ALBERTA TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION AND
COLLEGE OF ALBERTA SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS:

Report on Indigenous Teachers and Leaders in Alberta's Public School System

The Alberta Teachers' Association

CASS College of Alberta School Superintendents

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Superintendents

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Acknowledgement

We acknowledge that we work, live, and play on the traditional territory, gathering grounds, meeting places and travelling routes of the Treaty 6 First Nations, the Cree, Saulteaux, Blackfoot, Dene and Nakota Nations; Treaty 7 First Nations, the Blackfoot Confederacy of the Siksika, Kainai and Piikani Nations, the Stoney Nakoda Nation of the Chiniki, Bearspaw and Wesley Nations, and the TsuuT'ina Nation; Treaty 8 First Nations of the Cree, Dene Tha, Dane-zaa and Denesuline Nations; and the traditional homeland of the Métis Nation. We acknowledge the many First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples of the past whose footsteps have shaped this land, and those of the present and future who will continue to shape it for centuries to come.

Through this report and the reporting of its findings, we are committed to restoring and honouring the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada , and we strongly believe that truth must be acknowledged to move reconciliation forward. Engaging in respectful, responsible, responsive and reciprocal relationships with First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities is the path forward to reconciliation. Together we call upon our collective communities to take action upon the findings enclosed, which are dedicated to building a stronger understanding and relationship of all the peoples who dwell on this land we call home.

The research activity in this project was funded and supported in the following ways:

- The Alberta Teachers' Association fully funded the research for Indigenous teachers and school leaders and retained the academic expertise of Dwayne Donald, PhD, to analyze and comment on the Indigenous teacher and school leader data.
- The Association also contributed its research platform and expertise, along with the talented Document Production staff, to design and publish this report t o completion.
- The College of Alberta School Superintendents retained the academic expertise of Sean Lessard, PhD, to analyze and comment on the Indigenous system leader data, and acknowledges that it was funded to undertake this work through the Government of Alberta.
- The College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS) acknowledges and deeply appreciates the system leaders who have contributed to this study through their participation in the survey and focus group.
- The College of Alberta School Superintendents also acknowledges the contribution of Elizabeth Gouthro, CASS leadership consultant, for her leadership and support in this ongoing field of work.

- The College of Alberta School Superintendents acknowledges and appreciates the collaboration of the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA), in particular, Melissa Purcell, the ATA lead, for her leadership and work.
- The College of Alberta School Superintendents appreciates the support and contributions of Alberta Education and the CASS First Nations Métis and Inuit Education Action Committee.

Table of Contents

Preface

Teachers in Alberta and the Alberta Teachers' Association recognize the critical role and responsibility we have in advancing the goals of Indigenous education and in contributing to truth and reconciliation.

We understand that our profession bears an obligation first to admit the responsibility it bears for the multigenerational injury done to Indigenous children, their families and communities and then to strive to make amends by ensuring that our collective and individual practice honours the history, lived experience, knowledge and aspirations of Indigenous peoples. We must do better for the sake of our children and the betterment of future generations.

Reconciliation involves having non-Indigenous and Indigenous peoples walk alongside each other, creating spaces and opportunities for authentic and respectful relationships, and working to develop and advance a shared agenda that reflects the conclusions of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action,[1] the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples[2] and the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Calls for Justice.[3] We are called upon, then, to ensure that through ongoing reflection, commitment and action, we are creating welcoming schools and communities where each and every child is valued, feels safe and is cared for. Wherever they may live in this province, Indigenous peoples, including Indigenous teachers, should expect to feel welcomed, safe and cared for in our classrooms and schools.

The Association has an extensive history of advancing progressive policy positions related to Indigenous teachers and recognizing the critical importance of the role they occupy within Alberta's public education system. As it continues to evolve, Association policy supports increasing the number of Indigenous teachers in Alberta's public education system, providing mentoring supports for Indigenous teachers who are beginning their careers, actively monitoring progress made to increase the numbers of Indigenous teachers, and ensuring that Indigenous teachers feel valued, respected and supported.

To this end, the Association acknowledges the importance of nurturing Indigenous teachers and school leaders within the teaching profession. Listening, supporting and learning from Indigenous teachers will contribute to the advancing truth and reconciliation within classrooms, schools and communities across the province.

1. https://ehprnh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf
2. www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html
3. www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Calls_for_Justice.pdf

We must strive, then, to create spaces where we might come together to learn in the spirit of truth and reconciliation through education. There are many pathways for contributing to truth and reconciliation. Ultimately, we need to move forward in the same direction with open hearts and minds, continuously seeking and learning truths from Indigenous teachers within the profession and from Elders, Knowledge Keepers and leaders in the larger community.

On behalf of my colleagues who worked so diligently on this project, I want to express my profound gratitude to the many Indigenous teachers that contributed to this research report; we have listened to your voices and promise to honour the guidance you have provided as we journey forward together. A special note of thanks is due also to the researchers at the University of Alberta; to ATA executive staff officer Melissa Purcell, who led the Indigenous teachers and school leaders' dimensions of this report; and most especially to the Indigenous teachers who contributed their many voices through completing the survey and participating in the focus groups.

Thank you.

Dennis Theobald
Executive Secretary
Alberta Teachers' Association

This is a courageous report. The very source of its courageous nature rests with each of its participants, who have brought their stories forward with the hope of leveraging change. Specifically, the report reveals that Indigenous leaders serving the needs of the classroom and administration at the school jurisdiction level do not yet feel suitably empowered or enabled to contribute to all dimensions of our education communities. Within its qualitative dimension, the research brings forward perceptions and experiences that are very real. All of the stated concerns confirm the need to bring change to the place of Indigenous peoples working within our school jurisdictions and an examination and action-oriented response to the systemic conditions that inhibit such change from occurring. Because of such courage, the report also informs courageous opportunities, where everyone who continues to work on behalf of students can create a fully inclusive educational community—one where Indigenous leaders as teachers and system administrators have the same kinds of engagement and participation demonstrated as all other members of our educational communities.

The small sample size that contributes to this report exists because historically our social constructs and associated perceptions regarding Indigenous people have made it difficult for voices that would question the status quo to be heard. So, although the adage "sample size decreases statistical power" may be true in multiple contexts of research, creating awareness by whatever scope of research is available to address matters of justice and equality is always a necessary undertaking. Such efforts are always necessary even if only one voice represents the entire sample size.

It is my sincere hope that through school authorities coming to understand the causes of the concerns raised in this report and acting upon the recommendations that follow, *truth* will continue to be a forerunner to *reconciliation* in our schools, jurisdiction offices and broader community. Everyone who works on behalf of students in our school authorities needs to do so on the basis of authentic inclusion, mutual understanding and respect. On behalf of CASS, I offer sincere thanks to the participants, researchers and report writers, including Elizabeth Gouthro, who have contributed to this report and demonstrated how such an outcome is attainable.

David Keohane
Executive Director
College of Alberta School Superintendents

10

Introduction

In 2016, the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) and the College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS), along with representatives of the Government of Alberta, the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR), Alberta School Boards Association (ASBA), Alberta Association of Deans of Education (AADE), Alberta Regional Professional Development Consortium (ARPDC) and other education organizations in Alberta, signed the Joint Commitment to Action (JCTA) to ensure that all K–12 teachers receive additional training related to First Nations, Métis and Inuit histories and cultures. The JCTA is part of Alberta's enduring commitment to respond to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action.

In 2017, the Government of Alberta established three ministerial orders on professional practice standards for teachers, school and system leaders and superintendents: the Teaching Quality Standard (updated) (TQS), the Leadership Quality Standard (LQS) and the Superintendent Leadership Quality Standards (SLQS) (www.alberta.ca/professional-practice-standards.aspx). Each of these professional practice standards includes competencies and indicators to address expectations for teachers, school leaders and system leaders to build effective relationships with Indigenous students, families and communities; commit to learning about the history and contributions of Indigenous Peoples for all staff and students; and provide for opportunities to lead reconciliation within their school and district community. The ATA and CASS, with their partners from JCTA, provided ongoing professional learning to their members for the implementation of the standards in 2019; this support continues today.

Currently in Alberta's K–12 provincial school system, defined as public, separate, francophone and charter school systems, there is a significant underrepresentation of self-identified First Nations, Métis and Inuit teachers, school leaders and system leaders. This research report provides insight into the experiences of Indigenous teachers, school leaders and system leaders in Alberta, and aligns with recommendations from the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Canada 1996) in relation to Indigenous teachers. The data gathered from Indigenous teachers and school leaders has been analyzed separately from Indigenous system leaders to align with the professional practice standards.

> Excerpt from *Renewal: A Twenty-Year Commitment*, in relation to Indigenous teachers within the education system.
>
> The Commission recommends that
>
> 3.5.9 Provincial and territorial ministries require school boards serving Aboriginal students to implement a comprehensive Aboriginal education strategy, developed with Aboriginal parents, elders and educators, including (a) goals and objectives to be accomplished during the International Decade of Indigenous Peoples; (b) hiring of Aboriginal teachers at the elementary and secondary school level, with negotiated target levels, to teach in all areas of school programs, not just Aboriginal programs; (c) hiring of Aboriginal people in administrative and leadership positions; (d) hiring of Aboriginal support workers, such as counsellors, community liaison workers, psychologists and speech therapists; (e) curriculum, in all subject areas, that includes the perspectives, traditions, beliefs and world view of Aboriginal peoples; (f) involvement of Aboriginal elders in teaching Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students; (g) language classes in Aboriginal languages, as determined by the Aboriginal community; (h) family and community involvement mechanisms; (i) education programs that combat stereotypes, racism, prejudice and biases; (j) accountability indicators tied to board or district funding; and (k) public reports of results by the end of the International Decade of Indigenous Peoples in the year 2004. (Canada 1996, 210–11)

We are grateful to the Indigenous teachers, school leaders and system leaders from across Alberta who volunteered to participate in the survey and the focus groups. Their voices, stories and wisdom are critical to informing next steps as we work together to create a public education system that is equitable, diverse and inclusive of Indigenous teachers and leaders.

PRIMARY RESEARCHERS

Dwayne Donald, PhD, is a descendent of the amiskwaciwiyiniwak (Beaver Hills people) and the Papaschase Cree. He was a teacher at Kainai High School for 10 years and currently works as an associate professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta. His research focuses on the ways in which Indigenous wisdom traditions can expand and enhance current educational understandings of knowledge, knowing and what it means to live a good life.

Sean Lessard, PhD, is from Montreal Lake Cree Nation in Treaty 6 territory. He is an award-winning writer, international speaker and researcher in the field of Indigenous education and youth. Sean is an adjunct professor at the University of Regina and associate professor at the University of

Alberta. Sean has been awarded the Pat Clifford Award for emerging researchers by the Canadian Association for Teacher Educators, as well as the American Educational Research Association's Early Career Award. His work focuses on Indigenous youth empowerment and leadership, including the development of his not-for-profit Indigenous youth bursary and wellness program that has contributed over $150,000 in the past three years to Indigenous high school and postsecondary students across Canada.

Background and Context

Dwayne Donald

Canadians have recently engaged in an intensified confrontation with colonial history and the systemic oppression of Indigenous peoples perpetrated by the Canadian state. In the past decade, Canadian government officials and Canadian citizens have slowly begun to realize the extent to which colonizing government policies and practices have severely disrupted the lives of Indigenous peoples. As promised in the numbered Treaties, Indigenous peoples of the prairies were supposed to receive necessary supports to make the transition from the traditional hunting and gathering lifestyle to a more settled agricultural lifestyle. However, it is now understood that these Treaty commitments have not been honoured to the extent to which they were promised, and Indigenous peoples and their communities have suffered as a result.

For many people, the most egregious dishonouring of the Treaty commitments came in the form of Indian Residential Schools. It is well known that during the Treaty negotiations the Chiefs specifically asked that their children be educated in the ways of the newcomers because they understood that their people needed to make the transition to a different way of living. However, the schools they got were not at all like the ones that they had in mind. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada held meetings across Canada from 2010 to 2015 and provided opportunities for former students at Indian Residential Schools to share stories of their experiences while attending these schools. The stories tell of multiple forms of abuse, neglect and trauma that continue to trouble the victims, their families and their communities.

While the TRC process has instigated processes of healing for some First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples and communities, questions remain regarding the extent to which Canadians see themselves implicated in the oppressive colonial relations that made the Indian Residential Schools possible. For many generations, Canadians have been taught to ignore the oppression of Indigenous peoples. In theory, the TRC process should have caused Canadians to confront colonial culture and its ongoing detrimental effects on the well-being of Indigenous people and communities.

However, the conclusion of the TRC process in Canada seems to have been followed by a consensus among Canadians to "move on." In order to more fully understand this desire to "move on" among many Canadians, it is important to remember that Canada as a nation has been founded on a dream of freedom, equality, progress and opportunity for all. When Canadians learn that Indigenous people have not been treated fairly or equitably, the truth of this dream is troubled for a little while until they come to believe that the mistreatments have ended, that such injustices were in the past and that the people are treated much better today. The reason that this belief is so important to understand is that

it maintains the integrity of the dream of the Canadian nation and nationality. The dream remains untroubled because the acknowledgement of past harms and violence is effectively separated from the present and gives citizens the false impression that the difficulty is resolved.

The ability of the nation and nationality to continue to view itself as legitimate is produced through its willingness to learn from past mistakes and overcome its troubling colonial history (Blackburn 2007, 622). Canadian citizens desire closure on the issue—to "move on," based on the self-produced moral congratulation that Canada as a nation is better because of its willingness to undertake the TRC process and learn from the mistakes of the past. So, while the TRC process has been framed as a nationwide reckoning with Canada's difficult colonial past, the process seems to have given Canadians the mistaken impression that the work of truth and reconciliation is complete and the nation has earned a unique kind of institutionalized absolution. A subsequent assumption is that Canadians now have a reconciled and repaired relationship with Indigenous peoples.

This framing fails to acknowledge that the TRC process has been a qualitatively different experience for Indigenous peoples. While Canadians may be engaging in self-congratulation in the wake of the TRC process, Indigenous peoples are confronted with the problem of how to heal themselves from the intergenerational traumas that continue to vex their families and communities. Research has shown that the intergenerational trauma resulting from Indian residential school abuses is complex and has enduring negative effects on individual and community well-being (Bombay, Matheson and Anisman 2014).

However, it is also important to acknowledge that Indigenous peoples experience ongoing traumas through their daily interactions with Canadians in the form of systemic racism, prejudice, discrimination and institutionalized practices of exclusion. Colonial oppression has been so traumatizing to Indigenous peoples that some have accepted the view that their languages, cultures and identities lack value and have become irrelevant. The strength and unity of the people has been systematically undermined by the imposition of colonial logics that seek to erase ancestral traditions and replace them with Euroheritage values, knowledges and ways of being. These negative experiences have accumulated over the years and continue to undermine the well-being of Indigenous peoples and their communities.

Thus, this report begins with an acknowledgement of the struggle of Indigenous peoples and communities to heal from the multigenerational trauma of colonial oppressions while simultaneously working within educational systems that often disregard such traumas and oppressions as historical side notes. Based on this acknowledgement, then, it seems clear that the experiences of Indigenous peoples who work as teachers, school leaders and system leaders in Alberta schools *provide significant insight* into the current state of Indigenous–Canadian relations being enacted daily in school settings across the province.

Key Findings

Based on the survey responses and the focus group discussions, the following key findings for this study on Indigenous teachers, school leaders and system leaders within Alberta's K–12 provincial school system were identified by the opportunity to authentically listen to and honour Indigenous voices to advance truth and reconciliation for future generations. Our learnings identified many similarities among teachers, school leaders and system leaders in their workplace experiences.

The following learnings have been gathered through listening to the voices of Indigenous teachers, school leaders and system leaders:

- **Indigenous teachers, school leaders and system leaders are dedicated to teaching and leading**.

  Many teachers, school leaders and system leaders expressed passion and dedication for supporting Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, staff, families and communities. Participants shared a love for teaching and leading, including agreement on the importance of public education and making a difference for every student.

  > I love my profession, and I hope that I can make a difference in a child's life.
  >
  > Teaching found me—I didn't know I wanted to be a teacher. What I did want to do is provide a safe, caring, environment for students to learn and find out about themselves.
  >
  > I want to honour my parents and ensure that I am doing the best for them. I want to help create a school system where my nephews can be openly proud to be Métis, where my brothers and sisters are not scared to self-identify their children for fear of discrimination.

- **Indigenous teachers, school leaders and system leaders have experienced discrimination and racism.**

  Many participants shared experiences of overt and covert discrimination and racism within the workplace. Some participants expressed feeling pigeonholed early in their careers as being able and/or capable only of working with Indigenous students and being solely responsible for all Indigenous students, their families and communities within their school and/or system. Participants shared varying examples of microaggressions that they have encountered or witnessed throughout their teaching and leadership career aimed at themselves, school staff, students, families and community. A frequent response from both teachers and leaders was the action of their colleagues and supervisors who made them feel their skill set or competence was less than that of their non-Indigenous colleagues.

> I feel having to go into classrooms to have students raise their hand to self-identify is a form of discrimination.
>
> "You don't look Métis." "Why do we need to learn this?" "The Canadian flag needs to hang higher than the Métis and Treaty 6, because we are all Canadian." "The teachers at residential schools were trying their best." "You are my Indian princess!" "That Elder/ Knowledge Keeper/ drummer wants an honorarium—that's ridiculous!"
>
> The system continues to rely on a very hierarchical structure that has not made room for *true* collaboration, and I see this from other principals so I understand that this may not be a race/ discrimination issue but rather a system issue.

The Centre for Race and Culture defines *racism* as "a system of power and violence that structures opportunity and assigns value based on the social construct of race where privilege is afforded to whiteness. A system that unfairly disadvantages Black, People of Colour and Indigenous Communities while subsequently unfairly advantaging communities and individuals embraced by whiteness." (https://cfrac.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/critical-terminologies-1.pdf)

The Centre for Race and Culture defines *microaggressions* as "hostile verbal, behavioural, or environmental insults or slurs that target People of Colour and Indigenous Communities. They are normalized, and are thus often not recognized as aggressive or inappropriate." (https://cfrac.com/where-are-you-really-from-what-is-a-microaggression/)

- **Indigenous teachers, school leaders and system leaders expressed concern for lack of school- and districtwide accountability for Indigenous education**.

  Participants described a lack of ongoing commitment to Indigenous education and reconciliation from their school community/district. Many indicated a lack of depth of learning, engagement and commitment in Indigenous education prevalent at the school and division level, including the absence of a thoughtful place that is informed by Indigenous peoples and Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

  > I'm tired of studies and research and data and talking about the problem, and of rarely using the feedback our families and students and research has been saying for *decades* in meaningful ways. And I'm tired of the politics of Indigenous education. I'm tired of talking about Indigenous student "achievement" as a problem. I'm tired of being recolonized, retraumatized, and I don't want to keep recolonizing and retraumatizing our kids. They deserve better. So do I.

> My biggest concern is how flippant some of the staff at my school are toward Indigenous issues, history, culture, language and peoples ... Every PD that we've had on the topic of Indigeneity, there are eye-rolls and "Why do we have to do this?" complaints, and many do *not* pay attention.

- **Indigenous teachers, school leaders and system leaders have experienced emotional tax and lack of psychological safety**.

> "*Emotional tax* is the combination of being on guard to protect against bias because of race, ethnicity and gender and experiencing the associated effects on well-being and ability to thrive at work" (Travis and Thorpe-Moscon 2018). *Psychological safety* is when employees feel they can make mistakes and take risks without being penalized (Thorpe-Moscon and Ohm nd, 5).

Many participants described that they were working within a colonial education system and found it challenging to live in two world views: Eurocentric and Indigenous. Fear of self-identifying as First Nations, Métis or Inuit, along with feelings of exhaustion and burnout from heavy workload responsibility, was a common theme. In addition, other comments indicating emotional tax included lack of feeling valued or a sense of belonging, little or no decision-making responsibilities, tokenism, "lip service" response to advice, and feeling silenced or voiceless.

> We may have increasing amounts of Indigenous teachers and leaders; however, there is lack of inclusion at decision-making conversations.

> The biggest barrier is not feeling comfortable expressing my concerns or thoughts. There are consequences for sharing thoughts and concerns. I wish all parties would be honest with each other and create a more positive workplace.

> I am not sure that I am motivated to remain in the teaching profession as a teacher. I am confident in my ability to teach, reach and impact students' lives in a positive way. I am passionate about Indigenous education. While that is "tolerated" and sometimes celebrated, it comes as an addition to my everyday tasks. You can be a leader as long as you work full-time teaching, too.

- **There is a lack of opportunities for growth and advancement**.

Many participants expressed varying degrees of satisfaction with leadership opportunities, opportunities to mentor and be mentored, recruitment, hiring, and supportive conditions to do their work. Many participants identified a lack of equitable access to leadership opportunities.

> I regret that I am in an earlier stage of learning about/connecting with my Métis culture/history than I would like; therefore, I know I have a long way to go, and may never reach the

level of knowledge to be revealed to me in order to be a leader in Indigenous education. No matter my history or appearance, that knowledge is not mine to claim whenever I want and [to] use to forward my career. Although I would love to be in a position to do as much as I can to empower Indigenous youth, I am content to continue learning, and would never accept a position I do not feel I am qualified for, or entitled to accept.

I am Indigenous, I embrace change and feel that my professionalism and dedication to Indigenous education is not viewed as an asset in my own district. I am valued within Alberta as an Indigenous educator and leader.

I would like to see the district prioritize the hiring (and maintaining) of Indigenous teachers, Black teachers, and other teachers of colour. I would also like to see these teachers in roles that don't specifically pertain to race (Indigenous Learning Services) and normalize these teachers as experts in all subject areas. It's extremely difficult to move into leadership when you can't apply for district programs or training because you are not a permanent staff member. The district has also little reflection in regard to the lack of both female and racialized people in upper leadership roles.

- **There is hope for the future**.

  Many participants expressed the opinion that, despite all these barriers and challenges in provincial schools and systems, they believed these circumstances could be overcome through system- and school-based leadership that is accountable for addressing systemic racism practices and policies.

  I love my profession, and I hope that I can make a difference in a child's life.

  Our world is changing too fast and we need to learn and find new ways to help students in this changing world. Teachers need to plant seeds and give all children hope for the future. I want to do my part in making children's lives better.

  I love these kids. I love to see the hope in their eyes. Systemic issues are the biggest concern. I am working to be in a place to really push for change. I have not secured that position yet. I fear that if I am too vocal right now, I will be shut down.

Methodology and Methods

In 2021, the Alberta Teachers' Association and College of Alberta School Superintendents, in coordination with researchers from the University of Alberta, conducted an evaluation of the experience of Indigenous teachers and school and system leaders within Alberta's public school system. The evaluation consisted of an online survey and focus groups. The results of these evaluation activities are outlined in this report.

This study used a mixed-methods research approach to capture the experiences of self-identified Indigenous teachers and school and system leaders across the province.

An online survey took place in winter of 2021, in which self-identified Indigenous teachers (n = 63) and school leaders (n = 36) were invited to complete the survey; another survey took place for system leaders (n = 4) from Alberta provincial school authorities. In total, four online focus groups were completed. Participants who completed the survey were invited to express interest in participating in an online focus group facilitated by one of the researchers from the University of Alberta. Three focus groups included teachers and school leaders (n = 13); a fourth focus group was conducted for system leaders (n = 4).

Participation in the study was voluntary; teachers, school leaders and system leaders were free to skip questions or withdraw at any time until they clicked the submit button. The survey comprised a number of scale questions, in addition to several qualitative questions intended to gather more in-depth comments from respondents.

Researchers from the University of Alberta collected and summarized the focus group data, and Melissa Purcell (ATA) and Elizabeth Gouthro (CASS) summarized the online survey data. Descriptive statistics for all scale questions were computed. Additionally, a thematic qualitative analysis was performed on open-ended responses.

Summary of Teacher and School Leader Focus Group Data

FOCUS GROUP CONVERSATIONS: KEY INSIGHTS FROM INDIGENOUS TEACHERS AND SCHOOL LEADERS

Dwayne Donald

Participants in the focus group conversations were invited to share their thoughts, feelings and experiences in a virtual sharing circle context. Participants were given opportunities to contribute to the conversation according to their own preferences. While the general purpose of the virtual sharing circles was to gain better understanding of the experiences of Indigenous educators working in the provincial school system, the participants were provided with several focus question prompts to respond to if they wished to do so. These questions are as follows:

1. Based on your experiences, tell us about recruitment and retention, mentorship and leadership opportunities, racism and discrimination.
2. What are one or two changes that could be made that would make a difference in the work that you do?
3. What could the Association do to assist you in the work that you do?

Below are key thematic insights derived from the focus group conversations. Each theme is detailed with context and interpretation.

Sharing a Love for Teaching

Numerous focus group participants expressed passionate and heartfelt commitment to their roles as educators. Many shared that they derive much personal meaning and satisfaction from their involvement in the teaching profession. One participant expressed these sentiments poignantly:

> I do love teaching. I've always wanted to be a teacher. Always. The students are the reason that I am where I am. They make my day. They always have and they always will … They are the reason that I am there.

A significant number of the research participants were engaged in leadership roles in support of Indigenous education for their schools or divisions at the time of our focus group conversations. The character of these leadership roles is varied and seems to be dependent on the experience of each educator as well as the internal politics at play in each school or division. The majority of the research participants had been or are currently serving as First Nations, Métis and Inuit lead teachers for their school or division. There were also a significant number of participants who had been or were

currently in an Indigenous graduation coach or liaison role. Many of the participants reported that they had served in various Indigenous education roles over the course of their teaching careers. There were also a few participants who are or have been serving in leadership roles as principal, curriculum coordinator, and Indigenous education consultant or strategist within their school divisions. All participants expressed pride in their Indigenous roots and clear commitment to serve the needs and interests of Indigenous students, parents and the wider community in the varied roles that they have accepted. Among them, they share a clear sense of responsibility to do what they can to improve the educational experiences of Indigenous students. However, and importantly, the participants recognize that they work in public school settings, and so helping non-Indigenous students and teachers better understand Indigenous histories, cultures, experiences and foundational knowledges is a key priority for them as well. As one participant expressed it, the focus is on improving relationships:

> To always connect with kids, Indigenous and non-Indigenous kids, because I think that's where the real work is—with everybody. Just trying to share our culture, share our knowledge, share our history … That's where leadership came in. Having the opportunity to be a principal and looking at a different context. Still supporting kids, still supporting families. But how can I do that with a truth and reconciliation lens? And really get the people who need to have that soft heart and where First Nations people are at. And so that is why I chose a non-Indigenous community. To be able to share that. One, to be a role model. Two, to bring that to the forefront. Have those hard conversations.

Throughout these focus group conversations, the participants made it clear that they were very willing to take on the responsibilities associated with serving in the difficult roles that they do as Indigenous educators. They do not shy away from such challenges. However, many wished that they were better supported and encouraged by their system leaders when willingly taking on such responsibilities and commitments.

Toeing the Line

Many focus group participants expressed frustration with systemic structures and practices that position Indigenous education initiatives as second-rate in comparison to other educational concerns. They noted that existing institutional practices do not promote Indigenous education as a stand-alone educational priority. It is most often framed as a special interest topic subsumed beneath broader educational initiatives such as diversity or religious education. There was a shared view that the integrity of the work of Indigenous educators is consistently undermined when they are required to operate under the constraints of someone else's agenda. Participants reported that they regularly feel marginalized, disregarded and dismissed by supervisors and colleagues in the work that they do. They feel the need to "toe the line," or conform to problematic expectations in order to maintain their positions and continue to do the work that they know needs to be done. One participant expressed this "toeing the line" necessity in this way:

> I've always felt since I have been in the education field, no matter where I am at, I've always had to accommodate. I've always had to toe the line. I had to learn how to play the game. I had to learn when to put my mask on. But most of all, I've had to learn when to change my shoes. When do I put my shopping shoes on, my church shoes on or my ceremony shoes on … It's so subtle sometimes; it's not overt. But it's these little pins and needles that get thrown at you. I've always felt that I'm not worthy enough because I am who I am. Because of my skin colour, basically. Because I am visibly Aboriginal. I've always felt that it's a barrier, a wall.

This participant's reference to a barrier or wall connotes images of the fort as an ongoing social-spatial organizer of Indigenous-Canadian relations (Donald 2013). For many generations, Canadians have been told that their country originated with fur trading forts. In seeming tribute to this genesis, forts have been resurrected and maintained as national symbols. You cannot travel far in Canada without encountering a community that began as a fur-trading post or fort, a town or city that has the word *fort* in its name, or a historic site or fort recreated as a museum. These celebrations of the history of the nation have fostered the development of a colonial frontier logic—delineated by the fort walls—of insiders (Canadians) and outsiders (Indigenous peoples). A significant teaching of this creation story is that Indigenous peoples and Canadians live in separate realities and that the racial and cultural divides of the frontier are natural and necessary. This highly influential creation story of Canada continues to haunt contemporary Canadian society by defining the terms according to which Indigenous people and Canadians speak to each other about history, memory and society. Colonial frontier logics continue to manifest themselves in educational settings and create forts of a different kind. Some of the focus group participants expressed their awareness of these inherited divides and the institutional expectation that they would submit and conform to them in their roles.

Another focus participant expressed frustration with this systemic problem this way:

> My experiences are very political … A lot of it is fear based and there's power and there's hierarchy. You gotta be willing to jump through hoops and say the right things to the right people. I'm not that person. That's not real to me … I feel frustrated with a system that can't handle criticism … I can tell you the communities that I serve, the two schools that I work in, those kids that come in the door—it's life or death. I don't have time to assuage people's egos, that's not what my role—that's not what my work is about. And yet I feel, especially as an Indigenous person in this work, we have to toe the line, we have to stroke people's egos because there is so much at stake all the time.

This participant draws attention to the difficult realities that Indigenous educators can confront when working with Indigenous students and their parents. When students and parents are living amid poverty, trauma, crisis and violence, the pettiness of having to "jump through hoops" or "stroke people's egos" can feel like a betrayal of the very people these educators are trying to serve. It was very clear that several of the focus group participants felt that their supervisors do not understand the dire lived experiences of some Indigenous students and parents. System leaders seem unwilling to accept

that their insistent reinforcement of existing institutional structures and practices does little to help with these difficult situations. In truth, the focus group participants expressed the view that such approaches make their work more complicated and stressful.

Along with colonial frontier logics and the institutional perpetuation of social–spatial separations of Indigenous peoples and Canadians, there is also the persistence of a relational psychosis that troubles the work of these focus group participants. *Relational psychosis* refers to the aftermath of a decades-long curricular project dedicated to the telling of a particular kind of Canadian national narrative that actively excluded the memories, experiences and knowledges of Indigenous peoples. The legitimacy of Canadian identity can be troubled when there is acknowledgement that Indigenous peoples have deep roots and ancient ancestry in connection to the land. For some Canadians, such acknowledgements imply that they are newcomers and thus foreign to Canada. Since this is a contradiction too difficult for many Canadians to face, the institutionalized solution is to exclude and disregard Indigenous contributions, categorize them as just another part of the multicultural mix, and thereby limit the chance that Indigenous contributions might actually matter in educational settings. Thus, this relational psychosis can be characterized as a refusal to acknowledge Indigenous presence and participation *on their own terms*. Two focus group participants poignantly articulated examples of this relational psychosis present in the context of their own work:

> There is a real shyness to really delve into local history and culture. It's always "Let's learn about the Iroquois, let's learn about every other Indigenous group, but let's not really talk too much about Blackfoot. It's nice that you're Blackfoot, but let's not really talk about that. Let's learn about every other culture." If we talk about cancelling culture, I see that that's there. But as soon as you want to talk about cancel culture from the other side—if I can call it sides—there's this big "Whoa, what's happening?"

> Just yesterday we had a staff meeting where people came from our division office and the superintendent came to our school to talk to us. I asked a question about each school having its own Indigenous support because our school does have a liaison that works between three schools. But because she works between three schools we rarely see her because she is so busy … Basically, I was told that all cultures matter, not just FNMI culture ... I explained Indigenous culture has a different history and shouldn't be just lumped in. And I was told that I was wrong … We have a long way to go.

Many focus group participants reported feeling the negative effects of this exclusionary logic on their daily work as Indigenous educators. As St Denis (2011) argues, many Canadians regard efforts to address issues of diversity and inequity as a threat to the perceived virtuousness of the Canadian nation and nationality, and so the resentment of and resistance to the inclusion of Indigenous knowledges and histories is considered justified on these grounds.

Getting Stuck in Roles

While the focus group participants consistently expressed feelings of pride associated with their work as Indigenous educators, many noted that they have felt stuck in roles as well. Participants used the term *pigeonholed* to describe their feelings on this. Being pigeonholed refers to a situation in which a human being is categorized in ways that fail to reflect the complexities of his or her actual lived realities. Participants reflected on their shared experience of being assigned responsibility for all the Indigenous "stuff" once their Indigenous identity was made known. Indigenous educators are in short supply, and school systems take advantage of Indigenous staff by placing the burden of Indigenous "stuff" squarely on their shoulders. Participants consistently reported that it is difficult to extricate themselves from a particular role once their school or division has identified them as the person best suited for that role, even if their own training and expertise is in another field of study. The participants stated that this experience with being stuck in a role seems to be connected to the desire of school or division leaders to have Indigenous matters covered so that they can check boxes and give the impression that Indigenous programming needs are being effectively met. Some participants expressed the view that their own career opportunities are being negatively affected by such systemic practices:

> My recruitment was based on that I had Cree language and culture. I feel like because I was hired as the Cree language/culture teacher there was a lot of discrimination there. To me, it feels like I'm not good enough to be a teacher of any other subject … I'm really not happy because I feel that I was hired to fill that totemic role … I would love to teach English, I would love to teach Aboriginal studies, but I never got the chance … There should be opportunities for teachers to be where they want to be.

> When I came to the school division I'm in now and I worked at central office, those three years actually burnt me out because I had to share my story through the blanket activity. That's when it was really big where we had to share it with all our schools, all our classes, all our teachers to give them that knowledge. It burnt me out. I had to share my story every week, feel that pain, feel that discrimination that I felt as a young person.

These participants express well the complexities associated with being identified as an Indigenous educator working within the Alberta provincial school system. While there is clear expectation that school or division leaders would draw on the experiences and expertise of their Indigenous staff members to provide necessary programming, it becomes problematic when such staff become stuck in unbidden roles. In part, such pigeonholing implies that Indigenous educators are not considered qualified to serve in any other roles. The other implication of this concern contained within this pigeonholing practice is that there is a problematic assumption that only Indigenous educators are qualified to teach Indigenous content. The pedagogical logic implied here is that teachers are allowed to teach only about their own cultures—a logic that the field of education has never upheld (Donald 2009, 32). Among other policy documents and directives, the TRC's 94 Calls to Action, the

Teaching Quality Standard (TQS), the Leadership Quality Standard (LQS) and the Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard (SLQS) very clearly state that *all* educators are expected to provide leadership concerning Indigenous peoples and their foundational knowledges for the benefit of *all* students. Focus group participants want their school and division leaders to take seriously these policy directives and expect all educators to address them so that Indigenous educators are not overburdened or stuck in roles they might not want.

Vicarious Trauma

Vicarious trauma refers to the harmful effects resulting from consistent exposure to the traumatic experiences of others. In the context of this research initiative, some focus group participants reported that they suffer the effects of vicarious trauma brought on when witnessing systemic racism experienced by Indigenous students, their parents and even their Indigenous colleagues with whom they work. As already noted in this report, trauma needs to be understood as accumulated intergenerationally amongst Indigenous peoples, but it is important to acknowledge that Indigenous peoples experience ongoing traumas through their daily interactions with Canadians in the form of systemic racism, prejudice, discrimination and institutionalized practices of exclusion. Some Indigenous students and their families experience schools as unwelcoming and assimilatory places that do not value their traditions or cultural practices. Schools are perceived as places where Canadian colonial culture is imposed on Indigenous students and families without their consent, consultation or concern for their well-being. Indigenous educators who advocate for the rights of Indigenous students and parents can often feel caught between their roles as school-based educators and their concerns over the institutionalized mistreatment of Indigenous peoples:

> I suffer from vicarious trauma. When I watch others who are being oppressed—I can take the oppression, I can speak out. When I watch others, either students or other staff members, it's really hard to take that. So, I feel like I'm carrying that a lot of times. That's a big reason why I won't leave where I am.

As one participant shared, institutional racism experienced by Indigenous peoples is often lost in the overwhelming busyness of doing "everything else" deemed more important than addressing the needs of Indigenous peoples to feel safe, accepted and respected in school settings:

> I feel like we have been so busy building foundational knowledge, and trying to educate people and dispelling myths and stereotypes, that people have forgotten that Indigenous people also face racism … When people are looking at antiracism, the Indigenous story seems to be absent … Everything else just seems to be more important … Carrying others people's trauma is a huge thing I feel very deeply with my students, but also with people that I have worked with that also encounter institutional racism.

Feeling Isolated, Vulnerable and Unsupported by Leaders

Many of the focus group participants wished that their school and division leaders better understood the difficulty of the jobs they do and the vulnerability they feel as Indigenous educators. In many educational settings across the province, the efforts of Indigenous educators to support student and teacher engagement with First Nations, Métis and Inuit foundational knowledges (as mandated by TQS 5) are still unwelcome. Indigenous–Canadian relations remain contentious in many Alberta communities, and schools are places where lingering misunderstandings can generate conflict and discontent. The focus group participants reported that sometimes they feel as though their educational roles and responsibilities position them at the centre of such contentiousness, and that their school and system leaders do not comprehend the unique difficulties that they experience within such contentiousness. Such positioning can sometimes result in feelings of isolation, marginalization and vulnerability in Indigenous educators when they do not receive the clear support of their leaders:

> I was in one of the schools and I was teaching Aboriginal studies. A non-Indigenous family, mom and dad, came in to talk to me myself about being racist against non-First Nations kids. I had never met these parents before. My administration sat with me in this situation and agreed with them … What they had on me, evidence I guess, wasn't strong.

> I really understand how important I am as a Cree person … and I am a qualified teacher. I went to school for five years to become a teacher. It seems like I am always being alienated, isolated from the rest of the teachers because I am the Cree teacher … I would really like those things to change. To be recognized as a teacher is what I really need.

One participant expressed these feelings of isolation and marginalization somewhat differently:

> My school division likes to say they communicate and listen and everything else. But they'll send us a survey in a google forms—yes or no, agree, very much agree, disagree. But [we're not] able to put in our input or our explanations or our ideas as to why or what we could do. Or they'll bring in different programming for the students, but we don't get an input as to what they talk about or what they could talk about in the future, what worked, what didn't work with our kids. Because we know them. We know our students … I often feel like I'm not heard. I don't have a chance to really express my opinions without coming across as annoyed and angry.

This participant expresses concerns over the lack of opportunity for Indigenous educators to provide meaningful guidance on student programming to school and division leaders. Several participants noted a similar dynamic in their own work context wherein non-Indigenous school and system leaders seem to think that *they* know what is best for Indigenous students and fail to draw on the experience and expertise of Indigenous educators to inform their decisions. This problem of institutional leaders unilaterally deciding what is best for Indigenous peoples has been a normalized characteristic of Canadian colonial culture for many generations.

Career Opportunities, Recruitment and Retention

Focus group participants stated that they were not aware of any formal efforts to recruit or retain Indigenous educators to join their particular school divisions. A few participants noted that their school divisions seem to avoid recruiting from the local area, and instead look as far as the Maritime provinces to recruit educators for their schools. It is important to add that participants seemed to share the view that their opportunities to serve in Indigenous education leadership roles came mostly as a result of the support of an individual colleague who advocated on their behalf rather than any systemwide clear commitment to retain and promote Indigenous educators. These leadership opportunities came about informally in the sense that an individual in a leadership role provided discreet mentorship and encouragement to them as a friend and colleague.

One participant shared a quote from a division leader and then voiced concerns over the lack of Indigenous educators employed within the division*:*

> Indigenous students need to see Indigenous leaders. They need to see the people in the school system who are doing well. They need to see the people that come from their community, having gone through the very same issues in their community, having had the very same background, leading in their schools and being successful in their lives. Yet our division has no Indigenous leaders. The number of Indigenous teachers in our division is very small.

By citing this specific example, this participant is drawing attention to an apparent mismatch between messages conveyed by system leaders and existing recruitment and retention practices. Within this apparent mismatch, there exists the potential for differing interpretations of the "problem" that can fuel further misunderstandings. System leaders may state that they have tried to recruit and retain more Indigenous educators to work in their schools, but have found that qualified Indigenous educators are in short supply and difficult to find. On the other hand, some of the focus group participants pointed out that there are increasing numbers of Indigenous educators graduating from faculties of education, but most of them are choosing to work in Indigenous community schools because they find such schools more welcoming and collaborative than Alberta provincial schools. According to this interpretation, a significant number of recently graduated Indigenous educators are actively choosing not to work in Alberta provincial schools. Some focus group participants expressed the view that it is incumbent upon their school leaders to address this situation so that Indigenous educators feel welcome and valued in the Alberta provincial schools. Since the majority of school-aged Indigenous children living in Alberta attend provincial schools, there is an urgent need for more Indigenous educators to be working in these schools. As stated in the quote above, Indigenous youth do indeed need to see their own people in key leadership roles in the schools that they attend.

However, as one participant pointed out, it is also important to acknowledge that many Indigenous people *are* currently serving key roles as educational assistants in public school settings. From the point of view of this participant, these educational assistants are providing critical supports in these

schools, and public school system leaders should be actively encouraging these people to complete their teaching degrees and become certified teachers in their division:

> I do really want to see more Indigenous teachers in the school division. I work with seven support workers and, of those seven, probably three or four could be good candidates for teaching. But the school division doesn't really see the creativity around that … I see the gifts that they have. They have to do teaching, they have to go into the classrooms, but they're not being recognized for the work that they're doing. They don't belong to any type of union. Their positions are so tenuous.

Finally, while participants recognized that there are sparse numbers of Indigenous educators working in Alberta provincial schools, and that Indigenous education initiatives are the responsibility of all educators in Alberta schools, a few participants expressed the view that key Indigenous education leadership roles should only be held by qualified Indigenous people. One participant explained this view in these terms:

> A lot of positions [are] being filled within the school system by non-Indigenous people for Indigenous jobs. I'm talking about non-Indigenous people being Indigenous liaisons. Even though they did a great job, they were holding a space that didn't belong to them. And there were many people who could have been doing that job. It really actually hurt the work that all of the rest of us were doing … High school completion coaches that were supposed to be for Indigenous students were also non-Indigenous. So, how could their narrative at all relate? How could they help them cross that finish line of graduating when you don't have a similar experience, when you cannot connect or understand historical trauma? This is still going on … In the context of colonization, it's still acceptable.

From the standpoint of this participant, appointing non-Indigenous people to key Indigenous education leadership roles is an institutional practice that perpetuates the colonial view that Indigenous people are not qualified or competent enough to provide such leadership.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH AND IMPROVEMENT

Dwayne Donald

The value of compiling insights from Indigenous educators currently working in Alberta provincial schools is that doing so provides contextual background on how they experience their work and its effects on all those associated with it. In summary, the overall impression gained from these consultations with the focus group participants is that the overwhelming majority are deeply committed to their work, see much value in connecting all students to Indigenous foundational knowledges and are hopeful that they can have a role in the work as it continues.

However, despite the strengths of these educators and their clear commitment to continue working for improvements, it is important to recognize that they have identified several difficult challenges in Alberta provincial schools that need to be addressed. Below is a summary of three key issues that the focus group participants identified as needing attention from their system leaders:

1. A Shared Vision That Unifies All Involved

Educational change is a complex endeavour. Much of the research regarding educational change indicates that an essential aspect of such efforts—for their success as well as their sustainability—is a shared vision for the work. A shared vision brings unity regarding the purpose of the work and clarity concerning the overarching big-picture plan that all participants should be working to bring to fulfillment. It also helps clarify what is at stake in the work being done for all involved. A key consideration for the creation of a shared vision is that it cannot be borrowed from a different educational context. To be most helpful as an inspirational guide, the vision must be generated within the specific educational context under scrutiny by the people who will be most involved in making it come to fruition.

An excellent example of a specific shared vision for education in an Indigenous community comes from the Yirrkala community of the Yolngu people of Northern Australia. The Yolngu live in a unique ecosystem dominated by mangrove swamps in which salt water and fresh water mix together. Over many thousands of years, the Yolngu people have noted that most of the food in this ecosystem is located at the places where the salt water and fresh water mix. Thus, those places are considered to have life-giving properties and are integral part of the knowledge system of the Yolngu people. When the people were tasked with generating a shared vision for the kind of education that they want for their own children, it is not surprising that they used their own knowledge system in connection to their ancestral territory to articulate a metaphor called Ganma (Marika, Ngurruwutthun and White 1992). *Ganma* expresses an understanding that the salt water represents knowledge from another part of the world (mostly Europe) while fresh water represents the knowledge that the Yolngu people have of their own place in the world. Ganma expresses the vision that the Yolngu people want the education of their own children to be located right at the place where the salt water (knowledge from another place) and fresh water (their own ancestral knowledge) mix. Using the example of the ecosystem, this vision expresses the very local view that an education guided by the vision of Ganma will position the children at a location that has the most life-giving potential.

The focus group participants stated that the TRC's 94 Calls to Action, Teacher Quality Standard (TQS) 5, Leadership Quality Standard (LQS) 5 and Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard (SLQS) 5 all provide clear visional direction on how Indigenous foundational knowledges are to be engaged in Alberta provincial school settings. Implied within this visional direction is the urgent educational commitment to repair Indigenous-Canadian relations and renew them on more ethical terms. Participants noted repeatedly that their educational leaders tend to make decisions that send a message to staff that they do not take this commitment very seriously. They want their educational

leaders to be required to honour the visional direction expressed in the 94 Calls to Action, TQS 5, LQS 5 and SLQS 5, and be held accountable if they fail to do so (www.alberta.ca/professional-practice-standards.aspx).

2. Creating Sustainable Cultural Changes in the Daily Workings of Schools Requires Meaningful Structural Changes

After many years of service, most experienced educators understand that meaningful education system change is very difficult to effectuate. Veteran teachers will speak with some skepticism on the different programs and "fads" that have come and gone during their careers as teachers. What veteran teachers know is that the structures that govern schooling will resist any attempts at programmatic change and render them futile. This doubt that such programs will actually result in meaningful system change stems from an understanding that schools are places that are actually not very open to cultural change or innovation. Schools as institutions are indeed intensely cultural places, but the culture that typically governs schooling usually goes unnamed and is accepted as common sense. As is well understood, formal education as we have come to know and experience it today descends from the Industrial period in Europe and is founded on a factory system approach to educating young people. Although many educators have tried to reform formal education away from its industrial roots, the basic structural patterns and cultural assumptions that frame perceptions of how a "real school" should operate have proven to be very difficult to change.

These insights regarding education system change are very important to ponder. Over the years, many well-conceived Indigenous education program initiatives have not been sustained because the programs were attempted within existing Euroheritage educational structures that deformed them. Such initiatives become deformed when they are required to conform to Euroheritage structures and logics. These structures and logics undermine the integrity of Indigenous teachings and strip them of their potential to offer unique educational experiences for both students and educators. Thus, in sum, the key point here is that any educational reforms being attempted in response to the 94 Calls to Action, TQS 5, LQS 5 and SLQS 5 will be sustained only if they are accompanied by significant structural changes in the daily operations of Alberta schools. If the different Indigenous education initiatives are simply inserted into existing schooling structures, the initiatives will not be sustained because the Euroheritage governing structure will hinder the cultural changes that are being attempted.

Of course, schools can and do change, but usually *very* slowly and seldom in ways that fundamentally alter the basic cultural assumptions that govern schooling. *In order for Indigenous educators working in Alberta provincial schools to do the work that their system leaders expect of them, structural changes need to be made.* Such systemic and structural changes need to be developed and implemented by individuals or small groups of Indigenous educators working in Alberta provincial schools who draw upon their own personal practical knowledge and experiences as well as their constantly deepening knowledge of their students and the communities in which they live. Such deliberations regarding

structural changes need to be mindful of traditional schooling structures that shape classroom culture, notions of knowledge and knowing, teaching approaches, assessment, time, scheduling, and how the learner is conceptualized. At its most basic level, structural change begins with analyzing how the school day is planned, how time is used, the expertise of associated educators, and the characters and identities of the students implied in those structures. While the details of these structural changes are constrained by the need to adhere to provincial curriculum standards, there are multiple opportunities to reconceptualize the structure of Alberta provincial schools so that they reflect the expertise of Indigenous educators and better support the vision contained within the 94 Calls to Action, TQS 5, LQS 5 and SLQS 5.

3. Mentorship Program

Focus group participants expressed unanimous support for the creation of a network of Indigenous educators working in Alberta provincial schools who could offer support, guidance and mentorship to each other. Participants desire to be part of a provincewide collaborative network of Indigenous educators who share resources, strategies, ideas and experiences. Many felt that the creation of such a network would enhance the quality of their work and help them feel less isolated, marginalized and vulnerable.

Summary of System Leader Data

Unfortunately, there were few system leaders who identify as Indigenous who volunteered to participate in the survey and the focus group session. The system leaders who did volunteer to participate in the study all identified as Métis, were experienced teachers and leaders of 15 to 30 years, had earned master's degrees and attended CASS conferences to further their learning.

In Alberta, there is no provincial mandated tracking of this demographic information of system leaders who self-identify as Indigenous. Currently the Teacher Workforce Information Service (TWINS) invites teachers to self-identify as First Nations, Métis or Inuit; however, this information is voluntary and confidential (https://extranet.education.alberta.ca/twins.public/Documents/FAQ.public.pdf).

Although it was challenging to interpret and analyze the data from the few participants, the voices of the participating system leaders need to be heard and included, and compared to the findings from the participating Indigenous teachers and school leaders and to similar research in Canada on Indigenous leaders in education.

Although participation in the survey and/or focus group was voluntary, it was noticeable that several Indigenous system leaders chose not to participate. This low rate of participation by system leaders could be explained by fear of speaking up, lack of trust and/or confidence in the confidentiality of the process, and/or not wanting to be openly identified as Indigenous. All of these explanations relate to the emotional tax and lack of psychological safety potentially experienced by Indigenous educators.

SURVEY FINDINGS

Overall, Indigenous system leaders participating in the survey had a high level of agreement on the following themes (the numbers in parentheses refer to the survey question number—see Appendix B):

- What constituted good teaching (5) and good leadership (6)
- Opportunities to mentor others, less opportunities to be mentored themselves (7)
- Dissatisfaction with their district's recruitment, hiring, retention and promotion practices (7)
- Altruistic reasons for wanting to remain in education (8)
- Wanting to empower other educators (9)
- Belief in the power of education to transform (10)
- Barriers and challenges tied to racism and discrimination (11)

- Establish the hiring of Indigenous teachers as a priority in their districts (13)
- Felt unsafe addressing racism (15) (16)
- All experienced racism, either as a witness or personally (15)
- Need for districts to have a process for addressing racism (17)

Where participants disagreed on their level of satisfaction, it may be explained by the differences in their working context (4).

KEY INSIGHTS FROM INDIGENOUS SYSTEM LEADERS

Sean Lessard

This section of the report discusses the representation of Indigenous people in senior leadership or other positions of influence in education across Alberta, and highlights the experiences of a small group of Indigenous educators currently serving in leadership roles in their respective school divisions. The following information is derived from a focus group that took place on March 16, 2021. During the focus group, four participants from across the province were asked a number of semistructured questions regarding their experiences as Indigenous educators in leadership positions. The purpose of these conversations was to hear their stories and gain an understanding of the current challenges facing Indigenous people in our provincial education system, and discuss ideas to facilitate improvement at both micro and macro levels. These discussion points would be then turned into a set of recommendations that could be presented to CASS. The following questions were posed to the four participants:

1. Share a story about your experiences, struggles, and successes around retention.
2. Reflect and share on the level of support you had/have in your current role or previous roles.
3. Share a story or experience about a time you felt silenced or witnessed racism and/or discrimination in your role as an Indigenous leader.
4. What can CASS do to support leaders of school districts to address the concerns and experiences we shared today?
5. Can you share words of wisdom for future Indigenous leaders in education?

Each participant had an opportunity to answer each question and take the conversation in a particular direction, although in the advent of time, the facilitator placed time limits on participants' responses. Notes were taken from the conversations, and data pulled from the resulting conversations were grouped into themes. The general findings concluded the following:

1. Indigenous people in senior leadership or positions of influence currently face a number of challenges, including overt and covert racism during their educational journey, both from

educators and fellow senior leaders within and outside of their school division; and being labelled, particularly early in their career, as having only the capacity and interest to work in positions pertaining to Indigenous culture, without having the agency to choose their path in education.

2. Indigenous people working in education feel that they are often burdened with being solely responsible for the success of Indigenous students. They believe that the important work of supporting Indigenous students across the province lies with all educators, not just the designated few, in particular Indigenous educators.
3. Indigenous people need support to be recruited, hired and promoted, and to thrive within their school division throughout their career.

This report provides some valuable insights and a potential pathway forward; however, we acknowledge that there are limitations to the findings. The number of participants interviewed during the focus group was small, and only limited time was available for lengthier conversations during the focus group.

INTRODUCTION

A recent report written for Catalyst, a global nonprofit founded in 1962 to help build workplaces that work for women, found that Indigenous people are underrepresented in the workplace and often experience isolation due to a lack of Indigenous mentorship at senior levels (Thorpe-Moscon and Ohm nd, 2). In addition to the lack of role models in the workplace, Indigenous people work among colleagues and senior executives that "do not truly understand their history" and lived experiences as Indigenous people living in Canada (Thorpe-Moscon and Ohm nd, 2). The Catalyst report painted a picture of Indigenous people's experiences in the workplace; however, the emotional tax and the psychological insecurities Indigenous people face is a reality for many Indigenous people in education.

A mutually beneficial partnership between the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) and College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS) was established to assist both organizations in gathering information from self-identified First Nations, Métis and Inuit teachers, school leaders and system leaders. This partnership between the ATA and CASS is a critical step to ensuring that the experiences and understandings of self-identified Indigenous teachers and leaders guide future steps and actions. With these goals in mind, self-identified First Nations, Métis, and Inuit teachers and leaders, both school and system based, were encouraged to complete an online survey and volunteer to participate in focus groups conversations. Participants were invited to provide feedback and guidance to the ATA and CASS on areas of strength, needs and concerns/challenges with regard to recruitment, retention and support.

A story session was hosted by education researchers, and a total of four Indigenous leaders participated. The overall goal of the story session was to learn from what was shared so that

Indigenous educators within Alberta's public education system can be better sustained, empowered and supported in their careers.

SHARING THROUGH STORY

Storytelling and narrative bring forth shared experiences and provide participants the opportunity to make sense of past events and anticipate a new future (Kenny and Fraser 2012, 173). Holding stories as sacred, the researchers turned toward Indigenous research methods that aligned with Indigenous ways of learning, communicating and relating. Understanding that "research as storytelling" (Haig-Bown, in Archibald 2008, 47) evokes high emotional value, the researchers invited participants' stories as a way to understand their experiences as leaders in education. Embracing moments of silence, laughter and even tears is evidence that the story session was rooted in ethically composed Indigenous ways of being. Sharing in narratives is strongly connected with Indigeneity; further, "all cultures are sustained through stories that integrate past, present, and future" (Kenny and Fraser 2012, 7). Throughout the focus group or story session (as it was named), participants shared narratives of being both sustained and silenced, in the past and present. The report ends with a discussion of the future, outlining how Alberta educational leaders and organizations can begin to heal, learn, grow and move toward CASS's original recommendations and next steps as outlined in its 2019 report (CASS 2019, 6). CASS facilitating the process was a key step in beginning to engage in more disruptive conversations that can lead to significant actions that can have impact at a larger systems level. The word *disruptive* is used purposefully, because the cover stories within larger systems need to become uncloaked and unpacked to more fully understand the context and particular nature of a system structure that is challenged.

The goal of the virtual story session was to provide a safe place for Indigenous voices to be heard. The hope was that listening to other Indigenous leader stories would encourage more stories, more sharing and more connection that can lead to action-oriented responses.

SHARING THEIR STORIES

Stories are a creative act of leadership through which we manifest our solidarity and strengthen our people to take their next steps in encouraging good and healthy lives (Kenny and Fraser 2012, 2).

Experiences as Indigenous Leader and Educator

During the story session, participants spoke of their experience as leaders; however, they also included their more general experiences as Indigenous people in the field of education. Whether stories of school-based leadership or stories about getting hired as new teachers, every participant had something to share about their path to leadership.

During the story session, it became clear that all participants faced barriers while working toward their current role as leader. All participants stated their frustrations about how they are treated as Indigenous people by their peers and colleagues. One participant was hesitant and fearful to join the story session, while others were eager to have a voice. Throughout the story session, participants all spoke to their identity as Indigenous people.

Each participant shared their story of being hired at various milestones in their careers, saying they felt "pigeonholed" into Indigenous roles and spaces and were "only offered positions in diversity support." Another participant was told that "Indigenous roles are a great opportunity for you." It was clear that the participants struggled with their colleagues' lack of understanding and awareness of Indigenous people and history, and would discuss some of their colleagues as having pan-Indigenous mindsets or a lack of terminology awareness.

> [Obvious] microaggressions make you feel shameful. Stay quiet and do the work necessary.

> Any time the word *Indigenous* is brought up, everyone looks at me. Leaders and educators always get to look outward instead of stepping inside.

Participants discussed the nature of systemic racism, which still exists in school divisions across Alberta, and that simply identifying as Indigenous could be considered a career-limiting move. Participants spoke of their experiences with overt racism. One participant talked about witnessing racism toward Indigenous students. When one participant shared frustrations with colleagues, their feedback was met with resistance and they felt even more silenced. Calling out racism did not seem to be welcomed in many of the participants' roles. Further to this, many participants spoke of being silenced and talked about their "voice not being heard," which ultimately led to them leaving their former positions and/or organizations. Some of the participants gave up or deferred promising opportunities out of frustration, burnout and the heavy emotions of working as an Indigenous educator. Having to tolerate their work environment proved to be something that each participant discussed. In general, the positionality of Indigenous teachers and leaders can be marginalizing and a solo and often lonely transition to negotiate. This in itself is a unique finding that can be met with system responses that leading organizations notably take up. A repository of system responses and strategies ("wise practices") would be a small step in more fully understanding the current system successes and challenges. The systems data provincially would provide snapshot data, systems trends and tendencies in relation to hiring and retention, and leadership composition and onboarding practices that are embedded in current policies. A systemic review of HR and leadership policies would reveal immediate gaps and omissions.

> As an Indigenous educator, I'm expected to know everything; that's why many Indigenous educators don't self-identify—[there is an] unfair expectation to know everything.

The participants spoke about the expectations that are put on them as Indigenous teachers, including colleagues assuming that Indigenous teachers "know it all" or have all the answers. Further to this,

participants explained how they are invited to be a part of advisory committees but not initially involved in the making of large decisions regarding Indigenous education within the organization. There was a clear agreement that the participants did not feel valued and that their senior leaders just "paid lip service" to Indigenous issues, saying "at least they asked you." The word *tokenism* was used to describe these experiences at particular educational organizations within Alberta.

> I come to this role as an Indigenous person 24-7, and that cannot be forgotten. I have to constantly insert myself into big important work that I'm left out of. I always have to remind people "Hello, Indigenous person here. Indigenous education." I thought I was a senior leader. I thought I was going to be a part of the big decisions.

Murray Sinclair has spoken of how employees' identities "become interwoven with organizational interests; the leader is not outside this process, but enmeshed in it" (Hardison-Stevens 2014, 39). Participants talked about the feelings and emotions connected to being an Indigenous leader in education. They spoke of the impossible separation of being Indigenous and being a leader. Acknowledgements of the cultural conflict that is Indigenous leadership is always activated. Indigenous leaders have the dual identity of developing the skills necessary to operate in both worlds (Kenny and Fraser 2012, 193). It was clear through participant narratives that the complexities of serving as an Indigenous educator in a leadership position are multifaceted. Indigenous leaders often face the dilemma of double consciousness as they struggle to interpret, negotiate and survive in two distinct cultural worlds (Fitzgerald 2006). Contemporary leadership demands that Indigenous leaders make bridges between many worlds; this dilemma involved in this bridge building is often referred to as "living between two worlds" (Kenny and Fraser 2012, 4). It is clear that the constant tension that exists in their work is exhausting. Participants voiced their frustration and disappointment with the current educational climate in relation to honouring the work that is needed to move forward with Indigenous students. A clear concern is that Indigenous educators will experience emotional burnout or resentment: in many school divisions across the province, they alone carry the burden of supporting some of the most vulnerable and marginalized students. The systems response in this matter could be met with the basic acknowledgement that this is occurring at several levels, and then actively engaging in reflexive work at a senior level that offers capable response and embedding real actions that promote a culturally responsive and more equitable working environment. Engagement with system leaders beyond and removed from education and school would be of benefit.

Lack of Support and Capacity System Leadership

Indigenous peoples of North America have long been subjects of a complex history of colonization, attempted genocide, and deculturalization through education (Spring 2000). Even though national and international policies and guidelines have supported the self-determination of Indigenous peoples and their pursuit of equitable education (UNESCO 2007, 2015; TRC 2015), it is clear that

much work needs to be done. The testimonies of participants in this story session indicate that there is plenty of change to be had here in Alberta.

> Genuinely worried about provincial school system.
>
> What questions do leaders need to ask themselves? What are the barriers for people (non-Indigenous leaders) to do the work?
>
> Who holds superintendents accountable? School superintendents should know what they need to do.

The participants in the story session talked about the unrealistic demands put on them regarding their assigned job portfolios. They discussed how their portfolios contain many responsibilities, such as supporting Indigenous student success while also leading in professional development, and further to that, overseeing tasks that are apart from Indigenous education. This sends mixed signals that make Indigenous educational leaders question the importance of their work and/or Indigenous education.

> Every organization needs a senior leader, at the same level, who is provided the time and the space and the leadership and the decision making and the authority that is included in decisions, *all* the time. All the time. Not off my dining room table on a Saturday night.
>
> They [senior leadership in school divisions] say it's "everyone's work," but we don't see it.

Many leaders within the education systems believe that the momentum gathered from the 94 Calls to Action recommended by the TRC in 2015 has waned. Senior leadership in provincial systems has failed to leverage the initial impetus gained from the work done with non-Indigenous teachers to move forward their collective understanding, confidence and willingness to integrate Indigenous content in classrooms. Call to Action 10 calls on the government to provide sufficient funding to close identified educational achievement gaps and improve education attainment levels (TRC 2015, 2). Call to Action 62 urges the government to provide space for senior-level positions in government to include Indigenous content in education (TRC 2015, 7). Although these calls are directed at the federal, provincial and territorial governments, the onus is on educators and leaders to act in a way that reverses and reclaims what was lost in Canadian education.

Participants in the story session say that senior leadership allows the work to take a back seat, while many leaders across the province have reverted to more traditional educational priorities that focus only on outcomes relating to literacy, numeracy and standard achievement indicators. One might even ask if the misalignment is by chance or by design, and if there is a place for Indigenous ways of knowing within mainstream leadership education (Deloria and Wildcat 2001).

> [There are] no conversations by school superintendents about Indigenous education ... no conversations about creating conditions for Indigenous student success. How are superintendents engaged in learning so they can adhere to those standards?

Despite the presence of a small sample of strong Indigenous leaders across the province in provincial school systems, there remains a clear lack of visible representation. Within the picture of largely white or non-Indigenous leadership in Alberta, participants spoke of witnessing both overt and covert racism in schools and boardrooms. A lack of awareness and responsiveness has been noted at higher levels of leadership, with subtle forms of racism and discrimination occurring at lower levels of leadership across the province. "My first experiences with racism were in my youngest years at school. I think about what could have been different had we not experienced this." Participants discussed their hesitancy at disclosing their Indigenous roots for fear of limiting their opportunities for personal growth and advancement within their school division. One participant described the "shame" they felt and stated that they were able to "get by without citing my Indigenous background."

These sentiments align with existing literature that discusses the plight of Indigenous educators in positions of influence, and their need to prepare for the rigour of the continuing resistance they are almost certain to confront (Battiste 2000; Cross, Pewewardy and Smith 2019; Coulthard 2014).

> It's hard. I'm always fighting. I'm always the one to bring [Indigenous education] up, the one who thinks about it all the time. It's not only my job to think about this.

> It is exhausting. Always having to provide a historical context or justify Indigenous perspectives. It is emotionally taxing.

Despite facing many obstacles, participants discussed their unwavering passion for the work, and pride in being a strong Indigenous leader. They were unwilling to be silenced any more, and many have learned the art of having courageous conversations with their fellow leaders. They understand the critical nature of challenging leaders across the province in changing the narrative. "Taking up space" (as one participant has said) in places where key decisions are made and in important conversations remains paramount. They continue to encourage other emerging Indigenous educators to take up space in leadership positions and have non-Indigenous ally colleagues who support their cause. Despite the many barriers, these participants demonstrate resilience and strength of character in their current portfolios, and inspire others to serve Indigenous students and families in supporting their educational needs. One participant described their experience as having "pockets of strength."

Indigenous populations worldwide are known to have a relational world view that conceives of the world holistically as cycles, patterns and relationships both seen and unseen; this in some ways is part of the tension and clashes within systems, world views and philosophies (Cross 1995; Pewewardy 2002).

Participants are asking their fellow leaders at CASS and other Indigenous education stakeholders to "walk their talk" and prioritize the need to close the student achievement gap for Indigenous students, but within this gap is a larger call to systems reformation and sustainability. They ask that school districts support the growth and development of Indigenous educators in becoming leaders across the province, and help Indigenous educators to thrive by helping to sustain them in their work. Indigenous leaders, scholars, researchers and students are already moving toward a preferred future in which the Indigenous mind is freed from the fear of persecution and deculturalization. Leadership education can join in and assist or unwittingly sit back and resist (Cross, Pewewardy and Smith 2019).

Conclusion

In summary, supporting Indigenous teachers, school leaders and system leaders throughout the progression of their careers is crucial to reconciliation within Alberta's public education system. Creating authentic spaces and opportunities for non-Indigenous students, school staff, families and communities to learn from and with Indigenous teachers, school leaders and system leaders is an integral component of advancing truth and reconciliation.

Through the voices of Indigenous teachers, school leaders and system leaders, the findings highlight the passion and dedication to the teaching and leadership profession for the benefit of non-Indigenous and Indigenous students, school staff, families and community. Survey and focus group findings indicate that Indigenous teachers and leaders have a high level of commitment to teaching and leading, altruistic reasons for staying despite experiencing some difficult conditions and barriers, a strong belief in the power of public education to transform, and a commitment to mentor and empower all educators. The commitment and dedication of Indigenous teachers and school and system leaders is an opportunity for the education system to hear the truth and act as we move forward on our path to reconciliation through education. Currently, Alberta's public education system is imbalanced due to significant underrepresentation of Indigenous teachers, school leaders and system leaders.

> "*[R]econciliation* means 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." (LQS, www.alberta.ca/professional-practice-standards.aspx)

As a pathway forward from these findings, school systems should continue to develop and strengthen mutually respectful relationships with Indigenous teachers, school leaders and system leaders. Sixty-six per cent of Indigenous teacher respondents strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that their district values their perspectives; 75 per cent of school leader respondents strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that their district values their perspectives as a school leader, and 66 per cent of system leaders agreed.

However, the narratives shared through the open-ended survey responses and focus group opportunities indicate that teachers and school and system leaders feel undervalued, as noted in the survey comment "*Just being ignored. Being treated as though my ideas and input [aren't] valid.*"

The variance in responses suggests that more work is needed to create safe, respectful and culturally responsive opportunities, such as the focus groups, to listen, learn, respond to and include the voices of Indigenous teachers, school leaders and system leaders within their local context. While most teachers, school leaders and system leaders indicated that they felt undervalued through the focus group conversations, a few respondents did feel respected and valued in their current roles.

Establishing and sustaining inclusive and respectful conditions for Indigenous teachers, school leaders and system leaders is a critical component of the decolonization of education spaces. Sixty-eight per cent of teacher respondents, and 77 per cent of school leader and 67 per cent of system leader respondents strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that their district provides the support they need to do their work.

However, in contextual qualitative discussions (that is, open-ended and focus groups), there is a sense that teachers and school leaders are not feeling supported in some very specific ways—for example, not feeling respected or represented at the decision-making table, as noted in this survey comment: "*... it is one thing being invited to the table; it is another to have a voice.*" Teacher and school leader professional judgment needs to be maintained in the profession of teaching. There was a similar sentiment in system leader comments, such as, "*It is exhausting. Always having to provide a historical context or justify Indigenous perspectives. It is emotionally taxing.*"

The data indicated that there was a feeling of racism and oppression for teachers and school and system leaders. One survey participant described "*being told by a staff member that it was unfair that so much emphasis was put on Indigenous culture and it should be the same for all cultures.*" Ongoing professional learning about equity, anti-Indigenous racism, antiracism, and antioppression for educators and educational leadership is crucial to ensuring that school communities are safe, welcoming and caring, and they actively stand against discrimination, racism and oppression.

The Indigenous-focused competencies and indicators continue to be a high area of need for teachers, school leaders and system leaders across the province. A strong majority of teacher respondents (74.5 per cent) and of school leader respondents and system leaders (77 per cent) strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that their school district makes it a priority to support Indigenous students and education. Additionally, 70.5 per cent of teacher respondents, 77.8 per cent of school leader respondents and 100 per cent of system leader respondents strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that their school districts have a plan that addresses truth and reconciliation. Yet, most respondents expressed a lack of accountability by leaders for the achievement of the plans to improve Indigenous education. As one survey respondent indicated, "*It's hard. I'm always fighting. I'm always the one to bring Indigenous education up, the one who thinks about it all the time. It's not only my job to think about this.*" Teachers, school leaders and system leaders have a professional responsibility to meet the Indigenous-focused competencies and indicators in the Alberta professional practice standards.

This research project has emphasized the importance of engaging and learning about the truth as told by Indigenous peoples, and fully committing to a lifelong and careerlong learning journey in Indigenous education. The ATA and CASS are committed to bringing this research forward for discussions and action within our respective organizations.

> Indigenous Peoples are free and equal to all to all other peoples and individuals and have the right to be free from any kind of discrimination, in the exercise of their rights, in particular that based on their Indigenous origin or identity.
>
> —Article 2, United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf)

Education is what got us here and education is what will get us out.

—Honourable Murray Sinclair

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Appendix A

SURVEY RESULTS FROM TEACHERS AND SCHOOL LEADERS

Participants were invited to self-identity as First Nations, Métis or Inuit. Most participants self-identified as Métis (68.3 per cent of teachers and 51.4 per cent of school leaders) or First Nations (23.8 per cent of teachers and 45.7 per cent of school leaders). See Figure 1 and Figure 2.

Figure 1. Self-Identification of Indigenous Teachers

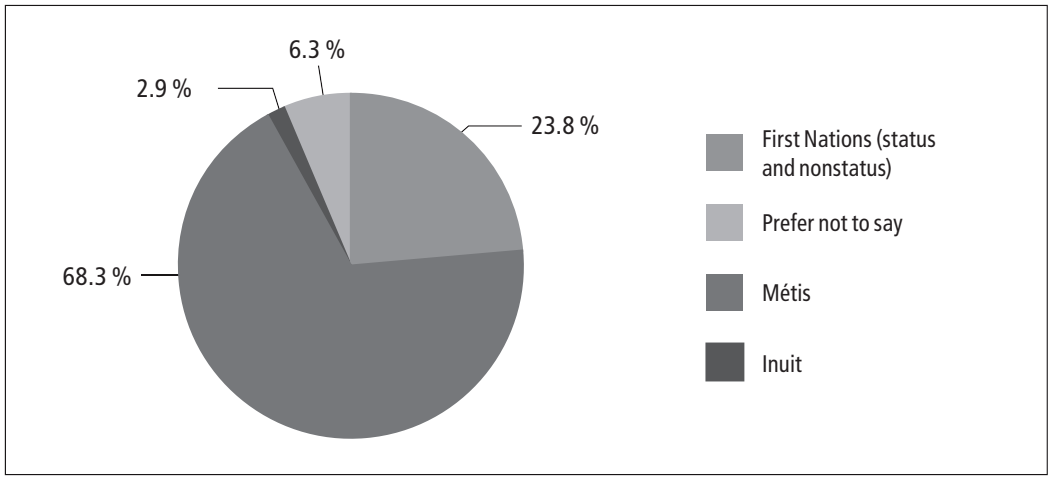
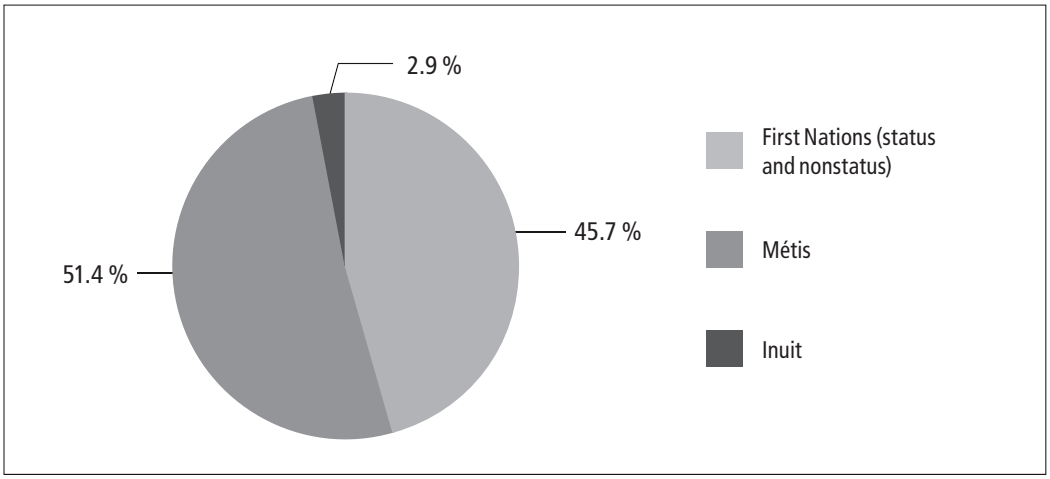


Figure 2. Self-Identification of Indigenous School Leaders



TEACHER AND SCHOOL LEADER REFLECTIONS ON CONDITIONS OF PRACTICE AND PHILOSOPHY

Respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which their school district supported their work as a teacher and school leader. Most teacher and school leader respondents agreed or substantially agreed that their school district has a high level of trust in its teachers and school leaders. Many indicated that their school district values their perspective and that they feel supported.

Teacher respondents (n = 50) indicated that 50 per cent somewhat agreed and 32 per cent strongly agreed that their school district has a high level of trust in teachers and school leaders. Forty-eight per cent somewhat agreed that their school district values their perspective, and 48 per cent somewhat agreed they are provided with the support needed to do their work. See Figure 3.

Figure 3. Indicate the extent of you how you feel your school district supports your work as a teacher.

	Strongly Agree		Somewhat Agree		Somewhat Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Responses
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count
My school district has a high level of trust in its teachers.	16	32.0	25	50.0	5	10.0	4	8.0	50
My school district has a commitment to equity that ensures that the learning needs of all students are met.	16	31.4	21	41.2	12	23.5	2	3.9	51
My school district makes it a priority to support Indigenous students and education.	10	20.0	27	54.0	10	20.0	3	6.0	50
My school district has a plan that is addressing truth and reconciliation.	8	16.0	27	54.0	12	24.0	3	6.0	50
My school district values my perspectives.	9	18.0	24	48.0	10	20.0	7	14.0	50
My school district provides the support I need to do my work.	10	20.0	24	48.0	12	24.0	4	8.0	50

School leader respondents (n = 27) indicated that 44 per cent somewhat agreed and 44 per cent strongly agreed that their school district has a high level of trust in teachers and school leaders. Forty-one per cent somewhat agreed that their school district values their perspective, and 37 per cent somewhat agreed that they are provided with the support needed to do their work. See Figure 4.

Figure 4. Indicate the extent of you how you feel your school district supports your work as a school leader.

	Strongly Agree		Somewhat Agree		Somewhat Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Responses
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count
My school district has a high level of trust in its school leaders.	12	44.4	12	44.4	2	7.4	1	3.7	27
My school district has a commitment to equity that ensures that the learning needs of all students are met.	14	51.9	8	29.6	4	14.8	1	3.7	27
My school district makes it a priority to support Indigenous students and education.	10	37.0	11	40.7	5	18.5	1	3.7	27
My school district has a plan that is addressing truth and reconciliation.	7	25.9	14	51.9	5	18.5	1	3.7	27
My school district values my perspectives as a school leader.	9	33.3	11	40.7	5	18.5	2	7.4	27
My school district provides the support I need to do my work as a school leader.	11	40.7	10	37.0	5	18.5	1	3.7	27

TEACHER AND SCHOOL LEADER REFLECTIONS ON RECRUITMENT, HIRING AND RETENTION PROCESS AND CONDITIONS

Teacher respondents indicated that 38 per cent are somewhat dissatisfied with leadership opportunities and 33 per cent are somewhat dissatisfied with mentorship opportunities for themselves (see Figure 5). Comparatively, school leader respondents indicated that 38 per cent are somewhat dissatisfied with leadership opportunities and 33 per cent are somewhat dissatisfied with mentorship opportunities from themselves (see Figure 6).

Figure 5. Indicate your degree of satisfaction with your employing board for Indigenous teachers.

	Very Satisfied		Somewhat Satisfied		Somewhat Dissatisfied		Very Dissatisfied		Responses
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count
Recruitment practices	4	8.9	20	44.4	9	20.0	12	26.7	45
Hiring process	3	6.7	20	44.4	11	24.4	11	24.4	45
Leadership opportunities	4	8.9	13	28.9	17	37.8	11	24.4	45
Mentorship opportunities for myself	7	15.6	12	26.7	15	33.3	11	24.4	45
Opportunities to mentor others	5	11.1	19	42.2	14	31.1	7	15.6	45
Teaching assignment	12	26.7	22	48.9	7	15.6	4	8.9	45
Ongoing feedback opportunities	5	11.4	21	47.7	11	25.0	7	15.9	44

Figure 6. Indicate your degree of satisfaction with your employing board for Indigenous teachers (as responded by school leaders).

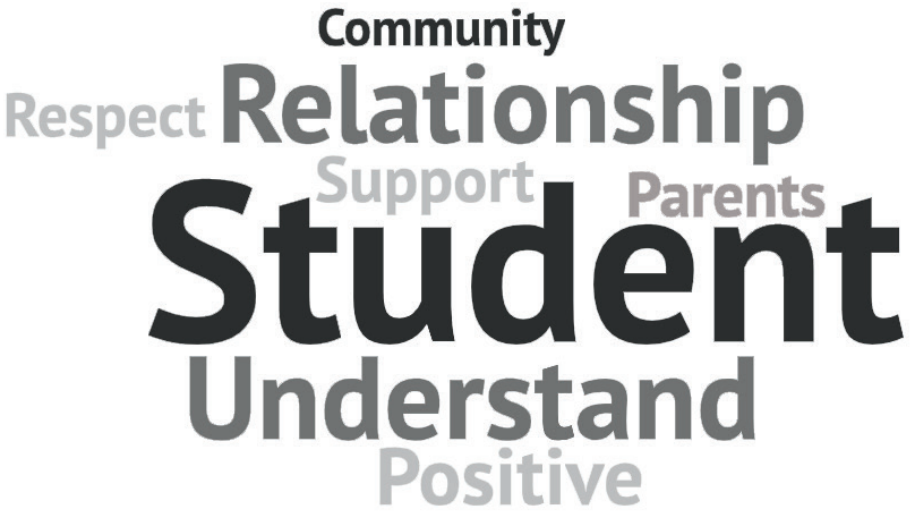
	Very Satisfied		Somewhat Satisfied		Somewhat Dissatisfied		Very Dissatisfied		Responses
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count
Recruitment practices	1	4.5	9	40.9	8	36.4	4	18.2	22
Hiring process	2	9.1	8	36.4	9	40.9	3	13.6	22
Leadership opportunities	3	13.6	10	45.5	6	27.3	3	13.6	22
Mentorship opportunities for myself	4	18.2	7	31.8	7	31.8	4	18.2	22
Opportunities to mentor others	5	22.7	9	40.9	3	13.6	5	22.7	22
Teaching assignment	6	27.3	10	45.5	6	27.3	0	0.0	22
Ongoing feedback opportunities	5	22.7	9	40.9	3	13.6	5	22.7	22

OVERVIEW OF OPEN-ENDED SURVEY RESPONSES

The following is an overview of the common themes expressed by teacher and school leader respondents in the online survey.

Good Teaching

Teacher and school leader respondents indicated that good teaching includes



Good School and/or System Leadership

Teacher and school leader respondents indicated that good school and system leadership includes

Motivation to Continue in the Teaching Profession

Teacher and school leader respondents indicated their motivation to continue in the teaching profession:

Barriers or Challenges to Leadership Opportunities

Teacher and school leader respondents indicated barriers or challenges to leadership opportunities:

Discrimination and Racism Within the School and/or Division

Teacher and school respondents shared a wide spectrum of experiences of discrimination or racism within the school and/or division. Some respondents indicated not having experienced any discrimination or racism at all. Respondents who did share experiences of discrimination and racism included a variety of microagressions, direct confrontations and daily occurrences.

> I often feel that I am underrated and my opinions do not count because I am just a Cree teacher.

> Some people are surprised when they learn about my background and connection to the community, but no discrimination or racism.

Teacher and school leader respondents indicated a variety of actions taken to deal with discrimination and/or racism in the school or division. Some respondents indicated examples of action, such as ongoing antiracism education, policies and procedures, and direct conversations.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Indigenous Teacher and School Leader Respondents

Table 1. Context and Grade Level of Survey Respondents

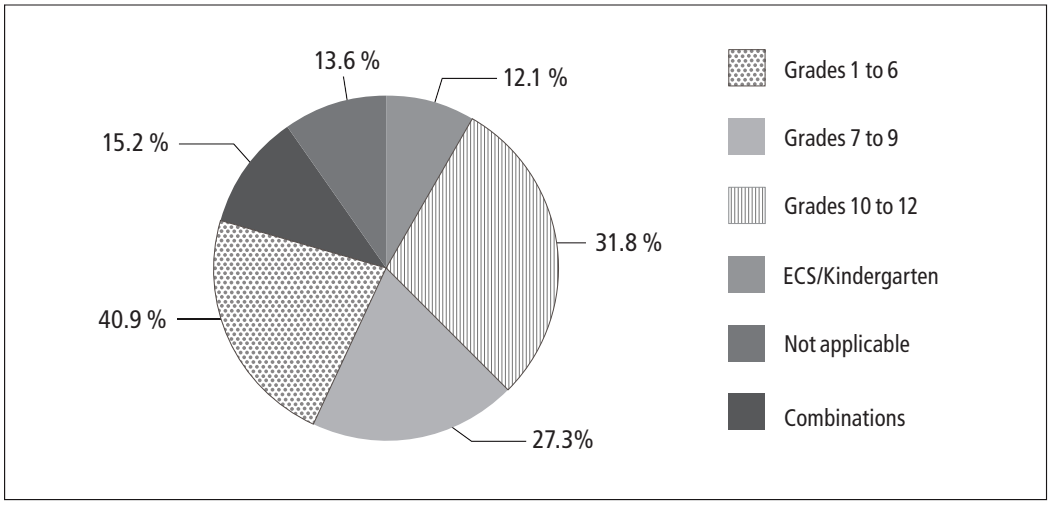


Table 2. Number of Years of Teaching Experience for Survey Respondents

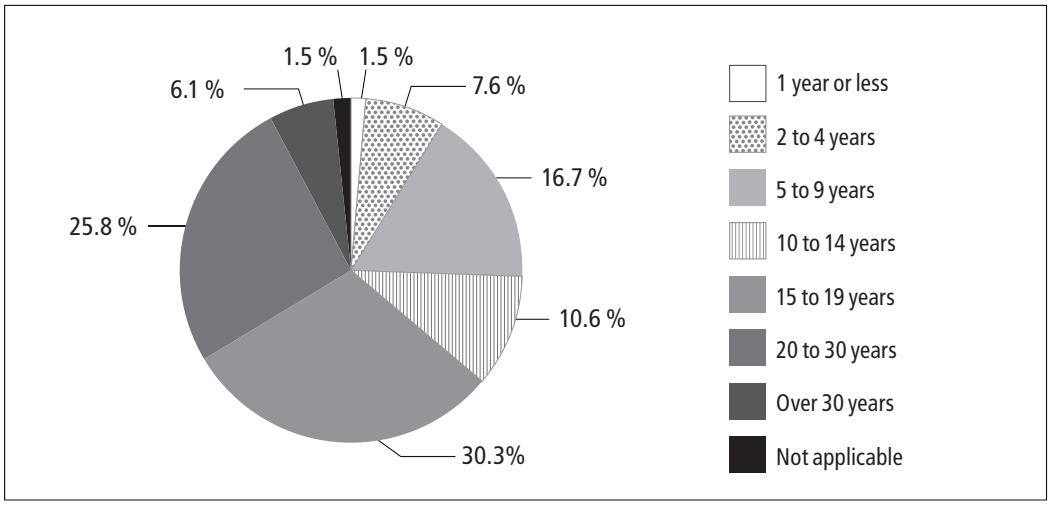


Table 3. Number of Years of Leadership Experience for Survey Respondents

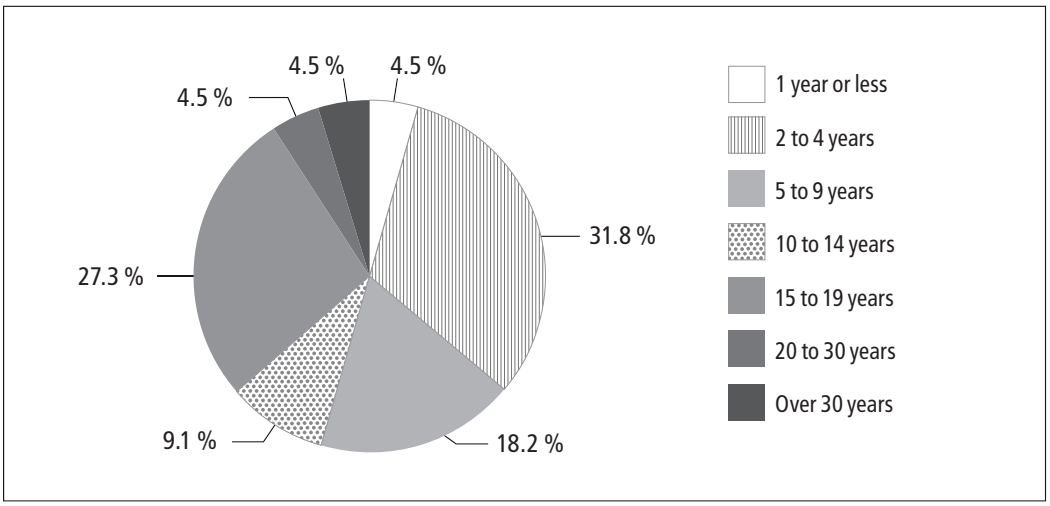
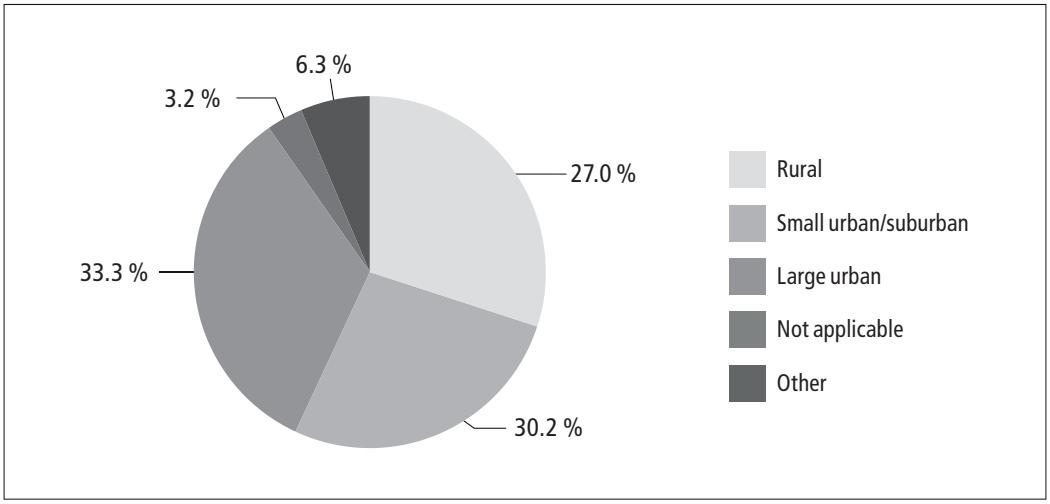


Table 4. Type of School Respondents Teach/Work In



Appendix B

SURVEY RESULTS FROM SYSTEM LEADERS

Note: Data for several questions were removed to protect the identity and confidentiality of respondents.

Survey Results

1. Do you self-identify as First Nations, Métis or Inuit?

All participants (100 per cent) voluntarily identified as Métis.

2. Voluntary First Nations, Métis or Inuit self-identification: if you wish to declare your First Nations, Métis or Inuit status, please specify.

3.What is your current assignment?

All participants (100 per cent) worked at central office.

4. The following questions assess the extent to which you feel your school district supports your work as a school leader:

Participants did answer this question, most likely because system leaders see themselves as leaders of school leaders. Responses to these six questions on the extent to which the participants felt supported by their district as a leader varied. These variances most likely are due to the context of their individual experience.

All participants agreed that their school district has a commitment to equity and has a plan that is addressing truth and reconciliation, while their responses to "My school district has a high level of trust in its school leaders," "My school district makes it a priority to support Indigenous students" and "My district provides the support I need to do my work as a school leader" were mostly in agreement— 67 per cent, versus 33 per cent disagreement.

The other five questions identified both agreement and disagreement most likely related to their feelings of their individual school district's level of support for school leaders.

5. Good teaching is …

Participants described good teaching as authentic, genuine, strength based, meaningful, relevant, holistic learning experiences for students that facilitate relationships with Indigenous peoples to learn Indigenous perspectives first hand.

> Authentic, genuine, research-based, differentiated to the students who are in the learning space, strengths based, play based (K through 12), meaningful and relevant to the students in the room—multiple ways to learn and show what you know.

6. Good school and/or system leadership is …

The participants were consistent in voicing that good system leadership is focused on equity through a shared vision that was inclusive of the voices of stakeholders, sustainable and just, and that recognizes inherent inequities, sets high expectations for all learners and staff, and moves past tokenism.

> Trustworthy, focused on a shared vision, with all stakeholder voices represented, sustainable, legacy, research and evidence based, responsive, reflective, modelled with integrity, equitable and just.

7. Please indicate your degree of satisfaction with your employing board for Indigenous teachers:

There was higher satisfaction with opportunities to mentor others and teaching assignments, some satisfaction with mentorship opportunities for themselves and ongoing feedback opportunities, and dissatisfaction with recruitment practices, hiring process and leadership opportunities.

8. I am motivated to remain in the teaching profession because …

The responses to this question demonstrated a high level of altruistic caring for all students, wanting the best for each and every student, and [recognition of] the value of their profession to improve the lives of all children, in particular Indigenous students.

> I believe all children, regardless of circumstance, race, culture, gender, ability, have the right to the best public school education we can provide—our most vulnerable who are voiceless to our most gifted.

9. Why did you become a school leader?

Respondents became school leaders to have a voice in decision making, to advocate for the vulnerable and to support teachers in their growth.

> It was not part of my plan—it happened as part of my professional journey. To provide voice and advocacy to our most vulnerable, to lead with integrity and empower others to grow and lead within the profession, celebrating them along the way.

10. What motivates you to continue to be a school leader?

Respondents continue to be school/system leaders because of their belief in the transformative power of public education and the commitment that school districts are making to the calls to action from the TRC.

> The rights of the child and a belief that public school education has the power to transform lives and society, influence our future and create equitable spaces for all

> The release of the TRC Calls to Action and the new-found commitments that school districts across Canada are making to interrogate and decolonize their thinking and structures are motivating. I believe that my leadership can contribute to both supporting my school district and holding it accountable.

11. What are the barriers or challenges to leadership opportunities for you?

Respondents identified barriers and challenges that related to patriarchal systems, tokenism, systemic racism, superficial involvement in decision making, and discrimination.

> The greatest barriers have been related to tokenism and systemic racism. As an Indigenous educator and leader, I have often been asked by those with more decision-making power what I think or what Elders might say or what we would do in way of a plan, and then we share only to be told that that won't work so we are going to do something else instead. Why even ask then?

> The largest barriers I face in my career that are specific to me as an indigenous person are that systemic inequities are only addressed on the surface. I routinely hear and see that Indigenous people in our profession are limited in their career opportunities. Some face open discrimination in the workplace, and many face more subtle forms of discrimination, particularly when advocating for authentic work around reconciliation.

12. Describe how you were recruited to your school district. What worked? What did not? Recommendations for improvement?

Respondents differed in describing their experiences in being hired: very helpful, kind and creating a sense of being welcomed, or not being hired for their Indigenous knowledge and experience. No recommendations were shared for improvement.

> I was contacted and asked to apply for an Indigenous education position. The HR contact was very kind to me and helped me navigate the process so everything went smoothly. She created a great sense of welcome.

13. Describe the hiring process to your school district. What worked? What did not work? Recommendations for improvement?

Respondents described the hiring process as a fairly standard process of application and interview. Recommendations for improvement were to have an Indigenous person as part of the interview and to acknowledge the lack of Indigenous staff in the school district and make it a priority to improve.

> I was hired through a standard hiring process (application, interview). I remember having a member of the Indigenous community on the interview panel, which created safety for me as an Indigenous person. I recommend that districts consider Indigenous ways of doing life and work when recruiting and interviewing Indigenous teachers.

14. Based on your current position, what do you like most? What is your biggest concern? What would improve your current position?

Respondents described liking most supporting the leadership of Indigenous education and contributing to teaching and learning.

Their biggest concerns were the weight of responsibility on the shoulders of Indigenous staff to do the work alone, the lack of Indigenous perspective informing teaching and learning, and that their current position might not fit the mould for promotion.

Their recommendations for improvement were higher expectations for school and system leaders to contribute and be accountable for improving success for Indigenous learners.

> I love being part of a team that is supporting the leadership of Indigenous education and working closely with schools and the Indigenous community. My biggest concern is the weight of the responsibility on the shoulders of Indigenous staff resulting in an unrealistic workload. Things are improving, though, as a result of TRC and personal and professional commitments to reconciliation by staff, students and families. To improve my current position, higher expectations for system and school leaders to contribute to Indigenous education are needed. Improving success for Indigenous students will take a commitment and effort from all staff.

15. If you have experienced any discrimination or racism within your school and/or division context, please describe these incidents and/or practices.

Respondents gave many examples of racism within their school districts. These acts of racism include tokenism, appropriation, endless microaggressions and low expectations for Indigenous students. One respondent stated

> Tokenism, endless microaggressions, silencing, invisiblization, appropriation ... the list is long and is built into the very structure of western education systems. The racism of low expectations for Indigenous students and their achievement is also alive and flourishing in my school district.

16. What actions do you take when dealing with discrimination and/or racism within your school or division context?

Respondents agreed that they felt unsafe to take action against these acts of racism or discrimination and only discussed them in the safety of the company of their Indigenous colleagues.

> None. It's not safe. It's not something myself and Indigenous colleagues talk about outside of the safety of our circle.

> I do not have confidence that raising concerns over discrimination protects those who raise the concern, [neither] at the system level nor the governmental level.

17. How is discrimination and/or racism addressed within your school and/or division context?

Respondents agreed that racism and discrimination are not addressed at the school and or system levels. They were not sure if leaders, staff and students knew how to address them. One respondent stated that more open forms of discrimination are visible at the system and board level and that it often goes unchallenged.

> On most levels and instances, open and blatant forms of discrimination are dealt with appropriately. At more senior levels and board levels, open forms of discrimination are sheltered. Systemic racism often goes unchallenged.

18. Are there other experiences with and understandings about discrimination and/or racism within your school and/or division context that you would like to share?

One respondent shared the following:

> I am in a position where I am able to observe how others are treated, and my overall experience is that many educators are sincere in their inclusiveness and intentions to support diverse groups, including Indigenous peoples. I also observe that educators and leaders who represent minorities are often subtly underheard or given token acknowledgment.

19. Describe the context and subject grade level of your current assignment or what grade(s) you are currently teaching. Please check all that apply.

20. Including the current year, how many years of teaching experience do you have?

The system leaders' experience in education ranged from 15 to 30 years.

21. Including the current year, how many years of leadership experience do you have?

The system leaders' experience as leaders ranged from 10 to 30 years.

22. What motivates you to become a school leader?

23. If applicable, which CASS conferences do you attend? Please check all that apply.

Respondents were active in supporting the CASS conferences, with 100 **per cent** attendance at the annual conference and the First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Gathering, and smaller attendance at the summer and fall conferences.

24. In what type of school do you usually teach/work?

Respondents came from a variety of school district size: urban, rural and small urban.

25. Enter the name of the institution that you attended for your teacher preparation (that is, your bachelor of education).

26. Do you have a master's degree?

All system leaders had a master's degree, and a few indicated potentially pursuing a doctorate.

27. Do you have a doctoral degree?

28. Are you considering doctoral studies within the next five years? If so, why? If not, why not?

Appendix C

SURVEY QUESTIONS FOR INDIGENOUS TEACHERS, SCHOOL LEADERS AND SYSTEM LEADERS WITHIN ALBERTA

Identification

1. Do you self-identify as First Nations, Métis or Inuit?

   ☐ Yes ☐ No

2. Voluntary First Nations, Métis or Inuit self-identification. If you wish to declare your First Nations, Métis or Inuit status, please specify.

   ☐ First Nations (status and non-status) ☐ Métis

   ☐ Inuit ☐ Prefer not to say

Assignment

3. What is your current assignment? *

   ☐ Classroom teacher ☐ Combined classroom and school leadership duties ☐ Assistant superintendent

   ☐ Substitute teacher ☐ Central office (ATA Member) ☐ Associate superintendent

   ☐ School leader ☐ Central office (CASS Member) ☐ Superintendent

Teacher Reflections on Conditions of Practice and Philosophy

4. The following questions assess the extent to which you feel your school district supports your work as a teacher:

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
My school district has a high level of trust in its teachers	○	○	○	○
My school district has a commitment to equity that ensures that the learning needs of all students are met	○	○	○	○
My school district makes it a priority to support Indigenous students and education	○	○	○	○
My school district has a plan that is addressing truth and reconciliation	○	○	○	○
My school district values my perspectives	○	○	○	○
My school district provides the support I need to do my work	○	○	○	○

5. Good teaching is …

6. Good school and/or system leadership is ...

School Leader Reflections on Conditions of Practice and Philosophy

7. The following questions assess the extent to which you feel your school district supports your work as a school leader:

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
My school district has a high level of trust in its school leaders	○	○	○	○
My school district has a commitment to equity that ensures that the learning needs of all students are met	○	○	○	○
My school district makes it a priority to support Indigenous students and education	○	○	○	○
My school district has a plan that is addressing truth and reconciliation	○	○	○	○
My school district values my perspectives as a school leader	○	○	○	○
My school district provides the support I need to do my work as a school leader	○	○	○	○

8. Good teaching is …

9. Good school and/or system leadership is ...

System Leader Reflections on Conditions of Practice and Philosophy

10. The following questions assess the extent to which you feel your school district supports your work as a system leader:

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
My school board has a high level of trust in its system leaders	○	○	○	○
My school district has a commitment to equity that ensures that the learning needs of all students are met	○	○	○	○
My school district makes it a priority to support Indigenous students and education	○	○	○	○
My school district has a plan that is addressing truth and reconciliation	○	○	○	○
My school board values my perspectives as a system leader	○	○	○	○
My school board provides the support I need to do my work as a system leader	○	○	○	○

11. Good teaching is …

12. Good school leadership is ...

13. Good system leadership is ...

Teacher Reflections—Recruitment/Hiring/Retention

14. Please indicate your degree of satisfaction with your employing board for Indigenous teachers:

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Recruitment practices	○	○	○	○
Hiring process	○	○	○	○
Leadership opportunities	○	○	○	○
Mentorship opportunities for myself	○	○	○	○
Opportunities to mentor others	○	○	○	○
Teaching assignment	○	○	○	○
Ongoing feedback opportunities	○	○	○	○

15. I am motivated to remain in the teaching profession because ...

16. Why did you become a teacher?

17. What motivates you to continue to be a teacher?

18. What are the barriers or challenges to leadership opportunities for you?

School Leader Reflections—Recruitment/Hiring/Retention

19. Please indicate your degree of satisfaction with your employing board for Indigenous teachers:

	Very Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Somewhat Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied
Recruitment practices	○	○	○	○
Hiring process	○	○	○	○
Leadership opportunities	○	○	○	○
Mentorship opportunities for myself	○	○	○	○
Opportunities to mentor others	○	○	○	○
Teaching assignment	○	○	○	○
Ongoing feedback opportunities	○	○	○	○

20. I am motivated to remain in the teaching profession because ...

21. Why did you become a school leader?

22. What motivates you to continue to be a school leader?

23. What are the barriers or challenges to leadership opportunities for you?

System Leader Reflections—Recruitment/Hiring/Retention

24. Please indicate your degree of satisfaction with your employing board for Indigenous teachers:

	Very Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Somewhat Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied
Recruitment practices	○	○	○	○
Hiring process	○	○	○	○
Leadership opportunities	○	○	○	○
Mentorship opportunities for myself	○	○	○	○
Opportunities to mentor others	○	○	○	○
Teaching assignment	○	○	○	○
Ongoing feedback opportunities	○	○	○	○

25. I am motivated to remain in the teaching profession because ...

26. Why did you become a system leader?

27. What motivates you to continue to be a system leader?

28. What are the barriers or challenges to leadership opportunities for you?

Recruitment, Hiring and Retention Process and Conditions

29. Describe how you were recruited to your school district. What worked? What did not? Recommendations for improvement?

30. Describe the hiring process to your school district. What worked? What did not work? Recommendations for improvement?

31. Based on your current position, what do you like most? What is your biggest concern? What would improve your current position?

Discrimination/Racism in Education

*Important Note: Individual names are not to be used when responding to the following questions

32. If you have experienced any discrimination or racism with your school and/or division context, please describe these incidents and/or practices.

33. What actions do you take when dealing with discrimination and/or racism within your school or division context?

34. How is discrimination and/or racism addressed within your school and/or division context?

35. Are there other experiences with and understandings about discrimination and/or racism within your school and/or division context that you would like to share?

Demographics

36. Describe the context and subject grade level of your current assignment or what grade(s) you are currently teaching. Please check all that apply.

- ☐ ECS/Kindergarten
- ☐ Grades 1 to 6
- ☐ Grades 7 to 9
- ☐ Grades 10 to 12
- ☐ Combinations
- ☐ Not applicable

37. Including the current year, how many years of teaching experience do you have?

- ☐ 1 year or less
- ☐ 2 to 4 years
- ☐ 5 to 9 years
- ☐ 10 to 14 years
- ☐ 15 to 19 years
- ☐ 20 to 30 years
- ☐ Over 30 years
- ☐ Not applicable

38. Including the current year, how many years of leadership experience do you have?

- ☐ 1 year or less
- ☐ 2 to 4 years
- ☐ 5 to 9 years
- ☐ 10 to 14 years
- ☐ 15 to 19 years
- ☐ 20 to 30 years
- ☐ Over 30 years
- ☐ Not applicable

39. Which teachers' convention do you attend?

- ☐ Calgary City
- ☐ Central Alberta
- ☐ Central East
- ☐ Greater Edmonton
- ☐ Mighty Peace
- ☐ North East
- ☐ North Central
- ☐ Palliser
- ☐ South West
- ☐ South East

40. If applicable, which CASS conferences do you attend? Please check all that apply.

- ☐ CASS Fall Conference
- ☐ CASS First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Education Gathering
- ☐ Not applicable
- ☐ CASS Annual Conference
- ☐ CASS Summer Conference

41. In what type of school do you usually teach/work?

☐ Rural ☐ Small urban/suburban ☐ Large urban

☐ Not applicable ☐ Other _____

42. Enter the name of the institution that you attended for your teacher preparation (eg, bachelor of education).

43. Master's Degree

Do you have a master's degree?

Yes, completed. Please indicate the institution that you attended and field of study.

☐ Yes _____

Yes, currently enrolled. Please indicate the institution that you are currently enrolled in and field of study.

☐ Yes _____

☐ No

Are you considering postgraduate study in the next five years? If so, why? If not, why not?

_____

_____

_____

_____

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