundational knowledge about First Nations, Métis and Inuit” (TQS 5), and “adhering to legal frameworks and policies” (TQS 6). (p. 3-5).

In the context of TQS 5, teachers are expected to use their respective “programs of study to provide opportunities for all students to develop a knowledge and understanding of, and respect for, the histories, cultures, languages, contributions, perspectives, experiences and contemporary contexts of First Nations, Métis and Inuit” (p. 5). Currently, it is the professional responsibility of teachers to apply this knowledge to their respective curricular subjects and “in any given context, reasoned professional judgement must be used to determine whether the Teaching Quality Standard is being met” (p. 2). Therefore, while both the framework and professional responsibility are present for teachers to adhere to, it is up to the professional judgement of administrators to evaluate teachers’ implementation of this foundational knowledge.

Furthermore, Wotherspoon and Milne (2020) explore what education policy frameworks and actions reveal about government approaches to education specifically related to Indigenous people (p. 1). Their exploration of the extent to which these initiatives “represent a matter of performativity and good faith rather than a movement towards foundational change” (p. 1) is relevant to the discussion of TQS 5 in Alberta. This is because of the ways in which teachers are held accountable for how they meet the standard. When “reasoned professional judgement” is the method by which teachers are measured to be meeting TQS 5, there is potential for a lack of meaningful implementation. For example, Wotherspoon and Milne state that “Educators committed to changing pedagogical practices and incorporating curricular content that acknowledges Indigenous cultural heritage and learning contexts often lack the knowledge, confidence or support to do so effectively” (p. 3). Be it a educator’s lack of knowledge on curricular documents, directives or resources, there is the potential that as a result “non-Indigenous [and I would argue Indigenous as well] students sometimes ‘go through their

entire educational career without learning about Indigenous Peoples and the history and legacy of residential schooling in Canada” (Milne, 2017, p. 10 as cited in Wotherspoon and Milne, p. 3). The presence of an IFGR in Alberta could provide assurance that all students have access to Indigenous history, knowledge and perspectives prior to high school completion. And while the course/s may be varied in delivery, a consistency can be maintained through a curricular mandate set forth by Alberta Education, alongside the TQS 5 framework.

c) Social Studies in Alberta-Curricular Mandate

In an Albertan context with respect to mandates and required education, it is crucial to mention the Social Studies curriculum in Alberta which “made the teaching of First Nations, Métis , and Inuit perspectives a key pillar of a K-12 social studies POS [Program of Studies] introduced in 2005” and which “mandates teachers to make engagements with First Nations, Métis , and Inuit perspectives a regular and ongoing part of classroom inquiry processes” (Scott & Gani, 2018, p. 167). Scott and Gani (2018) explore the ways in which Albertan teachers have responded to a curricular mandate and specifically highlight why teachers ignore, feel uncertainty and ambivalence towards mandates and why they largely ignore them (p. 168).

They summarise these beliefs as follows:

a) no perspectives can be identified due to the highly diverse nature of Aboriginal people and communities; b) only educators who are Indigenous can authentically offer insights into or teach Aboriginal perspectives; and c) Aboriginal perspectives should not be given special attention, because all cultural perspectives in Canada should be given equal treatment (p. 168).

These beliefs, which allude to both allyship and multicultural perspectives (mentioned previously) are equally important to consider when implementing an IFGR for secondary students in Alberta as teachers may be hesitant or resistant to engage in an IFGR. This is due to the fact that teachers may “dismiss the need to take up this curricular mandate, and thus avoid

the difficulties involved in reworking the deeply entrenched interpretive frameworks” required to take on an IFGR (p. 171).

Due to the fact that an IFGR would indicate a major shift in the completion requirements for students in Alberta, one can see how there could be tensions. These tensions lie in teachers who may lack the foundational Indigenous knowledge to carry out such a mandate. Therefore, support will be required for the creation and implementation of the IFGR in order to “offer possibilities for re-conceptualizing educator’s relationship with Indigenous peoples in ways that work against cultural, civilizational and temporal divisions” (p. 179). Albertan policy makers can learn from the process that went into the mandating of First Nations, Métis , and Inuit perspectives in the Social Studies curriculum and work towards supporting teachers in the processes of valuing an IFGR as a necessary component to high school completion.

7) *kehcinahiwewin tapwewin/choyerh gihnusta-Ensuring Truth*

a) *Indigenous-Focused Graduation Requirement Implementation*

Much of the literature on mandatory Indigenous education courses in Alberta and Canada is situated in post-secondary contexts. Danyluk et al. (2023) use the phrase “braiding and weaving” when referring to the instruction of Indigenous knowledge for the purpose of teacher education as well as the transfer of that education into the classroom for students. The authors use this terminology to honour Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing as opposed to the term “integration” which may “serve to reinforce colonial relations of power” (Donald as cited in Danylyk et. al, p. 385). This being said, Danyluk et al. assert from their findings that:

Integration, braiding and weaving across courses can provide students with an understanding of Indigenous ways; however, a mandatory and dedicated course

provides students with the opportunity to focus on Indigenous ways over a longer period, thereby extending understanding and improving their future teaching (p. 385).

To parallel these ideas to a context for secondary students, an IFGR can provide a focused and enriched learning experience that can extend understanding of an Albertan context for all students. Furthermore, Wotherspoon and Milne (2020) also point out that “some educators regard the incorporation of Indigenous content into the classroom teaching and learning as optional, on the periphery of mandated curriculum, or segregated and sometimes exotic content” (Milne, 2017; Schaepli, Godlewska, & Rose, 2018, St. Denis, 2010; p. 11). Constrastingly, an IFGR would value and importance on Indigenous history, knowledge and perspectives and would centre it as unique, distinct and valuable in the learning journey for secondary student education (St. Denis, 2011).

But what about choice? Should a secondary student be “forced” to take an IFGR in order to complete high school? Might this be limiting a student’s sense of autonomy and freedom?

According to Tanchuk, Kruse and McDonough (2018):

At least in the university context, if the civic content of students’ education is left entirely optional, with no conscious effort to address the ways in which knowledge about Indigenous peoples are created and shared in circumstances of epistemic injustice, then those students *most likely* to denigrate or misunderstand the value of Indigenous contributions can reasonably be expected to be *least likely* to choose voluntarily to engage with the content needed to understand these contributions in depth (p. 144).

They posit that even though a single-course requirement on Indigenous content may be inadequate in *fully* addressing what students should know, it is still a “positive step toward fostering Canadians’ need to appropriately orient their actions and our social institutions” (p. 144).

In my opinion, these assertions apply to a secondary context as well. While the educational system must respect the autonomy of student choice and freedom, a requirement shows the ways in which Alberta Education places value on Indigenous history, knowledge and perspectives as a requirement for what secondary students should know prior to high school completion. Just as Career and Life Management 20, Physical Education 10 or English 30 are valuable and required courses for secondary students, so must be foundational Indigenous knowledge in Alberta.

b) Layout

i) Content

As was mentioned earlier in this paper, both the Native Education Project (NEP) and the First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework (FNMIEPF) are the previous and current policy frameworks in place, respectively, for Indigenous education in Alberta. The FNMIEPF's major aims are to "increase and strengthen knowledge and understanding among all Albertans of First Nations, Métis and Inuit governance, history, treaty and Aboriginal rights, lands, cultures, and languages" and to "provide First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners with access to culturally relevant learning opportunities and quality support services" (Alberta Education, 2002a, p. 10 as cited in Prete, 2021, p. 100). Due to the fact that an IFGR, if implemented, would be new to Alberta and may or may not be guided by the FNMIEPF, I cannot determine the exact direction of how content would be mandated.

That being said, one might assume that a framework like this would be a guiding document. However, as was mentioned previously, these frameworks have been critiqued for their both the "assumption that a more culturally relevant curriculum is needed in order for Indigenous students to find success" and a lack of addressing "pervasive issues of racism" which

have had impacts on *both* Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in Alberta (Prete, p. 98). The FNMIEPF “was meant to be a ‘living document’ and it is ‘expected to change over time’ (Alberta Education, 2002b, p. 8) [and] what is ‘missing from this policy is an antiracist education program’” (Prete, 2021, p. 98). With respect to an IFGR, antiracism education must be a component for the required course in order to place value on awareness of the epistemicide of Indigenous knowledge, colonial history and harms done on Indigenous people and to benefit the learning community by increasing knowledge and action taken to decrease racism.

The IFGR cannot just be Indigenous history, content and “culturally relevant curriculum”. Relevance is not enough, therefore “part of ‘making it real’ and getting away from ‘fluff’ would involve providing curricular content and teaching practice that exposes the ways in which Aboriginal people have been dehumanised in Canada (Dion, 2007 as cited in St. Denis, 2011, p. 314). When this occurs in an IFGR, the system is placing value on important Indigenous history, knowledge and perspectives that secondary students are required to engage with prior to high school completion. For Indigenous students, an IFGR structured in this way demonstrates recognition, representation and opportunity for Indigenous voice and a sense of belonging. For non-Indigenous students, an IFGR structured in this way demonstrates an awareness of historical and present truth as well as knowledge that attempts to create understanding and respect for Indigenous people.

In reflecting on and aligning with my introduction, Indigenous language and language revitalization is of importance to me personally, but also I feel is of importance to an IFGR. This is because “language revitalization is part of a movement for spiritual renewal and healing that is badly needed both among many Indigenous communities and in the world as a whole” (Reyher, 1999, pg. xviii).

Again, in alignment with the aims of the TRC and the ongoing process of maintaining respectful relationships, making space in the IFGR for Indigenous language is an important part of placing value on Indigenous history, knowledge and perspectives for the completion of high school. With respect to an IFGR, both the knowledge *of* Indigenous language revitalisation is important to include as is the option to take a course *in* an Indigenous language. According to Kirkness (2002), “language is what gives us our identity and expresses our unique worldview. Language is the ultimate symbol of belonging; it is through language that culture is shared and transmitted” (p. 18). Including options for students to explore who they are and connect with their identities in a deep and meaningful way is crucial for the implementation for an IFGR. For example, the British Columbia Indigenous-Focused Graduation Requirement currently has both a “Spoken Language 10” course as well as 20 First Nations language options to choose from for their IFGR (Government of British Columbia, 2023).

Furthermore, this approach is also an important model for thinking about the importance of place-based education in an IFGR. “In developing relationship with place, one does not really learn about the land, but one learns from the land. Place is seen as fullness, as interactions, as thoughts planted” (Malredyy Pavan Kumar, as cited in a report by the Canadian Council on Learning (2009, p. 24) as cited in Hare, 2015, p. 118). Additionally, place is more about a singular geographical location that students learn *about* in an IFGR, rather it is learning *from* place where “cultural, spiritual, and social relations to Indigenous histories, stories, and presence of place, shaped by activities based on storytelling and intergenerational, experiential, and land-based learning” can occur (p. 118). Be it knowledge of history, land, ceremony, language or ways of knowing, place-based education is something for Alberta to consider for an IFGR with respect to the rich and diverse Indigenous population in Alberta.

ii) Carrying out the IFGR-Teacher Role

One of the most important considerations for an IFGR is: who would be best suited to teach a required course/s for the benefit of all learners? While honouring Indigenous voice and representation is of vital importance to the role of teaching an IFGR, there are arguments as to why this role must be shared with non-Indigenous teachers as well. As cited by Danyluk et al. (2023) who allude to a post-secondary context: “In their examination of racialized and Indigenous faculty in Canadian universities, Mohammed and Beagan (2019) pointed to the extra burden placed on Indigenous faculty who act as ‘cultural translators within academic whiteness’ (p. 344) and who are continually called upon to explain or advocate for Indigenous knowledges (p. 344). Therefore, “If we are to advance Indigenous ways of knowing in all places of learning, it cannot be the responsibility of a particular group of people” (Hare, 2021, p. 115). It must be the work of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators, policy makers and community in order to ensure that not only voices and perspectives are being heard, but also for individuals to position and place their own history, knowledge and relationships with coloniality in the context of an IFGR.

There is, of course, always the consideration of what the “credibility” or “appropriateness” is when it comes to non-Indigenous teachers carrying out Indigenous knowledge and content. On one hand, the “perfect stranger” position that argues “when white teachers claim to know little or nothing about Indigenous peoples and cultures, it becomes a way to shield them from difficult knowledge and to opt-out of integrating Indigenous perspectives and knowledges” (Dion, 2007, 2009 as cited in Douglas, Purton and Bascuñán, 2020, p. 311). At the same time, “non-Indigenous teachers must refrain from behaving as

experts on Indigenous perspectives and knowledges, recognize their limitations, and follow Indigenous protocols where appropriate and necessary” (p. 311). In this sense, an awareness of self and positionality with respect to colonial complicity, privilege and humility is vitally important to non-Indigenous teachers engaging with an IFGR.

Ultimately, “Institutions must encourage, hire, and promote Indigenous faculty and staff to teach such courses and facilitate program delivery until a critical mass of decolonized allies, who truly understand the meaning of that term vis-a-vis Indigenous peoples, is formed” (Leddy & O’Neil, 2021, p. 348). Ultimately, whoever teaches the course/s in an IFGR must embody a passion for, deep understanding of as well as connection and commitment to learning about and sharing Indigenous history, knowledge and perspectives

8) *pamihew-he/she serves*

To conclude, I would like to make reference to a comment made by Dr. Leona Makokis and Dr. Noella Steinhauer in the podcast “Two Crees in a Pod” hosted by Terri Suntjens (2020-2023). They said that, “as educators, we are meant to serve our students”. Upon hearing these words, I was moved. I have not forgotten and never will forget these important words and I think they are words that must be heard and reflected upon by all educators as well as policy and decision makers in Alberta’s education system. In education, we are here to commit acts of service to our students, families and communities. And in those acts of service, we of course must be attentive, giving and humble. We also must be critical. We must look at the system and its deficits in order to ensure that, in alignment with the TRC, Indigenous perspectives and knowledges are being recognized, honoured and shared.

The policy frameworks and mandates must be viewed with a critical lens to ensure that Indigenous history, knowledge, perspectives and current realities as well as anti-racist education

are being valued as required content for all secondary students in Alberta in their completion of high school. At this time, that I know of, there is no intention to create or implement an IFGR in Alberta. Hopefully this paper can lend insight into the theoretical and methodological approaches and considerations as to why and how an IFGR can ensure truth for all Albertan graduates.

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