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Exploring the Work of Treaty Catalyst Teachers in Selected Saskatchewan Schools

Brandon Needham, Michael Cottrell



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Research Coordinator
Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation
2317 Arlington Avenue
Saskatoon SK S7J 2H8
Telephone: 1-800-667-7762 or 306-373-1660

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Background

Responding to the needs of Aboriginal learners is one of the most compelling challenges currently facing Saskatchewan schools; First Nations and Métis students constitute the youngest and fastest-growing demographic group in the province yet benefit the least from publicly funded education (Government of Saskatchewan, 2014). To improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal students and promote greater cross-cultural understanding, in 2008 the Premier of Saskatchewan mandated the teaching of treaties in all classrooms in the province. The Ministry of Education introduced *A Time for Significant Leadership: A Strategy for Implementing First Nations and Métis Achievement Goals* (ATFSL) in 2008 as an implementation guide for First Nations, Métis and Inuit content, perspectives and ways of knowing. To redefine Aboriginal education as a foundation for learning, the ATFSL initiative called for divisions and schools to designate treaty catalyst teachers to ensure students have the opportunity to engage in a range of treaty essential learnings. Treaty catalyst teachers are also tasked with creating initiatives, partnerships and resources to assist colleagues with curriculum development and implementation to infuse Aboriginal content, perspectives and ways of knowing into all subjects. The ultimate goal of these initiatives is to create a “culturally responsive learning program that benefits all learners” (Government of Saskatchewan, 2009, p.12).

The Research Story

We came to this research initially through a common passion to improve outcomes for First Nations and Métis students in Saskatchewan classrooms and to enhance non-Aboriginal students' understanding and appreciation for First Nations, Métis and Inuit cultures and history. Both of these goals, we believe, are critical to Saskatchewan's future well-being and prosperity. From our professional roles as a high school teacher/administrator and academic, we saw the enormous value of all students having a deep understanding of treaties; however, we were also aware of some of the challenges faced by classroom teachers who are tasked with leading this initiative. To honour and support that work we felt that all teachers, especially the treaty catalyst teachers, would benefit from collaborative research which would enable them to dialogue with peers, allow their voices to be heard, document their experiences, challenges and struggles and celebrate their accomplishments. We also felt that the research would have the additional benefits of involving more teachers in the research process, encouraging self-reflection to challenge the established curriculum practices and interests that have traditionally been exercised in public schools. In terms of contributing to educational research and theory, we felt that this inquiry would deepen the understanding of culturally responsive education in the Saskatchewan context through analysis of enacted curriculum, with significant benefits for educators in other jurisdictions who face similar challenges and opportunities.

Participants

Participants were purposefully selected because of their designation as treaty catalyst teachers or their involvement in a range of activities that have supported improved learning outcomes for Aboriginal students and enhanced integration of First Nations, Métis and Inuit content into curricula. Many of the participants came to the research process because of prior relationships with the researchers; as such, relationality was also an influence on participant selection. Participants included both beginning and experienced educators who represented many dimensions of leadership in Saskatchewan education. To ensure maximum representativeness, participants were selected from public school divisions, Catholic school divisions and one participant from a First Nation controlled school system. There were a total of nine participants who identified themselves as treaty catalyst teachers: high school and elementary school teachers, one principal, one First Nations co-ordinator within a provincial Catholic school division, one middle years teacher in a First Nation school, one senior administrator and one university professor.

Methodology

Qualitative research, using a narrative inquiry method within an interpretivist-social constructivist paradigm, was deemed the most appropriate methodology for our inquiry. It was guided by the following overarching research question: What practices and initiatives created by treaty catalyst teachers best facilitate positive learning outcomes for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in Saskatchewan schools?

Narrative Inquiry

For the purposes of data collection, an initial focus group meeting was organized to orient participants to the research and build personal and professional relationships across diverse school organizations. Then a wiki was created and participants were encouraged to contribute to a monthly conversation, guided by a particular leading question or observation. Participants' contributions to this wiki conversation were then framed as narratives for the purpose of data analysis. To close the research, participants engaged in an online conversation led by the researchers to elaborate on insights from the wiki conversations.

Choosing narrative inquiry as a research strategy reflected our assumption that the value of storytelling is important and productive in several spheres of human activity: to the individual sense of "self," to the fabric of wider social networks, to the maintenance of culture and as a driver of political action. Narrative is one of "the primary means by which we make sense of our experiences through time" (Randall & McKim, 2008, p. 20) and by which we engage "one another's assistance in building lives and communities" (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 35).

Narrative inquiry focuses on the organization of human knowledge as more than merely the collection and processing of data (Riessman, 1993). It implies that knowledge itself is considered valuable enough to document, even when known by only one person and allows researchers to understand the way people create meaning in their lives as narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Interpretivist Framework

The interpretivist paradigm focuses on how people make sense of or assign meanings to their social world (Sarantakos, 2005). It promotes the view that there are multiple realities, that reality is subjective and that reality is socially constructed through interaction and interpreted through the actors (Neuman, 2003). In this research we are interested in the meaning-making of individual treaty catalyst teachers in their work as culturally responsive educators. Their subjective understandings and interpretations around this specific dimension of their life experiences to date were re-constructed via the research process and co-constructed with us, the researchers. Within the interpretivist paradigm this constitutes a legitimate form of knowledge production (Neuman, 2003; Sarantakos, 2005).

Literature Review

Our research aligns with a growing body of scholarship which concludes that creating more invitational and culturally affirming classrooms through the infusion of Aboriginal content, perspectives and ways of knowing into curriculum and pedagogy is the most effective means of improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal students in Saskatchewan and beyond (Battiste, 2005; Bell, 2004; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Cherubini, 2014; Grey & Beresford, 2008; Kaanu, 2007). There is also evidence that this culturally responsive education has the additional benefit of fostering greater cross-cultural understanding among students of different backgrounds (Aboriginal Education Research Network, 2008). According to Nicol et al. (2010),

culturally responsive education ... [is a] model of education for diverse groups that incorporates connections to culture and community, respects and is responsive to Indigenous knowledge systems and epistemologies, and is rooted in relationships and places ... [it is] a process of transformative learning and a direction for systemic educational change ... both a means of attending to prominent educational issues, and a pledge to respond to the specific needs of students, their families, and their communities (p. 4).

A primary goal of our research is to delineate the contours of what culturally responsive education looks like across multiple schools, grades and subject areas in the Saskatchewan context so that these practices can be further refined, adapted and extended to improve learning outcomes for all students.

We situate our study within a growing body of research on the significance of treaties and the implications of teaching about treaties in the Saskatchewan context. Orlowski and Cottrell (2015) explore knowledge and understanding of treaties as a mechanism for determining admissions to the teaching profession in Saskatchewan in order to select candidates who are most likely to work effectively with First Nations, Métis and Inuit students. Given the importance of historical knowledge, in order to effectively engage in culturally responsive pedagogy, findings point to significant inadequacies in the content that Grade 12 graduates bring to their teacher education preparation. Couros et al. (2013) take seriously calls for reconciliation with Aboriginal people within a Canadian context of ongoing colonialism. Their study explores the significance of treaty education and considers the challenges of this work with respect to teacher, student and researcher engagement and the ongoing systems of oppression that inform the relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada. Tupper (2011) suggested that educating about

treaties constituted an essential aspect of working toward reconciliation between First Nations people and other Canadians. She concluded that schools, teachers and curricula must play a central role in helping students understand the foundational importance of treaties to the Canadian nation.

Tupper (2011) further explored the possibilities of treaty education for reconciliation with First Nations people as corrective to the foundational myth of Canada and as a means of fostering ethically engaged citizenship. She argues that treaty education has the potential to help all students learn from and through events and experiences of the past in ways that inform not only their historical consciousness, but also their dispositions as Canadian citizens and their relationships with one another.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began as soon as data were compiled. The focus group conversations were electronically recorded and transcribed and these data were added to the narrative entries from the wiki to compile all data collected. Labov's (1972) thematic organization was used to understand major events in the narratives and the effect those events have on the individuals constructing the narrative. Thematic analysis was deemed the most appropriate approach to coding the data (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). Used mostly in qualitative research, thematic analysis examines patterns of themes within data sets associated with specific research questions, when a theme represents a level of patterned response or meaning derived from the data that is related to the research questions at hand. With the wiki entries, a process of comparing items and categories until there was a level of saturation was undertaken in order to discern emerging patterns with respect to persistent words, phrases, themes and ideas from participants' narratives (Creswell, 2007). Finally, the themes emerging from the data were aligned with the research literature around culturally responsive education as a means of locating Saskatchewan initiatives within broader national and international efforts to transform educational practices and improve the educational experiences of Aboriginal students.

Themes Emerging From the Data

Utilizing the analytical approach outlined above, the following four themes emerged from our analysis of the data: strategies, alignments, opportunities and challenges. In this section we elaborate on each of those themes. Because many of the themes intersect, as is typical with narrative research, some overlapping is unavoidable.

Strategies

Given the nature of the research questions and the conversations generated in the wiki narratives and focus group, it was not surprising that participants had much to say about the various strategies they employed in their work as treaty catalyst teachers. Participants identified numerous successful teaching strategies employed in their schools and also incorporated information on what colleagues who were not participating in our research were doing in other schools and school divisions to promote understanding of treaties. When subjected to closer analysis, a number of sub-themes emerged within this broader

theme of strategies: resources, Office of the Treaty Commissioner, teachers, teaching strategies, partnerships, leadership and self-awareness.

Resources

Although participants differed on the adequacy of existing resources and employed a wide variety of different teaching strategies, all agreed that the use of human resources was a vitally important strategy when connecting students and teachers to treaty teachings. Participants noted that opening the school to the Elders in the community allows for schools to highlight First Nations peoples as experts, which challenges the frequent deficit depictions of First Nations peoples. Another participant indicated that their school division had used Elders not only to enhance classroom teachings but also as catalysts for their entire organization to gain a deeper understanding of First Nations peoples:

A key initiative has been the gathering of local Elders and using them as a resource. About seven years ago, Alan Sharp organized a group of local Elders. Named the "Vision of the Elders," this group created a DVD for teachers to use to teach about First Nations' issues. Elders meet annually to receive updates from schools and to give their input. Three years ago, the Office of the Treaty Commissioner ran a workshop in our area for the Elders and the school division sponsored a meeting of Treaty 4 Elders to talk about the Pasqua Pictograph. [The] Good Spirit School Division cultural advocate co-ordinates the visits of Elders in our schools.

A lack of teaching resources, especially in subjects other than Native studies and history, was identified as a major problem by many participants in successfully implementing treaty teaching. In particular, how to incorporate treaty essential learnings at appropriate reading levels and in science and math were identified as significant obstacles to teachers embracing the work enthusiastically. Other participants spoke of the challenges of developing or adapting resources to accommodate the different Aboriginal cultures and language groups in Saskatchewan, resulting in a "one size fits all" approach. Still, others identified a lack of time for adequate professional development as a significant obstacle both to developing personal capacity and distributing that among their colleagues:

Is it a blanket, everyone is Cree because we found the most Cree resources or do I do Salteaux in Kamsack, because I know when we were in Tisdale it was Salteaux, we had a Salteaux Elder, it was a Salteaux medicine wheel everything was Salteaux. In my new situation where I've got urban Aboriginal students coming from all over the place. How do you ensure you're being responsive to that culture?

Participants identified the need for much greater coherence across all levels of the educational sector, from the Ministry of Education to school divisions to schools and individual classrooms, as being necessary to effectively advance the work of teaching treaties:

I suggest that each school division employ a First Nations and Métis/Treaty coach. It would also be of great benefit for there to be a co-ordinated effort by teachers, Elders, artists and writers, to create awesome books

about treaty education that are linked to the renewed curriculum. I would love to be part of something like that. As it stands, we are asking our teachers to manufacture lessons using resources that are written for university students, for the most part. Many teachers are frustrated by the lack of resources for treaty education.

Office of the Treaty Commissioner

Throughout our participants' narratives it was clear that the Office of the Treaty Commissioner (OTC) is playing a critical role in the implementation of treaty teaching. All of our participants had been involved in some form of OTC professional development prior to becoming treaty catalyst teachers and all credited that experience with being transformative in their commitment to culturally responsive education. From the perspective of our participants, the OTC, in addition to developing practical resources, organizing speakers and training trainers by virtue of its existence, generates moral and political support for those engaged in frontline pedagogy, thus providing critical assistance in dealing with resistance to the teaching of treaties:

Our school division has been supporting teachers by working with the Office of the Treaty Commissioner to train teachers to teach treaties. Many Good Spirit School Division staff members have taken day one and day two training. Twenty-six teachers, who teach in 15 out of the 28 schools in our school division, are trained as treaty catalyst teachers.

Teachers

Participants expressed some mixed feelings about fellow teachers in their narratives. All stressed the centrality of teachers to the enterprise of teaching and learning and all were in agreement on the necessity for all teachers in Saskatchewan to embrace more culturally responsive approaches to education. However, participants recorded both positive and negative experiences with colleagues regarding treaty teaching initiatives and expressed the need for further development in this area. In particular, participants identified that many long-term teachers did not have a great deal of content expertise in this area and were uncomfortable teaching material that they did not feel confident discussing. Additionally, some participants stressed that many of their colleagues were already overwhelmed with the expectations placed on them and thus saw the emphasis on treaty education as yet another demand:

Teachers are not breaking down the door seeking support in First Nations and Métis education either. I know that teachers feel overwhelmed with all of the emphasis on standardized testing and improving reading levels and math achievement. You know talking to teachers, their biggest complaint is "yes there's all this change, there's new curriculum, there's new assessment, there's new you know da, da, da, da, da, we're so shoved with new, new, new, new, new, and more, more, more, more, more. Where is the less less, less, less, less? Where do we balance-you're piling this plate but you never take anything away?" That is the biggest argument from staff members about other topics.

Creating partnerships with neighbouring First Nation communities was identified as one of the most successful approaches in this regard. Events such as this allowed for schools to create better relationships with the communities they serve and also allowed for staff to gain an understanding of the students they teach. The participant noted that an event like this can also spark greater interest among staff members to pursue further professional development in Aboriginal content.

Teaching Strategies

The treaty catalyst teachers shared a variety of teaching strategies they felt were successful when examining treaties and these formed a very interesting range, from local to global perspectives. Some felt most comfortable addressing Aboriginal issues as an integral part of Saskatchewan and local history and focused on their local community as an effective strategy to connect students to treaty. Being familiar with the microhistory of their own community can enhance the historical understanding of why treaties were signed and how that signing impacted the people in their own communities. This approach also allowed students to appreciate ways in which the histories and lives of all Saskatchewan residents, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, were linked through treaty. Using place-based learning strategies had the additional benefit of allowing teachers and students to get out of classroom and engage in authentic experiential learning. Taking part in customs and traditions of local First Nations peoples, whether it be powwow dancing, feasts or sweats, creates a deeper understanding of the beauty and history of First Nations peoples and their connections to the land. Participants stressed the importance of honouring the protocols of these ceremonies, ensuring much care was taken to follow them respectfully.

Other participants engaged with treaty teaching as part of global knowledge and encouraged students to connect the events in Canada surrounding treaty with the concerns of other Indigenous peoples throughout the world. This allowed for the students to see the treatment of Indigenous peoples not as isolated events but as part of wider historical, social, political and economic forces. A related strategy was to encourage students to link historical events with current developments such as the Idle No More movement. This grassroots Aboriginal protest movement was triggered by changes in federal legislation regarding environmental protection and provided an opportunity to consider how the protection of treaty rights could benefit all Canadians through opposition to unfettered resource development. All students were able to consider the implications of these developments for communities both locally and globally, and to reflect on their positions and roles as part of the learning processes:

Students are able to make a link to the events of the past by examining their current realities. Linking treaty teaching to current events such as the Idle No More movement or the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, create that link to the past. These current events allow for open and honest discussion to be had about the lasting impact of the treaty process.

Incorporating treaty teaching into media studies was another effective strategy used by a participant. Another participant spoke of approaching treaties and Aboriginal content generally as a means of generating empathy for First Nations issues and facilitating student insight into the Canadian political process. Being able to be collaborative with colleagues and sharing resources and expertise, whether it be in the school, school division or in other

school divisions, was highlighted throughout as a successful strategy. This allowed many participants to further their own understanding of teaching treaty, which in turn enhanced their own teaching practices.

Partnerships

Partnerships emerged as a powerful theme in the data, intersecting with many of the other themes within participants' narratives, and stood out as being a central strategy in advancing treaty teaching. These partnerships included in-school collaboration with colleagues, collaboration with colleagues in other schools and schools divisions including First Nation schools, collaboration with OTC personnel and collaborations with First Nations individuals and communities:

Some attempts to establish partnerships have been successful. Our provincial government's commitment to mandatory treaty education is an awesome initiative. The Office of the Treaty Commissioner does an excellent job of supporting the teaching of treaties. The Good Spirit School Division and Treaty 4 have collaborated with the Ministry in a pod to revamp the treaty teachings for Grade 9. I have had the opportunity to teach workshops alongside teachers from Treaty 4, especially Principal X from [a First Nation] school. Good Spirit School Division has been successful in establishing a group named "The Vision of the Elders," having produced a great DVD, learned about being an Elder for the OTC, talking about the Pasqua Pictograph and having an annual Elder's gathering. Detour, a programming centre for at-risk youth in our area, had been operating successfully in downtown Kamsack for a number of years.

Participants noted that partnerships allowed treaty teaching to be the work of many, not one, and had an especially powerful impact when it facilitated relationship building among students from across the racial divide:

When I taught in Tisdale, our school community was in a strong relationship with the Kinistin Saulteaux First Nation. Students from Kinistin in grades 10 to 12 were bussed to Tisdale to go to high school. There was a need to create a strong partnership to ensure the success of the students. This partnership led to many professional development opportunities for our staff, we even participated in a community feast. Our staff had met with the parents and students in their own community which allowed us to have an understanding of their way of life and culture. These partnerships allowed for community members from Kinistin to enrich the treaty teachings our school. We had many of the Elders from Kinistin come to Tisdale to share their knowledge with our students, we were even able to hire an Elder at our school. We had a cultural camp that was very effective.

An especially creative and innovative partnership identified by participants occurred during the data collection period among teachers not involved in our research. This involved the negotiation of a treaty between students from a provincial elementary school and a nearby First Nation school. By simulating in detail the actual process of treaty negotiating, students were able to appreciate the complexities of these negotiations and especially understand

the importance of language and its problematic impact in cross-cultural communications. Among the many positive benefits of that initiative was that it allowed non-Aboriginal students to spend time on reserve and engage in recreational activities with their Aboriginal counterparts; it facilitated relationship building and resource sharing between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers and also encouraged dialogue between school leaders from provincial and First Nations school systems. One of the initiating teachers noted:

I am very excited. It is time racial barriers be seriously challenged. As well, this takes treaty education, which is a required part of the Saskatchewan curriculum, to a whole new level. Not every step of the process has been easy but with commitment on both sides, the end result has been positive, promising and inspiring. Through this process we have exchanged uncensored honest questions and answers between classes and worked towards this special treaty signing ceremony (Battlefords Daily News, May 27, 2014).

Another dimension of partnerships addressed by participants was the relational dynamics that are central to all educational enterprises. A participant in a position of leadership in a provincial school spoke of his efforts to model a particular kind of relationality to advance treaty teaching and generally foster positive relationships within the school:

I think a lot of it is how I treat other people, how I interact with First Nations students, with First Nations parents, and non-First Nations parents and students and our staff. I do find my staff are very responsive ... I would suggest, 75 percent of our staff has taken Day 1 and Day 2 OTC because they want to be able to support ... our work in the school.

Although many participants noted significant challenges around the establishment and maintenance of partnerships, all agreed that these partnerships were critical for both First Nation and non-First Nation peoples to advance the teaching of treaties, to improve cross-cultural understanding and to enhance prospects for social cohesion. As will be discussed later, participants also indicated the need to strengthen these partnerships and had a number of practical suggestions in this regard.

Leadership

The importance of leaders who are passionate about Aboriginal content and genuinely committed to creating culturally invitational schools as a means of enhancing the success of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students is a theme pervasive throughout participants' narratives. Many asserted that the presence of leadership at the classroom level, among in-school administrators and at the divisional level, was the single most important factor influencing the success of treaty teaching in their schools. Some of the participants identified themselves as playing that leadership role and took enormous pride in their accomplishments:

A small group of us took it upon ourselves to really ensure that people understood the historical significance of First Nations people because before you can see what's happening today you have to make that jump to the past. About five years ago, Good Spirit School Division organized

a catalyst team to be a support for First Nations and Métis education and treaty education. We meet four times annually. We talk about short- and long-term plans, professional development, teaching treaties in the classroom, resources, the issue of self-declaration, the “Vision of the Elders” project and surveying teachers about how culturally responsive they are. Due to the work of this group, Good Spirit School Division teachers are now required to address treaty education and First Nations and Métis ways of knowing in their year plans.

Others indicated that their divisions suffered from a lack of leadership in this area, hampering the efforts of individual teachers in classrooms:

A school division needs to consider beginning with their leadership (director, superintendents and board trustees) to help them understand the relevance and importance to actualize treaty education within the school division. Once the leadership understands and prioritizes treaty education then it will move forward and become a reality.

Participants’ insights on the criticality of leadership in promoting treaty teaching are supported by a large body of leadership literature. Researchers on leadership, especially in contexts of organizational change, favour forms of distributed leadership across an array of positions within a school, rather than an emphasis on individual leaders. It is impossible for one person to contain all the necessary “knowledge, skills and dispositions” at the level required for school-wide improvements (Robinson et al., 2009, p. 47). However, as our participants identified from their local contexts, the principal acts like a guiding light for the values a school aspires to: in the person of the principal, certain leadership qualities need to inhere that enable distributed leadership in the first place and that “cause others to do things that can be expected to improve educational outcomes for students” (Robinson et al., 2009, p. 70). As will be discussed further in a later section of this report, the modeling of the principal is especially important when managing resistance and conflict about professional development initiatives that require teachers to critique their culturally located practice (Tuuta, Bradnam, Hynds, Higgins, & Broughton, 2004).

Alignment

Effective leadership is also necessary to ensure appropriate alignment; this was an additional sub-theme identified in participants’ narratives related to teaching strategies. In speaking of alignment, participants identified its necessity in the areas of curriculum, resources and goals.

Curricular Alignment

With respect to curricular alignment, participants stressed the need for the creation of grade-specific outcomes in contrast to the separate treaty kit curriculum, as is currently the case. In many cases, participants noted, the two seemed to be viewed by colleagues as separate from one another, when in fact they should be linked together:

I have found the treaty kit to be a very valuable resource but I find it does not mesh very well with the renewed curriculum in Saskatchewan. I teach

Social Studies 9 and find it very easy to infuse treaty teachings into my course because treaties are in the indicators and outcomes. I have used the kit and other resources. What about those subjects where it doesn't fit? Having it explicitly written in an outcome would make teachers take notice. Actually reporting to stakeholders and having a measure of students' understandings would be much better.

Another participant spoke of her participation in work with colleagues from around the province and the OTC to address such alignment concerns:

Most recently, I have been a part of a large committee called the Treaty Curriculum Renewal Team which is spearheaded by OTC and the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education to take the current curricular outcomes and indicators and identify specific treaty links and content. Each school division representative that sits on this large provincewide committee were given a specific grade level and would have to lead within their school division a POD (team) of treaty catalyst teachers who would work through all the curricular areas for that specific grade and identify the treaty link and content. Our school division was given the Grade 7 curriculum; this was not an easy task because once our school division went through the curriculum we noticed we could come up with various Aboriginal content but not so much treaty specific content, so it was somewhat of a strenuous task.

Alignment of Resources

Participants were in agreement that with finite resources it can be difficult to accomplish all that needs to be done within an individual school or an entire school division. However, many participants felt that their schools and divisions needed to unambiguously support the development of culturally responsive initiatives such as treaty teachings by releasing key staff for professional development, to produce resources or other capacities and to foster wider collaborative activities. Given what was previously discussed about the importance of leadership, participants noted that these kinds of measures represented practical manifestations of the significant leadership called for by the Ministry:

I enjoy being a treaty catalyst teacher. Time is somewhat of an issue for me. Our school division believes that teachers should not be out of the classroom for professional development no more than eight days in a school year. This seems like a reasonable limit to me, yet I know that I am missing a number of opportunities to grow as a teacher in this area because of this restriction.

Alignment of Human and Financial Resources

Some participants suggested that the goal of infusing treaty teachings across all subjects can only be achieved with a serious re-evaluation of the use of human and financial resources across the entire education sector. The allocation of additional resources towards Aboriginal initiatives may come at the expense of other programs schools might offer

and likely would be controversial for some parents, staff and students. However, some participants were adamant that such a strategic re-allocation was essential in order to make the necessary changes to support greater Aboriginal student success and greater cross-cultural understanding.

Alignment of Goals

As part of that systemic re-evaluation, participants spoke of the need for greater alignment of goals at the many levels of education. The professional goals of teachers must align with the goals of the school and then school goals must match with division goals. Finally, the goals of the school division need to align with the priorities of the Ministry of Education. Participants agreed that the vision and goals of treaty education have to come from the Ministry because of its capacity to ensure system-wide compliance. However, they also identified concerns with such a top-down approach, particularly the danger that teachers feel powerless and voiceless in the determination of educational priorities. For the initiative to work well, participants agreed that all constituents of the educational enterprise in Saskatchewan must be empowered and take ownership of inculcating the understanding that “we are all Treaty People.”

Self-Awareness

An important pre-condition of such empowerment and ownership, however, was for administrators, staff and students to take stock of their organizational climate as a means of increasing self-awareness. Participants suggested that schools and teachers must be able to understand where they are before they are able to move forward. Some participants mentioned the use of the school audit tool provided in the Ministry of Education’s *A Time for Significant Leadership* document. This document outlines initial steps in teaching treaties and infusing First Nations, Métis and Inuit content in existing curriculum. The audit tool allows for schools to examine their current realities, especially the cross-cultural climate, and, based on the results, create a clear path to reach the school’s goals:

I have had initial interviews with 12 out of our 25 teachers about teaching treaties and incorporating First Nations and Métis ways of knowing into the curriculum. What an eye-opener! It is always great to open up discussions with colleagues. So, often we are boxed in our classrooms, alone on our pedestal without having the opportunity to talk with other professionals about what we are doing and how we can teach more effectively. I decided to make a form to record what we talked about in the interview. There is quite a range of interest and practice of teaching treaties and incorporating Indigenous worldview and knowledge. It is quite encouraging that all the teachers are taking a half-hour out of their day to talk to me about it. Some are set in their ways. However, when I dig into their practice, they come to realize that there are things that they are already doing which connect strongly to this important perspective. Some are new to the teaching profession and are ignorant of teaching treaties. Some want to expand their practice and I am trying to help them. All in all, this has been a fruitful experience.

Challenges

Our participants generally were an extremely positive and optimistic group of educators, strongly motivated to embrace the work of teaching treaties. Nevertheless, they also were frank in acknowledging that the work was sometimes difficult and frustrating and they spoke openly in their journals and focus groups about the variety of challenges they encountered. While the bulk of the focus here was on difficulties encountered in their professional capacities, some participants also spoke of how this work sometimes impacted their personal lives and relationships. Under this broad theme of challenges we identified the sub-themes of resistance/racism/ignorance, resources/alignment/sustainability, challenges specific to Aboriginal teachers and various challenges specific to Aboriginal students and communities.

Without a doubt the greatest impediment to the work of teaching treaties and infusing Aboriginal content into Saskatchewan curriculum identified by participants in our study was the racism which some described as pervasive in their schools and communities. At its most benign, opposition to being exposed to Aboriginal content was articulated by students as resistance to privileging Aboriginal perspectives over “white” perspectives in class. However, in other more extreme cases participants spoke of resistance to the very presence of Aboriginal students in schools:

They would react to that; there were a lot of negative connotations around them being there. This is from the parents, the white parents, the students, even the staff saying “What is it that these kids are doing here?” They don’t sit in their desks, we have to chase them in the hallways all the time, they are not being successful and they are not handing stuff in, and on and on.

Other participants spoke of hard feelings on both sides of the racial divide, often resulting from historical developments. A participant currently in a position of leadership spoke of the backlash he witnessed at a previous school when staff decided to erect a teepee on school grounds to symbolically welcome Aboriginal students:

Having the teepee at the school. I was phoned up and had people say “What the hell is there a teepee on the school grounds for?” Those are crucial conversations you have with people. We also wanted to make the students feel welcomed. It is a very strong, opinionated community and you know I don’t want to say its racist because you know that’s a pretty

strong opinion. But, they have their opinions about First Nations people and it's very hard to change that, but so of my close colleagues.

Another participant in an urban school noted resistance to treaty teachings from newcomer students who seemed to have picked up very quickly some of the negative attitudes of mainstream Saskatchewan. In addition to resistance to treaty teachings because of negative views of Aboriginal peoples and cultures, other participants spoke of resistance from students and parents because of a perception that cultures other than First Nations were being ignored, or at least not given adequate attention, because of the heavy focus on Aboriginal content. Another source of resistance identified by participants was the fact that exposing white students and adults to some of the discriminatory aspects of Canadian history and highlighting the ongoing marginalization of Aboriginal peoples sometimes had the effect of making others feel uncomfortable:

I've been trying to talk about this for years. It's been my life work since the North, maybe since I was little, and every way I talk about it, I alienate people. They right away go to a defensive place and they don't hear the stories. They don't open their ears and listen to the pain people have endured. They just think, "You're calling me racist, and I don't like it."

This phenomenon was not confined to participants' work in the classroom. Although all took great pride in the insights they had gained into Aboriginal culture and historical injustices, some acknowledged that this occasionally caused conflict with friends and family members outside of work. Participants also spoke of resistance from colleagues, either because of their lack of knowledge of Aboriginal content or their insistence that all students should be treated the same, or a sense of being overwhelmed with a variety of new expectations.

Lack of Knowledge

A lack of historical knowledge among teachers, parents and students was also identified as a challenge to the work of teaching about treaties by many participants. Some spoke of significant deficits in their colleagues' understanding of local, provincial and national history and a lack of awareness of how that history continues to negatively impact Aboriginal peoples. Other participants noted that students generally knew very little about the presence of Aboriginal peoples in their areas before white settlement, had little conception of how their ancestors benefitted from the signing of treaties and, in general, lacked understanding of how federal policies like the *Indian Act*, residential schools or the pass system disadvantaged and marginalized Aboriginal peoples. Participants also noted a lack of awareness of how white communities benefitted from the sale or surrender of reserve lands or derived advantages from policies that marginalized Aboriginal peoples.

A First Nation participant indicated that a lack of local knowledge was also an issue in his community. Loss of language and culture among First Nation students was also identified as a challenge since non-Native teachers who lacked that knowledge often looked to Aboriginal students to support them in that work.

Challenges Specific to Aboriginal Teachers

First Nation participants identified a number of challenges specific to their unique circumstances within schools. Chief among these was the scarcity of Aboriginal teachers, especially within the provincial systems, with the result that they were frequently the only Aboriginal people on staff. In addition to feelings of isolation and vulnerability, they confided that this imposed unreasonable expectations of their knowledge and capacities:

At any time, I am the only First Nations status teacher at our school. So, anything that arises on First Nations content I'm the go to person. I don't have all the answers. That's where I get lost because when you're the only Aboriginal person who gets it in a building, you either are the radical or you're just "blah blah blahing"; nobody really gets it and we're not even going to go there.

Challenges Specific to Aboriginal Students

While working to improve outcomes for Aboriginal students and enhance cross-cultural understanding, some participants expressed frustration at some of the challenges facing Aboriginal students and communities. High rates of absenteeism among Aboriginal students was a consistent challenge identified by participants and many expressed frustration that this negatively impacted Aboriginal students' capacity to learn, forcing them to repeat grades and often begin culminating with those students dropping out. Others spoke of the difficulty of sustaining partnerships between provincial and First Nations schools and communities, often because of high staff turnover in First Nations systems. Still, others spoke of challenges related to self-declaration as an impediment to accurately tracking the progress of Aboriginal students. Because of the insights gained through their work as treaty catalyst teachers with an understanding of the impact of the social determinants of health on individuals and communities, participants framed many of these challenges as being symptomatic of the inter-generational damage wrought by residential schools, so not amenable to easy or simplistic solutions:

The current issue/challenge that I see needing to be addressed is residential schooling and the inter-generational effects in today's society. This was not part of the treaty promise of education. There are many people who have been hurt by this broken promise and people who do not understand the impact who have simply stated that First Nation people should "get over it." However, it is not that simple. We will have a few more generations of healing before we begin to better ourselves as a distinct people and perhaps gain the respect of others.

Opportunities

Since the data collected through participants' narratives was generally of an appreciative and affirming nature, we thought it appropriate to conclude our analysis by elaborating on the most positive theme to emerge from the data: opportunities. Under this broad theme of opportunities we identified the sub-themes: professional and personal growth, disrupting current educational hierarchies and engaging with novel conceptions of intelligence.

Professional and Personal Growth

Although differing from each other, all of our participants spoke of the multiple ways in which becoming a treaty catalyst teacher had provided opportunities for professional and personal growth. Most of the participants were drawn to the work either because they already had some content expertise in the area or because their passion for social justice called them to acquire more knowledge. Assuming formal responsibility thus allowed them to exert leadership in an area of expertise and passion but also required them to engage in significantly deeper learning. Because of the collaborative nature of the initial planning, an immediate benefit was linking like-minded individuals across school divisions and these collaborations often had significant long-term implications. As mentioned in a previous section, being able to be collaborative with colleagues and sharing resources and expertise, whether it be in the school, school division or in other school divisions, was identified both as an effective strategy and as an appreciated consequence of engaging in treaty teaching. It allowed many participants to further their own understanding of treaty, and to bolster their own teaching practices, through communication with and observations of others. Participants noted that partnerships allowed treaty teaching to be the work of many, not one, and had an especially powerful impact when it facilitated relationship-building among students from across the racial divide:

I am comfortable, even passionate, teaching about First Nations and Métis content. I have a personal and academic background that allows me to be confident. Our school division looks to me as a leader in this area. Many teachers lack enough background knowledge to be confident.

For some participants embracing new learning and professional development in this area required them to confront some of their own preconceptions and blind spots, acknowledge the inadequacy of their prior knowledge and unpack their complicity in maintaining systems of privilege and oppression:

I think about my own treaty education and it wasn't until about five years ago that I even knew I was a treaty person. I did my entire Master's thesis looking at anti-racism and treaty was not even a theme. I need to double check, but I don't think I even used the word treaty once in the 140 pages. So, yes racism is real and alive and often invisible to those who hold the power. Often those [of us] with societal power cannot even see their [our] own power, but envision themselves [ourselves] as powerless and oppressed by those with "real" power.

Once they embraced the role of treaty catalyst teacher, many of the participants became even more passionate about the work and were excited to consider engaging in additional professional development and asserting leadership in that area. For some of the participants who were veteran teachers, delving deeply into treaty teachings was a refreshing and energizing experience that required them to engage with new resources and curricular material. It also required the establishment of authentic partnerships with Aboriginal educators, Elders and communities. Many of the non-Aboriginal participants identified the process of establishing these partnerships as a transformative experience:

When I taught in Tisdale, our school community was in a strong relationship with the Kinistin Saulteaux First Nation. Students from Kinistin in grades 10 to 12 were bussed to Tisdale to go to high school. This partnership led to many professional development opportunities for our staff, we even participated in a community feast. Our staff had met with the parents and students in their own community which allowed us to have an understanding of their way of life and their culture. These partnerships allowed for community members from Kinistin to enrich the treaty teachings in our school. We had many of the Elders from Kinistin come to Tisdale to share their knowledge with our students, we even hired an Elder to be on staff. We built mentorship programs in grades 8 and 9 where we would link Grade 8 and 9 kids from Kinistin and they would come out and spend a day and then vice versa spend a day. We had a cultural camp that was very effective.

Finally, some participants noted that collaborations and partnerships forged while engaged in treaty teachings had wider impacts on their pedagogical approaches. Specifically, they noted a new openness to non-traditional sources of knowledge and authority and a greater willingness to move away from the silo approach towards a more collaborative approach embodied in the ideals of professional learning communities or communities of practice.

Disrupting Current Educational Hierarchies

In multiple ways participants shared their desire to disrupt current educational hierarchies as part of the work of treaty teachings. Some indicated that they were drawn to the work in part because of a sense that current curricula privileged the epistemologies of Western cultures and silenced others. They expressed frustration that even their strongest non-Aboriginal students were sometimes unable to see the hegemonic nature of some Saskatchewan curricula:

One of the barriers I feel faces the catalyst team the most is the question of "Why are we doing this ... there are lots of cultures in Saskatchewan." The idea of multiculturalism often clouds the work of the catalyst team. We had a powwow demonstration at our school last year and I was actually surprised at the reaction of my staff toward the demonstration. Lots of comments about why there was a showcase of only one culture and not any others. I feel there is a lack of understanding about the historical significance of the First Nations peoples which leads to these reactions. Even though multiculturalism is a wonderful concept it seems to be a barrier when it comes to First Nation education. Can we highlight First Nations cultures and still honour the other cultures in Saskatchewan?

Others took great pride in the fact that they were early adapters in the shift to culturally responsive pedagogy and were excited by their potential to effect a wider transformation in thinking through teaching. Occasionally, this led to conflicts with parents but some participants noted that through their example other teachers were willing to also become courageous advocates for the infusion of Aboriginal ways of knowing into classrooms:

The teacher told the parent that the reason why she was teaching it was that First Nations and Métis content is one of the foundations of Saskatchewan curriculum. I was very proud of the teacher. I also am disappointed that it has affected how she views our school and community.

This theme of disrupting hierarchies and challenging hegemonic practices resonated especially powerfully in the narratives of our Aboriginal participants. As mentioned previously, many (especially those teaching in provincial schools) noted that they were often the only Aboriginal teachers on staff. They also noted that the initiatives around the infusion of Aboriginal content placed sometimes unreasonable burdens on them. However, they also welcomed the fact that these initiatives framed Aboriginal epistemologies as having value and power and welcomed the opportunity to share their knowledge with non-Aboriginal colleagues and students:

My personal goal is to do my professional job to the best of my ability and to never forget who I am as a Nehiyawan (Cree person - the People of four, of everything they do). I think the more I can be a good role model then maybe others will see that I am a human being who is not defined by my race, but rather defined by my character. If I can make a positive difference by that, then perhaps I've represented my people in a positive way and others can look past the misconceptions they may have. I have always been taught that where there is life there is hope.

Synthesis/Analysis

In this concluding section we synthesize and analyze the themes emerging from our participants' narratives and we align these with the research literature as a means of grounding participants' experiences within a larger research and theoretical framework.

From a methodological perspective, we believe that our original assumption that narrative is one of the primary means by which we make sense of our experiences through time and through which we engage one another's assistance in building lives and communities, has been confirmed by the research. The narrative method employed here provided an outlet for participants' voices and allowed them to make sense of and assign meanings to their social worlds. Consistent with the constructivist/interpretivist framework, the research also confirmed that there are multiple realities within schools—that these realities are subjective, that they are socially constructed through interaction and interpreted through actors (Neuman, 2003).

Our goal in the research was to document and explore the meaning-making of individual treaty catalyst teachers in their work as culturally responsive educators. Their subjective understandings and interpretations around this specific dimension of their life experiences to date were re-constructed via the research process and co-constructed with us—the researchers. Although not explicitly intended at the outset, it seemed that the monthly narratives served as an affirmation that participants constituted a community of practice and speaks to the capacity of action research to empower teacher-led, non-directed professional development.

When subjected to analysis, the voices of our participants align with a growing body of scholarship which argues that creating more invitational and culturally affirming classrooms through the infusion of Aboriginal content, perspectives and ways of knowing into curriculum and pedagogy is the most effective means of improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal students in Saskatchewan and beyond (Battiste, 2005; Bell, 2004; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Cherubini, 2014; Grey & Beresford, 2008; Kaanu, 2007). Experiences documented by our participants also confirm assertions made by other researchers that culturally responsive education has the additional benefit of fostering greater cross-cultural understanding among students of different cultural backgrounds (Aboriginal Education Research Network, 2008). Additionally, our research supports the work of Tupper (2011, 2013) and Couros et al. (2013) who delineate the multiple benefits of teaching about treaties, including the vital contributions this knowledge makes to the creation of "ethically

engaged citizens” (Tupper, 2013, p.143) in Saskatchewan who will advance the necessary and urgent process of reconciliation between First Nations peoples and other Canadians.

A goal of our research was to delineate the contours of what culturally responsive education looks like across multiple schools, grades and subject areas in the Saskatchewan context so that these practices can be further refined, adapted and extended to improve learning outcomes for all students. Our participants’ narratives document the innovative work being done by committed professionals in multiple Saskatchewan school sites and provide powerful examples for others to emulate. Participants were especially grateful for the assistance of the OTC in supporting this work and also spoke to the importance of local innovation in developing resources and pedagogical approaches appropriate for their individual schools. What was striking about the variety of strategies employed by participants used to teach treaties is their alignment with both local and global curricular outcomes. Therefore, an important conclusion emerging from this research is the capacity of treaty teaching to facilitate place-based learning and appreciation for local Saskatchewan contexts, histories and relationships, while also enabling students to engage with the larger global forces and provide inspiration and possibilities to engage differently in that world.

Participants spoke eloquently about the multiple benefits related to personal and professional growth they derived from engaging in the work of treaty teaching and other culturally responsive initiatives. A conclusion we drew from that is that the search for equitable academic outcomes for Aboriginal students, although typically framed in deficit terms, actually represents an enormously exciting opportunity for public education in Saskatchewan and beyond. Ensuring that Aboriginal learners derive commensurate benefit from K-12 education is currently one of the leading drivers of innovation in Saskatchewan schools, challenging teachers, administrators, policy makers and governance personnel to reflect deeply and improve profoundly on all educational practices. However, in addition to calling the existing system to do better, our participants’ narratives of treaty teaching suggest that the growing Aboriginal presence in our classrooms also offers educators the exciting opportunity to embrace Aboriginal peoples’ worldviews, social structures and pedagogies as a legitimate foundation upon which to construct new meanings, alongside established Western curricular knowledge (Bouvier & Karlenzig, 2006). It is in this regard perhaps that Aboriginal teachers are especially critical and a clear conclusion emerging from our participants’ narratives is the importance of increasing the number of Aboriginal teachers and para-professionals in all Saskatchewan schools.

Although our participants typically took an appreciative approach to the work of teaching treaties, they also acknowledged the multiple challenges they encountered in this work and the larger task of advancing culturally responsive practices in their schools. Undoubtedly, the most significant impediment to that work identified in this inquiry is what participants described as pervasive racism among students, parents and colleagues, leading to resistance to the infusion of Aboriginal content into curriculum and, in some extreme cases, manifesting itself as opposition to the presence of Aboriginal students in provincial schools. This phenomenon has been identified by other researchers (St. Denis, 2010, 2007; St. Denis et al., 1998) and clearly needs to be confronted and acknowledged as a critical part of the work required in schools. Our participants’ insights on the importance of reflection, self-awareness and climate audits for school staff provide valuable guidance for that work. On a more positive note, many participants perceived students to be more open now to engaging with treaty teaching than when the initiative was introduced in 2008.

Many also believed that teaching about treaties was indeed having the desired outcome of changing hearts and minds and felt that as the current generation of high school students moved to adulthood and began having children, Saskatchewan students would be more open to the idea that we are all treaty people.

In advancing that work, participants had a number of practical suggestions, focusing especially on the importance of partnerships, alignment and leadership. Participants' insights on the criticality of leadership in promoting treaty teachings are supported by a large body of leadership literature. Researchers on leadership, especially in contexts of organizational change, favour forms of distributed leadership across an array of positions within a school, rather than an emphasis on individual leaders. It is impossible for one person to contain all the necessary "knowledge, skills and dispositions" at the level required for school-wide improvements (Robinson et al., 2009, p. 47). However, as our participants identified from their local contexts, the principal acts like a guiding light for the values a school aspires to and certain leadership qualities need to inhere, that enable distributed leadership in the first place, and that "cause others to do things that can be expected to improve educational outcomes for students" (Robinson et al., 2009, p. 70). The modeling of the principal is especially important when managing resistance to and conflict about professional development initiatives that require teachers to critique their culturally located practice (Tuuta, Bradnam, Hynds, Higgins, & Broughton, 2004). This is very much the case in advancing treaty teachings in Saskatchewan schools.

Inside best evidence are real leaders from real schools. Their personal narratives serve to complement the de-peopled nature of official discourse (Simon & Smith, 2001). Our narrative inquiry provides a glimpse into aspects of educators' practices that are "internal, almost invisible," and not able to be measured by quantitative research approaches (Heck, 1998, p. 68). The "wisdom of practice" that emerges out of narratives of experience from local contexts may ring true for others dealing with similar concerns (Walker & Shuangye, 2007). The wise practices of the treaty catalyst leaders in this study are based on the values and competences that they have accrued in some cases over long professional careers and inform how they interpret and filter new experiences (Doherty, 2002, p. 164). We believe that they deserve enormous credit for the courage they have shown in engaging with this work and it is our hope that their narratives will support and inspire other teachers in advancing the understanding that in Saskatchewan we are all treaty people.

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2317 Arlington Avenue
Saskatoon SK Canada S7J 2H8
Phone: 306-373-1660
Toll Free: 1-800-667-7762
Fax: 306-374-1122
Email: mcdowell@stf.sk.ca

www.mcdowellfoundation.ca