

**A PRINCIPAL'S JOURNEY: A STUDY INTO THE IMPACT OF WEAVING
INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGES ALONGSIDE STUDENTS IN AN
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL SETTING**

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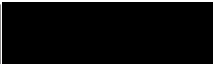


**Concordia University of Edmonton
FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES**

Edmonton, Alberta

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Dedication

This research study is dedicated to my Mom, Donna MacTaggart. You have always believed in me and have been my biggest champion throughout my educational journey and my life. Thank you for your love, guidance, and for always having confidence in me. You have helped shape the person I am today.

Abstract

According to the 94 Calls to Action (Truth & Reconciliation Commission, 2015), it is vital that educators learn and apply foundational knowledge of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit knowledge systems and perspectives in schools. Thus, students and teachers must have ample opportunities to learn about Indigenous culture from Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and communities. Moreover, Alberta's Leadership Quality Standard (2018a) outlines the responsibility of teacher leaders/administrators to lead a professional learning community to ensure the application of foundational knowledge of Indigenous peoples is established within the school culture and community. As we think about our responsibilities as teacher leaders, what role do we have in students' learning to ensure deeper understandings? This study shares my journey as a principal coming alongside my elementary school community which is unique in many ways. With the guidance of a Knowledge Keeper on staff to support teachers, students, and families, we have been able to provide intentional teachings and opportunities to engage in Indigenous programming over the past six years. Through holding focus group conversations with 20 children in grades 4, 5, and 6 during the 2021-2022 school year, this research highlights the impact of Indigenous teachings on these children's experiences and learning. By attending to the experiences of the children, this research provides deeper insights into the importance of continually reflecting on our practices and learning as teacher leaders as well as creating spaces for meaningful learning alongside children, families, Knowledge Keepers, Elders, teachers, and the community.

Key Words: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit; Indigenous peoples; Knowledge Keeper; Truth and Reconciliation; Administrator; Students; Leadership; Experiences

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Narrative Beginnings

Early Memories of my School Journey – Carry-All

I was so excited to begin my school journey. I was only four years old when I started kindergarten. I was the youngest in my class. I remember begging my Mom and Dad to start school. Finally, my Mom agreed, even though most parents waited until their children turned five. I think back to the night before my first day of kindergarten, and I could not fall asleep. I was so eager to start and finally meet other kids my age. Growing up on an acreage in the country, I had no neighbors to play with; all I had was my big sister. She was my best friend.

The year before starting kindergarten, I remember watching my sister go to school with great envy. I wanted to be like her. I was jealous that she was able to attend school. I wanted to experience school so desperately that my Mom purchased a small backpack to carry my lunch in so that I could pretend like I was going to school. Every day for over a year, my Mom would pack me a lunch just like my sister, and I would pretend that I was going to school. When we would drop my sister off at school, I would take my backpack to feel like I was also going. I was only three years old. The funny thing is the backpack was more of a murse, a combination of a bag and purse. I guess I was a trendsetter at an early age, and I did not even realize it. The front of my murse had huge lettering across it which said: "Carry-All." I carried my lunch and a few hot wheels cars in that murse. I wanted to feel as important as my big sister as I watched her go to school while I waited in anticipation to start kindergarten.

Looking back at this early memory, I am thankful that my Mom engaged in lighting my fire to want to go to school by buying me that "Carry-All" and packing my

lunch when she could have waited another year when I would officially start formal schooling. I have always enjoyed school and I am thankful to my Mom for inspiring this love of learning. To my delight, when I was recently cleaning out my parents' acreage home, I found my "Carry-All" bag. After all these years, my Mom had saved it for me. It is something I treasure. I often think about these early memories of school in my position now as a principal in an elementary school. I am reminded daily of where I came from and what I knew first. In reflecting on Chung's (2009) words, she emphasizes that:

To understand who I am in any narrative sense as an individual, as an educator, I must understand the threads of my interwoven, intergenerational stories. The social, institutional, and cultural narratives that shape my personal and professional landscapes influence who I am and how I teach. (p. 134)

These early influences, or resonances such as recalling the excitement of attending kindergarten and following my big sister's footsteps, are empowering. The sheer awe of remembering my innocence and love for school is an important reason why being an administrator or teacher leader is such a significant role that I do not take lightly. I wish for all students to enter a school with the same excitement and hope that I had as a child.

My Journey as a Teacher Leader and Administrator

As a teacher leader and administrator, I reflect on the many different reasons I value and place importance on learning more about Indigenous¹ cultures and ways of knowing. I recall one of the first professional development opportunities I attended as a new principal of an elementary school. To this day, the exercise had a significant impact

¹ Throughout this research study, I will be using the words First Nations, Métis, and Inuit as well as Indigenous and Aboriginal. I will predominantly be using the word Indigenous as it has become more of an inclusive term. According to the Government of Canada (2021), Indigenous is defined as "a collective name for the original peoples of North America and their descendants".

on me and has heavily shaped and influenced my leadership, and has been a catalyst for my master's research project. About six years ago, the principals within my catchment area participated in the Kairos Blanket Exercise, facilitated by Melissa Purcell, currently Executive Staff Officer, Professional Development, Indigenous Education with the Alberta Teachers' Association. At the time, Melissa was working for the Edmonton Public School Board as a First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Education Consultant.

The Kairos Blanket Exercise is an important, unique, and interactive experience where the histories of Canada's Indigenous people are shared through story and group participation told from an Indigenous perspective (Kairos, 2021). As the exercise progressed, horrific events such as smallpox infections, the Sixties Scoop, and the Residential School system were shared, along with the experiences of isolation and segregation. Even though I had already been a teacher for 14 years, I started to realize how unaware I was of the devastating impact of colonization on Indigenous peoples. The Kairos Blanket Exercise was an overwhelming emotional experience. I began to comprehend how much more I needed to learn as a principal myself. I also wondered how I would better support staff, students, families, and even my 82-year-old mother (who came to participate in the exercise with me) in building their capacity and learning. Finally, I pondered how I could genuinely carry out the 94 Calls to Action (Truth & Reconciliation Commission, 2015) to bring about more awareness, change, and equitable anti-racist practices for all children within our school. As McCaskell (2005) reminded me, "to be effective in changing how students thought and acted, anti-racist education had to touch both hearts and minds" (p. 113). My heart and mind were touched immensely, to the point where I became emotional trying to picture how Indigenous mothers and fathers

survived and coped with having their children taken away to residential schools. I found myself imagining how scared the children must have been to be placed in a residential school away from their families, customs, and cultures.

After participating in the Kairos Blanket Exercise with the other principals, I wanted to share this learning with other teachers, so I asked Knowledge Keeper, Mrs. Debbie Semeniuk, if she would be willing to lead our staff in the exercise at Westglen School. With great emotion and excitement, she agreed to lead it with her brother for the students, staff, and families. As I participated in the exercise for the second time, I noticed the teachers and parents/families participating connecting deeply as they witnessed first-hand the intense emotion this activity generating not only for themselves, but also for the Knowledge Keeper, who is a valued member of our staff and school community. We witnessed her pain and suffering as tears ran down her face, yet she progressed with the exercise. This prompted me to be mindful of her reactions to leading the exercise and exposing her trauma as I looked over at her frequently and consistently asked if she was okay. Greene (1995) states, "we are only beginning to realize the importance of including, whenever possible, alternative visions on what is offered as historical truth..." (p. 218). By engaging in this activity, we were provided an alternate understanding of what each of us thought we knew as we learned more about the historical atrocities and the shocking realities that Indigenous peoples faced and continue to experience as a result of these histories. It also highlighted the importance of starting to unlearn the Eurocentric and colonizing ways we have been taught. During the reflection component of this exercise, the Knowledge Keeper explained why she was so personally impacted by the historical events she described, as her mother is a survivor of Canada's

residential schooling, and her sister is a survivor of the Sixties Scoop. As we (teachers, parents, and administrators) listened to her stories, we began to learn more about her experiences and reinforced the importance of creating safe and welcome spaces in schools. By learning more about the histories and wrongdoings of the past, we can take action to begin to repair the past leading forward to a hopeful future.

The Kairos Blanket Exercise awakened me in new ways as a beginning administrator and started my journey of learning and unlearning. Over the years, I continued to engage in numerous teachings led by Elders and Knowledge Keepers. As a school community led by Mrs. Semeniuk, in 2018, we worked to host a celebration of Indigenous cultures by organizing the first Powwow at Westglen School; this would also be one of the first Powwows hosted by an elementary school in the history of the Edmonton Public School Division. I remember asking the Knowledge Keeper all about Powwows, as I had a deep interest in them despite never having attended one before. After discussing this with her, I inquired if we could host our own “Westglen” Powwow. She looked at me with shock and delight. I remember her first words, "Are you sure you want to do this?" and my response was, "Absolutely!" I wanted to ensure the students understood the significance of a Powwow, the teachings, and come together with community in this fantastic celebration of Indigenous cultures. Since that time, we have now hosted two Powwows with well over 1500 people in attendance from all over Alberta. It has become a new tradition and something that we value and honour at Westglen School. We work diligently to connect community and family. In fact, our Knowledge Keeper’s brother has even created a Powwow resource booklet to explain the significance of dances and regalia to give deeper insight to the students and families.

During COVID, we hosted a virtual Powwow connecting with over 15,000 people from all over Canada. Our next goal is to provide even a further reach by live-streaming a Powwow from Westglen School in the hopes to connect to, and with, even more people so that they may also learn about the many gifts and rich cultures of Indigenous peoples.

As a school leader, I feel it is imperative that the students, staff, families, and community see that we value Indigenous cultures and make intentional spaces in our curriculum making to learn more. The journey does not stop with the Kairos Blanket Exercise or a Powwow, it is just the beginning.

Purpose of the Research & Significance

A school principal has a responsibility to lead a professional learning community to ensure the application of foundational knowledge of Indigenous histories is established within the school culture. As such, one of the goals of a learning community is to create a mutual understanding moving forward together as a team. Coherence exists through a learning community with a "shared depth of understanding about the purpose and nature of the work" (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 1). As an administrator, I work to significantly increase First Nations, Métis, and Inuit programming to ensure an increased depth of understanding within my school community and beyond. I recognize that as a leader, I must "enabl[e] all school staff and students to gain a knowledge and understanding of, and respect for, the histories, cultures, languages, contributions, perspectives, and experiences and contemporary contexts of First Nations people" (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 4) and "broaden students' perspectives by valuing, respecting and nurturing the diverse ways of experiencing and understanding the world" (Alberta Education, 2016, p. 13). Moreover, it is crucial that students, teachers, and administrators have ample

opportunities to learn from Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and communities. As a leader, I feel my duty is to support these experiences and support the Knowledge Keepers, Elders, and community I am privileged to work with and learn from daily.

This study shares my journey as a principal coming alongside my school community, which is unique by having a Knowledge Keeper on staff. As principal, I reflect on the lived experiences of the students at Westglen School. By examining the present impact of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit programming on elementary students at Westglen School, I will then understand what steps need to be taken to further increase the impact.

Presently, there is limited research on the impact in creating sustained, intentional spaces for learning related to building and applying Indigenous knowledge with children in an elementary school setting. Specifically, this research explores the impact of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit programming with an elementary school community alongside students in grades 4, 5, and 6. The purpose of this research study is to inquire into my journey and learnings as an administrator who is guided by the experience of my students to not only meet Teacher Quality Standards (2018b) and Leadership Quality Standards (2018a), but to better honour the Truth and Reconciliation's 94 Calls to Action (2015) lived out in schools.

Literature Review

It is paramount that students gain deeper understandings of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit histories and rich cultures. Students must be presented with past histories and understand the lasting impact on Indigenous peoples. When the initial 215 unmarked graves were found at the former Kamloops Indian Residential School in 2021, we were

reminded of the horrific cultural genocide that has occurred in Canada, not to mention the continued search for possible buried children at other former Indian Residential School sites across Canada (Dickson & Watson, 2021). With the information learned in school decades ago being taught heavily from a Eurocentric perspective, the past can no longer be ignored. We need to step up and care to bear witness to this tragic history. Students require solid foundations and understandings of the past to understand the full impact of these present-day events. We also need to ensure educators have the knowledge and tools necessary to teach these histories with the support and teachings taught by Knowledge Keepers and Elders whenever possible.

In the following literature review, I will explore the importance of ensuring teachers are provided with the necessary resources to confidently teach First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures and histories. Secondly, I will discuss the importance of attending to the lived curriculum of students and families. Lastly, I will speak to the significance of learning from and having Knowledge Keepers or Elders in schools.

Educators Teaching First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Histories and Cultures

Many teachers want to teach and share the cultures and histories of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit but often lack the background knowledge to do so. Laramée (2008) uncovered:

Historically, no one [having attended public schools] has been taught Aboriginal education and Aboriginal people themselves...not everyone knows what has happened in the past in the Aboriginal community because they [Aboriginal people] have been influenced by an education system that basically wrote them

off and stuck them in a corner and didn't want anybody to know anything about them. (p. 65)

Teaching from a Eurocentric point of view offers a one-sided perspective.

Laramee (2008) further examined how Indigenous ways of learning were grounded in the land and, in contrast, how the histories of Indigenous education were predominately "Eurocentric," specifically with the residential school process. She emphasized how this teaching was extremely damaging to Indigenous students and non-Indigenous students due to a lack of transparency of the events that have occurred as well as "den[ying] them access to a rich dimension of Canadian history and culture..." (p. 59).

Many teachers lack this knowledge about Canada's past to teach Indigenous cultures and histories. Harrison and Greenfield (2011) noted most educators presently teaching:

[Struggle] to define Aboriginal perspectives, opting for a gloss such as, 'knowledge about Aboriginal people and their past and culture' and 'respect', 'acceptance' and 'an awareness of culture' as 'adding an Aboriginal view across all [Key Learning Areas] by including information, and resources'. (p. 69)

Further to this, what was discovered is that "teachers were often developing Aboriginal perspectives in their programs as syllabus content," leading to teaching these perspectives as a "commodity" (Harrison & Greenfield, 2011, p. 69). Instead, these researchers propose that teachers need to "analyse what knowledge and perspectives are appropriate to include in the curriculum and what the pedagogy does to students in terms of their expectations and images and how they talk to Aboriginal people" (Harrison & Greenfield, 2011, p. 69). It is vital to ensure that Indigenous histories and cultural representations are

accurately presented. Even with good intentions, teachers may unknowingly teach a component inaccurately or culturally inappropriately. Donald (2013) discovered that most teachers "whatever their level of experience and subject-area focus- feel woefully unprepared to lead their students in meaningful consideration of Aboriginal perspectives" (p. 28).

Teachers must have supports and resources readily available to be able to follow the framework in the Teacher Quality Standards, "applying foundation knowledge about First Nations, Métis, and Inuit for the benefit of all students" (Alberta Education, 2018b, p. 6). Barry and Conlon (2003), in their study of teaching American Indigenous music from a "culturally appropriate perspective" (p. 21), note the importance of preparation and "equipping music teachers with clear teaching guidelines and dependable sources for obtaining teacher materials" (2003, p. 22).

Providing supports and resources, including connections to Knowledge Keepers and Elders, to assist teachers with following the Teaching Quality Standard (2018b) is what Lakey (2019) discusses in the model that Red Deer Public Schools First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Learning Services use "to provide curriculum service delivery and support to cover as many grades as possible, making as many connections as possible" (p. 33). This model focuses on collaboration with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Learning Services, teachers, and administration. In this model, "School personnel can approach First Nations, Métis and Inuit Learning Services with a question, a possible connection that they see or an opportunity for infusion" (Lakey, 2019, p. 33). When teachers propose the idea, work with Elders and Knowledge Keepers, it is then "developed, refined and delivered to students. Then it is kept in a cache to be shared with others who

might be interested" (Lakey, 2019, p. 33). The First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Learning Services also "create curriculum connections, focusing on areas where infusion is possible, and then approach teachers and ask them to pilot the ideas" (Lakey, 2019, p. 33). Harrison and Greenfield (2011) concluded that the following three approaches led to strong teaching practices in Indigenous education: "relationship to place, a strong culture of collaboration among the school and community and transition to school programs" (p. 71). These approaches avoided the "stereotypical representations that are often an effect of current pedagogies" (Harrison & Greenfield, 2011, p. 71). The methods listed focused on something that could be instilled into daily practice rather than a one-off event. This model demonstrates strong leadership and relationships to ensure that teachers gain confidence and are supported in teaching First Nations, Métis, and Inuit outcomes and histories with the consultation and guidance of Elders and Knowledge Keepers.

Attending to the Lived Curriculum of Students

Connelly & Clandinin (1988) reveal, "curriculum is something experienced in situations" (p. 6). These situations include emotions, intentions, reactions, purposes, perspectives, interactions of space and time between people, teachers and students, processes, and the environment. Hosting or attending a Powwow or having a Knowledge Keeper or Elder share their teachings with students provide an example of an experience that may be memorable to the learner. However, we need to ensure that these are not isolated events or experiences, but an integral part of the school culture and curriculum. Laramie (2008) revealed, "Aboriginal education should be moved to a place where it seen, heard, felt and lived across all areas of the learning environment and throughout the facets of their school's operations" (p. 68). By doing so, teachers will gain increased

knowledge, understanding, and confidence when teaching Indigenous education. It is much more than meeting the Teacher Quality Standards for our students. It is creating an experience with the intention of sharing Indigenous cultures and histories, which has a lasting effect and impact on teachers' and students' past, present, and future experiences.

Positive change can be built when the school represents "present life-life as real and vital to the child as that which he carries on in the home, in the neighborhood, or on the playground" (Dewey, 2004, p. 19). As a leader, I feel that my responsibility is to create learning opportunities that positions students alongside Mrs. Semeniuk, our Knowledge Keeper, and her lived experiences to give students a deeper understanding of Indigenous histories and cultures. As Dewey noted in his Pedagogical Creed, "education, therefore, is a process of living and not a preparation for future living" (2004, p. 19). In schools, as we work closely with communities, we need to present real-life opportunities to make a difference in a child's learning and attitude.

Walking Alongside Knowledge Keepers

In a recent conversation Knowledge Keeper, Mrs. Semeniuk had with Elder Grant Whitstone² (G. Whitstone, personal communication, April 18, 2021), he commented on the current role of Knowledge Keepers who work to maintain the teachings of ceremony and natural laws. Knowledge Keepers have immense wisdom pertaining to the tribe, universe, mother earth, and animals. He also shared the purpose of a Knowledge Keeper is to continue the cultural teachings, as times have changed and people's livelihoods have altered. He believes that young people seem to be less interested in their culture these days and fears it will start to disappear in time. However, he insists that our young people

² I was given permission by Elder Grant Whitstone to share these teachings in this research paper.

must be encouraged to continue the learnings and teachings of Indigenous people. If not, these lessons will most likely be forgotten and lost over the next 50 years. (G. Whitstone, personal communication, April 18, 2021). Sylvia McAdam (2015) further discusses the importance of keeping oral evidence alive:

These recorded events are 'passed from generation to generation and they have been validated to each generation in the chain; the result is that oral histories are 'enclothe[d] ...with a cloak of trustworthiness. The generational chain is maintained by individuals who have been taught since birth to remain diligent and accurate about events significant to the nation. (p. 41)

The stories and perspectives passed on by Knowledge Keepers and shared with students, staff, and the community help deepen our understanding of Indigenous peoples diverse cultures and histories. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (2010, as cited in Calgary Board of Education, 2021) states the importance of Knowledge Keepers within the school system as "someone who has earned a reputation for wisdom and spiritual knowledge," and their "contribution to education is enormous because they possess specialized knowledge about First Nations, Métis or Inuit history, society and spirituality" (p. 3). This enormous contribution of a Knowledge Keeper can be felt at Westglen School daily as we are guided in our understandings and teachings of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures and ways of knowing. Unfortunately, the reality is that most schools do not have the advantage of a Knowledge Keeper or an Elder onsite. Therefore, when we view present-day Indigenous representation in schools, it is often absent or lacking unless the school is specifically Indigenous focused. Dr. David Courchene further explains that:

The Knowledge Keepers are there to support those who want to make the journey to the land, to receive the intelligence of the land that can help create unity and define a path of peace. Re-educating ourselves must be paramount. We begin by teaching our children, modeled by Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous thought. If the young people are given the proper guidance and mentoring from the Knowledge Keepers, the grandmothers and the Elders who are connected to our way of life, they will fulfill their destiny to change the world. (Government of Canada; Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, 2020, para. 18)

Advocating for and placing significance on having a Knowledge Keeper on staff has encouraged my school community of teachers, students, and families, to engage further in First Nations, Métis, and Inuit programming. It is essential that stakeholders know that First Nation, Métis, Inuit programming is prioritized and valued at Westglen School.

The concept of Knowledge Keepers has not changed over time, but the work that Knowledge Keepers do has changed to some degree. Through their willingness to share their culture, combined with the value we place on these lessons, Knowledge Keepers are now expanding beyond the boundaries to include not only those of Indigenous backgrounds, but all those willing to respect and learn their cultural values. As a principal, it is my responsibility to "make a conscious decision to nurture Indigenous knowledge, its dignity, identity, and integrity by making a direct change in school philosophy, policy, pedagogy, and practice" (Battiste, 2013, p. 99). The insights obtained from exploring the history of Knowledge Keepers confirm the significance of having a

Knowledge Keeper on staff to gain deeper understandings and perspectives of Indigenous culture, which is vital to our progression in the Truth and Reconciliation process.

As principal of Westglen School, I have prioritized the involvement of a Knowledge Keeper sharing her experiences and stories as Mrs. Semeniuk passes on her treasured knowledge and wisdom. I emphasized this because it creates the most impactful experience for students, teachers, and families. Even though the stories the Knowledge Keeper shares with us are emotional for her at times, she informs us that it is a way of helping her heal. Her stories touch our minds and hearts with the work we need to put in, and what we need to acknowledge when we hear these stories, we recognize our responsibilities. McCaskill states, "to be effective in changing how students thought and acted, anti-racist education had to touch both the hearts and minds" (2005, p. 113).

As a leader, I strive to build capacity in myself and among the teaching staff by "creating and maintaining the necessary conditions, culture, and structures that facilitate learning and skill-orientated experiences and opportunities, ensuring interrelationships and synergy between all component parts" (Western and Northern Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Education, 2006, p. 75). Having a Knowledge Keeper guide us in the curriculum making alongside students creates the necessary conditions, relationships, and synergy sought out by the Truth and Reconciliation process. As well, the connections of the Knowledge Keeper with the students and staff provide visibility to the Indigenous cultures that would not be present to the same extent without her. It is a starting point of an "ethical space" described by Ermine (2007) and Donald (2009). A Knowledge Keeper leading our Indigenous learnings by sharing her experiences within our professional learning community is of vast importance. She is an integral part of the school

community and the curriculum we compose together. I am reminded of the valuable work she conducts with children and teachers as Donald (2016) states:

Wicihitowin refers to the life-giving energy that is generated when people face each other as relatives and build trusting relationships by connecting with others in respectful ways. In doing so, we demonstrate that we recognize one another as fellow human beings and work hard to put respect and love at the forefront of our interactions. (p. 10)

The strong relationships Mrs. Semeniuk has formed with all members of staff have impacted her ability to connect with everyone in a significant way.

Methodology

This study proposes to share my journey as an administrator coming alongside my school community. As a teacher leader and researcher, I strive to inquire into the experiences of students in an elementary school setting that works to honour Indigenous learnings and teachings. Unique to our school community is that we work closely with a Knowledge Keeper (a permanent member of the school community) who helps provide enhanced learning and teaching opportunities related to Indigenous knowledge. As the principal of Westglen School (the research location), I am aligned with the Leadership Quality Standard (LQS), which strives to “enabl[e] all school staff and students to gain a knowledge and understanding of, and respect for, the histories, cultures, languages, contributions, perspectives, and experiences and contemporary contexts of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit” (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 4).

Being a school principal, there is often little time to reflect on the collective impact of the work that we (teachers/staff/students) engage in as a school community.

The study provides intentional spaces to examine in greater depth, the ways that I, positioned as a teacher leader/principal, can better support students and teachers/staff, in particular, related to this competency of building and applying foundational knowledge (Alberta Education, 2018a). As part of this learning, the study provides spaces and opportunities for student participants in grades 4, 5, and 6 to share their experiences and learning from Indigenous teachings, cultural events, and overall programming through focus group conversations. The data collected informs my practice as a teacher leader who is committed to attending to the needs and experiences of students and teachers to grow as a school community, specifically related to this Teaching Quality Standard of “supporting the learning experiences of all students by using resources that accurately reflect and demonstrate the strength and diversity of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit” (2018b, p. 6).

This research is guided by a narrative inquiry approach. Narrative inquiry is "the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 477). When thinking about my experiences as a learner and as a new administrator, the autobiographical narrative beginnings I shared shaped the direction I have taken with my leadership and research; within these stories are the personal, practical, and social justifications. I am drawn to narrative inquiry as it works to attend closely to experiences. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) note:

People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which [their] experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. (p. 477)

When looking at First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, much of how they share their past histories is guided by oral language, through stories shared from one generation to the next. "The places we've known, the bodies we inhabit, the pasts we've inherited, the futures we have dreamed of- all of these building blocks of identity are known to us only through the stories that give them shape" (McCall et al., 2017, p. 13). As King reveals "the truth about stories is that that's all we are" (2003, p. 2). Positioning myself alongside students on this journey allows me to explore our experiences relationally as we work towards the Truth and Reconciliation process.

The Research Process

To begin the research process alongside students, I first submitted an application to Concordia University of Edmonton's Research Ethics Board and received approval in July 2021. With the support of my supervisor, we then submitted a Research Project Submission to *Edmonton Public School Division's Research and Innovation for Student Learning* for review. I received approval in November 2021 to proceed with the research at the school where I am principal. However, in order to conduct the research due to my position as principal, I had to delegate the responsibility of conducting focus group conversations with students to a volunteer assistant. The volunteer assistant, Ms. Van Vo, was under the guidance and supervision of my supervisor, Dr. Simmee Chung. While the volunteer assistant was conducting focus group conversations with the students, the Knowledge Keeper, Mrs. Semeniuk, a trusted adult, was also in the room to support the students. To support this research, I successfully applied for a student research grant; this enabled me to hire a transcriptionist to transcribe the focus group conversations. Before

sharing the transcriptions with me, the transcriptionist took out identifying students' names to provide further anonymity.

The research took place at Westglen School, a kindergarten to grade 6 school, in the heart of the Westmount community, in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. I am presently the principal of Westglen and have been for the past seven years. This is where focus group research conversations occurred in the 2021-2022 school year with 20 students who volunteered to participate in grades 4, 5, and 6. This research was supported by a Student Research Grant awarded by Concordia University of Edmonton.

Obtaining Consent and Procedures

Participants in the student focus group conversations were minors; therefore, consent was required by the students who wished to participate and their parents/guardians. In order to conduct this research, I had teachers in grades 4, 5, and 6 distribute the *Information Letter and Consent Form for Parents/Guardians* (see Appendix 1) and the *Information Letter and Consent Form for Students* (see Appendix 2). In addition, teachers collected the returned forms and presented them to the office in a sealed envelope to be given to the volunteer assistant. As noted in the information letters, student participation in the focus group was strictly voluntary. Once I had received written consent from both the parents/guardians and students, focus group conversations occurred during the lunch hour. In addition, consent from student participants was asked for prior to beginning focus group conversations and throughout the research process. Student participants in the focus group conversations had the right to withdraw at any time during the study without consequence or explanation. Students who expressed

interest in the study were informed orally and in writing (via the consent form) that they may withdraw from the study at any time.

As an extra precaution, I delegated the responsibility of interviewing the students to a volunteer assistant, Ms. Van Vo, who holds a Bachelor of Education Degree and a Master's of Education Degree; this volunteer was approved by my supervisor, Dr. Simmee Chung, who helped oversee the focus group conversations with students. As noted earlier, due to my positionality as the principal, I was not present in the room during the focus group conversations with students. The volunteer assistant reminded student participants that their participation was strictly voluntary. They did not have to answer any questions they did not want to answer; they could also stop participating or leave the focus group conversation at any time by simply informing the volunteer assistant. The parents/guardians also had the ability to withdraw their child from this study at any time by letting the volunteer assistant or supervisor, Dr. Simmee Chung know either by email or in person.

Before focus group conversations started, the volunteer assistant was also required to sign a confidentiality agreement and have completed the Vulnerable Sector Police Check as per Edmonton Public School Division procedures and guidelines. With the consent of the focus group members/students, the sessions were audio-recorded to ensure an accurate transcript of the conversations. Following the focus group conversations, I had a transcriptionist transcribe each focus group conversation. The transcriptions were completed and shared with me with pseudonyms in place to ensure confidentiality.

Each focus group conversations lasted between 40-45 minutes over the course of one lunchtime at Westglen School in the library, where participants could safely physically distance themselves. There were five focus group conversations held with a maximum of five students in each group. The Knowledge Keeper, Mrs. Semeniuk, was also part of the focus group conversations as an additional adult in the room to support the students. Below are the focus group questions asked of students.

Focus Group Questions

The volunteer assistant attended to the student's experiential experiences through focus group conversations. The following questions were explored:

- Do you have a special memory here at Westglen that helped you learn more about Indigenous peoples and their cultures? Why is this a special memory?
- We have held a Powwow for the past three years now. Can you share with me what you have learned?
- To find out more information about Indigenous peoples, what do you do?
- Does anyone here participate in the lunch hour Awasisak club? Can you share something you have learned in the club?
- What are you still wondering or want to learn more about related to this topic?
How can the principal, the teachers, and the Knowledge Keeper help make students' learning better around this topic?

Focus Group Dynamics

The opportunity to participate in the focus groups was made available to all genders and ethnicities with student participants from grades 4, 5, and 6 at Westglen

School. The age range of participants was from 9 to 11 years of age, with most students either being 8 or 9 years old. The participant's number of years attending Westglen School was between 3 to 7 years, with thirteen out of twenty students attending Westglen School for 5 and 6 years. It is essential to share this data as it directly relates to the students' understandings and experiences with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit programming at Westglen School over time and in relationship with Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and communities. All students participating in the focus group conversations experienced at least one year of Westglen's First Nations, Métis, and Inuit programming prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic two years ago.

Student Participants – Demographic

Table 1

Students participating in Focus Group Conversations by Grade

Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6
10	7	3

Table 2

Students Participating in Focus Group Conversations by age at Westglen School

8-year-old	9-year-old	10-year-old	11-year-old	12-year-old	13-year-old
0	8	9	3	0	0

Table 3

Students Participating in Focus Group Conversations by the Number of School Years Attending Westglen School

1 Year	2 Years	3 Years	4 Years	5 Years	6 Years	7 Years
0	0	2	3	7	6	2

Table 4

Students Participating in Focus Group Conversations by Self-declared Cultural Background at Westglen School

Indigenous	European	African	Unknown	Australian & European	Indigenous & European	Ukrainian & European
2	5	2	6	1	2	2

Five student participants identified as European or a European mix, while two students identified as African, six were unaware of their cultural background, two were Indigenous, two were Indigenous/European mix, two were Ukrainian/European mix, and one was Australian/European mix. It was strictly optional for students to share their background or heritage. Twenty students in total participated in the focus group conversations.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit programming that students, staff, and the community had become accustomed to at Westglen School was adjusted to follow COVID-19 protocols. However, the Knowledge Keeper was still able to assist teachers with programming advice and guidance. Another loss to

Indigenous programming due to the pandemic was the temporary postponement of the Awasisak Club which Mrs. Semeniuk would lead during lunch hours. This was typically an opportunity for her to share Indigenous stories, crafts, food, activities, and language lessons with students in grades 1 to 6.

Furthermore, during the 2020- 2021 school year, we were unable to host round dances, in-person Powwows, and the Kairos Blanket Exercises due to COVID-19 restrictions. All of these experiences had become part of the foundation of Westglen School. However, under our Knowledge Keeper's guidance, perseverance, and organization, Westglen School was able to host a virtual Powwow and continue to weave in teachings across our curriculum.

Findings- Student Focus Group Conversations

As relayed to me by the volunteer assistant, Mrs. Van Vo, and the Knowledge Keeper, Mrs. Semeniuk, students participating in the focus group conversations were excited to share their experiences and the impact of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit programming at Westglen School. When reviewing the transcriptions of the five focus group conversations, four key threads emerged- Connections with family; The impact of cultural events; The love for a Knowledge Keeper and Awasisak Club; The importance of student engagement and ideas to increase understanding. As noted, the actual names of students were not used in order to protect their anonymity and confidentiality both in the transcription and in the findings where I share quotes and key ideas of the students.

Thread One -- Connections with Family

A common thread that emerged from the students' focus group conversations was they indicated how their parents' involvement increased their level of understanding and

learnings of the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit histories and cultures studied at Westglen School. In essence, the curriculum making that occurs both at school (with teachers and the Knowledge Keeper) and at home (with their families) intersected and strengthened their learning. As Rosiek and Clandinin (2016) share:

Students' families, defined broadly within temporal span, geographic location and cultural diversity, offer rich sources of knowledge as curriculum resources. When families' lives are brought into curriculum making, a richness that spans intergenerational time, place, and relationships is made visible. (p. 301)

I share below some of the experiences of the students,

- Dallas, a grade 5 student, revealed that his mother works at a museum. She often teaches him about the Indigenous artifacts at the museum, which has extended his learning from Westglen (December 7, 2021).
- Jenny, a grade 5 student, stated that her mother assisted at a food booth at the Westglen Powwow. She felt that having her mother present made the Powwow more special and memorable as they could experience it together (December 7, 2021).
- Robin, a grade 4 student, expressed that her mother also attended the Westglen Powwow. She cherished the moment at the Powwow when the audience was invited to come up and dance, and she was able to experience this with her mother. (December 10, 2021).
- Jake, a grade 5 student, discussed that his mother works at a library. She is constantly bringing new books home to support his learning. Recently she brought home a book entitled *The Barren Grounds* by David Robinson, a well-known

Indigenous Canadian author. It is now one of his favorite books; literature and conversations with his mother assist him further with understanding Indigenous history learned from Westglen (December 6, 2021).

- Mary, a grade 6 student, shared that her mother watched the virtual Westglen Powwow at home. Later on, when Mary came home from school, she discussed the virtual Powwow with her mother. She felt it was nice that her mother and her could watch it together again at home to ask her mother specific questions to increase her understanding of Powwows (December 2, 2021).

Looking across the transcripts and listening closely to what the students were sharing reinforced how parents are essential learning partners. By including them in the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit experiences we share with their children/students at Westglen School, we increased the impact beyond our classroom places. As a principal, I am reminded that I must ensure that I "pursu[e] opportunities and engaging in practices that facilitate reconciliation with the school community" (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 4). Alongside my Assistant Principal and teachers, we have intentionally invited parents, families, and the community at large to cultural events as well as experiential activities throughout the school year. Aligned with Alberta Education (2018a), we strive to "establish opportunities and expectations for the positive involvement of parents/guardians in supporting student learning" (p. 4). Parents are a vital part of a child's learning experience and our school community.

Thread Two -- The Impact of Cultural Events

Learning comes to life when experiencing cultural events such as a Traditional Powwow. After the Kairos Blanket Exercise and the notable impact it had on me, I

reflected on how I could create an opportunity for students, families, staff, and the community to further their understanding of Indigenous culture. In 2018, Westglen School was one of the first elementary schools in the Edmonton Public School Division to host a Powwow. This was an enormous undertaking for Mrs. Semeniuk and the Westglen staff. When making spaces for cultural events and welcoming community, a message is sent to students, staff, families, and the community that we value Indigenous culture, we want to learn more, share with others, and create a space to do so. Traditional Powwows allow all stakeholders to witness a ceremony and celebration of many Indigenous nations' songs, dances, and regalia.

In the focus group conversations, many students indicated that one of their special memories at Westglen School that helped them learn more about Indigenous peoples was participating in the Westglen in-person and virtual Powwows. Lori, a student in grade 4, stated, "I like Powwows a lot. I also like the regalia they're wearing, and I like to see their culture in it" (December 10, 2021). Lori also shared that the Jingle Dancer was one of her favorites. She loved the blue regalia they were wearing and the sounds coming from the regalia while they were dancing (December 10, 2021). While Jenny, a grade 5 student, expressed that she understands that the different dances represent and symbolize different things. "They don't all mean the same thing" (December 7, 2021).

To deepen the students' understanding of Powwows, a Powwow resource guide was created by Kevin John, a well-respected Indigenous leader, and Mrs. Semeniuk's (Knowledge Keeper's) brother. This guide was shared with all participants in advance and explained the historical significance of the regalia and dances, along with corresponding pictures. For example, in the Pihewisimowin (Prairie Chicken Dance

Ceremony), "Dancers take their place in a circle formed around two fires. They move slowly around the circle while mimicking the actions of a prairie chicken" (John, 2018, p. 4). Even more, the guide describes the etiquette and overall experience of a Powwow. For example:

You may hear the announcer say the next dance is a special. This is a particular dance chosen by individuals or families that have requested a special. Often, this is done in memory of a member of their family who has passed. It is common for this to be done for five years after the death of a loved one. (John, 2018, p. 1)

The depth of the experience would be overlooked if the Powwow guide and teachings were not provided. The Knowledge Keeper ensures she collaborates with teachers to help educate students on the historical traditions and meanings behind this event. Even though the students enjoy the elaborate visuals of the dance and regalia, we recognize that rituals associated with Powwows are deeper and more significant than these forefront cultural representations. Caitlin, a grade 5 student, stated:

I really love Powwows, the real-life ones, when we would go outside, especially because our parents could come and a lot of schools could come. So, it was like maybe for the people who don't have the power to make that happen, they can still come and see this. (December 7, 2021)

One of Jenny's favorite things during the Powwows was the opportunity to go inside a teepee in the schoolyard. She reveals, "it was really awesome" (Grade 5 student, December 7, 2021). Heather, a grade 6 student, experience was similar:

In grade 3, we did a Powwow. So, we all went outside, and there was a teepee, and then there was a circle. All of the classes got to sit in different parts of the

circle, and Indigenous people would come in and do really cool dances. It felt good because I was like part of something, and it was really fun. (December 2, 2021)

Finley and Mary, grade 6 students, discussed the significance of the Powwow drumming. Mary stated, "the beat of the drum is very important," while Finley shared, "they do it like the heartbeat" (December 2, 2021). Mark, a grade 4 student, also loved the drumming and singing and was excited to share, "the drummers even translated a bit of the singing" (December 8, 2021). While Heather, a grade 6 student, revealed, "I remember at the beginning of the Powwow, when everybody like first got in a big circle, the speaker, he taught us to say, 'Hi, how are you?' in his Indigenous language" (December 2, 2021).

Interestingly, Lilia, a grade 4 student, indicated, "It has been a while since I've seen a Powwow" because of COVID. However, she could still recall the experience as it was meaningful to her. She shared that "the dancers looked creative" (December 8, 2021). Joyce, also a grade 4 student, liked the part where she saw the Knowledge Keeper's son enter the arbor to dance. She stated, "He showed like the full-on regalia. It was like, it was like blue and yellow, and all these different colors and it had like a feather, and he looked like he loved dancing" (December 8, 2021). It was memorable for her to see someone dancing at the Powwow who is related to the Knowledge Keeper.

Reflecting on the stories the students shared, I recognize that having a Knowledge Keeper on staff enabled the students and teachers to engage with community in meaningful and memorable ways. The connections Mrs. Semeniuk has built and shared within and across communities allowed us to host over 200 Indigenous participants in the

Powwow, comprised of Elders, dancers, drummers, and the Powwow emcee. In addition, Elders provided Indigenous teachings inside the teepees for students to learn more about their traditions and culture. The Knowledge Keeper worked tirelessly with teachers and staff to lead, plan, and organize these immensely successful events. Events such as these are crucial in honouring and showcasing Indigenous culture to students, staff, families, and the community as part of Truth and Reconciliation.

During the COVID-19 outbreak, the Knowledge Keeper and I collaborated intensively to ensure that students could once again experience a Powwow in some form. We were determined to produce a plan to safely share the Powwow with all stakeholders. The Knowledge Keeper connected with her Indigenous community to inquire if they would record themselves explaining the cultural significance of their traditions, along with their dancing, drumming, and storytelling. Fortunately, numerous Indigenous people participated in sharing their culture, allowing us to create a Westglen School virtual Powwow site.

Focus group students discussed that during the virtual Powwow, they were able to see other traditions of a Powwow that they did not get to view at the in-person Powwow. Jeff, a grade 4 student, shared, "I remember the videos of people smudging with the smoke. Yeah, it was really interesting and cool" (December 8, 2021). Dallas, a grade 5 student, remembered the video of the pipe ceremony talk by Elder Philip Campiou. His favorite part was where he spoke about the skull of a wolf (December 7, 2021). Kyle, a grade 5 student, excitedly shared that his favorite part of the virtual Powwow was the Fancy Shawl Dancer, Shirley Hill, and her friend Lemon Bear. The Fancy Shawl Dancer taught Lemon Bear to hoop dance (December 7, 2021). While Jenny, also a grade 5

student, recalled the hoop dance of another Indigenous person on the virtual Powwow site, "I really love the hoop dance. It was like 16 hoops! I figured out how to put like, two hoops on each of my arms and that was very hard" (December 7, 2021).

A welcome unexpected outcome of creating this virtual Powwow event was the ability to reach more students, parents, teachers, and community members than we expected. We had over 40 schools participate, ranging in age from kindergarten to Grade 12 and beyond, within two school boards and one university. As a result, we proudly connected with well over 24,000 students.

Thread Three -- The Love for a Knowledge Keeper and Awasisak Club

Another essential thread is how having a Knowledge Keeper as a colleague that helps creates meaningful connections and increases Indigenous cultural awareness with students at Westglen School. One of Mrs. Semeniuk's initiatives was starting a lunch hour gathering place for students entitled Awasisak Club, which translates as "children" from the Cree language. Students explore Indigenous culture through crafts, cooking, and stories with this club. All students were welcome to join. Unfortunately, during the last two years of COVID-19, the club was unable to run due to students not being able to mix cohorts. The club initially had twenty students, and before COVID-19, it had approximately one hundred students in all grade levels, equating to over 30% of the school population. It became so popular the Knowledge Keeper began offering two different sessions per week, separating the younger and older students.

Justine, a grade 4 student, vividly remembers during Awasisak Club from a few years ago, "we used to make bannock and dolls" (December 8, 2021). While Finley, a grade 6 student, explained the "Knowledge Keeper made a club, and we would do

beadwork, make bannock and all sorts of things" (December 2, 2021). Lori, a grade 4 student, shared that during Awasisak Club, the Knowledge Keeper would read us stories. One story she recalls, in particular, was an Inuit story where the Knowledge Keeper had little dolls that looked like the images in the book (December 10, 2021).

Mary, a grade 6 student, revealed that having a Knowledge Keeper at the school share her culture is important. She stated:

Having someone that actually is like, that has had those experiences and is actually able to share them. And that has, like, um grown up with that culture is easier to learn about that stuff. If you have someone that's known a lot about it. (December 2, 2021)

James, a grade 5 student, also indicated that a few years ago, because of having a Knowledge Keeper at the school, we were able to ask the Knowledge Keepers' mother, who is an Elder, questions about her experience as a residential school survivor (December 6, 2021). This was an exceptional opportunity for him as most students may never have the chance to experience this from an Elder, and because of the Knowledge Keeper, we were able to video the conversation to share with our students and families.

Thread Four -- The Importance of Student Engagement and Ideas to Increase Understanding

The last thread discovered throughout the student focus group conversations was that many in-school activities led to an increased understanding of Indigenous culture. As principal, I am consistently engaged in "pursuing opportunities and engaging in practices to facilitate reconciliation within the school community" (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 4). Students mentioned the activities they enjoyed participating in, discussed what else

they still want to know more about, and suggested new potential initiatives to create an increased understanding of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit history, language, and culture.

- Jake, a grade 5 student, mentioned, “when we tied ribbons on the fence, to honour all of the kids who had died in the residential school” was impactful for him (December 6, 2021).
- James, a grade 5 student, stated, "I would like more stuff about like, Indigenous people, more classes" (December 6, 2021). He further revealed that my teacher shared "she didn't know about residential schools until later on in junior high school and high school" (December 6, 2021).
- Joyce, a grade 4 student, identified that she would like to "learn more about the language and more about like the dancing, the music, and the food" (December 8, 2021).
- Kim, a grade 4 student, agreed with Joyce but also wants to learn "more about the traditions and stuff" (December 8, 2021).
- Jenny, a grade 4 student, discussed how she "wants to learn like all the different ceremonies the Indigenous people have, and for all the different reasons" (December 7, 2021).
- Caitlin, a grade 4 student, revealed that "I would definitely want to learn more about their dances, and their languages because I think things like that are very interesting because if I were able to read their language, that would be pretty awesome" (December 7, 2021).
- Jake, a grade 5 student, explained:

There are so many different types of Indigenous people. I just want to know every single one. Like it is hard to say, but I kind of want to go in-depth of every single one of their cultures, traditions, compare differences, see all the details, and maybe find similarities. (December 6, 2021)

- Mark, a grade 4 student, shared that he would like to hear once a week on the school morning announcements important information about Indigenous people (December 8, 2021).
- Jeff, a grade 4 student, suggested that instead of having a monthly hot dog day, we could have a bannock day (December 8, 2021).
- Robin, a grade 4 student, voiced that we should have an Indigenous week, and classes would share what they have learned (December 10, 2021).
- Jenny, a grade 4 student, wanted to have "more representative days like Orange Shirt day" throughout the entire school year (December 7, 2022).
- Jeff, a grade 4 student, wished to have a specific subject around learning an Indigenous language. For example, he stated, "we could have French one day, and then like, have a day we could learn an Indigenous language" (December 8, 2021).
- Jenny, a grade 4 student, revealed that Indigenous culture is super interesting. She shared, "It's such a big part of our past and probably our future as well" (December 7, 2021).
- Dallas, a grade 4 student, mentioned that he "wants to teach people about my knowledge of Indigenous people, and I want to learn more about what they have to say" (December 7, 2021).

Taking the time to sit, ask questions and listen to students, I am learning a lot about what has made a difference in their learning. Not only do you grasp whether the work we are doing is meaningful and is making an impact, but we get to walk alongside their experience. In addition, they are helping to plan further initiatives and school actions. I turn to Battiste, who tells me that, “To effect reform, educators need to make conscious decisions to nurture Indigenous knowledge, dignity, identity, and integrity by making a direct change in school philosophy, pedagogy, and practice” (2013, p. 66).

So Why? Who cares?: Furthering the Journey

In furthering my journey, I return to the personal, practical, and social justifications when reflecting on the stories shared by the students in this research.

Personal Justification

From my start as a principal, the first time I experienced the Kairos Blanket Exercise changed my life forever. It was not only eye-opening, but it began my lifelong journey of understanding and wanting to know more about the real history of the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people from their perspectives. It was the start of unlearning the Eurocentric ways taught in my youth and wanting to share this knowledge with our students, teachers, families, and community. As a leader, I have always placed importance on First Nations, Métis, and Inuit programming, and I am continuing my journey of learning and sharing more. Stonechild (2016) stated:

There are four dimensions of learning: body, heart, mind, and spirit. Development is a lifelong task. Education must focus on building positive and respectful relations. Respect involves taking the time to analyze, to evaluate, and to be aware, and is a powerful principle of learning, Mosôm told me. (pp. 55-56)

The Kairos Blanket Exercise respectfully connected to my four dimensions of learning, hitting my heart the hardest. This is why I have placed such importance on learning the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit histories and cultures so that students become aware of their true history and be part of the road to reconciliation. As I slow down and walk alongside my colleague, Mrs. Semeniuk, and the elementary-aged students in our school, I have learned the importance of listening deeply to the students' learning and experiences with Indigenous histories and cultures. I think about how we might move forward with students' stories and their ideas in mind to continue to foster welcoming spaces for the benefit of all students, Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

I know that I need to continue to prioritize and make visible the need for intentional spaces and teachings of Indigenous learning. I recognize that not every school has the ability to have a Knowledge Keeper as a colleague and member of the school community. This reminds me of the importance of collaborating and sharing our experiences with other schools so that we may collectively provide richer experiences for students across the division. Aligning with the division strategic plan "to support a Division culture that promotes Truth and Reconciliation through the acknowledgment of the impact of colonization and intergenerational loss of language, culture, identity, and relationships on children, families, and communities" (EPSB, 2020, p. 1). Hearing the impact on students' lives further inspires me that we are all part of the journey to Reconciliation. The Leadership Quality Standard (2018a) defines reconciliation as,

The process and goal of creating societal change through a fundamental shift in thinking and attitudes, increasing intercultural understanding to build a better

society through learning about First Nations, Métis, and Inuit perspectives and experiences, including residential schools and treaties. (p. 2)

Reconciliation is the starting point for schools to make fundamental changes.

Practical Justification

By having Knowledge Keepers or Elders as colleagues on staff, fundamental significance is placed on these essential roles to support students, teachers, families, and the community to engage further in First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures and knowledges. While it may not be possible to have a Knowledge Keeper or Elder working in every school, the idea of Knowledge Keepers and Elders working closely together with administrators and teachers across a division benefits everyone, especially students. As Battiste (2013) stated, “Canadian educational institutions should view Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and workers who are competent in Aboriginal languages and knowledge as living educational treasures” (p. 185). These treasures support the learning within the schools. Stonechild (2016) discussed, “Elders have always been the guardians of First Nations cultural and spiritual heritage. They inherit a traumatic legacy in which the foundations of their societies have been historically undermined and shattered” (p. 43). Having our students listen to Elder Helen John, our Knowledge Keeper’s mother, discuss her experiences and trauma of being at a residential school opens the eyes, minds, and hearts of our students, teachers, and families. We are fortunate to be able to learn from her. We are following the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action, Education for Reconciliation by “building student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect” (Truth & Reconciliation Commission, 2015, p. 7). When and where possible, schools should invite Elders and

Knowledge Keepers to share their culture, wisdom, and support to guide the learning of the students, staff, and community.

Being a principal, this research reinforces the importance of creating experiential experiences as part of the curriculum making in schools. I understand that we are all curriculum makers. Rosiek and Clandinin (2016) remind me that "everything happening in students' schooling experience potentially contributes to their habits of being..." (p. 297). I see the treasured experiences the Knowledge Keeper has given the students, staff, and families through her teachings and sharing her culture. Some of these curriculum-making experiences include hosting a Powwow, leading Indigenous lessons in classes, and organizing the lunch-hour student Awasisak Club. I want my students, staff, and families to have a deeper understanding of Indigenous culture so they can recognize the importance of the Truth and Reconciliation process. I have now placed my "Carry-All" bag in my office as a daily reminder of my love for school at an early age and the crucial work that I do, and honoured to be a part of as an administrator. All these rich experiences and teachings we compose alongside Knowledge Keepers, Elders, and community, I hope will be a part of every students' "Carry-All" bags.

Social Justification

To continue the Truth and Reconciliation process, we must learn more about Indigenous cultures and histories. Elders and Knowledge Keepers play a significant role in this process. Big Head stated:

The Elders of our time are the heart of cultural existence. A sad reality is that our Elders will not be with us forever. However, inviting and having Elders share

their knowledge is one way of ensuring that their stories, songs, teachings, and wisdom are kept alive for many generations to come. (2011, p. 5)

With the haunting past of Indian Residential schools coming to light yet again, we must face these findings and prepare ourselves for where this journey may lead. We owe this to the Indigenous people. As administrators, teachers, and human beings, we must assist in bringing about real change. Our responsibility is to acknowledge and remember the past while working towards change and progressing on this Truth and Reconciliation journey.

I believe leading by example is crucial, and one must "talk the walk" (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 1). In addition to prioritizing the Knowledge Keeper and the immeasurable value she brings, I learn from her. With this knowledge and collaboration, our school community is guided through actions and not just words. I hope that these learnings resulting from this research will shape and further influence practices and divisional policies. As Fullan & Quinn note, "Every action leaders take sends ripples through their organizations" (2016, p. 49). In the spirit of Reconciliation, we must strive for cultural unity and collaboration to enrich the lives of students, staff, and the school community.

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Appendix 1

Information Letter for Parents/Guardians

Research title: A Principal's Journey: A Study into the Impact of Weaving Indigenous Knowledges Alongside Students in an Elementary School Setting

Research Investigator:

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My name is Cory MacTaggart, and I am the principal of Westglen School. Currently, I am also a graduate student at Concordia University of Edmonton in the Masters of Educational Leadership program. I would like to invite your child to participate in a study.

What is the study?

My study aims to attend to the experiences of students in an elementary school setting which works to honour Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing. I want to hold small Focus Groups run by a Volunteer Assistant, Mrs. Vo, where children can reflect on and share their experiences as we strive to provide enriched learning and teaching opportunities related to this topic. Our Knowledge Keeper, Mrs. Semeniuk, will be part of the focus group conversations.

Require Consent from BOTH Parent/Guardian and Child

If your child is interested in having a conversation with the Volunteer Assistant, Mrs. Vo and our Knowledge Keeper, Mrs. Semeniuk, in a small Focus Group (with 3-6 other students from their class), then you (the

parent/guardian) will need to provide consent by signing the form attached. Your child will also need to sign and return the consent form to their classroom teacher.

What are Focus Groups?

A Focus Group is usually a small group of people who talk and share their ideas and feelings on a certain subject or topic. It is very important that people in a Focus Group feel comfortable and safe to share their ideas with others in the group. What is shared by students in this group needs to be respected and kept confidential. We want to honour all members of the Focus Group.

Who will be in the Focus Group study?

The Focus Groups will be made with 3-6 student participants from students in grades 4,5, and 6. If more than 18 students wish to participate, they will be selected randomly in a draw.

What will happen in the Focus Group discussion?

During the Focus Group discussions, children in the small group will be asked to reflect/share some of their experiences around the events and teachings with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities at Westglen School. They can also skip or not answer questions that they do not wish to answer.

Here is a sample question that may be asked of the group: Do you have a special memory here at Westglen that helped you learn more about Indigenous peoples and their cultures? Why is this a special memory?

Where and when will the study take place?

The discussion will be conducted by a Volunteer Assistant and occur in the library for 30-45-minute sessions over the course of two lunch periods with our Knowledge Keeper, Mrs. Semeniuk present. A third meeting will be facilitated if the time is required and the students wish to continue to participate. Your child will be able to eat lunch and engage in discussions at the same time. The children will also be able to physically distance themselves in accordance with any COVID-19 guidelines at the time.

Risks and Benefits:

The relationship of benefits to risk of participation in the proposed research project is not applicable. There is no risk of participation to your child in this proposed research project as it is completely voluntary.

The psychological risks associated with the Focus Groups discussion are minimal as they are no greater than those students may encounter within the classroom. However, if students do experience great emotion during and/or after participating in the Focus Group

discussion, they will be able to talk to the Knowledge Keeper, Mrs. Semeniuk or School Counsellor, Mrs. Lastiwka Durling, for support.

Your Child's Rights:

Your child has the right to stop their participation in the Focus Group conversation at any time; they also may skip questions, or have their data removed up to the time of the submission of this final paper. Your child can inform the Volunteer Assistant, or Knowledge Keeper, Mrs. Semeniuk, if they want to stop participating at any point during the Focus Group discussion. Quotes from your child may be used in the writing of this study. However, pseudonyms (fake names) will be used in place of your child's real name in any of the written work including final paper, presentations, and possible publications. Only the Volunteer Assistant, researcher (Cory MacTaggart), supervisor (Dr. Simmee Chung), will have access to the transcribed conversations.

This plan has been reviewed by the *Concordia University of Edmonton Research Ethics Board Guidelines for Research with Human Participants* and is found to adhere to ethical guidelines.

If you have any questions or require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact Cory MacTaggart (cmactagg@student.concordia.ab.ca) or Dr. Simmee Chung (simmee.chung@concordia.ab.ca).

Thank you so much for your interest in this study!

Warm regards,

Mr. Cory MacTaggart

Parent/Guardian Consent Form

Project title: A Principal's Journey: A Study into the Impact of Weaving Indigenous Knowledges Alongside Students in an Elementary School Setting.

Please initial each line below.

I _____ have read the information letter and understand the presented conditions and expectations for my child who is in grade 4 to 6 at Westglen School.

I _____ understand his/her participation is voluntary, and my child may withdraw from the Focus Group Discussion at any time.

I _____ understand that if my child wishes to participate, he/she/they also needs to give consent by completing the **Child Consent Form**.

I _____ understand that the Focus Group Discussions that my child will participate in will be recorded and later transcribed.

I _____ understand that the Focus Group Discussions will be run by a Volunteer Assistant who has had a Vulnerable Sector Police Check.

NOTE: Due to the limited number of spots in this study, a random draw will be made and student participants will be notified by the Volunteer Assistant if selected.

I give consent for my child to participate in the study, *A Principal's Journey: A Study into the Impact of Weaving Indigenous Knowledges Alongside Students in an Elementary School Setting.*

Name of child

Homeroom

Name of parent

Signature

Date

*Please have your child **RETURN** this **Parent/Guardian Consent Form** to your child's teacher if they are interested in participating*

Appendix 2

Information Letter for Students

Dear Grade 4, 5, and 6 students,

Hi, this is Principal MacTaggart writing to you. Did you know that I am also a student like you? Right now, I am a graduate student completing a Master's degree at Concordia University of Edmonton.

I am looking for student participants/volunteers to help me with a research project. I hope to have students share their experiences and learnings about First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures and other Indigenous teachings at Westglen School.

So, what would your participation involve? It includes being in a small Focus Group where I would have another trusted adult (Volunteer Assistant) ask you and some other students from your grade to reflect and share your experiences around this topic. There are no right or wrong answers, as we want to hear and learn more about your experiences. I, principal MacTaggart will not be in the room but the Knowledge Keeper (Mrs. Semeniuk) will be in the room if you want to leave the Focus Group at any time and talk to her about your feelings.

Sadly, we wish we could speak to all the students in Focus Groups but we only have 18 spots available. If there are a lot of students interested in participating, we will hold a random draw to select participants/students.

First, I need the 2 permission/consent forms completed by you (**Student Consent Form**) and your parent/guardian (**Parent/Guardian Consent Form**). Please return these 2 forms to your teacher by November 25th if you are interested in participating.

How much time will it take? The Focus Group discussions will take place over two lunch hours in our library. A third meeting will occur if the time is required and you wish to continue to participate. We will have a Volunteer Assistant lead the Focus Group with the Knowledge Keeper (Mrs. Semeniuk) present. You will eat lunch together and have a conversation. You will be physically distanced from each other. At any time, you may stop participating in the discussion for any reason. You may skip over any question you do not want to answer. To stop participating at any time, you can just let the Volunteer Assistant or the Knowledge Keeper (Mrs. Semeniuk) know. Your parents/guardians can also email if you do not wish to participate any more.

Thank you for considering participating in the Focus Group conversations. We are excited to hear and learn more about your experiences! Have a great day.

Warm regards,

Mr. MacTaggart

Consent Form for Students

Project title: A Principal's Journey: A Study into the Impact of Weaving Indigenous Knowledges Alongside Students in an Elementary School Setting.

Please initial each line below.

I _____ have read the information letter and understand the expectations of participating in a Focus Group discussion with other students, the Volunteer Assistant and the Knowledge Keeper (Mrs. Semeniuk).

I _____ understand my participation is voluntary and I may leave the Focus Group Discussion at any time I want to.

I _____ understand that what my peers and I share in the Focus Group Discussions should be respected.

I _____ understand that I can ask questions about this study at any time and that I will be asked for my consent again (verbally) before any Focus Group Discussions begin.

I _____ give my permission for the Volunteer Assistant to record the Focus Group Discussions that I am a part of.

I _____ understand that the Focus Group Discussions will be run by the Volunteer Assistant with the Knowledge Keeper (Mrs. Semeniuk) present.

I _____ give my permission and want to participate in the study, **A Principal's Journey: A Study into the Impact of Weaving Indigenous Knowledges Alongside Students in an Elementary School Setting.**

Printed Name

Homeroom

Signature

Date

Please return this Student Consent Form to School if you are interested in participating.