

“I Think of my Classroom as a Place of Healing”: Experiences of Indigenous Students in a Community-Based Master of Education Program in Saskatchewan

¹James Alan Oloo & ²Michael Relland
University of Windsor¹, Gabriel Dumont Institute²

Abstract

An increase in the number of Indigenous teachers and education administrators is an important way to help improve Indigenous educational outcomes. However, while Indigenous teacher education programs in western Canada are registering increasing enrolments, master of education programs that prioritize Indigenous perspectives and pedagogies are rare in Canada. Using conversational method, this study examines experiences of six Indigenous students in a community-based master of education program that is a first of its kind in western Canada. The program is delivered by an Indigenous institution in partnership with a public university. The study is grounded in an Indigenous paradigm, namely, the Nehinuw (Cree) concepts of teaching and learning. Content analysis of data revealed five themes and sub-themes: (a) self-doubt; (b) a feeling of guilt as a result of family-work-school conflict; (c) self-advocacy; (d) re/connection with self, culture, and heritage; and (e) professional transformation. In general, a master of education degree is a requirement for educational administration positions including vice principal, principal, and superintendent. Understanding and acting upon the kinds of strategies that could enhance the success of Indigenous students in graduate programs is a key policy step in addressing the existing gaps in educational attainment between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians.

Keywords: conversational method, Nehinuw (Cree) concepts of teaching and learning, Indigenous teacher education, Indigenous perspectives, Saskatchewan

Introduction

Northern and remote communities of Saskatchewan, including several Métis and First Nations regions, have historically experienced numerous challenges in their attempts to provide educational opportunities for their young people. These include systemic issues that continue to disproportionately impact Indigenous student success across the education system, from preschool to Grade 12 and beyond (Burm, 2019; Massouti, 2021), and teacher shortages due to lower retention and above average teacher attrition rates (Oloo, 2007). The challenge is further compounded by the fact that Indigenous school-age population, especially in the North, has been growing at a faster rate than the provincial average (Statistics Canada, 2016).

One of the key policy responses to these challenges has included the delivery of bachelor of education programs that target Indigenous and Northern students. These include the Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program (SUNTEP), the Northern Saskatchewan Indigenous Teacher Education Program (NSITEP), Indigenous Teacher Education Program (ITEP), Cree Teacher Education Program (CTEP), and the education program at the First Nations University of Canada. Some of these teacher education programs (including CTEP and ITEP) are offered by the University of Regina or University of Saskatchewan while others, like SUNTEP and NSITEP, are delivered by Indigenous post-secondary

institutions in partnership with the two Saskatchewan universities.

The importance of these (undergraduate) Indigenous teacher education programs cannot be overstated. For example, the SUNTEP, delivered by Gabriel Dumont Institute (GDI) in Prince Albert, Regina, and Saskatoon since the 1980s has graduated more than 1,300 Indigenous teachers with Bachelor of Education degrees. Note that, about four decades ago, there were less than one dozen Indigenous teachers in Saskatchewan's largest urban schools (Bird-Wilson, 2011). There were even fewer Indigenous educators in school administration positions such as vice principals, principals, and superintendents positions that generally require a master of education degree (Oloo & Kiramba, 2019).

GDI is a Métis post-secondary and cultural institution with 15 campuses across Saskatchewan. The Métis, together with First Nations and Inuit, are the three distinct Indigenous peoples in Canada. In this paper, we recognize the diversity between and among the various Indigenous (also referred to as Aboriginal) Canadians. The City of Prince Albert, where this study was conducted, is located in Treaty 6 territory and the homeland of Indigenous groups that include the Woodland Cree, Plains Cree, Swampy Cree, Dene and the Dakota, as well as the Métis nation. Prince Albert has one of the highest Indigenous (First Nations, Métis and Inuit) population ratios in any Canadian city (Statistics Canada, 2016).

The Community-Based Master of Education Program

In 2012-2013, the number of graduates from SUNTEP Regina – delivered by GDI since 1980 in partnership with the University of Regina – reached 238. The same year, the University of Regina and GDI started exploring the possibility of expanding their partnership to include a new offering of a joint Community-Based Masters of Education Program (CBMEP) in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, a city commonly referred to as “Gateway to the North” (City of Prince Albert, 2019). The graduate program would help meet the needs of Prince Albert area educators who were serving a student population that, at the time, was over 50% Indigenous and increasing.

GDI has had a strong presence in the Prince Albert area and other parts of northern Saskatchewan where it offers community-based programs to Indigenous students. Thus, the partnership between GDI and the University of Regina to offer the CBMEP in Prince Albert seemed like a natural evolution of their partnership. The CBMEP held its first class for the inaugural cohort of 25 students at GDI Prince Albert Centre in the summer of 2013. The program has a strong Indigenous focus that is woven across all the courses of study. A great majority of students in the CBMEP are of Indigenous ancestry, although a small number of non-Indigenous students also attend the program. Almost all the CBMEP students work as teachers at local schools.

The CBMEP leads to a Master of Education degree with a concentration in Curriculum and Instruction. A total of 75 students from three cohorts have graduated from the CBMEP to date. The fourth cohort of 24 students is expected to graduate in 2021. Many of the graduates have taken leadership roles in Prince Albert and area schools as administrators, consultants and Indigenous Liaisons. In short, the CBMEP program, from a recruitment and retention standpoint, has been immensely successful and it has proven itself to be sustainable and in high demand.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to unfold and understand the experiences of Indigenous students in the community-based master of education program (CBMEP) offered by GDI in partnership with the University of Regina in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. The study is guided by one broad research question: what are the experiences of Indigenous students in the CBMEP?

Methodology

This study employs a conversational method (Kovach, 2010) to explore experiences of six Indigenous students in the CBMEP. The study is grounded in an Indigenous paradigm, namely, the Nehinuw (Cree) concepts of teaching and learning (Goulet & Goulet, 2014).

Data Collection

Using interview as conversations (Kovach, 2010), we obtained stories of lived experiences of six recent graduates of the CBME program. Kovach (2010) writes that conversational approach is a “method of

gathering knowledge based on oral storytelling tradition congruent with an Indigenous paradigm” (p. 40). She asserts that conversational method is “relational at its core,” and involves “dialogic participation” by researcher(s) and study participants “that holds a deep purpose of sharing story as a means to assist others” (p. 40). The others, in this case, include current and future students in the CBMEP, Indigenous teachers who are presently working in K-12 system, educational administrators, faculties of education, and researchers who would find the stories of lived experiences of the study participants useful.

The conversations were guided by open-ended research questions (Wilson, 2001). We found the approaches employed by Kovach (2010) and Oloo and Kiramba (2019) useful and drew on both in our conversations with the study participants. This included starting the conversations by telling stories of our individual experiences – Michael as an Indigenous (Métis) man and educator, and James as a non-Indigenous educator and an ally to Indigenous peoples.

We invited the study “participants to chronologically reconstruct their lives through the best of their recollections and according to their own relevancies” (Berger, 2016, p. 477) as it relates to the CBME program and as guided by the open-ended questions. We held two 60-90 minute sessions with the participants at mutually agreed locations in Northern Saskatchewan. Based on Wilson’s (2001) notion of Indigenous research as ceremony, and Kovach’s (2010) call for a research inquiry space that embraces “relational dynamic between self, others, and nature” (p. 42), we were intentional in establishing and nurturing a rapport with the study participants that “encourage[d] honesty and trust between the investigator[s] and informant[s]” (p. 71). Participants were also asked to write their reflection on their journey through the CBMEP program. These ‘reflection journeys’ were an important source of data that helped in the completion of this research. Artefacts (including photos and writings) supplied by study participants, and social media posts were also used as data where participants gave permission. Names of the participants have been anonymized. The study was granted ethics approval by GDI.

GDI is owned by the Métis of Saskatchewan. Close to 90 percent of the students in the CBMEP self-identity as Indigenous. All non-academic staff and most academic staff are Indigenous, and the program is delivered by GDI at its Prince Albert campus in partnership with the University of Regina, a public university in Regina. The campus can be described as welcoming and fostering a sense of belonging for Indigenous students and community members through its culturally affirming artefacts, images, and writings on display.

We decided to complete an ethics protocol from GDI rather than from the University of Regina. As an Indigenous post-secondary and cultural institute, GDI has prioritized Indigenous protocols and relational ethics in research projects and research involving its students throughout its 40-year history. Its mission statement, which starts with the words: “To promote the renewal and development of Métis culture through research ...” (GDI, 2021), underscores the assertion by Tuhiwai Smith (2012) that researchers “have the potential [or power] to extend knowledge or perpetuate ignorance” (p. 178). For the former to be truly achieved, relational ethics and accountability are important since, as Kovach (2015) reminds us, “research like life is about relationships” (p. 55) – a notion that underpins GDI research protocols. “Relational accountability,” Wilson (2008) points out, ensure that the research methodology used is “based in a community context (is relational)” and “demonstrate[s] respect, reciprocity and responsibility (is accountable as it is put into action)” (p. 99).

Theoretical Framework

The CBMEP incorporates Indigenous perspectives and ways of knowing. This study is grounded in the Nehinuw (Cree) concepts of teaching and learning (Goulet & Goulet, 2014). Goulet and Goulet write that in Cree, there are three main forms of education, or teaching-learning process: *Kiskinaumagehin* (teaching another) – which entails formal and informal teacher-directed learning; *Kiskinaumasowin* (teaching one-self) or self-directed learning; and *Kiskinaumatowin* (teaching each other) – in which learning is interactive and interdependent (pp. 65-67). This study adopts the view that “[E]ffective teaching for Indigenous students is about relationships and connections - that is, relationships between teacher and student, among students in the class, and connections to the content and process of learning” (p.78).

Engaging in Collaborative Inquiry

The co-authors, James and Michael, previously worked together at an Indigenous educational institution.

James was an invited speaker at a past CBMEP graduation event. Michael is an instructor and head of an Indigenous Teacher Education Program. Ideas for this study emerged from Michael's reflections on the third graduation of the CBMEP and his discussions with James about the program and its impact. As part of his work, James had previously interviewed graduates of the three cohorts of the CBMEP and highlighted their stories (Oloo, 2015, 2017, 2019). "Stories," write Battiste and Henderson (2000), "are enfolding lessons. Not only do they transmit validated experiences; they also renew, awaken, and honour spiritual forces" (p. 77). In her "Indigenist agenda," (Battiste, 2013) calls on Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to work together as allies in reconciliation and urges the latter to join Indigenous peoples in their struggles for decolonization and by supporting Indigenous (led) initiatives. We have heeded the call by Battiste by coming together as allies, Michael as Métis and James, an African-Canadian, to create a space for the voices of Indigenous students to be heard.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data analysis in a naturalistic inquiry like the current study is usually an iterative process that starts before data collection is completed (Athens, 2010). Using interview as conversation, we encouraged study participants to share stories of their lived experience in their graduate studies at GDI. The conversations were guided by semi-structured open-ended questions which touched on *Kiskinaumagehin* (teaching another), *Kiskinaumasowin* (teaching one-self) or self-directed learning; and *Kiskinaumatowin* (teaching each other) (Goulet & Goulet, 2014). These included a reflection on the actions of the professors in the program; the students' actions as they took responsibility for their own learning; as well as shared experience with peers including classroom discussions and group work.

We transcribed the audio-recorded interviews as conversations and reconstructed the narrative accounts of each participant based on research questions that informed the conversations and suggestions by Athens (2010). We then shared the narrative accounts with each participant for their comments and feedback to better reflect who they were and were becoming (Kiramba & Oloo, 2019).

Our data analysis procedure employed paradigmatic analysis (Sharp et al., 2018) which allowed for the use of inductive conceptualizations to identify common threads from within the stories of the participants (Kiramba & Oloo, 2020). It also enabled us to utilize "deductive processes to explore how well data fits with predetermined concepts ... [as] reflected in an existing theoretical framework" (Sharp et al., 2018, p. 9), which in this case was the Cree concepts of teaching and learning as presented by Goulet and Goulet (2014).

Research Findings

Two broad themes emerged across the participants' stories: personal transformations and professional transformations as a result of the participants' experience at the CBMEP. These are examined below. Note, however, that at times, the distinction between the two themes was not clear and they tended to overlap.

Theme 1: Personal Transformations

Within personal transformation are four subthemes from the participant stories. These included, 1) self-doubt; 2) a feeling of guilt as a result of family-work-school conflict; 3) self-advocacy; and 4) a re/connection with self, culture, and heritage (which led to healing). These are discussed below.

Self-Doubt

'*Self-doubt*' was a common theme in the participants' narratives, a finding that concurs with that of previous studies (see for example, Usher et al., 2005). Five of the six participants mentioned self-doubt when talking about their apparent lack of educational preparedness for graduate school. This was quite surprising because all the participants had bachelor of education degrees and were working as teachers at the time they were applying to the CBMEP. One of the participants (Amanda) said,

I remember, as if it was yesterday, how nervous I was when I sent my application for the Master of Education program. I was opening a new door in my life and a whole can of worms. Tears filled my eyes as I struggled with the questions: "Am I good enough? Am I

Self-doubt persisted even after getting admission to the program and starting classes. As another participant, Kim, stated: "At the start of the program, I was unsure of where this journey would lead and whether it was a good decision."

In their inquiry into experiences of an Indigenous teacher during her journey to becoming a teacher, Young et al. (2010) write about the teacher's feelings of inadequacy: "who ever thought that I would be in university? I always thought that university was for 'really smart people.'" (p. 186). Young et al. (2010) point out that the "feelings of inadequacy are significant as they are one way to trace the continuing impact of the narrative of colonization in [the Indigenous teacher's] life." They continue, "This impact occurred both prior to and during her journey to become a teacher, and prior to and during the life journeys of her parents, of her grandparents, and back and back." (p. 287).

Narratives of self-doubt are due, in part, to generational experiences (Young et al., 2010) such as those resulting from government policies that have led to or exacerbated a cultural and social disconnection of Indigenous peoples from their home communities (Alfred, 2009); lasting effects of residential school experience on families (Muir & Bohr, 2019); as well as personal identity formation that, as Wawrykow (2020) posits, "has been negatively influenced by colonization, which stems from shame and punishment taught at residential school for association with one's Aboriginal cultural identity" (p. 8).

Bailey (2016) asserts that different kinds of discrimination and other microaggressions that are too often experienced by Indigenous students (see for example Oloo & Kiramba, 2019) may result in a "'cumulative burden' that contributes to general feelings of self-doubt and segregation/isolation, assails personal integrity and creates mental exhaustion" (p. 1264). However, as the present study found, Indigenous students in the CBMEP did not see themselves as helpless victims. Rather, they pursued and actively engaged in self-validation, a process that was affirmed by the CBMEP in its prioritization of culturally-relevant pedagogy and related sources of validation in students' well-being, identity, as well as lived experiences, heritage, and history.

Feeling of Guilt Due to Family-Work-School Conflict

Another common line in the participant stories was the "*feeling of guilt*" for not spending enough time with their family when they were completing their CBMEP. As one participant, Tim, stated:

My children don't understand why Daddy is always gone to class or can't play because he has homework. There is some guilt. The program has helped me grow as an educator, a parent, and a person.

Another participant, Janet, said:

I am a devoted wife and mother. Any free time I had was spent on assignments, reading and researching. It broke my heart to see my children do family activities without me and to hear the sadness in their voices when they asked why I could not join them. These are moments I will never get back ... but I hope they look back on this time and see that with hard work and sacrifice they too can achieve higher education and be an advocate for change.

Previous studies have explored the issue of work-family conflict among workers in North America (Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, 2020; Bingham, 2011; Parker & Aldwin, 1994). Alfred P. Sloan Foundation (2020) found that "[W]orking mothers lose approximately one night's worth of sleep a week, due to the combined demands of work and family" (para. 8). However, there is a gap in the literature on the conflict experienced by Indigenous people who work full time, in this case, as teachers, and are enrolled in a graduate program, while also balancing their family responsibilities as parents and spouses. In this study, the most common word used to describe the family-work-school conflict was 'guilt.'

Bingham (2011) writes that her study participants, which included Indigenous women who had returned to school after raising their children, often talked about "the pull of family as they mentioned feeling sadness and guilt for not being around their grandchildren and teaching them about their [I]ndig-

enous culture” (p. 27). Parker and Aldwin (1994) go further and point out that the challenge of balancing school and family not only results in a feeling of guilt, but also increases the likelihood for stress among Indigenous students. These, Bingham (2011) suggests, were not limited to students who were parents, as even those who were not parents reported stress in their other close relationships.

Self-Advocacy

Schools across Canada have not always been safe and welcoming spaces for Indigenous students or their parents. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) report noted that: “The majority of Indigenous youth do not complete high school and rather than nurturing the individual, the present schooling experience typically erodes identity and self-worth” (p. 434).

Significant gaps exist at all levels of education in the educational attainment of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians (Statistics Canada, 2016). This point is well captured in a report on high school graduation in the Province of Manitoba (Office of the Auditor General, Manitoba, 2016) thus: “it is particularly concerning that ... only 55% of Indigenous students are graduating from high school, compared to 96% of non-Indigenous students; a gap that has widened since 2010” (p. 1). These numbers are not unique to Manitoba, but are an indication of educational outcomes for Indigenous students across the country.

The gaps could be attributed to a number of factors, including “structural oppressions that ... commonly face Indigenous students: poverty, suppression of their identities, racism and gender violence” (Harper & Thompson, 2017, p. 41). However, as indicated in participant narratives, Indigenous students are pushing back by engaging in self-advocacy, a strategy that has been previously employed by Indigenous students. One of the students in the CBMEP who participated in the current study said:

The school year following my Anti-oppressive Education [class] ended up being one of the hardest that my oldest daughter had to go through in terms of the stereotypes and racist comments she encountered. I was so glad I was a little more prepared due to the class I took.

Another participant noted, “I think of my classroom as a place where students, especially those from Indigenous backgrounds, can heal from traumas in their life. Towards this goal, the [CBMEP] was an important program for me.”

In her examination of experiences of American Indian students at a female boarding school between 1900 and 1930s, Wellington (2019) writes that the students demanded and actively sought “forms of education that fit their needs and desires ... they negotiated these spaces to create greater opportunity for themselves” (p. 101). Wellington asserts that while many Indigenous students turned away from schools that were not always welcoming – as is often the case even in Canada today – many others turned “toward education and actively negotiat[ed] for different options” (p. 101). As she writes:

Female students’ resistance at Chemawa took two distinct forms: advocacy for choice and advocacy for self-definition. These students advocated for themselves by negotiating both the curriculum and broader educational access Their educational self-empowerment disrupted the boundaries of control that Office of Indian Affairs boarding schools sought to exert. (p. 101)

Indigenous students, advocating for themselves and resisting by turning towards education, in the early 1900s Oregon, United States, and in 2021 in Saskatchewan Canada is a remarkable thing. As Moses and Cobb (2001) remind us, student self-agency is a necessary part of effective education reform.

Re/Connection with Self, Culture, and Heritage

A re/connection with self, culture, and heritage was a common thread across study participant stories. Goulet and McLeod (2002) asserted that Indigenous Canadians continue to suffer from the effects of colonization that have, among other things, “disrupted the transmission of intergenerational knowledge needed by any people for the development of a positive cultural identity and cultural retention and renewal” (p. 355). Taiaiake Alfred (2009), a Mohawk scholar, puts it like this:

[C]olonialism is best conceptualized as an irresistible outcome of a multigenerational and multifaceted process of forced dispossession and attempted acculturation—a disconnection from land, culture, and community—that has resulted in political chaos and social discord within First Nations communities. (p. 52)

That disconnection has resulted in suffering both at the individual and social levels as seen in the participant stories. And, as Alfred (2009) reminds us, “the real deprivation” that continues to be manifested in Indigenous communities “is the erosion of an ethic of universal respect ... that used to be the hallmark of [I]ndigenous societies” (p. 43). The impact of colonization and successive government policies are also evident in the education system including in funding deficiencies between First Nations schools (under the federal government jurisdiction) and public schools (under provincial jurisdiction) (Oloo & Kiramba, 2019).

It is in this context that an education program, such as the CBMEP, that is grounded in Indigenous cultures and ways of knowing, and land-based pedagogy provides a space for its Indigenous students to re/connect with self, their culture, and heritage. As one study participant, Naomi, said:

The program has created a new sense of purpose in myself. As a mother, I am now stronger in advocating for the needs of my own children. Being an educated role model for my children will encourage my children to strive for more in life.

Another participant talked about finding her voice as a result of the CBMEP:

Everyone in my cohort had their own stories, passions and views on education and I became inspired and captivated by the wealth of knowledge that filled the room each day. I realized that in this place and through this program I did have a voice.

Similarly, another participant, Tom, said:

The next step in my journey was about finding my voice. It began with the exploration of Indigenous research methodologies. With the recent loss of a student to suicide, I chose to research the methods used when working with Indigenous youth. This project became a way to hear their voices [and] enable me to find my professional voice as well as strengthen my personal voice which had been hidden for so long.

The notion of learning about self was also highlighted in another participant story:

I have learned a great deal about myself. On a personal level, I have learned that it is important to create time and space to make myself a priority. I learned that my family can indeed survive without me. In fact, they grew from the experience.

Another participant went further and linked the re/connection with self, culture, and heritage to personal healing. As she put it,

I have learned and been reconnected with my Cree language and culture that my mother never taught me. I now understand that this was from the disconnect and dysfunctional childhood she suffered. The sweat lodge we built and participated in was so healing I felt like a brand new me had emerged.

That healing resulted from a re/connection with self, culture, and heritage was a point that was raised by another study participant:

The opportunity to begin [the] CBMEP came at a time when darkness was the only thing my

eyes would see. I often told friends and family that my soul was ... not capable of shedding tears or feeling joy, that it had all been stolen from me. I struggled to identify with who I was – a side from a mother. An invitation to build and participate in the sweat lodge [in one of my classes] was my first opportunity to begin the healing process. I was able to release a pain that had ached for so long. I cried that day. It was that day that I recognized the healing I would need to endure before getting to find myself again.

Similarly, another participant spoke about an experience of healing in the CBMEP:

We were asked in one of the classes to write a personal narrative. I stumbled through my words as I shared my traumatic birthing story. The strength of the women that day was undeniable. As we each shared our stories, we felt closer to one another, and we did not realize at that point that we would become pieces of each other's stories. While the depth of the healing is difficult to describe in words, I could see the immediate impact it had on my life. Not only was I able to cry again, but I smiled again.

The paradox highlighted by the lived experiences of the study participants in the form of experiencing healing in the CBMEP program was a significant lesson learned in this study. As stated above, education has not always been a safe place for Indigenous students. Rather, it has been a place where Indigenous children were made to be ashamed of their linguistic and cultural heritage (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Yet, participants in this study describe how they experienced healing as a result of being re/connected with self and heritage at the CBMEP. Education has always been a weapon for good and for evil, for liberation and for colonization and perpetuation of socioeconomic inequalities. However, it is encouraging to see an Indigenous-led CBMEP becoming a means of healing for Indigenous students who have suffered an intergenerational disconnection from themselves and their heritage as a result of education.

The four threads discussed above - self-doubt; feelings of guilt as a result of family-work-school conflict; self-advocacy; and a re/connection with self, culture, and heritage (which led to healing) – have been grouped under a broad theme we refer to as personal transformations. There was also the theme of professional transformation in the realm of knowledge, awareness, and understanding, in the participant stories as discussed below.

Theme II: Professional Transformations

Cove et al. (2008) suggest that “knowledge and understanding are transformed in unpredictable ways for ... teachers” (p. 197). In this study, such a (professional) transformation resulted from three main experiences. These included instructor-directed learning, self-directed learning, and interdependent learning between the participants and their peers in the CBMEP program (Goulet & Goulet, 2014).

The study participants talked about the impact of the CBMEP on their professional pathways. This took two main forms. Opportunities for career advancement as a result of earning a master of education degree at the end of the program, and experiencing a transformation as a result of the knowledge, skills, and understanding acquired in their program which enabled them to improve on their teaching and student learning. A participant commented on the relevance and impact of the program on his work as a teacher:

Many of the class projects, presentations, and discussions were directly applicable to current situations at my school. This was a very effective way for me to learn. I could look at the theory and apply it to a lesson or situation in my school.

Another participant described how her view of relationships changed as a result of the CBMEP: “I’m now able to empathize with students and their families. I understand why they react to different situations. I wasn’t always able to do that.” Meyers et al. (2019) describe teacher empathy as the “degree to which an instructor works to deeply understand students’ personal and social situations, to feel care and concern in response to students’ positive and negative emotions, and to respond compassionately

without losing the focus on student learning” (p. 160). Warren (2018) underscores the importance of empathy in enabling educators to better understand their students and their families and building a positive relationship with them.

There were also cases where participant professional experiences touched on their personal lives. One participant put it like this:

My [spouse] passed away when I was a student in this program. My family’s new life was tough ... An assignment in one of my classes involved writing a mini-proposal. I chose the topic of supporting students through grief and bereavement. This assignment was pure therapy. I was able to research the most important piece of my life, my children, and their journey through their grief and bereavement.

Another participant’s narrative of lived experience blurs the borderline between the personal and professional transformation in the form of increased knowledge, awareness, and understanding resulting from attending the CBMEP:

Living with a child who has great qualities, who has the biggest heart but is not recognized for those qualities in school, because all that matters is that he struggles with math and his spelling is not at grade level just breaks my heart. This Master’s program has taught me that we focus too much on [the] Ministry [of Education] initiatives, curriculums and deadlines and not enough on the student.

The need to focus on the student has been raised in previous studies (see for example, Moje, 1996; Wentzel, 2009). In her research titled “‘I teach students, not subjects’: Teacher-student relationships as contexts for secondary literacy,” Moje (1996) describes a teacher who prioritized building positive relationships with students. Moje asserts, “Because the teacher cared deeply about her students’ success, she searched for pedagogical strategies ... that she felt would ensure such success. Students sensed and appreciated the teacher’s caring for them and responded positively...” (p. 173). In other words, care and relationships were established before success was attained.

Another participant described what became clearer to him as a kindergarten teacher and student in the CBMEP:

My students have taught me that each new day is just that. We have to put yesterday behind us, take out new-found knowledge and grow upon it today. They have taught me that curriculum is not the end all and be all of our education system. Rather, relationships are what are important. The learning will come when the children are ready. There is so much pre-teaching that occurs in kindergarten that I cannot get hung up on what the curriculum says. What is important are basic things such as how to walk in the hallway, put lids back on markers and be nice to our classmates.

Participant narratives speak to how the CBMEP influenced their pedagogical approaches and challenged or affirmed their underlying beliefs about teaching and learning that had been developed over the years. Example includes:

I now view students holistically, and teach accordingly. I strive to make my classroom more culturally inclusive, both in visual displays, and in the curriculum content I teach. I allow students to have more input in the classroom climate, including making classroom rules and decisions, and about the content they learn. I have more understanding of the impact of residential schools and their legacy on Indigenous people over generations.

Saskatchewan and other provinces and territories across Canada have implemented curriculum reforms in recent years to require inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in the K-12 teaching (Bailey, 2016). This is a plausible policy shift that enables us to better reframe and advance reconciliation with Indige-

nous peoples. Some study participants discussed how their instructional approach has been impacted by the CBMEP:

This program has allowed me to look at our education system with a critical eye, especially when it comes to First Nations education. Our students [should] see themselves in their education. We need to bridge the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous content so that all children can learn from one another and have a better understanding of each other's worldview.

Another participant added:

I'm starting a new position as the Aboriginal Consultant this fall and I'm going to pursue implementing Indigenous pedagogy in the classrooms of our division. We have a very high percentage of Indigenous students in our schools and it is essential we acknowledge the different learning styles of our students.

The issue of different learning styles between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is not new (Four Arrows & Miller, 2012). As Noddings (2005) points out, education in western societies has often been “driven by a ‘standard’ and evaluated on the basis of whether students meet it” (p. 9). Noddings argues that the “pervasive goal” of such an education system “is control: control of teachers, of students, of content” (p. 9). This is quite different from traditional Indigenous education which

[O]ccurred in a holistic social context that developed a sense of the importance of each individual as a contributing member of the social group ... [and] worked at sustaining life process. It was a process of education that unfolded through mutual, reciprocal relationships between one's social group and the natural world. (Cajete, 2019, p. ix)

If, as Ford and Fottler (1995) assert, “Without question empowerment is THE topic of the day” (p. 21), then the very decision by the participants in this study to pursue a master of education degree while working as teachers is commendable. The participants described how the CBMEP has empowered them in their personal and professional landscapes, and also enabled them to empower their students and peers. Empowerment, in this context, refers to the “process whereby school participants develop the competence to take charge of their own growth and resolve their own problems” (Short et al., 1994, p. 38). Luke, a participant in this study said:

This journey has been inspiring and empowering. I have learned so much from this group of people. We all came from different walks of life, with different life expectations but with all a common goal. We all want to make a difference in our students' lives. I believe that our journey in this program has prepared us to go back to our schools and make those positive changes. Who knows, what we learned may rub off on our co-workers [and] create a chain reaction of positive change throughout the school – resulting in a place where all students will want to be.

Implications and Conclusion

We used conversational method to listen to and gather stories of Indigenous students in the CBMEP while adhering to Indigenous relational protocols. The participants' stories of lived experiences centred on personal and professional (educational) landscapes. In highlighting what the stories mean to the participants and their implications, we revisit the importance of Nehinuw (Cree) concepts of teaching and learning (Goulet & Goulet, 2014) as a lens through which we approached this study. The participants were fulltime teachers in the Prince Albert area schools, and also students in the CBMEP. In these roles, they were engaged in (at least) the three forms of teaching-learning processes: *Kiskinaumagehin* (teacher-directed learning with the participants as teachers); *Kiskinaumasowin* (self-directed learning which was an important part of their experience in the CBMEP where they not only took more control

of their learning (compared to their K-12 and undergraduate experiences), but were also playing new and sometimes conflicting roles, with some participants talking about the adjustments they had to make as parents, partners, students, and teachers); and *Kiskinaumatin* (learning as an interactive and interdependent process where many participants identified emphasized the importance of positive relationships with colleagues in encouraging and learning from each other) (Goulet & Goulet, 2014). The Nehinuw (Cree) concepts of teaching and learning and self-reflection by the participants were a key pathway to the storied experiences.

Goodson (1992) exhorts researchers to “assure that teachers’ voice is heard, heard loudly, heard articulately” (p. 112). In this study, we have attempted to do this by creating a space for the voices of Indigenous teachers in a master of education program to be heard. These Indigenous teachers, like the ones who participated in a research by St. Denis (2010), “valued the opportunity to be heard . . . and to be part of an effort that hopes to promote change” (p. 7). A change that would have an impact at the individual level by reassuring Indigenous students who may be having self-doubts that they are well able to succeed at the university. Change would also be realized at the policy and decision-making level to create conditions that allow for more Indigenous teachers in the classrooms and in school administration positions.

Other than the knowledge and skills that the participants built and acquired, there were certain elements of the CBMEP that they found helpful, and which could provide lessons for future graduate programs offered by Indigenous institutions in partnership with non-Indigenous institutions. One participant, for example, commented on the importance of cohort model of the program:

I appreciated being with the same group of people and getting to know them academically, professionally, and personally. We pressed each other to the limit. I would not have put forth the effort to do this if not for being with the same group for every class.

Overall, the participants stated that they found the program useful. Thus, as Brayboy and Castagno (2009) also found, community-based education that is grounded in Indigenous cultures and ways of knowing, are better suited to meet the (post-secondary) educational needs of Indigenous students. Also important, is the fact that the CBMEP is offered by GDI, an Indigenous institute, in partnership with the University of Regina. That partnership, as Dr. Jerome Cranston, Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Regina, asserts, “recognizes the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples, places a premium on learning within community, and is an attempt to better balance the typically asymmetrical relationships that have historically existed” (GDI, 2019).

Using interview as conversations with Indigenous teachers in a master of education program we have co-created a space for their voices to be amplified as they tell and relive critical stories of their personal and professional experience in the program and beyond. We are honoured to have been entrusted with stories of six Indigenous educators who participated in this study. As Lewis (2011) points out, ‘it is through story that we may come to know, through the story of the other’ (p. 506). Our goal was to learn from and with the study participants and to shed light on the implications of their experiences. These educators

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

And “so the moral of [our] story is for you to tell your stories And while you think and work, listen to the poetry as ordinary people tell you stories of their lives” (Charmaz, 2016, p. 54).

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