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Inspiring Success: Collaborative Animation of an Indigenous Education Policy Framework as a Means of Defining the Path to Improvement

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Abstract: This article presents a process-focused account of how a multistakeholder committee co-developed the Indigenous Education Responsibility Framework (IERF) using Indigenous methodologies and community based participatory research. Situated in Saskatchewan and grounded in *Inspiring Success* (2018) – the provincial Indigenous education policy framework, the collaboration unfolded over 14 virtual group meetings and subsequent field tests in six volunteer districts. Data included field notes, participant-generated artifacts, iterative reflections, and meeting minutes. Analysis consisted of open–axial–selective coding with negotiated coding and collective sensemaking. Findings surface how ethical space (Ermine, 2007) was established; how collaborative sensemaking over terminology (e.g., "disrupting") shaped commitments; how decision-making and power-sharing were negotiated; and how Indigenous perspectives of land, languages, and relationships influenced the work. The IERF emerged as an outcome of this process, offering rubric-based guidance to assess current practice and spark improvement at multiple levels of educational organizations over time aligned with provincial education goals and embedding a strategizing continuum (Observing → Supporting → Disrupting). We conclude this article with implications for partnering across Indigenous and Western paradigms, emphasizing humility, reciprocity, and relational accountability. Limitations and areas for further inquiry are also noted.

Keywords: Indigenous education; Community-based participatory research; Ethical space; Indigenous methodologies; Policy implementation; Educational accountability

Introduction

In Canada, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) Calls to Action (2015) highlight the central role of educational institutions in both perpetuating harm and advancing reconciliation. In Saskatchewan, despite decades of initiatives, outcomes for Indigenous learners have remained stubbornly inequitable. Policy frameworks such as *Inspiring Success* (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2018) call for system level

transformation – grounded in languages, cultures, and relationships – to move toward educational justice. Nevertheless, while helpful, such frameworks fall short as guides for change because they describe only what the future should look like but do not point to the steps the organizations might take to achieve that future or illustrate what it might look like at various points on the improvement journey.

Purpose and Contribution

The two-fold purpose of this research was (i) to draw from extant literature and relevant policy documents a vision for educational support of Indigenous K-12 students – including a conceptual framework to account for the multiple contexts and worldviews involved, and (ii) to animate a provincial Indigenous education policy framework as a means of providing a vision for success and a means of assessing districts' support of Indigenous education.

This article foregrounds the process by which a province-wide, multi-stakeholder committee co-developed the Indigenous Education Responsibility Framework (IERF) using Indigenous methodologies and community based participatory research (CBPR). Rather than centering on the product alone, we illuminate *how* trust was built, how *ethical space* (Ermine, 2007) was enacted, how *language shaped commitments* (e.g., shifting from "accountability" to "responsibility"), and how *iterative sensemaking* across field-tests refined the framework. We offer practical guidance to researchers, leaders, and communities seeking to move from policy to relationally-accountable action with a focus on promoting and assessing growth over time.

Method

The methods and conceptual framework employed in this study are outlined in the sections that follow. Recognizing the explicit application of Indigenous methodologies, our approach was deeply influenced by the unique political and social context in which this work took place.

Context

This research took place in Saskatchewan, Canada. Saskatchewan's Indigenous education policy trajectory spans the gamut from early poverty-focused initiatives (1980s) to curricular integration (1989) and mandatory Treaty Education (2007) to province-wide policy frameworks such as *Inspiring Success* (2009; revised 2018). Recognizing that more direction was needed and that the provincial education sector appeared ready to engage in such work, the Saskatchewan School Boards Association's Indigenous Council sponsored a project in 2021 to operationalize the existing *Inspiring Success* policy framework to create a tool for district self-assessment and growth. Recognizing that the province encompasses lands from across multiple treaty territories (Treaties 2, 4, 6, 8, and 10) and the traditional homeland of the Métis peoples, means that place matters and that no one place matters more than any other place. Consequently, this context motivated a conceptual framework that honours land, languages, and relationships as living epistemic anchors (Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000; Kovach, 2009; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999)

Conceptual Framework

This research was explicitly guided by a dual conceptual framework, informed by Indigenous epistemologies and the tenets of Chilisa's (2012) community-based participatory research framework.

Amendt (2019) described using Indigenous epistemologies and methodologies to guide research with a view to putting the principles of respect, relationality, and reciprocity into action. This includes respecting and honouring the voices of research participants and acknowledging the strengths, gifts, and knowledge

they have to share. These methods were respected and utilized by the non-Indigenous principal investigator (PI) and the research participants (all but one of whom are Indigenous).

Utilizing Indigenous methodologies in this project meant that the PI needed to resist the impulse to take control of the project and respect participants' knowledge and their right to shape the work. He did so by providing advice and encouragement through his facilitation of iterative sensemaking to ensure that the ongoing work reflected participants' intent.

It also meant that relationships – both those existing prior to this project as well as the new ones that emerged – were foundational to the success of project (Wilson, 2008; Battiste, 2013). They were essential, honoured, nurtured, and celebrated in a variety of ways.

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) emphasizes including members of relevant communities affected by the research as collaborators to define the research questions, guide the development of the research design and data collection methods, contribute to data analysis and interpretation, and collaborate as knowledge mobilizers. Furthermore, the theoretical underpinnings of CBPR see the knowledge and skills of the community and individuals within it as strengths contributing to its overall health (Oakley & Kahssay, 1999). Drawing on the extant literature, Springett (2017), identified an extensive range of advantages of CBPR that were relevant to this study. These include enhanced relevance of research questions, increased success for research implementation and dissemination, increased involvement of communities in the research process, better uptake of new knowledge created by the project, sustainability of outcomes, improved institutional and community resources and infrastructure. As pointed out by Ramsden and colleagues, CBPR "equitably involve[s] community members, organizational representatives, and researchers in all aspects of the process and [makes room for them to] contribute expertise and share decision-making and ownership" (2010, p. 33).

Project Design

This community-engaged qualitative study combined Indigenous methodologies – prioritizing relationality, reciprocity, and respect (Amendt, 2025; Battiste, 2013; Wilson, 2008) with CBPR principles (Ramsden et al., 2010), equitably involving the community partners in framing questions, shaping research design, generating and interpreting data, and mobilizing knowledge. Ultimately, this research was an authentic partnership directed by the committee and the Elder with the support of the PI and his research team.

Participants and Roles. The project's sponsor, the Saskatchewan School Boards Association Indigenous Council, originally envisioned this project to be broad-based and highly inclusive of anyone who wished to contribute. An initial gathering was scheduled for early April, 2020; but was not held due to public gathering restrictions prompted by the Global Pandemic. Once it became clear that restrictions would not be short-lived, the members of the project's original advisory committee and its Indigenous Council recruited a working committee (n = 11; 9 Indigenous) that collaborated with the non-Indigenous PI and his research team to complete the project.

The working committee members represented key K-12 stakeholder groups from across the province, including the provincial government, Indigenous governance/educational authorities, school districts (i.e., senior administration and cultural perspectives consultants), and the SSBA. The provincial teachers' union was invited to nominate a member, but they declined to participate. As is traditional with such projects in this territory, the working committee was also guided by an Elder. To round out the research team, the PI hired an international graduate student Indigenous to colonized territories in Africa as a research assistant (RA) and a First Nations educator and long-time colleague as a Cultural Perspectives Advisor to support this project.

Data Sources. This project was originally conceptualized over several months in late 2019 and early 2020 as a relatively brief iterative consultation. As mentioned earlier, a large advisory group had been confirmed and an initial in-person meeting had been scheduled; but, as was the case for many initiatives at that time, work on the project stalled as we adapted to a COVID-19 socially-distanced reality. While there were some calls to hold off on the project until it could be completed as originally intended, it was ultimately decided that was important to capitalize on the interest and momentum from community partners and it would proceed – albeit in a much different way than originally intended.

Phase I of this project saw the working committee meeting with the PI and the research team for 14 virtual group interviews/working meetings over a two-year period. These meetings lasted between 90 and 150 minutes. During each meeting, the PI was present to facilitate and/or prompt discussions, surface relevant literature, and respond to inquiries. Utilizing Indigenous methodologies in this project meant that the non-Indigenous PI needed to exercise humility. For him, it meant deliberate and active ongoing attention to honour participants' knowledge and remain flexible to proceed as directed by the working committee and Indigenous Perspectives Advisor as the project took shape – rather than taking control of the project and steering it in the direction he thought it should go.

After each working group meeting, the PI met with the RA and the Indigenous Perspectives Advisor to review the official minutes of the meeting along with our respective field notes and recollections of the discussions that took place. We collaborated to interpret the participants' intentions and perspectives. Then, the PI and the co-author of this paper met to vet the research team's interpretations through his lens (he also took the official minutes and was intimately involved at all stages). At the start of each meeting, the PI shared the research team's collective understanding of the working group's intent and probed the group to ensure the nuances that may have been missed were appropriately represented in the iterative dataset. Phase I ended with the committee's acceptance of a draft *IERF*.

Phase II consisted of meetings with six volunteer districts who agreed to participate in structured field tests of IERF implementation. Phase II data included facilitator field notes, participant generated artifacts (e.g., draft rubric language), and iterative reflections.

Analytic Approach

During Phase 1 working group meetings, field notes were prepared by the PI (one of this article's co-authors), his research assistant (RA) took notes of the proceedings, and official group minutes were taken by a member of the working group who also acted as project manager (and is the other co-author of this article). During Phase I, open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 2014) conducted by the PI, RA, Indigenous Perspectives Advisor, and the project manager in pairs/triads with coding of the data being both iterative and negotiated as follows:

- Following each meeting, the PI and the RA met to compare the three accounts of the meeting and triangulate details from each transcript to ensure that the data were as complete as possible.
- Any contentious issues raised by meeting attendees were also discussed with the project manager and, at times, with the project's Indigenous Perspectives Advisor. Contrary to typical projects like this, the focus of these discussions was not to resolve contentious issues for the working group but rather to ensure that the points of contention were captured properly and well-understood by the research team so that they could be explored during the next working group meeting.
- The next step of data analysis consisted of member checking and relational validation – we circulated the full blended transcript of the meeting proceedings to working group members for their feedback – integrating their comments to align with community intent and perspective.

The process of iterative, collective sensemaking continued in the above manner throughout the project following each working group meeting. Following the ceremony that began each meeting, the PI presented a summary of the previous meeting's discussion along with the collective analysis of their implications for the project and invited input and reaction from the committee members as a means of developing collaborative sensemaking. Over that time, the body of data was gradually established and refined.

After the first few meetings, the PI and research team were directed by the working group to develop draft elements of what eventually became known as the IERF. During these 2-4 hour sessions, the PI and the Indigenous Perspectives Advisor (IPA) worked together to create these drafts. These sessions typically involved the PI asking the IPA questions like "What would it look like if a school district was at the *disrupting stage* of this stepping stone?". After a period of time, the PI summarized the discussion and the wording in any given cell in the IERF framework was negotiated until the IPA agreed that it captured the spirit and intent of her perspective. Each stage of each stepping stone included in the IERF was developed collaboratively in this manner. Then, as work was completed, the drafts were shared with the working group for feedback, input, and, ultimately, further revision.

During Phase II, the PI and an Indigenous project facilitator from the SSBA visited each of the six volunteer school districts to discuss the draft IERF. Field notes were completed by both the PI and the project facilitator and collaboratively merged following each meeting to ensure a robust record of the perspectives of each district's participants. Once the Phase II meetings were complete, the PI subjected the data to open and axial selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 2014) and met with the IPA again to review the feedback and make appropriate revisions to the draft IERF.

Finally, the draft IERF was shared with the working group for feedback. Ultimately, the working group endorsed that the IERF captured their intent and a Pipe Ceremony was held to launch the IERF officially for the provincial education sector.

Ethics and Reciprocity

Throughout the process of developing the *IERF*, the ethical conduct of this study was rooted in the principles of community-based participatory research (CBPR), Indigenous methodologies, and Canada's Tri-Council Policy Statement for ethical conduct for research involving humans (TCPS 2, 2022); all three of which specifically emphasize shared ownership, mutual benefit, and the cultivation of continued relationships (e.g., Oakley & Kahssay, 1999; Springett, 2017).

To explain the process, one must first have a conceptual understanding of Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous theory and recognize that "Indigenous knowledge is valid in its own right" (Amendt, 2025, p. 142). It is derived from "peoples and collectives and related to place" (Battiste, 2013, p. 74). Indigenous theory is based on values such as respect and reciprocity. Indigenous knowledge is collectivist and both oriented to and grounded in place and relationships (Amendt, 2025; Battiste, 2013; Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000; Kovach, 2009; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). "Indigenous theory is highly contextual. It respects and recognizes that knowledge is connected to place, thereby adding credibility and validity to the knowledge" (Amendt, 2019, pp. 50-51). Indigenous research is relational and values reciprocity, where both the researcher and community benefit from the process (Wilson, 2008).

Shared ownership was enacted by positioning the Indigenous-majority Working Committee and the Indigenous Perspectives Advisor as the "principal shapers" of the project, with the non-Indigenous Principal Investigator serving in a supportive, non-directive capacity to ensure the resulting Indigenous Education Responsibility Framework (IERF) authentically reflected the community's vision and knowledge.

Mutual benefit was achieved through the co-creation of the IERF – a policy tool sponsored by the community itself that is intended to support systemic change and growth across Saskatchewan's publicly-

funded education sector. Since its launch, anecdotal evidence from educational stakeholders suggests that the IERF is, indeed, supporting systemic change. A full study of its impact is scheduled for 2026-2027.

The two-year, iterative nature of the working meetings prioritized building and strengthening relationships founded on respect as foundational to the integrity and sustainability of the research outcomes.

This project was also reviewed on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan behavioural ethics board and approved.

Findings

Findings from this study are presented below in three sections. First, we highlight the findings of our review of historical documents to establish an historical timeline of Saskatchewan's provincial policy directions related to Indigenous education. Then, we illustrate elements of the completed *IERF* along with an overview of how both the product and process of this project aligned with Indigenous epistemologies as artifacts of the collaborative research that took place. Finally, we reflect on the process of conducting the research described herein and the product that emerged from the work to propose a model for Indigenous-Western collaborative applied action research.

Historical timeline of Saskatchewan Indigenous education provincial policy directions

Saskatchewan's Ministry of Education (2018) renewed and released the *Inspiring Success Policy Framework* – reaffirming the centrality of Indigenous knowledge systems, cultures, and languages to public education's structures, policies, and curricula – ultimately, to ensure an equitable and inclusive system. *Inspiring Success* builds from a provincial policy context for Indigenous education in Saskatchewan dating back to at least 1980. It is recognized that this work is situated over decades of work by Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators committed to improving Indigenous education. It is further acknowledged that the work undertaken in the present and into the future is possible because of the significant contributions of those who have passionately and effectively advocated for years before us.

In keeping with honouring Indigenous knowledge, the following timeline is provided to situate the work in "place" by telling a piece of the story of the evolution of Indigenous education in Saskatchewan.

1980: In the 1980s, the Ministry of Education's *Core Curriculum Initiative* endorsed the integration of First Nations and Métis content and perspectives as a foundation for provincial curriculum and resources for all students. The *Community Schools Program* was also launched in 1980, primarily to address what was then called urban Aboriginal poverty. 11 schools in three of the largest cities in the province – Prince Albert, Saskatoon, and Regina – were designated as Community Schools.

1984: The Minister's Advisory Committee on Native Curriculum was established. This committee advised and made recommendations to the Ministry on the development, implementation, assessment, and review of the Kindergarten to Grade 12 policy and program in Indian and Métis education. Despite being disbanded by the Government of Saskatchewan in 2014, it was the longest serving Minister's advisory committee in the province's history.

1989: Saskatchewan's *Indian and Métis Education Policy* was released. The Policy charted curriculum integration of First Nations and Métis knowledge and perspectives across all required areas of study.

1990: In the 1990s, the Ministry of Education employed a curriculum and resources analyst to review all recommended educational resources for bias related to First Nations and Métis peoples and provide recommendations to educators in the province regarding appropriate resources.

2001: At the turn of the century, there were notable developments relevant to First Nations and Métis education in Saskatchewan associated with a concept termed School^{PLUS}. In 2001, for example, the *Aboriginal Elders and Community Workers in Schools* document was released. Primarily funded through a Ministry of Education grant, this document provided general information regarding protocols to engage Elders and showcased examples of such engagement from school divisions across the province.

2003: The *Building Partnerships: First Nations and Métis Peoples and the Provincial Education System* policy framework was released. This policy framework provided the context for the creation of co-management and co-governance relationships between school divisions and First Nations. To that point in the province, the relationships between school divisions and First Nations consistent largely of tuition arrangements to fund First Nations students who attended provincial schools. This document set the tone for the importance of relationships between First Nations and school divisions and telegraphed that these relationships needed to evolve beyond financial conversations.

2007: The Government of Saskatchewan proclaimed *Mandatory Treaty Education* to be instituted in all schools. This was a significant step that recognized the importance of treaty relationship in Saskatchewan and placed the expectation on the provincial education system to ensure treaty education was present in provincial curricula and taught in schools throughout the province.

2009: *Inspiring Success*, a new First Nations and Métis education policy framework, was released. This document established Indigenous education as foundational to the provincial education system and described it in a holistic manner that attended to governance, curriculum, instruction, assessment, language and culture, and family/community engagement.

2010: *A Time for Significant Leadership* was relaunched as a tool to support school divisions in implementing the *Inspiring Success* policy framework. It was largely focused on professional development for educators.

2018: *Inspiring Success* was revised and relaunched in 2018. It added a new goal and foregrounded the work in Canada's federal Truth and Reconciliation Commission's *Calls to Action*.

2022: The Saskatchewan School Boards Association funded the development of the *IERF* to support school divisions in self-assessing their efforts in implementing *Inspiring Success*.

As illustrated above, provincial Indigenous education policy direction started with a focus on needs associated with poverty; progressed towards attention to ensuring curriculum and resources reflected Indigenous content, perspectives, and ways of knowing; acknowledged the importance of partnerships between school divisions and First Nations in the early 2000s; and ended (for now) with envisioning Indigenous education holistically and underscoring the imperative that all residents in the province ought to learn about and alongside First Nations and Métis peoples. In the early days of this historical timeline, conversations associated with Indigenous education in Saskatchewan were tinged with questions like "why do we have to do this?". As the public education sector came to terms its responsibility to improve and change, conversations shifted to wondering "how do we do this?". Notably, the *IERF* was created by boards of education in Saskatchewan taking up the Indigenous education imperative in a new way, by asking "how can we lead in this work?".

Establishing Ethical Space

Drawing on Ermine's (2007) conceptualization of ethical space as a "meeting place" between knowledge systems, the committee used protocols (land acknowledgments, storying, and ceremony-informed practices) to cultivate relational safety and shared purpose. This *ethical space* enabled frank discussions about historical harms and current responsibilities.

When Indigenous peoples become the researchers and not merely the researched, the process of research is transformed. "Questions are framed differently, priorities are ranked differently, problems are defined differently, people participate on different terms" (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, p. 193).

The above quote from the seminal text by Linda Tuhiwai Smith poignantly applies to this project which included primarily Indigenous educational leaders from Saskatchewan representative not only of various educational partners within the province, but also representative of many of the Indigenous nations in Saskatchewan - Métis, Cree, Dakota, and Saulteaux. It is important to note that, while the project was as inclusive as possible, the working group was well aware that not all nations were represented; a fact that reinforced the importance of Phase II to ensure that an even broader engagement process took place.

As the committee continued its work and as near-final drafts of the IERF were emerging, a tension was raised by one of the Indigenous members upon reflection of the heavy duty of care they felt not only to represent Indigenous ways of knowing, but also to change the outcomes for Indigenous students in Saskatchewan for the generation to come. While the weight of this duty of care was undoubtedly felt throughout the process by the Indigenous members of the committee, we provide one vignette to capture how this manifested itself amongst the committee.

Recognizing that the IERF is built upon the five goals from the provincial *Inspiring Success* policy, the IERF includes stepping-stones under each of these five goals with a continuum of practices identified to support self-reflection. One of the Inspiring Success goals is "Shared management of the provincial education system by ensuring respectful relationships and equitable partnerships with First Nations and Métis peoples at the provincial and local level." A stepping-stone developed under this goal was related to data and information management. During review of the final stages of the IERF, one of the members asked the committee if indeed it was a priority to raise to this level in the IERF as an important stepping-stone under the goal of partnerships between the provincial education systems and First Nations and Métis. The committee member explained that while he agreed this was a factor to be addressed, the question was, given the need to limit stepping-stones to priority areas under each goal, were we, as a committee, sure this was it? In other words, should this matter be at a stepping-stone level that would enable effective partnerships while leading to improved outcomes for Indigenous students?

The committee members expressed appreciation for the honesty of the question and similarly expressed that they also shared the weight of this work and importance of *getting it right* for Indigenous students and communities. Following a thoughtful sharing of views, the members achieved consensus and affirmed their desire to keep the stepping-stone as it currently stands, noting that the area of data and information management is indeed an important area that, if not handled correctly, can lead to the breakdown of trust in relationships between Indigenous nations and boards of education in the provincial education system.

Language Matters

Indigenous knowledge lives in Indigenous languages and is passed on through the generations through stories (from place) and ceremonies (Amendt, 2019). Language was respected in the committee's work literally in terms of respecting and honouring the languages and cultures of the Indigenous communities in Saskatchewan, as well as respecting the languages and cultures of the committee members in this work as they drew upon their identities to shape the document. One example relates to an IERF working committee member who is a fluent Cree language speaker sharing her understanding of the importance of language and spirituality as it relates to animate vs. inanimate concepts (Western vs. Indigenous understandings) and highlighting the importance of embedding such concepts into the document.

Establishing the Strategizing Continuum. The concept of languages in relation to this work was also highlighted in the development of the IERF's *Strategizing Continuum*. Recognizing that all journeys start somewhere and require strategizing along the way as the traveler moves from one territory to another and

encounters obstacles along the way, the *IERF* eventually became grounded in a three-point continuum from *observing* through *supporting* to *disrupting*; but the process for establishing the continuum was among the most contentious issues debated by the Working Committee.

During the development of this continuum, the committee engaged in extensive dialogue about the precise terminology that should be used to represent the stages of development. Echoing Safir and Dugan's (2021) critique of "improvement" in contexts of structural injustice, the committee affirmed that discourse shapes action. They debated extensively the use of "disrupting" as the advanced stage in the strategizing continuum. While committee members felt strongly that significant change must take place in order to improve outcomes for Indigenous students, they were concerned that the use of the word "disrupting" as the advanced stage in the strategizing continuum has the potential to cause readers and practitioners to react negatively and become focused on their discomfort with that term, at the peril of dismissing the bigger picture and the opportunity to reflect and improve. This internal debate was informed both by committee members' personal experiences and through external feedback gathered during Phase II field testing as well as during presentations at provincial and national conferences. This feedback revealed that, while some folks found the term jarring, a majority appreciated its bold and decisive use. Consequently, the committee retained the term "disrupting" in the strategizing continuum, ensuring that at each point, the IERF clearly describes the specific actions individuals – especially those with formal leadership roles – would be undertaking within their organizations.

Thus, the committee chose the following terms to represent the points on the strategizing continuum.

Observing. *Observing* is the entry-level point to each stepping-stone's strategizing continuum. At this stage, most of the action rests in observing what is taking place and, for the most part, resists actions that might challenge the *status quo*.

Supporting. At the *Supporting* stage (the middle point), the district (including senior leaders and trustees) is usually engaged in some significant actions that support and, occasionally, inspire change – but those changes, while important and welcome, tend to nibble at the edges of the *status quo* leading to improvements but surface-level ones.

Disrupting. *Disrupting,* the third continuum stage, is grounded in anti-racist/anti-oppression scholarship and embodies the ultimate vision of *Inspiring Success* and, by extension, the IERF because it describes what it would take to disrupt the context in which formal schooling takes place to the point that the outcomes for all First Nations and Métis children and youth are on par with their peers.

Decision-Making and Power Sharing

Indigenous ways of knowing are based upon Indigenous knowledge that is passed down through the generations primarily via oral teachings, often through stories and ceremony. There is no pan-Indigenous way of knowing. Each Indigenous nation is unique, each with its own language, history, stories, and connection to their lands. While there is no one Indigenous way of knowing, there is a set of common themes that emerge when Indigenous peoples share their knowledge; particularly, the centrality of land, languages, and relationships (Amendt, 2019). These themes are built upon principles and values that are important to Indigenous peoples.

Cardinal & Hildebrandt (2000) interviewed treaty Elders in Saskatchewan from across the nations and language groups in the province. They found that, while each nation is unique, there are shared "spiritual philosophies, teachings, laws and traditions that are remarkably similar to one another" (p. 9). For example, a sacred connection to the land is common among the stories from the Elders. Principles of good relations and getting along with others also emerges as a theme. "In each of their languages, the Elders described the collectivity of their citizenry" (p. 39), underlining the value of relationships and kinship. Kovach (2009) noted

similar themes that consistently emerge in Indigenous epistemologies: they are holistic in nature, pragmatic in intent, and focus "on language and place, and on values and relationships" (p. 57). The stories ground the people in knowledge from place and bring a sense of belonging and interconnectedness to each other in relation to the land or place. Furthermore, Indigenous epistemologies reflect "a holistic, value-based knowledge system that consistently returns to the responsibilities of maintaining good relations" (p. 63). Brayboy (2005) emphasized the uniqueness of Indigenous communities resulting from place, language, and histories, but also identified commonalities in Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies. Finally, land, languages, and relationships reside in tribal knowledge.

Land, languages, and relationships are foundational elements of First Nations and Métis ways of knowing as expressed in Saskatchewan's First Nations and Métis education policy framework (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2018). The writers of the original policy framework explained that First Nations and Métis ways of knowing are lived out in Indigenous languages and passed on through Elders and knowledge keepers. One of the principles in the policy framework is a commitment to a provincial education system that values relationships and the authentic engagement of children, youth, families, and communities in creating culturally responsive learning programs. Further, the writers articulated a respect for the natural world, and for embracing this value by including this knowledge within learning programs for students. Battiste (2013) cited examples of successful school programs that support Aboriginal learning by, among other things, legitimizing the voice of Aboriginal people through place and culture; embracing both Indigenous and mainstream knowledges; and, supporting learning within the community by encouraging the [engagement] of parents, elders, and community (p. 176). These practices demonstrate respect for Indigenous ways of knowing and are examples of ways educators can reflect Indigenous knowledge in their classrooms and schools, in order to support student achievement. In a parallel fashion, the Indigenous Education Responsibility Framework was developed by a team utilizing Indigenous methodologies in its work which foundationally situated Indigenous knowledge, in particular, respecting the core of those elements - land, languages and relationships. The committee's commitment to each of these elements is described below.

Land. Indigenous ways of knowing value the knowledge derived from place (land). Knowledge connected to place has enhanced credibility and validity because of where it resides. "Stories connected to place are both about collectivist tribal orientation, and they are located within our personal knowing and conceptual framework of the world" (Kovach, 2009, p. 62). Māori protocols of introduction name "the mountain, the river, the tribal ancestor, the tribe and the family" (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, p. 126). In other words, context situates the person, acknowledges their kinship, and provides credibility as it locates their knowledge as situated in a specific place or context.

Foregrounding land in this work was done intentionally and pragmatically at the onset of each committee meeting by the committee Chair offering a land acknowledgement. This included noting that committee members (attending virtually from throughout the province) were on traditional lands referred to as Treaties 4, 6, 8, and 10 territories, and on the traditional homeland of the Métis. The Chair added that this was said at the outset of each meeting to respect and honour the treaties that were made, to acknowledge the harms and mistakes of the past, and to demonstrate our commitment to moving forward with Indigenous peoples in the spirit of reconciliation.

Languages. As was said earlier, Indigenous knowledge resides in traditional languages and is passed on from one generation to the next through stories and ceremonies (Amendt, 2019). Being responsive to the preservation and retention of Indigenous languages and cultures within the context of schools was, therefore, an important element to include in the IERF.

In the context of the IERF working committee, however, *language* also emerged as a particularly important concept with the committee's deliberations on the use of the word "disrupting" which has been

previously outlined in this paper. The committee created the required space to dialogue and debate respectfully this concept in order to arrive at the bold conclusion that was chosen; that is, to include the term "disrupting" in the IERF intentionally as a way to demonstrate not only that significant change in education systems is required but also to spark the cognitive dissonance that is often required to effect significant change.

The working group's intent has been played out in multiple ways since the IERF became public. A particularly poignant illustration of the type of discourse the working group intended occurred during a presentation at a provincial education conference shortly after the IERF had been launched.

The two authors of this paper shared with the assembled audience of about 100 the IERF's conceptual framework along with the rubrics used to assess organizational and individual progress. During the presentation, an audience member opined demonstratively that the working group's use of the term "disrupting" was "too jarring and would turn people off" to the point that many would reject the IERF summarily; the comment was accompanied by several attendees nodding their heads in agreement. At that moment, another attendee observed that, while such a term may make people uncomfortable, substantial change can be uncomfortable for many and maybe it was "necessary to push people out of their comfort zones if we really want to see change".

Anecdotally, we have received reports of similar interactions throughout the provincial public education sector. During phase II meetings, school district personnel also observed that not only were educators and families finding the IERF helpful as a means of creating the impetus for critical reflection and discussion but also the nature of those interactions were shifting from "why do we have to do this" to "how can we accomplish this work" – mirroring the discussions that we observed among school board trustees and senior administrators at the outset of this project.

Relationships. Indigenous ways of knowing value relationships – relationships with land, kinship, and with each other. Saskatchewan is a small province in Canada, in terms of population. Within the education sector in the province, perhaps it is even smaller. As such, personal and professional relationships are often formed among colleagues resulting in years (decades in some instances) of relationship. As previously mentioned, the committee working on the IERF was eleven members, nine of whom are Indigenous. While some new relationships were formed, many of the committee members had known and worked with each other on Indigenous or other educational initiatives, for years. These relationships were critical to the success of the project and are built upon respect.

Committee members respected each other. The insights from years of professional and lived experience that each brought to the present project allowed for the vigorous dialogue required for this kind of work to take place without offence or apology. Committee members (Indigenous members in particular) often carry the weight and sacred responsibility of bringing Indigenous ways of knowing to discussions. They bring to such discussions deeply personal understandings of the results of inequities in education, ongoing racism, and the impact of education systems that may have personally failed them, their family members, and their nations. A strong commitment to *getting it right* was consistently experienced as the process ensued. The respect embedded in these relationships ultimately resulted in the final document coming to fruition in a manner supported by all committee members.

Indigenous-Western applied research method

The process of animating the provincial Indigenous education policy framework illuminated critical pathways between contemporary western education and *Indigenous Knowledge*. Through this research, we found that a critical challenge with leading change in Indigenous educational contexts is that we must be prepared to test our assumptions and examine our personal biases and prejudices. As observed by researchers such as Ermine (2007), participants reaffirmed that contemporary education system must make

room for other "ways of knowing and doing", including individuals' openness to make room within their own paradigms the worldviews and perspectives of others.

The fact that the participants successfully navigated the complexities associated with pulling together multiple worldviews to animate a governmental policy directive should encourage individuals in other settings to evaluate and shift behaviours and practice. Ermine (2007) proposed an ethical space, a space between Western society and its ways of knowing and Indigenous peoples and their ways of knowing, where these two solitudes can come together in reconciliation. It was in this ethical space where new dialogue and interactions for engagement occurred. This work was, by no means, exhaustive nor did it establish a final destination for reconciliation; however, it illuminates a path for consistent growth and progress and will foster development of the conditions needed for ongoing dialogue through an ethical space of engagement.

The purpose of the *IERF* is to broaden opportunities for all students in general and for Indigenous students in particular by ensuring they are celebrated for the knowledge they bring and the ways in which they seek to extend that knowledge. For Indigenous peoples there is no separation between learning and life per se, in the words of Elder Danny Musqua (2007), "We were put on this earth to learn – learning is what makes us human." Further, the *IERF* heightens the expectations for school districts to attend to Indigenous education and provides a tool for school districts to self-assess their practices in implementing Indigenous education, through a more comprehensive lens.

The Product as Outcome: A Brief Overview of the IERF

Process precedes product. By centering Indigenous methodologies and CBPR, the committee cultivated ethical space for courageous language, shared responsibility, and iterative refinement – conditions that allowed the IERF to emerge and take root. For institutions seeking to move from policy to practice, the path runs through relationships, humility, and sustained co-creation.

The IERF comprises **five rubrics** aligned with *Inspiring Success* policy goals, each articulated along a **strategizing continuum** (Observing, Supporting, Disrupting). The rubrics are designed for self-assessment, dialogue, and planning – supporting movement toward culturally sustaining, relationally accountable practice. The purpose of this paper was to describe the process of conducting Indigenous-Western shared research. However, we would be remiss if we did not also share the fruits of our labour. Consult Appendix A to access the rubrics themselves. They are offered in this article to illustrate the potential of research conducted from a truly shared perspective. We deliberately do not discuss the rubrics in detail because the process of interpreting them and applying them for any particular setting is critical for understanding the ways in which they may be used to assess district- and school-level progress.

Conclusions

When utilizing Indigenous methodologies, humility is required. A central value in many Indigenous nations, humility can result in uncomfortableness, perhaps particularly for researchers who may perceive themselves, or may be perceived by others (students, families), as experts. Molnar (2008) described the uncomfortableness that educators, especially those who are non-Indigenous, can encounter as they engage with those different from themselves and helps to reframe the experience of this uncomfortableness. "Recognizing our un-preparedness and our inadequacy though unsettling, signals our attentiveness to the difference we encounter and while uncomfortable gives us some assurance we are listening to the call of the Other. In other words, we are being responsible" (p. 272). Safir & Dugan (2021) go further, encouraging educators to "embrace vulnerability and progress over perfection as we strive to transform our school and organizational cultures" (p. 170). Our experiences as educators, and who we are, may be quite different than the students and families in the school community – "the Others." The differences may leave educators

and/or researchers feeling unprepared or inadequate in their ability to build relationships with Indigenous or newcomer populations for example. Non-Indigenous researchers are encouraged to embrace the uncomfortableness and vulnerability that may be associated with engaging with Indigenous individuals and communities, approaching this with a sense of humility.

This paper describes a unique methodological approach for researchers. In using Indigenous methodologies, researchers are encouraged to engage and collaborate authentically with Indigenous individuals and communities. Bring Western ways of knowing and engage Indigenous ways of knowing thereby finding ethical space. Such an approach requires humility and researchers are encouraged to embrace any uncomfortableness and vulnerability they may experience in working in this way. Finally, researchers are invited to attend to the core elements of Indigenous knowledge – land, languages, and relationships, as an insightful and practical way to frame their work and guide them as they translate educational policy into meaningful and measurable positive outcomes.

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Appendix A – Critical policy goal rubrics

All learners demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the worldviews and historical impact of First Nations and the Métis. Nation

Stepping Stone	Strategizing		
	Observing	Supporting	Disrupting
Intentional and developmental exposure, experience, and engagement in learning for all staff	Sponsors occasional cultural events and/or projects. Informs teaching and administrative staff about events.	Sponsors and/or creates regular developmental exposure opportunities for all staff to learn about Indigenous worldviews and cultures. Leaders frequently participate and all staff are encouraged to participate in at least some of these opportunities.	Creates multiple developmental exposure opportunities for all staff to learn about Indigenous worldviews and cultures. Clearly communicates expectations that all staff engage in these opportunities and provides time for them to do it. Increases staff engagement in community-based events to extend their learning.
Evidence of progress (What was the net effect of the implemented actions?):			
Next steps (Based on the net effect of actions, what are the next steps the division commits to in order to improve?):			
Investigate, acknowledge, and respond to truth, history, and land	Mentions historical truths about this land and Indigenous peoples that impact the present day during public events. Permits individuals to pursue opportunities to extend knowledge. Occasionally asks Indigenous peoples for advice but messages are filtered through non-Indigenous leaders' perspectives.	Acknowledges the historical truths about this land and Indigenous peoples that impact the present day. Policy, practice, and public events sometimes address truth – usually indirectly. Incorporates Indigenous peoples' perspectives and sometimes gives them the floor to speak their own truths about "safe" topics. Encourages individuals to pursue opportunities to extend knowledge.	Intentionally addresses truth in policy, practice, and public events – usually explicitly. Actively seeks opportunities to extend knowledge and promotes the learnings and teachings of others to move this work forward. Provides resources for individuals to pursue opportunities to extend their knowledge as well.
Evidence of progress (What was the net effect of the implemented actions?):			

Next steps (Based on the net effect of actions, what are the next steps the division commits to in order to improve?):			
Relationships with Indigenous peoples in the local territory	Rarely takes the opportunity to communicate and engage with Indigenous peoples. Rarely engages Indigenous peoples of the territory in relationship-based projects; when it does happen, it is usually near the end of development and/or implementation.	Accepts opportunities to meet Indigenous peoples. Seeks to engage Indigenous peoples of the territory in relationship-based projects aimed at improving the educational experiences of children and youth. Interacts with Indigenous peoples as they would with non-Indigenous, as in a partnership, friendship, or professional transaction.	Actively seeks opportunities to meet and collaborate with Indigenous peoples. Consistently engages Indigenous peoples throughout all relationship-based projects through co-governance of initiatives that pertain particularly to Indigenous children and youth but affect all students. Policy, administrative procedures, and strategic plans are infused with Indigenous worldviews and Indigenous peoples are consistently present to contribute their perspectives and experiences.
Evidence of progress (What was the net effect of the implemented actions?):			
Next steps (Based on the net effect of actions, what are the next steps the division commits to in order to improve?):			

Equitable opportunities and outcomes for First Nations and Métis learners

Stepping Stone	Strategizing		
	Observing	Supporting	Disrupting
Aware of and challenge bias and stereotypes	Within the context of the *Education Act* and other relevant regulations; the division reviews structures, policies, administrative procedures, and strategic plans occasionally when questions arise by discussing with groups of teachers, families, and community members.	Within the context of the *Education Act* and other relevant regulations; structures, policies, administrative procedures, and strategic plans are systematically reviewed with groups of teachers, families, and community members using a critical lens informed by anti-racist/anti-oppressive theoretical frameworks.	Within the context of the *Education Act* and other relevant regulations, regular systematic reviews of structures, policies, administrative procedures, and strategic plans with groups of teachers, families, and community members result in changes that reflect anti-racist/anti-oppressive theoretical frameworks – making them more equitable and inclusive.
Evidence of progress (What was the net effect of the implemented actions?):			
Next steps (Based on the net effect of actions, what are the next steps the division commits to in order to improve?):			
Learning is the "constant" but context matters	Policy and practice decisions are informed through community discussions but often absent of First Nations and Métis voice. There is a common research-informed language and practice related to educational practice and policy matters.	Policy and practice decisions are informed through discussions with local First Nations and Métis representatives. There is a common research-informed language and practice related to educational practice and policy matters but schools retain flexibility to respond to local communities' needs.	Policy and practice decisions are made by committees that include local First Nations and Métis representatives. The community's needs are actively met because the relationships built through developing and using research- and community-informed common language and practice ensures that community's voice is present at all times.
Evidence of progress (What was the net effect of the implemented actions?):			

Next steps (Based on the net effect of actions, what are the next steps the division commits to in order to improve?):			
Everyone can and will succeed	Academic success is important but not essential – other things (e.g., having a safe place to go, providing a meal, etc.) are just as important. Teacher practice reflects their belief that "all students are the same."	Academic success is important and there are multiple paths to success. Success in other areas is promoted as well. Teacher practice reflects their belief that all students can and will succeed.	Academic success is essential and is achieved and recognized through a holistic perspective. Teacher practice fosters development of the "whole" learner as an essential component of academic success.
Evidence of progress (What was the net effect of the implemented actions?):			
Next steps (Based on the net effect of actions, what are the next steps the division commits to in order to improve?):			

Shared management of the provincial education system by ensuring respectful relationships and equitable partnerships with First Nations and Métis peoples at the provincial and local level

Stepping Stone	Strategizing		
	Observing	Supporting	Disrupting
Trust and authentic engagement	Division develops policy, administrative procedures, and strategic plans; then it seeks input from local First Nations and Métis community.	Division engages with local First Nations and Métis community as policy, administrative procedure, strategic planning, and practice decisions are made.	Division and local First Nations and Métis communities have shared commitment, equitable representation, and active voice as they work collaboratively on policy, administrative procedure, strategic planning and practice decisions.
Evidence of progress (What was the net effect of the implemented actions?):			
Next steps (Based on the net effect of actions, what are the next steps the division commits to in order to improve?):			
Data/information management	Data are collected and stored following the Registrar's Handbook for School Administrators guidelines and other relevant policies. There is little or no communication with families/caregivers regarding (i) the data that are collected, (ii) the intended uses of those data, and (iii) the ways in which findings from data analysis will be communicated. Data are stored indefinitely for division's use.	Within the context of the Registrar's Handbook for School Administrators and informed by other relevant policies, the division is open and clear about the data that are collected, the purpose of collecting them, the way in which they will be used (and not used), how results will be communicated (and to whom), and how they will be disposed of when no longer needed.	Within the context of the Registrar's Handbook for School Administrators and informed by other relevant policies, data handling protocols are developed collaboratively with local First Nations and Métis communities, to guide data collection, use, communication, and disposal. First Nations and Métis families/caregivers are invited into dialogue regarding data collection and handling processes.
Evidence of progress (What was the net effect of the implemented actions?):			
Next steps (Based on the net effect of actions, what are the next steps the division commits to in order to improve?):			

"Ethical space of engagement"	Division provides an annual one-day seminar for employees and trustees led by an outside expert. Employees and trustees are encouraged to reflect on their implementation of that training through their personal learning plans.	Division hires a consultant to develop and implement a training program for creating and sustaining equitable environments and relationships. All employees and trustees participate in annual seminars based on this program. Employees are expected to reflect on their implementation of that training through their personal learning plans.	Through partnerships between the division and local First Nations and Métis communities and individuals, all staff and trustees participate in ongoing training for creating and sustaining equitable environments and relationships. All employees are engaged in regular reflection regarding their implementation of that training through their conversations with their supervisors regarding their personal learning plans.
Evidence of progress (What was the net effect of the implemented actions?):			
Next steps (Based on the net effect of actions, what are the next steps the division commits to in order to improve?):			

Culturally appropriate and authentic assessment measures that foster improved educational opportunities and outcomes

Stepping Stone	Strategizing		
	Observing	Supporting	Disrupting
Multiple pathways/definitions of success	Assessments tend to rely primarily on "mandated" tools and processes that are set division wide. Reporting takes place via division-sponsored progress reports and parent-teacher interview days; teachers phone home when "there is a problem."	Purpose and process of assessment incorporates a blend of division-wide and classroom-based tools and is clearly communicated. Reporting takes place primarily via division-sponsored progress reports and parent-teacher interview days; but occasional telephone calls or emails are used as well.	Purpose and process of assessment is clear because, while division-wide tools are used as required, a majority of assessments are co-constructed among teacher and students. Teachers, families, and students clearly understand progress because there is an open line of communication that blends division-sponsored progress reports and parent-teacher interview days with regular communication with families and ongoing dialogue with students.
Evidence of progress (What was the net effect of the implemented actions?):			
Next steps (Based on the net effect of actions, what are the next steps the division commits to in order to improve?):			
Instruction and assessment reflect both Saskatchewan curriculum and local knowledge and experience	Students are sometimes aware of the outcomes being assessed. Educators accept local ways of knowing concepts underlying outcomes being taught as evidence of "enrichment" but not part of the core assessment plan.	Students know the outcomes being assessed. Educators discuss with local Elders and Traditional Knowledge Keepers about community's way of understanding concepts underlying the outcomes and local knowledge is sometimes accepted as a means of demonstrating achievement.	Students know the outcomes being assessed and teachers facilitate and accept multiple ways to demonstrate mastery of outcomes. Educators actively seek advice from local Elders and Traditional Knowledge Keepers about the community's way of understanding concepts underlying the outcomes and local knowledge is valued and

			welcomed as a means of demonstrating achievement.
Evidence of progress (What was the net effect of the implemented actions?):			
Next steps (Based on the net effect of actions, what are the next steps the division commits to in order to improve?):			
All persons with a stake in student outcomes (i.e., families/caregivers, students, teachers) are intentionally included in assessment of school and division progress	All persons with a stake in student outcomes (i.e., families/caregivers, students, teachers) are told about the staff's vision for the organization and direction of the school and the division.	All persons with a stake in student outcomes (i.e., families/caregivers, students, teachers) are asked about their vision for the organization and direction of the school and the division.	Representatives from groups of persons with a stake in student outcomes (i.e., families/caregivers, students, teachers) are engaged in committees discussing their vision for the organization and direction of the school and the division.
Evidence of progress (What was the net effect of the implemented actions?):			
Next steps (Based on the net effect of actions, what are the next steps the division commits to in order to improve?):			

First Nations and Métis languages and cultures are valued and supported

Stepping Stone	Strategizing		
	Observing	Supporting	Disrupting
Territorial languages, knowledge, support, and integration	The division develops culturally sustaining programming and expected practice policies.	In discussion with local First Nations and Métis communities and individuals, the division develops culturally sustaining programming and expected practices.	Through partnerships between the division and local First Nations and Métis communities and individuals, culturally sustaining programming and expected practices are defined, developed, and implemented.
Evidence of progress (What was the net effect of the implemented actions?):			
Next steps (Based on the net effect of actions, what are the next steps the division commits to in order to improve?):			
Representative workforce reflects the community	The division has stated publicly that it has a commitment to developing a representative workforce.	The division's commitment to a representative workforce is evidenced in policy and procedure documents and hiring decisions are sometimes influenced by these policy and procedure statements. First Nations and Métis employees are invited to join a mentorship program.	The division's workforce composition reflects local demographics. First Nations and Métis employees are provided with an appropriate mentor and relevant supports.
Evidence of progress (What was the net effect of the implemented actions?):			
Next steps (Based on the net effect of actions, what are the next steps the division commits to in order to improve?):			