Constrained and Contested: Nova Scotia Teachers' Experiences of Teaching

Mi'kmaw Studies 11

By

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Abstract

The Truth and Reconciliation Report's *94 Calls to Action* requested that Canadian schools create mandatory, age-appropriate curriculum "on residential schools, Treaties, and Aboriginal peoples' historical and contemporary contributions to Canada" (TRC, 2015, p. 7), with the outcome to be the "building [of] student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect" (TRC Truth, 2015, p. 7). *Mi'kmaw Studies 11,* a course offered to grade 11 students in Nova Scotia as an option for fulfilling the Canadian history component of the high school diploma, appears well positioned to respond to these specific Calls to Action, and this project explores the course through the experiences of the teachers leading the learning.

The overarching question of this research is "What is it like to teach *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*, a course that is purposively created as a tool for reconciliation in a settler colonial school system, in a public high school in Nova Scotia?" The methodology for the research is transcendental phenomenology, as described by Moustakas (1994) in his *Phenomenological Research Methods*. Phenomenology is a study of lived experiences that explore a recollected moment through the descriptive telling of the person whose experience is being studied.

This study reflects the lived experiences of six teachers of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*. They spoke about course material, pedagogical choices, students, the support (or lack thereof) from administrators, centres for education and the community, and the concepts and actions that come into play when one is teaching about a living culture from (mostly) the outside. Listening to the lived experiences of the six teachers is an opportunity for all the stakeholders involved with education working toward reconciliation to consider what is happening in those classrooms.

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Although I cannot name them specifically as they have been anonymized in the research, I want to thank the six teacher participants who took part in this work. Without all of you, this project would not have been possible. Every moment of the day is precious to a teacher, and I am grateful for the time you shared to tell me the stories of your experiences teaching *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*. It is my sincere hope that this work will be read and considered by the Nova Scotia Department of Education and that your voices will be heard.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Between 2009 and 2015, the Honourable Murray Sinclair (Mizhana Gheezhik), of the Peguis First Nation, served as the Chief Commissioner of Canada's Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Queen's, 2023). When the final report of the TRC was released in December, 2015, Commissioner Sinclair, in conversation with CBC news anchor Peter Mansbridge said,

> Education is what got us into this mess, the use of education at least in terms of residential schools, but education is the key to reconciliation . . . we need to ensure that all children being educated in our school system in Canada are educated to understand the full and proper history [of Indigenous people in Canada]. (CBC News Murray Sinclair, 2015, 9:36)

Sinclair's statement provides focus and direction for both educators and education researchers who take seriously the call for reconciliation. His words inspired this work, as I explored the lived experience of teachers of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11,* a course about the history, culture, and current lives of Mi'kmaw people[1] offered as one of five options to fulfill the Canadian history component of the Nova Scotia high school diploma.

Why The Topic Matters

The Truth and Reconciliation Report's *94 Calls to Action*, released in December, 2015, call for Canadian schools to create mandatory, age-appropriate curriculum "on residential schools, Treaties, and Aboriginal peoples' historical and contemporary contributions to Canada" (TRC, 2015, p. 7). Specifically, Call to Action 63 includes the statement that a desired outcome from creating and implementing that curriculum in the public school system in Canada is the

"Building [of] student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect" (TRC Truth, 2015, p. 7). Calls to Action 62 and 63 recognize the role of education as a doorway to understanding and relationship building between people who may not know or feel comfortable with each other as a result of colonization practices, of disrupting the settler role of the "perfect stranger" (Dion, 2007) who stands apart and claims an absolute lack of experience with Indigenous people and issues (Dion, 2007; Donald, 2011; see also Chilisa & Ntseane, 2014; Kerr, 2014). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission defines reconciliation as "establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples . . . [requiring] awareness of the past, acknowledgement of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes, and action to change behaviour" (TRC Canada, 2015, p. 3). Using this definition of reconciliation, directed education (specifically in classrooms in the public education system as specified in Calls to Action 62 and 63) approached with an agenda of truth, no matter how difficult for the non-Indigenous learners, might be the beginning of majority settler colonial society learning how to respectfully and authentically approach relationships with Indigenous peoples.

Thinking about my own life experiences, whether personal or pedagogical, the impetus to action has often begun through an educational opportunity. As both a student and an educator, I have so often been inspired to seek out new people and experiences, to broaden my worldview, to open my heart, as a result of being provided the opportunity to learn about someone who was not me. Developing educational material and courses provides an opportunity for present and subsequent generations of non-Indigenous persons living on the portion of Turtle Island today referred to as Canada, to learn about the Indigenous peoples who live (and have lived for thousands of years) as nations on this land. Curriculum development that prioritizes accurate

information about Indigenous peoples and makes their stories, lives, and histories accessible to both settler colonial citizens and other newcomers to this land is a necessary step on the path toward reconciliation (Butler et al., 2015; Freeman et al., 2018; Peters, 2016). Additionally, developing this curriculum allows Indigenous students to see themselves and their culture reflected and validated in school course materials.

The topic of my research springs directly from Calls to Action 62 and 63. The Nova Scotia high school curriculum contains a beginning step toward fulfilling both Calls to Action by offering the social studies course *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* as one of five choices for the compulsory Canadian history requirement to graduate. This placement in the curriculum might be viewed as ironic from a number of perspectives, perhaps most directly as the Mi'kmaw people have never ceded Mi'kma'ki to Canada and still view themselves as a sovereign nation (Palmater, 2019), and secondly as Indigenous persons in Canada are not only historical figures in an abstracted past but vital members of the modern political construct that is referred to in settler terms as Canada (King, 2003; Highway, 2022; Vowel, 2016, 2022). Despite its positioning as a "history" course, *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* is described in its curriculum document as a specific attempt to educate non-Indigenous students about Mi'kmaw people and culture in the present day, claiming that "through taking this course students should become more informed, active citizens who have a holistic understanding of the relationship among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Nova Scotia and Canada" (*Mi'kmaw Studies 11,*2016, p. 1). Referring back to the title of this section, "Why the Topic Matters", what happens in the classrooms where *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* is offered does matter to the work of reconciliation, and this is the focus of the project.

Problem Statement

To provide context for this work, I draw attention to the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement, implemented in 2007. This agreement was the result of the Canadian government's response to multiple lawsuits launched by former residential school students (Bora Laskin, 2023). In 2005, a federal inquiry was created to "bring a fair and lasting resolution to the legacy of Indian Residential Schools" (Gov't of Canada, 2021, Para. #1). One of those elements was the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, whose process focussed on the testimony of residential school survivors, their families and other persons either directly affected or implicated in the system (National Centre, n.d.). From that, in 2015, came the published report and the *94 Calls to Action* with a stated goal of addressing the damage to Indigenous people perpetrated by acts of colonization and furthering the process of reconciliation through specific acts of reparation to Indigenous persons, both individually and as communities/nations, by non-Indigenous citizens of Canada (both as individuals and in the guise of various institutions both public and private) (TRC, 2015). As a settler living in Ontario in the wake of the Commission's highly publicized report, I became more conscious of how Indigenous people in what is now called Canada have been displaced and disinherited by settler society. Reading the *94 Calls to Action* provided me with a place to begin my own journey of actively seeking to acknowledge the responsibility I have to the process of reconciliation as a settler living on Turtle Island.

This work is in response to the section from the report titled "Education for Reconciliation", specifically Calls to Action 62 and 63, which call for provincial governments to create mandatory, age appropriate curriculum for students that "Build[s] student capacity for intercultural understanding" (2015, p. 7). While teaching in several Nova Scotia high schools, I became aware of the Social Studies course *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*, a course that uses as its central

question, “How am I connected to the First Peoples of Nova Scotia?” (2016, p. 1). *Mi’kmaw Studies 11* appears well positioned to respond to these specific Calls to Action directed at the school system from the TRC, and this project explores how the course answers the central question that it poses through the experiences of the teachers leading the learning.

Looking at a sample of research literature from across North America that focusses on Indigenous education and pedagogy, it appears that the research examining methods of pedagogy and curriculum concerning Indigenous course materials and how they are taught focusses on two specific areas: (1) curriculum and methods being used with Indigenous students in community (Milne, 2017; Orr et al., 2017; Paetkau, 2018; Reyhner, 2015; Tinkham, 2013; Wilson & Hodgson, 2016), and (2) curriculum with Indigenous content intended for settler schools where there may or may not be a population of Indigenous students (Rogers, 2011; Tipton, 2017; Tompkins, 2002). *Mi’kmaw Studies 11* may be placed in the second category, as a course with Indigenous content that is intended for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.[2]

Pursuant to the two focus areas of research referred to in the previous paragraph, there does not appear to be research that directly looks at *Mi’kmaw Studies 11* to determine the pedagogical focus of the course. *Mi’kmaw Studies 11* is often (but not exclusively) presented by settler teachers and administered by settler school boards, and the course exists in a western[3] centred educational system. During my career as a classroom teacher, I have spent countless hours developing actual curriculum based on the directives and outcomes presented in ministry documents. Even though there are often statements made in those documents about how material is to be presented (for example “outcome-based learning”, which is referred to directly in the *Mi’kmaw Studies 11* curriculum document), it usually comes down to the specific teacher or department to develop the methods for delivery of curriculum (Aoki, 1993). A principle that I

have followed in terms of creating methods within pedagogy is to look to both the source material and the students I am teaching. As an example, I would draw on my experience using plays as a portion of curriculum. Whether it is the work of Tomson Highway, William Shakespeare, or Lynn Nottage, in my class we engage with the plays as theatre experiences (as readers, actors, critics, audience) because this reflects the intention of the authors and provides specific context to create meaning for the learners. In the same way, an aspect of "intercultural understanding" (TRC, 2015, p. 7) of material in the *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* course may be curriculum delivered in a way that is congruent with Mi'kmaw methods of teaching. This might mean that teachers of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* are provided with specific access to Elders and resources from Mi'kmaw knowledge keepers and communities to support their teaching. Within my participant group, this is not currently being provided to teachers of the course

The work of Battiste (2013, 2016), Smith (2012), and Wilson (2008) asserts that settler scholars must "put the Indigenous agenda firmly in the present" (Battiste, 2013, p. 74). Looking from methodologies to pedagogy, it would appear that creating and growing a course for grade 11 students that addresses Mi'kmaw ways of being and knowing might provide opportunities for a fundamental shift of how learners are taught and evaluated, perhaps growing a pedagogy that centres all students in a "consciousness of the landscapes, images, languages, themes, metaphors and stories of the Indigenous world" (Smith, 2012, p. 147). In my exploration of the lived experiences of the teachers I spoke with in the course of this inquiry, I have learned how they chose, applied, and developed the pedagogies they employ as they teach their students.

My method was to talk to teachers of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* to learn about their experiences developing and teaching the course. I'm thinking of this work as a "check in" to reflect on purpose and pedagogy, to provide stories of what is happening and why in *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*

classrooms. The Nova Scotia Department of Education curriculum document for *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* has been developed in partnership with Mi'kmaw Elders and scholars. However, a majority of those teaching and taking the program are settlers, who are situated in a settler funded and run education system. It would seem that listening to the lived experiences of teachers of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* might provide an opportunity for all the stakeholders involved with education working toward reconciliation to consider what is happening in those classrooms. This leads to the overarching question that will organize my research is "What is it like to teach *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*, a course that is purposively created as a tool for reconciliation in a settler colonial school system, in a public high school in Nova Scotia?"

Author Positionality

Thinking about positionality as I consider this project, I recognize that my first instinct is to describe myself as a teacher because this is how I see myself, but I can't stop there. I am a white woman and a settler of English heritage. Bringing together those descriptors, white/woman/settler, I then consider how each reflects who I am as a teacher. Beginning with white, I understand that I am a privileged person; opportunities are available to me simply because of the circumstances of my birth. As a cis woman my life pattern has followed the gender patterns of the majority. Until quite recently, I had not seriously contemplated my position as a settler. My family has lived in Mi'kma'ki for about two hundred years—in "the grand scheme of things" (one of my mother's favourite sayings) not very long at all. Everything I have has been generated by ancestors whose tenancy was created and supported by colonial forces working against Indigenous people and their primacy of place on the land. This set of privileges has helped to shape who I am as both a teacher and a researcher (de los Ríos & Patel, 2023; see also Crossa, 2012). I look to the work of settler scholars like Paulette Regan (2010)

and Carol Lynne D' Arcangelis (2018), who urge a recognition of responsibility to engage actively and concretely in decolonizing work for all settlers. In the context of this work, I am cognizant that both my internal constructs, including what I think about teaching and why, and my actions and reactions to participants in the course of each interview external presentations are factors in the bracketing of my research.

Returning to Nova Scotia in 2020, following my career as an English teacher in southern Ontario, I found myself in new teaching and learning environments. I began work as a substitute teacher, and in 2021 started a Master's program in Curriculum Studies, where I was presented with opportunities to examine my role as a settler and a teacher in relation to the place I live, the roles I inhabit, and the people (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) I interact with in my life here in Kjipuktuk, Mi'kma'ki. I chose Curriculum Studies as my program focus because I see it as a discipline that is intersectional and philosophical as well as, to some degree, founded in practicalities. The Curriculum Studies thinker in North America that piqued my interest to explore further was John Dewey and his focus on the purpose of public education. In his *Democracy and Education* (2001), he argues that the primary purpose of public education is to prepare students to become functioning members of a democratic society. He invokes the term pragmatism, which, most simply expressed, is to learn things most necessary for living a productive and useful life as part of society (Maddox & Donnett, 2015). My personal teaching philosophy centres around the idea that skills and knowledge relevant to students are often the most motivating portions of a course. As a result, I find Dewey's assertions that relevance combined with specific concentrations on skill building particularly relevant to my own inquiries (Weiss et al., 2005). Progressing forward to William Pinar's reimagining of Curriculum Studies, in the Reconceptualization, as a way of thinking that rejects stasis and embraces the dialectical

(Pinar, 1979), I found a space in this diverse collection of theorists, an appreciation of the "complicated conversation" (Pinar, 2005). I see Curriculum Studies in its present iteration as a direct outgrowth of Pinar's construct of a regular practice of questioning ourselves, our methods, and our materials as teacher-philosophers who care about both the practicalities of the classroom and also strive to create and curate a sincere reflexive practice toward that work.

As a result of my western-centred academic career (prior to this work), I have spent almost a lifetime thinking through a system that prioritizes a pedagogy of male whiteness and the ideation of personal wealth and achievement based on competition. In the words of Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernandez (2013), "the project of schooling in the US and Canada has been a white supremacist project" (p. 75). Specifically, that settler-colonial pedagogies concentrate on replacing all references to Indigenous people with settler visions of a "new" land, a mythical *terra nullius* that rejects any occupants of the land that are not European Christians as having tenancy rights to that land (Buchan, 2007; Oxford, 2010; Vowel, 2016). This perspective has made me uncomfortable for a long time, and as a result I am taking steps to move in other directions in my teaching and learning. I have been thinking about the nature of public high school classrooms, including how and why the environment is organized, the role of teacher authority, the creation of curriculum, the hidden curriculum, and the null curriculum. The initial result of my reflection has led me to readings about Indigenous pedagogies from a variety of nations. Contained within these readings are ways of teaching and evaluating learning that do not depend so heavily on a grading system, focussing instead on demonstrated competence of skills. As a result of my reading, I have come to consider how certain Indigenous pedagogies might be incorporated into publicly funded classrooms as a benefit to all students and as a step toward reconciliation.

The Historical Impact of Settler Colonialism on Mi'kma'ki

As a final portion of this introductory chapter, I believe it is necessary to delineate, in brief, the historical impact of settler colonialism on Mi'kma'ki. The relationship that is now being constructed among settler people, other non-Indigenous people, and Mi'kmaw people who live in Mi'kma'ki has its roots in the brutal colonial pillaging conducted by a variety of western European nations (primarily England and France) on the land of the Mi'kmaw people. The following paragraphs describe the relationship that began between 1525 and 1550 with first contact between Mi'kmaw people and Basque fishers (Mi'kmaw History, 2016). What started as a relationship between sovereign nations became a genocide against the Mi'kmaq[4] and spawned a culture of environmental destruction against the lands where the Mi'kmaq have lived "from the beginning of the world" (Knockwood, 2023, Para. #1). These actions must be acknowledged, and reparations be made before authentic steps toward reconciliation can begin (Palmater, 2019). A first step may be through the land back initiatives of environmental assessment and monitoring and consent protocols and permitting as discussed in the Yellowhead Institute's Red Paper titled "Land Back" (King et al., 2019).

Noting the destructive omnipresence of settler colonialism to Indigenous societies on a global scale, there is a recognition that "In order for the settlers to make a place their home, they must destroy and disappear the Indigenous peoples that live there" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 6). Reflecting on the history of colonization in North America specifically, the waves of Europeans who arrived following the first explorers and seasonal fishers came with the intent of creating communities on land that they viewed as "terra nullius", or empty land, based on the 1455 Romanus Pontifex "Doctrine of Discovery", which articulates that lands not previously settled by Christians are available for occupation (Vowel, 2016). This was not and is not true. These

lands were and are occupied by Indigenous people with tens of thousands of years of history living with and caring for the land.

Understanding that education is a process that seeks to create change, and that the process of restoration that must precede reconciliation is strengthened by knowing the past, it is imperative for settler people to understand the history of contact between settlers and Indigenous people in the land where those settlers now reside. Any understanding of how relationships may be understood, changed, or strengthened in the present and the future must come from an understanding of how those relationships began in the past. In order to respectfully build ways to create meaningful intersections of Mi'kmaw and western pedagogies in a twenty-first century high school course (*Mi'kmaw Studies 11*), it is necessary to reflect with thought and purpose on the five hundred years of contact that precede the present day.

The first contact between Mi'kmaw people and Europeans is thought to have been in the 1500s with fishermen who appeared seasonally in Mi'kma'ki. In the 1600s, the relationship between the French (including Roman Catholic missionaries) and the Mi'kmaq became well established as traders, fishers, and trappers began to live in Mi'kma'ki. As the British began to move more into Mi'kma'ki in the late 1600s, tension and violence grew between the French and English. The Mi'kmaq were allied with the French, and so found themselves in opposition to the English. Despite the Mi'kmaw people having a relationship with the French based on a shared opposition to English rule, it is important to note that the French intent was still to colonize the traditional lands of Mi'kma'ki (Paul, 2022; Upton, 1979).

Between 1725 and 1779, a series of treaties were created between the Mi'kmaq and the English government. An important aspect of these Peace and Friendship Treaties is the idea that both nations would treat each other with respect, and it was written in the treaties that Mi'kmaw

people would continue to live on the land, to hunt and fish as they always had, and to trade with the English as they would with any other sovereign nation (Battiste, 2013). Despite the existence of these treaties, the English government quickly began to push the boundaries of the agreements and bring more people to occupy Mi'kmaw lands as farmers (Bear Nicholas, 2011).

The English settlers came with the understanding that the land they were given became their private property, and tension and violence erupted when Mi'kmaw people attempted to use lands that were protected by the agreements in the Peace and Friendship Treaties with the English government. A cornerstone of western civilization is "the right to protect private and national property from invasion with force" (Paul, 2022, p. 120), and by ignoring the protection their own laws should have provided to the Mi'kmaq nation under the provisions of both the Peace and Friendship Treaties and their own traditions of law, the English government created a situation where violent dispute became inevitable. In response to the conflict, Governor Edward Cornwallis created an extirpation proclamation in 1749, where he directed settlers and English military personnel to kill Mi'kmaw men, women, and children and to produce their scalps to receive a bounty. Cornwallis's "Scalping Proclamation" was an act of genocide perpetrated on the Mi'kmaw people (Paul, 2022) that allowed the English to think of and treat Mi'kmaw people as less than human. Settlers continued to displace Mi'kmaw people in Nova Scotia, and in 1801 the British government created the first designated "Indian Reserves" in Nova Scotia, deeming these lands as a "protection" for the Mi'kmaq. In 1855, the government in Nova Scotia enacted legislation that took title of all lands "reserved" for the Mi'kmaq (Paul, 2022).

Throughout the late 1800s and into the early twentieth century, Mi'kmaw people continued to have their sovereignty eroded through settler deceit and force, and the agreements outlined in the Peace and Friendship treaties were ignored by the government of Canada. The

integrity of Mi'kmaw communities and families was stripped away by isolating people on "reserves" and taking children from their parents. Between February 1930 and 1967, the Shubenacadie Indian Residential School was part of a deliberate process to assimilate and destroy Mi'kmaw people and culture funded by the Canadian federal government (Battiste, 2013). Mi'kmaw children at Shubenacadie were physically and emotionally abused by the nuns and priests who ran the school, and then inculcated with a code of silence by their abusers as a moral teaching (Knockwood, 2015).

Throughout the remainder of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, the Mi'kmaq have continued to be marginalized by settler society in Nova Scotia. Instances of overt and systemic racism continue to be perpetrated against Mi'kmaw people (Peter, 2021). Assimilationist language persists as Mi'kmaw students who participate in mainstream education may feel silenced (Julian, 2016). Sharon Rudderham, director of Nova Scotia's new Mi'kmaw Health Authority, in November of 2023, has specifically commented that, "The current health and wellness system is not working for our people and a different approach is needed" (CBC News Health Services, 2023, Para. #3).

As I conclude this reflection on a history that is fraught with deceit, broken promises, violence, murder, theft, and environmental destruction on the part of settler colonial governments and individuals, it is apparent to me that the only way forward is for the descendants of the perpetrators, those of us who are settler folk, is to be led by the people who were disenfranchised, the Mi'kmaq. Looking to a step in the right direction, I see Aaron Prosper's (Eskasoni), special topics course at St. Mary's "Kisaknutmagan: Peace and Friendship Treaties". The course will concentrate on analysing the treaties signed between the Mi'kmaw people and colonizers. Prosper wants to bring Mi'kmaw values, "the traditional lessons of peace, dialogue

and compassion in day-to-day life" (CBC News There's "Misunderstanding", 2023, Para. #2) to his classroom. Reflecting on current reports of media (Fall, 2023), perhaps this is a moment for creating a relationship between Mi'kmaw people and settler colonial people that springs from acknowledged responsibility and the desire to do and be better (as settler folk). It is time for the real commitment to learning, and then the move to action that acknowledges the original inhabitants of Mi'kma'ki and their rights as First People.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The Directive To Education

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2007-2015) documented the experiences of Indigenous people compelled to attend residential schools, and the fallout that spilled from that poisonous system onto the families and communities of those children. The commission released its report, *The 94 Calls to Action*, in December, 2014, with a mandate to inform Canadian citizens about the genocidal system disguised as education created by government and implemented by a number of Christian churches that had, as a stated purpose-from Canadian prime minister John A. MacDonald—to "take the Indian out of the child" (Ziervogel, 2019, n.p.). Calls to Action 62 and 63 from the report demand that provincial governments (who are responsible for education in Canada) create mandatory, age appropriate curriculum for students that "Build[s] student capacity for intercultural understanding" (2015, p. 7). This statement serves as a directive for Canadian schools (funded and supported by their various provincial authorities) to begin a process of reconciliation by creating, with Indigenous people as truth-tellers and subject matter experts, curriculum that provides authentic information that challenges non-Indigenous students to hear the truth about a system designed to perpetrate a cultural genocide on Indigenous people.

Principles Of Indigenous Pedagogy

As a starting position toward reconciliation through education (for non-Indigenous people), there is available a body of scholarship that describes principles of Indigenous pedagogy from the perspective of Indigenous scholars and settler scholars who work with them. Accordingly, there is both knowledge and process available for non-Indigenous teachers and researchers to build curriculum and guide inquiry. It is not my intention to imply a pan-

Indigenous philosophy of how education takes place; however, in my reading there is an appearance of agreement among many Indigenous peoples that being on and with the land is the greatest teacher of how to live. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2014), a Nishnaabeg scholar, provides specific descriptions of how learning with the land and the pedagogy of the Land occurs in her community. The emphasis is on discovery learning that happens as children explore their environment. They are treated with respect by their communities and encouraged to focus on learning that is of particular interest to them. She writes,

> Within this system there is no standard curriculum because it is impossible to generate a curriculum . . . because it doesn't make sense for everyone to master the same body of factual information . . . . Nishnaabewin fosters and cherishes individuals with particular gifts and skills as a mechanism for growing diversity. (Simpson, 2014, p. 10)

In like fashion, many Indigenous scholars cite land as central to the concerns of education (Coulthard, 2017; Drouin-Gagné, 2021; Freeland Ballantyne, 2014; Haig-Brown & Hodson, 2009; Ritskes, 2014; Styres & Zinga, 2013; Styres, 2019; Tuck et al., 2014; Wildcat et al., 2014). A very recent addition to this scholarship that has been central to my own understandings of anticolonial education and the move to reconciliation is Styres and Kempf's (2022) *Troubling Truth and Reconciliation in Canadian Education*, a collection of critical perspectives of education and reconciliation written by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars. Each voice brings a challenging perspective to the perhaps too easy ideas about reconciliation and education that are part of the mainstream discussion being held by Canadian provincial school boards and post-secondary institutions.

Returning the discussion to a specifically Mi'kmaw perspective, scholar Marie Battiste describes traditional Mi'kmaw education systems as "characterized by communal participation,

observation, pragmatic and experiential learning, both formal and informal, and highly dependent on intrapersonal, interpersonal, kinaesthetic, and spatial learning, as expressed in oral language and active engagement in the daily life of the people" (2013, p. 38). Key words in Battiste's description include participation, observation, experiential learning, and active engagement. Settler scholar Justin Pack, responding to Deloria Jr. and Wildcat's (2001) *Power and place: Indian education in America*, acknowledges the transformation of how one teaches as a result of learning deeply about that place where you teach. Pack (2019) asserts that the process of working through the pedagogy of the land as a teacher and learner, that is approaching scholarship through an Indigenous epistemology, holds the potential for developing critical thinking skills beyond the traditional western canon. Both Simpson and Battiste describe methods of learning that prioritize active members of a learning community engaging with work and content that is personally relevant and connected to the land, and Pack reimagines this pedagogy for non-Indigenous scholars and students as part of the work of reconciliation (see also Coulthard, 2017; Downey, 2016; Drouin-Gagné, 2021; Styres & Zinga, 2013; Tuck, et al., 2014; Wildcat et al., 2014).

Battiste connects education to reconciliation in Mi'kma'ki using the phrase brought into social rights parlance by disability advocates (Charlton, 1998) "nothing about us without us" (BC Campus News, 2020, Para. #3), reaffirming the central role of Mi'kmaw people and knowledge systems in creating every educational tool that seeks to be a part of the reconciliation process. Battiste (2016) addresses an essential construct of Mi'kmaw pedagogy by explaining the centrality of place-based knowledge systems. She stresses that an understanding of the land and how its rhythms impact living and influence language are essential tenets of Mi'kmaw education practices. Accordingly, "everything is alive and is my relation (msit no'kmaq)" (Henderson,

2016, p. 31). The Mi'kmaw language comes directly from the experience of living in the environment, and so knowledge of vocabulary is specifically reflective of how people learn and are taught. Method, language, and knowledge are intertwined to create contextualization for learners (see also Armstrong & Grauer, 2001; Styres, 2019).

There are specific educational resources about Mi'kmaw pedagogy available to all educators and provided by the Membertou community, reinforcing the importance of education that takes place on the land and the water, and of the connections between language, ancestors, and history. This curriculum, *Treaty education Nova Scotia: Land and water based education*, is founded on the principle of *Netukulimk*, which the resource defines as "a practice of humility and mindfulness . . . teach[ing] us to take only what we need and care for the land in a way that ensures there will be enough for every living thing for the next seven generations" (Hanscomb, 2022, p. 3; see also Prosper et al. 2011; Robinson, 2014). A specific method employed in this curriculum is circle teaching. Circle teaching happens in the context of a sharing circle, which is a part of the oral tradition of many Indigenous communities. The sharing circle allows every participant to speak without interruption. As one person is speaking, everyone else in the circle listens respectfully (Knockwood, 2015; Kovach, 2010; Tachine et al., 2016). The sharing circle provides the opportunity to consider alternative perspectives, and by its very nature reinforces the interconnectedness of people to each other and the earth (Graveline, 1998, 2010). Another concept suggested is engaging in *Etuaptmumk* or Two-Eyed Seeing, which is used in present day as an example of seeing both one's own culture and that of another, but traditionally for the Mi'kmaq is a sense of engaging curiosity, questioning the integrity of one's actions, and looking at the past to improve current time and the future (Bartlett et al., 2012; Prosper, 2022).

Cajete(1994), a Tewa scholar, asserts that there are foundational principles that characterize Indigenous educational processes across many nations. These include recognizing a readiness to learn, learning by observation, and learning as a step by step process that is guided by body and spirit as much as mind (Kelly, 2010, 2020). Cajete's assertion of the importance of art as both practical and connective to community reflects all three of these principles. Mi'kmaw scholars Marjorie Gould and Marie Battiste share a teaching from Elder Caroline Gould that illustrates this teaching from the perspective of art education, and also demonstrates the principles of learning readiness, learning by observation, and learning through the application of body and spirit. Elder Gould was not only renowned for creating baskets, but taught basket making for many years. She taught the importance of dedication to the art, the practicalities of teaching, how it could be a sustenance both financially and spiritually for the community, and finally how gifting a basket to leaders outside the Mi'kmaw community created relationships (Battiste, 2016; see also Bartleet et al, 2014; Meuse, 2019; Orr et al, 2002; Root et al., 2019; Tulk, 2008; Zorilla Martinez, 2003).

Mi'kmaw Studies 11

In Nova Scotia, a social studies course is offered at the high school level called *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*. It is described by the provincial education authority as a specific attempt to educate non-Indigenous students about Mi'kmaw people and culture both historically and in the present day (Department of Education, 2015). It is important to note that Mi'kmaw students also take this course. *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* is a replacement course for *Mi'kmaw Studies 10. Mi'kmaw Studies 10* was created in response to the 1993 Task Force on Mi'kmaq Education's (this body is currently called the Council on Mi'kmaq Education) recommendation that all Nova Scotia students be provided the opportunity to learn about Mi'kmaw people, their culture, and true

history (Council on Mi'kmaq Education, 2008). Starting in 2011/2012, the curriculum writing process began to transform *Mi'kmaw Studies 10* into *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*. The reimagined *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* was initially offered to students in 2016 and is currently described as a course where "students should become more informed, active citizens who have a holistic understanding of the relationship among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Nova Scotia and Canada" (Department of Education, 2016, p. 1).

The following introduction to *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* is presented on the Nova Scotia Curriculum website:

> The key principle for *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* is that through inquiry into Mi'kmaw issues past, present and future, students will be able to answer the question, "How am I connected to the First Peoples of Nova Scotia?" Through taking this course students should become more informed, active citizens who have a holistic understanding of the relationship among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Nova Scotia and Canada. The course incorporates an inquiry-based approach and considers broad concepts such as governance, culture, education, spirituality, and social justice. Students analyze historical and Mi'kmaw issues, which will enable them to achieve a greater understanding of, and respect for, both Mi'kmaw society and Mi'kmaw contributions to Canadian society. (Department of Education, 2016, p. 1)

Key words from the description include "inquiry-based", "past, present and future", "citizens", "holistic", "relationship", "respect", "Mi'kmaw society" and "Canadian society". The course, as presented in the curriculum document, appears to utilize settler and Indigenous scholarship and pedagogies in an attempt to create understandings of Mi'kmaw people, history, and culture primarily for non-Indigenous students. The course is open to all students in the public school

system, but does not address the impact on Mi'kmaw students present in the classroom whose heritage and lives are a part of the curriculum.

The curriculum documents provided by the Nova Scotia Department of Education stress that the course should be inquiry based, and that the course may be modified to accommodate the nature of the material and the learning of the students. It does not, however, specifically address or recommend Mi'kmaw pedagogies (Cajete, 1994; Downey, 2022a; Orr et al., 2002; Wilson, 2008) or a more generalized pedagogy of the Land (Downey, 2020; Styres et al., 2013; Styres, 2011; Simpson, 2014; Tuck et al., 2014). It is also silent on who will teach the course and if any specific support or education will be provided to teachers who have *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* as part of their course assignment, avoiding the acknowledged importance of Indigenous educators when Indigenous subject matter forms the curriculum (Cardinal & Fenichel, 2017; Jacob et al., 2021; Marchant, 2009; Oskineegish, 2015; Sanford et al., 2012). Finally, there is no provision that the course has access to support from respectfully acknowledged and appropriately compensated Mi'kmaw scholars and Elders (Toulouse, 2016; see also Aho, 2019; Chapman & Whiteford, 2017; Ducharme, 2013). There are questions that arise from these observations of the current curriculum that may be addressed by listening to and reflecting on the lived experiences of teachers of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*.

Social Studies And *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*: An Intersection

A resource that provides contextualization for the genesis of the current *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* curriculum document is Pamela Rogers *Problematizing Social Studies Curricula in Nova Scotia* (2011). Rogers deconstructs how Indigenous knowledge, as defined by Battiste (2002), may be impossible to incorporate into a course of study (*Mi'kmaw Studies 10*- predecessor of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*) seated so firmly in a western pedagogy. Rogers reflects on the conundrum

for providing such a course through Battiste's observation that "It [Indigenous knowledge] is a knowledge system in its own right, with its own internal consistency, and ways of knowing, and there are limits to how far it can be comprehended from a Eurocentric point of view" (Battiste, 2002, p. 2). Additionally, Rogers (2011) examines the focus on cultural appreciation and the lack of political awareness prescribed by the original grade 10 curriculum (p. 106) and recognizes how this limitation did create a course that was in some ways a shell of performative acts rather than a sincere attempt at building understanding and relationships between non-Indigenous students and Mi'kmaw people. Rogers' work was published in 2011 and, although it is thirteen years old, it still addresses curricular holes in the current presentation of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* in 2024. Although not specifically focussed on *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*, Roger's returned to an examination of the Nova Scotia social studies curriculum model in 2018. This work re-emphasizes the neoliberal ghettoization of social studies in the overarching high school curriculum, reflecting on the consumerization of course choices that draw students away from courses like *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* as they are encouraged toward choices that enhance their perceived economic futures (Rogers, 2018). Rogers examines how the commodification of the Nova Scotia high school curriculum works as a detriment to social studies courses like *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*. My inquiry focusses on the lived experience of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* teachers in this neoliberal social studies paradigm, and how they make meaning and relevance for themselves and their students, especially when the courses offered by social studies departments are devalued by a consumerist model of education (Norris, 2020; see also Downey, 2022b).

My intended research focusses specifically on teachers, and asks the question, "What is it like to teach *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* in a public high school in Nova Scotia?" A resource that provides perspective on what it is like to be a teacher specifically interested in decolonizing

one's practise in the classroom and with colleagues is Joanne Tompkins'(2002) "Learning to see what they can't: Decolonizing perspectives on Indigenous education in the racial context of rural Nova Scotia". Tompkins centres her work on the process of addressing power structures in a colonized teaching system. The group activities she utilizes, based on Indigenous talking circles (Tompkins, 2002; see also Brown & DiLallo, 2020; Dylan, 2003), are designed to encourage listening for those who may more often speak, and to provide speaking opportunities for those who may feel their voices have not been heard in the settler colonial education system. Although this research is over twenty years old and was conducted with teachers in rural Nova Scotia, it still addresses relevant concepts for my own work, as so many educators still struggle "to 'see' the diverse realities that exist around them and imagine other, more inclusive ways of schooling" (Tompkins, 2002, p. 421). Tompkins speaks to the issue of non-Indigenous educators in Nova Scotia high school classrooms and how they are addressing the power structures that impact their students and themselves. My study will build on this work by examining the lived experiences of teachers (who may or may not be Indigenous) of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*, who are specifically involved in work that seeks to be more inclusive in application and scope than the traditional western pedagogically centred classroom.

Research situated in Nova Scotia about education and Mi'kmaw culture appears to concentrate on the perspective of the pedagogy being used with Mi'kmaw students, whether in specifically Indigenous schooling contexts or the provincial settler system. A notable exception is Nancy Peter's (2016) "Tales Told in School: Image of the Mi'kmaq in Nova Scotia School Curriculum", which provides a historical perspective on how Mi'kmaw people have been presented to students in provincial schools from 1925 to almost the present day. Her work

culminates with a reflection that speaks of culturally responsible pedagogy, of curriculum "as a deep 'conversation' with ourselves and others where the goal is the building of community" (Peters, 2016, p. 215). This focus on the importance of culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995b; see also Ragoonaden & Lyle Mueller, 2017; Richards et al., 2007) is documented as resulting in a sociopolitical consciousness that strengthens "learners' critical awareness . . . to address authentic problems [in the curriculum]" (Mitton & Murray-Orr, 2021, p. 1089). The reference to learners is relevant and applicable to both students and teachers, specifically making clear that teachers must be willing learners of the culture where their students reside. Orr et al. (2017) documented the experiences of Mi'kmaw youth in both public and Mi'kmaw community operated schools. One aspect of their work discusses the perspective of Mi'kmaw secondary students concerning relationships between Mi'kmaw and non-Indigenous students. The researchers provide an aggregate of observations from the participating Mi'kmaw students in the following paraphrase: "if their non-Aboriginal peers were educated about Aboriginal culture, ignorance and ridicule might be replaced by understanding and acceptance" (Orr et al., 2017, p. 71). In the same article, there is a consensus amongst the students "that public school teachers had a desire to support them and help them do well, yet they felt their teachers lacked knowledge of how to do this effectively" (Orr et al., 2017, p. 75). Looking to an earlier study, Orr et al. (2002) asked highly experienced Mi'kmaw educators working in Mi'kmaw schools about the success of their practice as teachers with their students. There is consensus among the three participant teachers that educators who honor and are knowledgeable about Indigenous ways of being and knowing "can be more responsive to Aboriginal students' needs" (Orr et al., 2002, p. 333). These articles represent a common research focus that sheds light on the importance of cultural awareness and accurate, specific knowledge about Mi'kmaw

people and their history when teaching Mi'kmaw students. There is also reference to the value of providing these same stores of knowledge and practice in non-Indigenous public schools and to settler students and teachers as actions that work toward reconciliation. The work of Orr et al. (2002) comments directly on the focus of my own study, which is a more specific portrait of how teachers of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* are, through their experiences, reflecting practices that work toward reconciliation.

Jennifer Tinkham's (2013) doctoral thesis, *That's not my history! Examining the role of personal counter-narratives in decolonizing Canadian history for Mi'kmaw students*, is focussed on how Mi'kmaw students view their experiences of education in both Mi'kmaw community schools and provincially run public schools. Within the text, there are reflections and observations on the experiences of non-Mi'kmaw teachers struggling to find appropriate and respectful ways to teach Indigenous curriculum, pedagogy, and philosophy. Referencing the term culturally responsible pedagogy (Pewewardy, 1994; see also Peters, 2016) as being an approach for non-Indigenous teachers who are working with Indigenous knowledge, Tinkham rejects terms like cultural proficiency for anyone outside the Mi'kmaw community, asking the question, "but can a non-Mi'kmaw person outside of the Mi'kmaw culture ever be considered culturally proficient?" (Tinkham, 2013, p. 282). As a counterpoint, Tinkham deconstructs the problem of fitting a Mi'kmaw worldview of education into a settler organization and recognizes that it may become only a performative exercise, if the attempt is "to insert culture into the education, instead of inserting education into the culture" (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, p. 159). Tinkham concludes her work by asking for further support for culturally responsible social studies education through Nova Scotia education authorities (through curriculum development and appropriate funding) and as a part of teacher education programs. She asserts that teachers who

come to classrooms prepared and supported to be culturally responsible educators will do a better job of meeting the needs of both Mi'kmaw and non-Mi'kmaw students, especially in provincial public schools (Tinkham, 2013). Tinkham's study provides significant insight into what it is like to teach Indigenous content more generally. Eleven years later, teachers in the Nova Scotia system are still working to develop culturally responsible pedagogies. My research seeks to support that educational goal by generating a focus on the microcosm of teaching *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* through lived experiences of teachers of the course.

Reflecting On Education And Reconciliation

Returning to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's *Calls to Action* 62 and 63, the responsibility for reconciliation falls first on those who have done the damage, and a path that starts the journey toward reconciliation begins with an acceptance of truth, which allows education, and results in justice (Faculty of Arts, 2018). Although *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* was created and taught in Nova Scotia high schools prior to the findings of the TRC, it appears poised in its present iteration to act as a tool of reconciliation for educators and students in the public school system in Nova Scotia. According to Absolon and Absolon-Winchester (2016), "Reconciliation is about collective commitments to take action" (p.16), and so there appears a space in the research to hear the lived experiences of the teacher of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* who are a part of that collective action as a reflection on the process of reconciliation.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this literature review has been to create contextualization between phenomenology as a methodology and my research question as it is situated in the relevant literature. My concentration has been on scholarship that studies Indigenous pedagogies, social studies curriculums and their connection to Indigenous knowledge, and specific scholarship that

provides critical perspectives on reconciliation and anti-colonial education. I will turn next to a description of phenomenology as an organizing research methodology for this project.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Organization Of The Chapter

I begin this chapter by describing the methodology I employed and the underlying paradigm for my research, which is transcendental phenomenology as described by Moustakas (1994) in his *Phenomenological Research Methods*. I then discuss the process of adapting phenomenology to the qualitative research model and reflect on the specific processes described by Moustakas. Then, I move on to a reflection on the concept of the reduction (bracketing). Finally, the chapter concludes with the specific research methods from Moustakas' system I intend to employ to organize the work. My purpose in this chapter is to trace reflectively the history of ideas and thinking associated with the term phenomenology and the application of those ideas to my own work.

Phenomenology As A Methodology

Phenomenology is a study of lived experiences that focusses "not on the participants themselves or the world that they inhabit, but rather on the meaning or essence of the interrelationship between the two" (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015, p. 251). It is a research lens that explores a recollected moment through the descriptive telling of the person whose experience is being studied. Moustakas describes the phenomenological researcher as aiming "to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience" (1994, p. 13). Using phenomenology as a methodology encourages the researcher to take the position of a careful, reflexive listener who actively seeks a perspective that is open and without judgement. I chose phenomenology as the methodology for this project because I wanted to understand what teachers of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* were experiencing in their classrooms. Creating a space for the study participants to speak without interruption about their classroom lives, to describe their

methods, their students, and their working conditions, provided me, as the researcher, a window into their worlds. I consider this work to be grounded in the theoretical framework of reconciliation education (Styres & Kempf, 2022), and I see phenomenology as a methodology that provides a space for me to listen to the stories being told.

Moustakas follows the tradition of Husserl by employing the word transcendental as a descriptor in the Kantian sense, which implies that when attempting to investigate the lived experience of another the researcher intuits those descriptions through that person's experience with space and time, and so they must be aware that all experiences exist through a lens of interpretation (Stang, 2022). To transcend is to go beyond the ordinary and the surface (Brittanica, n.d.), and Husserl's methodology of transcendental phenomenology echoes this definition in its description of the attempt to put away from the process of knowing all the preconceptions, assumptions, and prejudices that take away from uncovering the essence of the lived experience (Harvey, 2023). Phenomenology is descriptive (about the experience), reflective (on what has been described), and reflexive on the part of the researcher. Its purpose, as explicated by Moustakas, is to focus on the experiences of participants with an open mind and a perspective that attempts to be without judgement. He writes, "The aim is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). This "telling" or reflection, as expressed by the speaker to the researcher, forms the basis of an interpretation of that experience. From the specific experiences of the individual may come "general or universal meanings" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). The purpose in the collection of these experiences is to gain knowledge about a particular lived experience through an analysis of the remembered reflections of persons for whom those life moments are authentically recollected. From these recollections, the essence (Zhok, 2012) of an experience may be derived. The

concept of essence traces historically to Plato's theory of forms, the form being that perfect abstraction of an idea that gives rise to understanding (Ricoeur, 2013). Following Plato's explication of the form as ideal, Aristotle describes essence as the particular, in contrast to Plato's form as the generalized abstraction. Aristotle uses the Greek phrase *to ti esti*, which translates literally as "the what it is", or those qualities (many of which are beyond the physical) that make something uniquely itself (Cohen & Reeve, 2021). Reflecting on Aristotle's description, it is apparent that the intellectual struggle to understand the perception of another's lived experience is connected to 20th century phenomenology (for both philosophers and social scientists) through Husserl's explanation of essence as thought purified, that essence is disclosed thought and is not simply quantifiable as anything as mundane as fact (Mohanty, 1959). The essence of the lived experience is dual: as we consider an experience, not only are we reflecting on the actuality of the moment in time, but we are also creating a conception of its essence, an understanding of what makes up every part of the experience. According to Moustakas, "In reflecting on what one has 'seen' and described, one is coming to an understanding of meanings that have been concealed" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 70): we are seeking the essence of that experience.

Prior to being employed as a research methodology, phenomenology was codified and practised as a school of philosophy in the early decades of the 20th century (Smith, 2018). In the first sentence of the acknowledgements of *Phenomenological Research Methods*, Moustakas describes the significant influence on his work of Edmund Husserl, who is recognized as the modern founder of phenomenology as a school of philosophy. Moran (2012), in his book *Husserl's Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction*, provides a guide to Husserl's (1970) final work *The Crisis of European Sciences and*

Transcendental Phenomenology and the most important concepts arising out of that work. According to Moran,

> For Husserl, sense is not simply something outside us that we apprehend, it is something that is 'constituted' or put together by us due to our particular attitudes, presuppositions, background beliefs, values, historical horizons and so on. In short, phenomenology is a reflection on the manner in which things come to gain the kind of sense they have for us. (2012, p. 52)

This reflects my own understanding of the fundamental principles of phenomenology, that how we understand the world cannot be separated from who we are in the world and what has gone into the making of that "who". Husserl delineates this idea of a constructed sense of being as both reflective and self-reflective (Moran, 2012); included in that construction is a consideration of one's past experience as well as that of the present.

Tracing the development of phenomenology into the second half of the 20th century, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (2015) *Phenomenology of Perception* asks and answers that most difficult of questions: what is phenomenology? Merleau-Ponty (2015) writes, "it tries to give a direct description of our experience as it is" (2015, p. vii), adding that "Husserl's first directive to phenomenology . . . [is] to be 'descriptive' . . . to return to the things themselves" (p. viii). Although this is a relatively simple definition to explain a notoriously complicated school of philosophy, his words resonate with me. I am inspired by phenomenology as a construct to examine the world because it asks the researcher to, above all else, be true to what they are told by those who share their lives in the pursuit of understanding how lives are lived. A phenomenological perspective demands that one let go of presupposition; it requires a humbleness of nature that means, as a researcher, that one must never stop trying to

hear/see/feel/know what we are receiving from those who share their experiences without superimposing our own ego driven constructs as lenses through which we view the lives of others. The two concepts that Merleau-Ponty focusses on that resonate for me in terms of creating a research study true to the principles of phenomenology are in his discussion of the reduction and intentionality. I am drawn to Merleau-Ponty's explication of the concept of the reduction as an understanding that the world we experience continually contextualizes our cognitions about that world and how we view it (Merleau-Ponty, 2015). The metacognitive practice of suspending one's personal "understandings" of a phenomenon is the process of enacting the reduction. It is a layered process that demands a continued examination and putting away of our biases, expectations, experiences, and interactions with both people and the world in which we live. In many schools of research, a similarly applied concept is referred to as bracketing. Merleau-Ponty quotes Eugen Fink, whose expression of the reduction is that of experiencing " 'wonder' in the face of the world" (2015, p. xiii), a beautiful description that evokes the idea of an innocence in the face of experience. It is also worthwhile to note the paradox of the reduction explicated by Merleau-Ponty, that "The most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction" (2015, p. xiv). This idea, that by most seriously considering and attempting to apply the reduction we are faced with an understanding that it will always be incomplete, is both frustrating and freeing to me in my role as a researcher. Recognizing that bias is an inherent piece of the research puzzle reminds me of the nature of phenomenological research as the examination of a moment in time. The task of the researcher is to present those moments, the lived experiences of participants, with honesty. It is the human condition made manifest: accepting that our perceptions and experiences colour even the work that we contend to be without a distracting lens. It is a moment of metacognition, to

accept that no matter how conscious you are of the "baggage" you bring to the project, you will, and can, never be free of it. In direct correlation with the reduction is the concept of intentionality. Intentionality, for Merleau-Ponty (2015), is a conception of consciousness directly influenced by the body's response to the world: "Our relationship to the world, as it is untiringly enunciated within us, is not a thing which can be any further clarified by analysis; philosophy can only place it once more before our eyes" (p. xviii). By recognizing the inevitability of our interactions with the world as being that which creates the "intentionality" of our thoughts and reflections on those experiences, it becomes clear that the reduction process must be ongoing if the intention of the researcher is to produce a piece of work that might be termed phenomenologically honest. Understanding that the reduction is never finished and accepting that my intentionality is always a factor in the work provide the challenge and opportunity to stay open to where the project and its participants bring me. In some senses, the conception of the ongoing reduction and how it creates an opportunity to relinquish control becomes central to the research. As I muse on the ideas of the reduction and intentionality, I have come to a place where I consider who and what I am, how I see the world, how best I can set aside any of that world (through a process of active metacognitive processes) during the course of this work (Agama, 2021).

A discussion generated when one transitions specifically from the discipline of philosophy to a social sciences/research paradigm of applied phenomenology is how to apply the principles of phenomenology in a research setting. Husserl's student, Martin Heidegger, a problematic figure in the discipline of phenomenology and philosophy as a result of his Nazi sympathies, demonstrates the difficulty of separating the thought/philosophy from the thinker.[5] Although it makes me personally uncomfortable to reference a thinker so flawed in judgement as

to support Hitler's Third Reich, it is almost impossible to describe phenomenology in the first half of the 20th century without acknowledging the work of Heidegger. He provides a useful definition of phenomenology for the applied social sciences, writing that the purpose of phenomenology is "to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself" (1962, p. 30), which supports the idea that an experience, in order to be examined from a phenomenological perspective, must be kept as intact and as true as possible to the original telling of that person from whom the experience was received. In deference to the aforementioned concepts of reduction and intentionality, this is the moment to make reference to the ideas of *noema* (thinking about the object/experience/idea) and *noesis* (considering those thoughts about the object experience/idea) (Moustakas, 1996), and how both concepts are an integral part of the metacognitive aspect of phenomenology as a methodology of qualitative research. As the researcher listens to, and eventually interprets, the lived experiences of another person, there must be a constant awareness of how both the research participants and oneself are affecting the experience even in the retelling of it.

Adapting Phenomenology To A Qualitative Research Model

The adaptation of phenomenology to qualitative research requires deliberate consideration and awareness of the concepts of the philosophical process, as explicated by van Manen (2017). According to van Manen, the idea of phenomenology as a research methodology has been co-opted too quickly by researchers conducting studies that deal with "experience". He cautions that phenomenology is not ethnography, case study, or cognitive therapy. He then poses a series of questions and provides a set of tenets for researchers that demand an honest evaluation of the work and how it does indeed follow a phenomenological methodology. There are two questions that appear most relevant for the beginning researcher attempting to work in a

phenomenological paradigm. The first is “what is this lived experience like?” (van Manen, 2017, p. 776), which he explicates by providing direct examples from practicing phenomenological researchers. It would appear that formulating a research question that begins with the statement “What is it like to” allows an inquiry to develop that specifically applies the central phenomenological principle of intentionality toward a lived experience. The second question that van Manen poses is “What, if anything, is the basic method of phenomenology that is essential to its philosophical and human science practice?” (van Manen, 2017, p. 777). He answers this question by declaiming that phenomenological studies must display a reflective process that is constituted through the application of the epoche and the reduction (van Manen, 2017). Accordingly, the epoche may be understood as the method by which we free ourselves from unquestioned acceptance of our own life experiences as a type of truth. The reduction follows an authentic acknowledgement of the conception of the epoche and serves as a continued stripping away of personal clutter that separates the researcher from the experience of the participant in the work (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology is paradoxical when one considers the process that is necessary in order to gain the desired research result. One must be painfully self aware of one’s own biases and expectations in terms of the research, and yet it is of paramount importance to allow the participants in the research to feel unfettered by these same constructs. Despite the difficulties of working in a paradigm that asks so much of the researcher in terms of self awareness, van Manen does remind the new researcher that a dedication to phenomenology is worth the struggle, as “phenomenology, if practiced well, enthralls us with insights into . . . the world as it gives and reveals itself to the wondering gaze” (van Manen, 2017, p. 779). A study organized and implemented thoughtfully and honestly using the core principles of phenomenology may reveal to the researcher a view of the world that is rich and new.

I believe that phenomenology, as it works when employed as a qualitative research paradigm, is an appropriate choice for collecting and interpreting the experiences of teachers in the classroom (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). The qualitative approach seeks to understand human ideas, actions, and behaviours through direct consultation and collaboration with the persons who are experiencing/engaged in the situation that has inspired the researcher's question. Qualitative research is based on exploration of experiences, it is descriptive, and its goal is often the enhancement of understanding a particular phenomenon rather than providing a result based on quantification (McGill, n.d.). As a qualitative methodology, the phenomenological perspective puts forth the question "What is it like to experience this phenomenon?" (van Manen, 2017, p. 776). With these descriptors in mind, posing the question "What is it like to teach *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* in a public high school in Nova Scotia?" is within the scope of a phenomenological methodology. My research seeks to understand the classroom experiences of how teachers of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* are teaching this particular course and the impact that the pedagogy of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* may have on any other courses they are assigned. Within the current course document provided to teachers by Nova Scotia Curriculum, there is no "must" in terms of how the course is to be taught. Instead, the descriptors of the course delivery centre around an inquiry based approach, and teachers of the course are encouraged to create and deliver curriculum "in a context that makes the most sense for them" (Nova Scotia Curriculum, 2023, Para. #1). As a result, when I began to consider how to gather information about what teachers were doing in their classrooms, it became apparent that I should look to the lived experiences of these teachers—to ask them to reflect on how, and what and why they choose to teach *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* the way they do every day in their classrooms through their own rememberings. As I looked to the organization and reporting phase of this project detailed in Chapter Four, I wanted

to tell the stories of the participants as tales for learning- lived experiences that create an accessible window into the worlds they inhabit as teachers of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*.

Reflecting On The Process Suggested By Moustakas

In the paradigm put forward by Moustakas (1994), researchers record the lived experiences of participants in order to learn about how those participants understand their experiences. The process then becomes descriptive (about the experience) and reflective (on what has been described). Throughout the process the researcher must be reflexive, attempting to deepen their understanding of how they impact the process of gathering another's story. Moustakas's method is particularly accessible to the beginning researcher in the field of phenomenology, as he provides a step by step method for conducting the work. That method consists of the following steps:

1. Discovering a topic and question . . .
2. Conducting a comprehensive review of the . . . literature
3. Constructing . . . criteria to locate . . . participants
4. Providing participants with instruction on the . . . investigation, an agreement [of] . . . informed consent . . and responsibilities of the researcher and research participant
5. Developing a set of . . . topics to guide the interview
6. Conducting and recording a lengthy person-to-person interview
7. Organizing and analysing the data to facilitate development of . . . a synthesis of . . . meanings and essences. (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 103-104)

Phenomenology is a process that, by its nature, is sometimes circular, often esoteric, deliberately complex in its terminology, and paradoxical in certain concepts that are central to its application. Despite these comprehensive difficulties, I am drawn to phenomenology as a

methodology because it reminds me of literary criticism. As a teacher who has worked in the area of literature studies, I find echoes of New Criticism (Brittanica, n.d.) in phenomenology as a research paradigm, especially in the parallel of the close reading of a text and the close attention/listening/recording to be paid to a participant's lived experience in a phenomenological interview. Close reading is used to discover the constructs that create the meaning of a text. Often times, close reading helps the reader uncover new knowledge and perspectives that shed insight on the experience of reading the particular text (Broughton et al., 2018). In parallel, phenomenological analysis of a lived experience may provide a similar access to a worldview that is new and outside our personally constructed ideation. As there are methods to close reading designed to explicate the process to the student of New Criticism, I find the method that Moustakas (1994) provides as a template for the creation of a phenomenological study to be both useful and comforting (in my place and space as a new researcher).

Reflecting On The Reduction (Bracketing)

The process of bracketing, or the reduction, is well documented as a method that, for most phenomenologists, is a necessary portion of the research model. A simple definition of bracketing that I find useful is the idea of looking beyond preconceptions that may arise as one studies the lived experiences that are a part of research (Tufford & Newman, 2010). Following definition, the question arises of why phenomenologists see bracketing as necessary. In my understanding, the purpose is to increase reflexivity on the part of the researcher and "to mitigate the potential deleterious effects of unacknowledged preconceptions related to the research and thereby to increase the rigor of the project" (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 80). The process of bracketing is multi-phasic, and may or may not occur throughout the length of the research project; additionally, it can take various forms, including journalling, formal and informal

discussion and debriefing with colleagues external to the research process, and notes and memos reflecting on the research process itself (Tufford & Newman, 2010).

Within the tradition of phenomenology as philosophy in the 20th century, the idea of the reduction or bracketing has been adapted, and even rejected (e.g., Heidegger, 1962), by various scholars to fit the work as they conceive it. As qualitative phenomenological research has continued into the 21st century, the concept of bracketing and how it is applied has become almost personal in nature to the researcher, rather than adhering to a set pattern from a previous school (Tufford & Newman, 2010). The most meaningful ideation of bracketing for my work comes from Merleau-Ponty (2015), who saw the process as a setting to the side of personal prejudices (without a judgement that these might be pejorative or positive), theories that might be too convenient and limited, and research constructs that could obscure or get in the way of actual engagement with the lived experiences that form the study or research (Ashworth, 1999). My process of bracketing has been ongoing through the course of the research. It is primarily organized as a personal journal that has allowed me to reflexively consider my position in the face of the lived experiences of the research participants. Having considered the aspect of participants also bracketing themselves during the interviews (which may occur either consciously or subconsciously), I did not formally request participants to bracket, as I felt it might obstruct their engagement with the process.

My bracketing began with a reflexive process about how I work as a teacher and the effect it has on my research persona. As a curriculum creator and evaluator who has asked questions to teachers about a course that is not mine in terms of development or application, I have worked to come to terms with my biases toward specific western modalities that rely on "production of product" to demonstrate learning and accountability. I have lived in a system that

prioritizes results measured through numbers and letters. Even in my own learning, I sometimes observe myself being concerned about "the mark" and how it reflects my own worth as a learner. Through conscious recognition of this bias, I am noting my tendency and striving to put it aside.

Using bracketing as a model to help me understand and set down some of my own ingrained habits and practices (which may themselves be neither inherently positive nor negative) that do not serve the work, I recognize that my teaching style has always been very interactive. I'm a "confirmer" and a cheerleader by nature, one who uses words to smooth interaction. As much as this can be positive in teaching, it can also be a block in the process of actively listening. It was a challenge when I conducted interviews with my co-researchers to not interject myself into their lived experiences, no matter how well intentioned. Curiosity about the experience of another is the motivation for my research, and I honour this as a starting point for the work. Additionally, I recognize my tendency to gravitate naturally to positions of control, and as a result I consciously worked to melt into the background, to let go, so the participants could guide the work.

Another aspect of my own bracketing is to be aware of the hierarchy of courses that is a part of the hidden curriculum that I have been schooled in by the western pedagogies that dominate public education in Canada. In my experience, despite the lip service we pay as 21st century educators to "honoring all paths" of learning, there is still a clear delineation between what many (and I have fallen into this group) consider important and essential courses for learning (often directed toward university admission) and the courses students take that may not be a traditional part of the western canon. The study participants were frustrated by this neoliberal hierarchy, especifically in reference to how students are being directed toward or away from this course. It is necessary that I acknowledge the colonial values based around the

traditional western canon that I have been taught that helps to create this type of bias. During the interviews with participants, I consciously reflected on this ingrained societal construct, which is a part of my academic life, including creating an awareness of my language while communicating with research participants. I have worked to find a position of support without undue interference as I listened to the lived experiences of the participant teachers in this work.

Research Methods From Moustakas' Transcendental Phenomenology

Participants (Selection Criteria And Recruitment)

Study participants were solicited through teacher colleague contacts in high schools and on-line through teacher information groups on social media. To take part in the study, participants had to be current teachers of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* in a public high school in Nova Scotia. The total number of participants was six. Two participants identified as male and four as female. Culturally, four identified as settlers, one as African Nova Scotian, and one as Mi'kmaq. Four participants were experienced teachers of the course, having taught it many times. Two were teaching the course for the first time.

Data Collection

I conducted a semi-structured interview with each of the six participants that ranged between sixty and ninety-five minutes. As part of the informed consent process, participants were provided with informational material about the study, the format, and questions for the interview(s) intended to stimulate their memories of teaching *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* (Hoffding & Martiny, 2015). All material discussed with the participants was provided through written documentation. Prior to scheduling interviews, participants provided informed written consent affirming that they wished to participate in the project. Participants were also encouraged to bring topics about their experiences teaching the course that they wished to offer during the

interview. Each of the participants did share personal experiences that were not a part of the original question set. Additionally, participants were offered the opportunity to member check their transcripts at a later date. Thought none wished to be contacted for this opportunity, I did speak to two of the participants following my initial transcription for clarification of their words. Each interview was audio recorded.

Ethical Considerations

All participants identities are anonymized in the reporting of the research. This was a necessary component of the study as the participants shared information and experiences that sometimes showed colleagues and administrators in unfavourable lights, and they also spoke frankly about community experiences and political issues. It should be noted that the information provided by participants were their personal lived experiences of teaching the course. This study is qualitative in nature, and so the trustworthiness of the data comes from the detailed observations generated by each participant about their experiences with the course, the persistent nature of consistent observations from the participants about their lived experiences, and my ability to confirm portions of their experiences through independent sources (i. e., news sources reporting on education issues in Nova Scotia). Additional ethical considerations that are a part of the project concern my own relationships with some of the participants. Although there are no career power differentials between us (i.e., I am not in an administrative role in any school), they have trusted me with personal stories and opinions that might be viewed as critical of the education system in Nova Scotia, and so it was clear to me that I owed them a duty of care to protect their identities by anonymizing the study data.

The Interview Process

Each interview began with a brief recap of the purpose of the study, an opportunity for the participant to ask any questions about the work and process before the interview formally began, and a reconfirmation of consent to be a part of the process (including being audio recorded). I reminded participants that this interview is a part of my thesis work at Mount Saint Vincent University and thanked them for their participation. I also asked the participants to share any information about themselves that they felt may be impactful to the project.

Following the reconfirmation of consent and introductory time, I moved into the "lived experience" phase of the interview. I began with the following question: "Can you talk about how you started/have continued teaching *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*?" Next, I asked, "From your perspective, what is it like for you to teach *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*?" Following the participant's reflections on these prompts, I asked each participant if they would like to bring forward their own topics to describe or if they wished to speak about any of the prompts provided. I provided a list of questions/prompts to participants for them to consider explicating during the interview (see Appendix A). I then asked follow up questions as each interview progressed that were generated by the reflections of each participant on both the questions I provided and the topics they brought for explication.

Data Analysis

Once the interviews were completed, I followed Moustakas's (1994) suggested methods for data analysis. First, I transcribed all interviews. I made the decision at the beginning of the research process to complete all the transcription myself because I felt this would allow me to hear the participants' voices and stories with more accuracy and authenticity. It also allowed me to begin thinking about potential themes and common ideas to emerge from their words.

I used the transcripts to discover and code relevant themes that emerged from the interviews. This is called horizontalization. Although there is software available to assist researchers with this process, I chose to complete the work as hard copy. This choice was deliberate, as I felt that every time I read the words of the participants, I gained more insight into their experiences. I feel that a major benefit to the smaller sample size of this study is being able to stay closely connected to the participants and their stories.

Horizontalization is the process of creating groupings or themes from experiences or statements that emerge from the data (Padgett, 2008). Specifically, I printed the transcripts and then began the process of organizing the teachers' stories and experiences into categories. I began with large groupings based on the question prompts I posed to the participants. I took their responses and grouped each question for all six participants on a single document. I then went through each question document and highlighted common and related responses. Following this step, I reprinted the question documents with only the common and related responses. I then cross-referenced the documents for more commonalities from the perspective of the major themes that I discovered in my initial reading of the transcripts. The fours themes that all participants spoke of extensively in the interviews are as follows: teaching the course, what participants heard from students, connecting *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* to reconciliation, and future dreams for *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*. Finally, I created a narrative (chapters four and five) constructed of the individual textural descriptions of the participants based on the four themes revealed in the coding process.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this chapter has been to describe my understanding of phenomenology as an organizing methodology for qualitative research in the field of education and to situate that

methodology within the parameters of this study. I have delineated Moustakas' specific research paradigm as described in *Phenomenological Research Methods* (1994) and discussed the adaption of phenomenology from a philosophical construct in early twentieth century western Europe to its present modality within the qualitive research field. The chapter concludes with specific information about the study participants, data collection, ethical considerations of the study, and the process of data analysis. The contextualization of phenomenology as a research methodology provided in this chapter serves as an introduction to the reporting of the research participants' lived experiences that are reported in Chapter Four: Results.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Introduction

This study reflects the lived experiences of six teachers of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* working in the public school system in Nova Scotia. Individual interviews were conducted with the teachers between April 1st and May 31st of 2024. The schools where they teach range from urban to suburban to verging on rural. As per the conditions of participation in the study, each of the six teachers has been assigned a pseudonym to ensure the protection of their identity. I made the decision to anonymize the participants because I wanted them to feel able to talk about their experiences without concern for relationships with colleagues, administrators, students, and the communities where they work. I discussed this choice with each participant, and all six agreed that they would prefer to remain anonymous. Additionally, any identifying names and place references have been removed from the work to further ensure the anonymity of participants, schools, and communities. It should be noted that much of this chapter is direct quotation generated from the participants' interviews. Participants were free to bring personal perspectives to the interviews and make their own language choices. I have transcribed their words as presented and, as does happen when people are thinking and developing responses as part of a conversation in a trusted space, some expressions or word choices may be not those that would be presented in a curated, academic environment.

Participant Descriptions

While preserving the anonymity of my participants, I would like to provide a short characterization of each participant and also identify that participant through their assigned pseudonym in order that readers have a sense of each individual who has contributed to this

work. These characterizations are presented in random order. Laura is a retired English teacher who takes on term assignments. Her assignment at the time of the interview included two sections of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11,* which she was teaching for the first time. Francesca is a mid-career social studies teacher who has been teaching several sections of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*each semester for about five years. Claude was a new teacher who has been doing substitute teaching for several years and was currently in a long term substitute position teaching two sections of *Mi'kmaw Studies* for the first time. He is a social studies teacher and has previous experience teaching in Indigenous communities in northern Canada. Shari is a mid-career social studies teacher who currently teaches only *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* and one other course. Shari has taught *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* since it started in 2016 and previously had taught *Mi'kmaw Studies 10*. Paul, who self-identified as Mi'kmaw, is a late career teacher and department head. He taught *Mi'kmaw Studies 10* for many years and has both taught and been involved with board level curriculum development for *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* since its inception. Annette is a mid-career social studies teacher who started teaching *Mi'kmaw Studies* as a grade 10 course and now continues to teach multiple sections of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* yearly.

Contextual Information

The following contextual information serves to create the setting for the narratives that will follow. During the winter and spring of 2024, tensions were running high in Nova Scotia schools between teachers and both the government and the various provincial centres for education. There were growing instances of violence being perpetrated on both students and teachers by certain students (Act for Education, 2024; Global News, 2024). Many teachers were speaking out about what they viewed as unsafe working and learning conditions (CBC, 2022; Halifax Examiner, 2024). Additionally, negotiations for a teaching contract were coming to a head. High

school teachers were frustrated by their increased workload, the lack of adequate staffing in schools and perceived themselves to be inadequately compensated. On April 11th, the result of a Nova Scotia wide strike vote by teachers was reported as 98% in favour of strike action. On April 18, 2024, the teachers' union and the Nova Scotia government reached an agreement in principle. Working as a substitute teacher at various schools and reading social media generated by Nova Scotia teachers, I both heard and read that many teachers were dissatisfied with the agreement they were being offered. The feelings they expressed were that neither their working conditions nor the growing violence was being addressed or taken seriously by the government. On May 22, 2024, the agreement was ratified with "91 per cent of NSTU members vot[ing] 80.5 per cent in favour of the deal" (News, 2024). Despite the fairly high percentage who voted in favour of ratification there was still much discussion in the schools where I was present of discontent and suspicion about the conditions of the agreement in principle being offered to teachers by the provincial government. It is within the context of these conditions that I spoke to six teachers about their experiences of teaching *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*.

Part of the preparation for interviewing participants involved creating a series of questions to stimulate their recollections of teaching *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*. The organizing principle behind each of the questions comes from the inquiry "what is this lived experience like?" (van Manen, 2017, p. 776), which reflected the phenomenological principle of intentionality as one considers a lived experience. The narratives that follow have been grouped thematically from the recollections of participants (Moustakas, 1994). The genesis of the groupings arose from my reading of the responses to both my original questions and the topics brought by participants. It became apparent through my reading that certain questions I posed

revealed experiences in common from multiple participants, and in turn there were common topics brought to the interviews again by multiple participants.

Teachers come to their assignments in a variety of ways. Sometimes there is a choice to pick up a course and at other times it is simply assigned. I was initially curious about how and why each participant came to teaching *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*, and so I asked, "can you talk about how you started teaching *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*?" Both Claude and Laura were teaching the course for the first time. Each knew that *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* comprised the majority of the assignment they applied for, and both expressed their positive reaction to the opportunity to teach the course. Claude told me "I have a history of ah like kind of specializing in Indigenous Studies. I taught on a reserve in Ontario for three years . . . so when this position went up I felt that ah like very much it would be a good fit." Laura recollected saying yes after being approached to take the assignment because "I love the subject matter of it and am interested in looking at the different parameters of what happened to Indigenous people [in Canada]." Francesca and Annette started their careers teaching social studies at junior high and then changed to high school. Francesca was not initially hired to teach *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*; she was mentored into the course as a result of conversations with the teacher growing the program at the high school where she works. Francesca grew up with close family friendships with Mi'kmaw people. Reflecting on why she pursued opportunities to teach *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*, Francesca explained,

> I find the [Mi'kmaw] culture beautiful and for someone who is not of that culture I am more familiar with it than maybe other teachers my age might be. So I enjoy teaching it because I have a deep respect for so many Mi'kmaw people, and I think the culture . . . deserves to be better known and understood.

The original high school position Annette applied for was specifically to teach *Mi'kmaw Studies*, and having had some experience with the curriculum in a junior high setting, she was eager to spend more time with the subject. Currently she teaches, by choice, up to five sections per year. In her words, *Mi'kmaw Studies* is "number one when we put in our assignment requests for the next year." Paul has been teaching *Mi'kmaw Studies* the longest of all the participants. He recalled,

> Back in '96 when the first version of the course [*Mi'kmaw Studies 10*] came out the principal came to the staff and sent out an expression of interest email and two of us replied. I replied because Mi'kmaw heritage is part of my background. I didn't know much, but I thought this might be a good opportunity to find more information and to make some connections.

The only participant not given an initial choice to teach *Mi'kmaw Studies* was Shari, who noted that the course was absent from her school for a number of years, and then when it was returned to the curriculum being offered, "I received my notice of assignment on May 15 of that year and it was on there. So I didn't ask for it . . . but I had one section of *Mi'kmaw Studies 10*." Shari acknowledged that she quickly developed an affinity for the course as she developed her curriculum, "and now its become kind of like my thing." All the participants indicated that they are currently happy to be teaching *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* and wish to continue teaching it in the future.

Theme 1: Teaching The Course

Within the context of their interviews, all six participants took time to recollect and reflect on the way they personally choose to teach *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*. The following excerpt

from the course document describing the nature of instruction for *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* provides context as to the expectations of the Nova Scotia Department of Education:

> the most effective instructional approach is eclectic in nature. The classroom teacher employs those instructional strategies deemed most appropriate given the needs of the learner, the learning outcomes, and the resources available. One cannot be prescriptive in favour of any single teaching method in *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* since students differ in interests, abilities, and learning styles . . . Therefore the discerning teacher will use a variety of methods in response to a variety of instructional situations. (Department of Education, 2016, p. 11)

A considered reading of this statement allows the interpretation that *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* has been designed with some personal autonomy in mind for teachers to deliver this curriculum. Each teacher who spoke to me would seem to have taken this philosophy of pedagogy to heart and either has or is in the process of curating a course of instruction that informs their personal vision for teaching *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*.

Formal Testing And Examinations

Although each teacher has a personal vision for their *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*, there are commonalities within the set of participants. Paul, Laura, Claude, and Francesca have decided that testing and a formal examination will not be a part of their *Mi'kmaw Studies* course. Paul, who was a part of the team that created *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*, felt the most strongly about not setting an exam or even tests. When I mentioned to him that other teachers I had spoken to did set tests and exams he responded emphatically, "Yeah, that's a huge mistake! The way the course was before it was rewritten was along those lines and there were places for tests and quizzes and

papers and such. But the kids were never really engaged." Francesca felt that the nature of the material and concepts in the course did not lend themselves to tests and exams. She explained,

> so much of what you're teaching them can't be taught in a traditional European or Eurocentric way. It just doesn't lend itself to that. It's more experiential, it's more about discussing, it's more about coming to your own understanding with support of an idea or reflecting back in terms of how does this affect me?

Laura and Claude are both new to the course and are being supported by mentor teachers who have encouraged and allowed them to work outside the traditional western parameters of testing as evaluation, and so both are also, with full administrative support, not employing tests or end of year examinations.

Shari and Annette's *Mi'kmaw Studies11* students do write both tests and year end examinations. Shari would prefer not to use these modalities, especially a formal, written examination, but feels both peer (from department members) and administrative pressure to conform. *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* is one of three choices at her school to fulfill the Canadian history requirement necessary for graduation (the other two are *Canadian History* and *African Canadian Studies*). In her words,

> I would prefer not to do an examination, but because I am one of three Canadian content courses . . . there's a lot of push for equity. It's like, the *Canadian History* kids have to do an exam, so why don't the *Mi'kmaw* [*Studies 11* students]?

Additionally, Shari has watched *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* grow in popularity at her school, and as a result other teachers have lost sections of their Canadian content course. She has been questioned about the rigour of her own course by other teachers and as a result her administration insists that

a written examination must be a part of the course. Annette also uses tests and quizzes as well as a year end exam. Her perspective is different from Shari's, as she does not feel pressured to have an exam but wishes to in order to preserve what she views as the academic integrity of the course as it is compared to the other Canadian history options. Annette reasons that

> you need one [an examination] for your grade 11 academic course. *Canadian History*, *African Canadian Studies* does an exam, so I do an exam. And I feel like if you're looking at the assessment policy, you need to do something that shows you [the teacher] that they [the students] know summatively the actual information in the course.

As an addendum to this, Annette does provide alternative methods, like an oral examination, for students who may not be successful in a traditional test writing situation.

Project Based Learning

Despite the differing perspectives on testing and examinations, the reflections from all six teachers about the day-to-day pedagogy of their *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* classrooms is that the majority of the course focusses on project based learning. Claude spoke about using multiple options for assignments and methods of evaluation in order to accommodate the interests and abilities of his students. He was also grateful for the flexibility of the curriculum document, "cause I'm kind of figuring things out." Laura spoke specifically about her focus on using a "welcoming pedagogy" and making her classroom "a place where they [students] can feel a sense of belonging." Laura believes in the validity of project based learning for *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* "because it helps me learn more about where kids are in their learning as individuals." Annette's focus is project based, but her overall pedagogy is firmly centred in a western tradition. She teaches the course as a chronological history and feels that it should be "all about

content. It's a grade 11 academic course." Annette expressed her deliberate creation of a sense of congruence for *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* with *Canadian History* and *African Canadian Studies* in order that the course be seen as academically rigorous.

Shari, Francesca, and Paul do teach *Mi'kmaw Studies* as a project based course, and they also deliberately incorporate Mi'kmaw pedagogies as learning strategies in their teaching. Shari began her reflection about how she teaches the course by saying, "to me relationship is everything". Her methods use as their centre the Mi'kmaw concept *msit no'kmaq* (Henderson, 2016), or "all my relations", which emphasizes the connections between people and all that surrounds them in the world. She then described the link she sees between relationship and pedagogy:

> I find there's a huge disconnect between trying to teach the course about Mi'kmaw culture, Mi'kmaw spirituality, Mi'kmaw world view, all these things, and then do it from such a colonized perspective as like lecturing. Right? So I talk a lot about relationship, and I try and do talking circles when I can. I try to not only teach what is Mi'kmaw, about Mi'kmaw, but I try to emulate maybe some more of the methods that they would use.

Shari makes a concerted effort to bring in Mi'kmaw concepts like *Etuaptmumk* (Reconciling ways of knowing, 2020), two-eyed seeing, and *netukulimk* (Nova Scotia Curriculum, 2020), to have enough but not take more than enough, and to use Mi'kmaw ways of teaching such as talking circles, story telling, and drumming in her classroom. Francesca echoed Shari's words, describing her own teaching as being influenced by Mi'kmaw ways of being and knowing in her personal life (through ongoing relationships with Mi'kmaw friends) and as a result of the curriculum design of the course, explaining,

> being introduced to the *Mi'kmaw Studies* curriculum, the way its laid out is, you know, very different from how many of the other social studies curriculums are organized. So that right away gives you a reason to pause and consider how you're going to deliver this . . . and I have sort of integrated a more Indigenous many ways of knowing approach [in my teaching] . . and I think it's made me a better teacher. And I think my students are more successful than they might have been otherwise.

Francesca spoke specifically about student directed learning "where they would have an idea, they would have a learning goal, but they would largely be responsible for the journey to that goal, and I was just there mainly to support them." This technique mirrors the idea of discovery learning described by Simpson (2014), where children in her Nishnaabeg community are encouraged to follow their personal paths to education. To illustrate how he teaches using pedagogies inspired by the Mi'kmaw, Paul told me a story:

> There's a unit in my course about the [Mi'kmaw] calendar, it's called *Time* . . . For a lot of Indigenous people time doesn't exist because their ancestors are always with them.[6] And they believe that they take all that with them. The idea of Indian time, this joke about how Indians always show up late, there's no such thing as late, there's no such thing as early, what happens in nature happens when it happens. So whatever is going on right now is the most important thing. So its one of the things I would teach them. I would say look, what's going on now is the most important. When the frost fish ran, when it was time to fish cod, that was the only time they could do it. And whatever's going on right now is the most important thing . . . There's no such thing as late, if you showed up late you were S.O. L. So I would try and put all this stuff together and teach the kids the same outcomes using real life situations. I'd use real life learning, and I'd show them in the

> way the Elders would teach Mi'kmaw kids. You throw a few things over their heads and make them stretch for it. And then they have to do something with the information that they have. It's not enough just to be able to regurgitate it. Now I want you to kind of reassemble this and hand it back to me in a different way.

Paul's story reflects traditional Mi'kmaw pedagogies (Battiste, 2013) where pragmatic skills and experiential learning connect learners directly to the environment. His teaching methods ask students to learn through action, to take responsibility for themselves and come up with the answers to questions that they find meaningful.

Access To Resources

A third area of common reflection for participants was access to resources made available by the Nova Scotia Department of Education, each teacher's particular centre for education, and their school administration. The availability of classroom resources was documented as a factor that directly influences the efficacy of program delivery (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk, 2002), and this is a central talking point for each teacher in the study. As the teacher with the longest history of teaching Mi'kmaw Studies 10 and 11 in the participant group, Paul's response to the query of how much support he feels the department of education and his centre for education currently brings to teachers of the course is succinct and telling: "none". When asked to elaborate, he said,

> So, what support is there from the board? Not much, cause they don't know much . . . there's no support for the support workers, no support for the Mi'kmaw teachers. There has been no training for Mi'kmaw Studies teachers beyond when we first introduced the course with the province. There has been nothing else since the course rolled out [in 2016].

He then spoke about how the majority of curriculum development in his experience has been directly from teacher to teacher, saying, “It was very much like the way Mi’kmaw culture had been kind of disseminated. Word of mouth, it was handed on person to person.”

Professional Development

Every one of these teachers wants professional development specifically targeted at *Mi’kmaw Studies 11* curriculum and classroom. The remaining three teachers with multiple years of experience teaching *Mi’kmaw Studies 11* spoke to Paul’s point that what they need is time together with other teachers of *Mi’kmaw Studies 11* and Mi’kmaw Elders. Annette’s ask is “time for more teachers to work together, and conversations with Mi’kmaw Elders, which we’ve never had.” Shari wants professional development time where *Mi’kmaw Studies 11* teachers have opportunities to listen to what Elders think should be in the course. She also has taken Indigenous Studies courses in her master’s degree program and believes this is another access point to bring together *Mi’kmaw Studies 11* teachers. Francesca pointed out that the majority of teachers currently teaching *Mi’kmaw Studies 11* are not Mi’kmaq, and as a result they are faced with a huge learning curve of both content and pedagogical philosophies when they come to the course, and this could be addressed if teachers were given professional development opportunities (primarily time) together and with Elders on a regular basis. From her perspective this would relieve a portion of the content burden for new teachers so that they might concentrate on actually teaching the course.

Laura said she spent an inordinate amount of time just locating resources. When asked about potential support at the board level for a teacher new to the course she responded, “I don’t even know their names [resource personnel at the education centre].” Her wish was simply to have access to materials to assist her with teaching the course on a daily basis. Annette echoed

Laura's experiences with minimal board level support, saying that post-pandemic, "half these people [at the board level], even if they ever were in a classroom, they haven't been in the classroom since cell phones, since covid, and the world has changed and they don't get it." In an expression of solidarity with their colleagues, all four of the experienced *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* teachers made the offer to lead professional development and provide materials for teachers new to the course.

All the teachers in this study emphasized how important they felt it was to have opportunities with their classes to experience teachings from Mi'kmaw Elders and knowledge keepers, to take part in land-based learning opportunities, and to have their students participate in cultural activities as a part of the course. Unfortunately it appears that most of these opportunities and experiences have either never been made available or have been curtailed following the Covid 19 crisis. Francesca delineated the lack of access to land-based learning and cultural activities by explaining,

> ideally if you're teaching an Indigenous studies course, you would be out on the land, you would be talking about, you know, connection to territory, connection to place, how place winds up influencing everything from how your government is structured, how your trade operates to what you wear and what you eat. And you can talk about those things in a classroom but its not nearly as impactful as being out on a land-based experience so. Those things are expensive, hard to organize, hard to make work logistically . . . even something as simple as going to Millbrook to the cultural centre. Its just a little bit too far, a little bit too sticky on time constraints in terms of like having the bus leave after a school day begins, driving the hour and a bit, spending a reasonable

> amount of time learning, and then getting back before the bell rings. Even something that should be pretty simple is difficult to arrange.

Annette's experience is similar. She has been unable to coordinate any sort of field trip: "busses are not available; money is not available . . . there's no coverage [for classroom teachers] because of seven of eight [courses being taught by high school teachers]. It used to work but not now . . ." Shari remembers pre-pandemic times at her school when opportunities were more available and high school teachers were not teaching seven courses: "[One year] I had seven I think guest speakers . . . We went to a powwow at Dalhousie, we went to Millbrook cultural centre, we took a bus to Debert and did the Debert walking trail . . . It was amazing." However, even at that time, Shari relied on her own contacts for guest speakers from the Mi'kmaw community as opposed to receiving those resources from the board of education or her centre for education. Annette has been trying to bring guest speakers back to her classroom for the past two years, but feels she is stymied by board policy and lack of administrative support at her school:

> To bring in guest speakers now, the board has made that almost impossible. I tried to have one last year . . . It has to be approved by the principal, and the principal has to like vet them and go through, and when I tried last year it was just like I'm [the principal] too busy, I don't have time for that right now, and it didn't happen.

Indigenous Support Workers

Each of the participants described the specific support provided by Indigenous support workers to their *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* classrooms. A majority of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* teachers in Nova Scotia are not Mi'kmaq, and many do not have close ties to the Mi'kmaw community. The study participants acknowledge that the Indigenous support workers at their schools go out of their way to provide cultural knowledge and community access to teachers of *Mi'kmaw Studies*

11. Francesca's experience with the Indigenous support workers assigned to her school has been extremely positive. She is quick to note that she views their role for her as a cross cultural liaison both with curriculum planning and as subject matter experts on ceremony and Mi'kmaw ways of being and knowing.

Shari has had a particularly close working relationship with several Indigenous support workers. At the start of each semester, she addresses stereotypes and misinformation about Indigenous people with students. They can submit any question about Indigenous people and culture as long as it is in the spirit of learning. She and the Indigenous support worker then address the queries in an open forum situation during class:

> How I deal with the whole things you wanna ask but you won't ask is I usually bring in the first week the Indigenous support worker. And I've had excellent ones over the years. And they come in and we say ask anything. Like, is there something you hear people say about Mi'kmaw people that you want to know is it true. So we talk about taxes,[7] we talk about reserves . . . We let them just get it all out . . . as long as its in the spirit of learning you can ask us anything.

Both Paul and Francesca felt it was also important to point out that Indigenous support workers are stretched between more than one school and are chronically overworked. Francesca was particularly conscious of not asking too much of Indigenous support worker colleagues whose mandate is to support Mi'kmaw and Indigenous students, not to act as a resource for curriculum, saying, "I'm also mindful of not wanting to lean too heavily on them as a resource . . . I have a job to do and they have a job to do, and they are not there to do my job for me."

Teaching Constraints

Furthermore, each of the participants made reference to constraints they felt while teaching *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*. Five of the six are not Mi'kmaw, and reflected on how one teaches a living culture, especially in a time of truth and reconciliation, while not being of that culture. Claude felt that even applying for and becoming the successful candidate to teach *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*, "is a little bit of an awkward feeling as someone with European background." Laura voiced her own fear, "that I'm going to stereotype something . . . I'm also afraid of my lack of knowledge, cause I could say something without even realizing." Annette related a conversation with the teacher candidate she was hosting this semester, who told her that it seemed problematic [to the candidate] that a settler was teaching an Indigenous studies course. Reflecting on the conversation, Annette admitted, "It's hard for me as a white woman, and I'm very aware of it." Shari very specifically delineated areas of teaching she will not approach as someone who is not Mi'kmaw: "I don't take them out and smudge. That is not my place. There is knowledge that is not mine, that you should really hear from the mouths of the people who live that experience. I try and bring in people's own voices, even if it has to be through video."

Francesca identifies as a settler woman but does have deep connections to the Mi'kmaw community. She has strongly developed opinions about what non-Indigenous people should and should not take on as teachers of an Indigenous studies course:

> So there would be things that because I'm white I realize and appreciate and respect that I ought not to be the person passing on this teaching to other white students. For example crafts and things. So, a dreamcatcher is probably the most appropriated craft out there . . . But I feel that it is irresponsible and disrespectful for me to be the person handing down the teaching of a craft that is very meaningful to Indigenous people and has a rich history

> to a bunch of white students without having an Elder there or having the Indigenous support worker come in and be part of the teaching. So even though I've been given the teaching from Elders myself, and have been given permission by that Elder to do the craft in my classroom, I still would want someone present on the first day that we do it . . . I would want, you know, an Elder to be present to, to kind of preside over that and to correct me if needed. Cause the last thing you want is to perpetuate misunderstandings or just things that are not accurate or centre the wrong ideas in something that is considered sacred . . . even the Mi'kmaw language itself is considered sacred. I have qualms about being the person passing on this knowledge to people who again are essentially outsiders as I am. But I also think its important for white students to know these things and to appreciate them and to be exposed to them. So it is a bit of a dance between I am not of this culture but I'm gonna share what I know and have come to understand with you because that's my job and that's what I've been hired to do. But I also need to know that I shouldn't be and I need you to know why I shouldn't be and why I am and why there's no alternative here at the moment.

Even Paul, who identifies as Mi'kmaw, has areas of the curriculum that he is uncomfortable teaching. Paul is a practising Christian and finds himself in the paradoxical situation of being asked to go beyond teaching about Mi'kmaw spirituality into what he considers practising religious ceremonies. He draws a very distinct line between instruction and practise, saying,

> I can teach the kids about it, but I've never had a smudging ceremony in class . . . I made the decision that I was never going to practise the religion as part of those classes. Now

> they're [other teachers] having sacred fires and sweat lodges, you know they're doing all those things and that for me personally is problematic.

As a result of his personal beliefs as a Christian, Paul finds himself unable to participate in what he considers religious ceremonies outside his own faith, and he views certain practices he is being encouraged to incorporate into Mi'kmaw Studies 11 as too close to religion.

Policies And Politics

Finally, each of the participants spent time reflecting on the political aspects of the Nova Scotia education system and how the policies and expectations of their centres for education, the education ministry and the communities where they work effect their teaching of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*. Annette and Paul spoke directly to the provincial assessment policy that focusses on outcome based education (Nova Scotia Department of Education, 2022). Annette is concerned that with the changes she sees in the assessment policy: "we're less project based and more outcome based . . . there's certain things you can't mark." She also commented that she feels constrained by this change and that "the people who make those policies don't talk to teachers." Paul reinforced Annette's observations, saying,

> outcomes based is not student centred. Outcomes based is outcomes centred. And years ago I decried it, I said it's a problem, it's not gonna work . . . You need to be able to just teach what you can the best way that you can so that the kids can learn the best way they can. And we need to get to the point where kids are the centre and the outcomes are just kind of ideas."

Another issue raised by Laura, Shari, Francesca, Annette, and Paul was teaching assignments. In each one of their schools it appears that there may not be a choice for some

teachers, especially new ones, to receive a section of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*. Shari spoke to the consequences of having teachers randomly assigned to *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*:

> Always the new teacher . . . gets "stuck" with a section . . . It's one section, you hope you're never gonna have it again, so your willingness or your excitement to build that is not there. So for most people, for years in this building, it was everyone getting that one section of Mi'kmaw and then going "awe", and they muddle through, make up some stuff or they borrow stuff from other people and it might fit it might not, but they kind of slug through the semester and go ugh I hope I don't have to do that again.

Paul, who was a part of the writing team for *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* in 2015, did describe the course as originally meant to be accessible for new or inexperienced teachers, saying,

> When we rewrote the course, we joked that we wanted somebody who had never taught the course before to be able to teach it . . . Put them [new teachers] in the classroom where they have to teach something that they've never seen before, how are you going to get them to have success? So we looked at what are the enduring things, what are the things that are the most important that are gonna come out of this? That's the way we tried to put it together so that these people who are incredibly constrained by the outcomes can actually move around them.

Sadly, eight years later, "There has been nothing [professional development] since the course rolled out". In Paul's view there is a reason for this: "part of it's because it's an arts course."

All six participants referred to constraints on their time for curriculum development and student contact, and even their personal health and work life balance, as a result of their current workload teaching seven out of eight courses over the year as opposed to the six of eight courses

that had been the workload until two years ago. New *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* teacher Claude has such limited preparation time during the school day that he often misses opportunities to work with the school Indigenous support worker: "often I'm busy throughout working hours and then like 3:30 okay, I'm finally free, but the support staff are already gone." Looking to her teaching colleagues who are starting out, Annette sees the problems:

> I think its scary if you're a teacher doing seven of eight now as a new teacher coming in. If I was teaching five new courses a year and I was a new teacher and I was trying to come up with this [Mi'kmaw Studies curriculum] on my own I just feel like I wouldn't do it justice necessarily.

Paul sees the lack of available time impacting the relationship between teachers and students, to the detriment of learning for both teachers and students:

> We need to know our kids in order to teach them. And yet we are not given the opportunity to know them. If this [*Mi'kmaw Studies 11*] is truly going to be a success, if the message of what happened to the Mi'kmaw people and the importance of the culture itself surviving is going to be taught we need to know our kids. We need to be given the opportunity. And seven out of eight doesn't allow that. Not being able to do things with our kids outside of the classroom doesn't allow that because we don't have the time to do it. We don't have the time to improve our teaching methods, we don't have the time to learn the things we need.

Theme 2: What Participants Heard From Students

Referring to the interview prompt "can you describe your experiences with students enrolled in *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*?", each of the participants was eager to share their perception of

students taking the course. Although *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* is not a mandatory course, it is one of five options that fulfill the graduation requirement for the Canadian history component (Nova Scotia Department of Education, n.d.). At the high schools where the study participants teach, three of the five options are routinely offered. They are *Canadian History 11*, *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*, and *African Canadian Studies 11*. The remaining options, which are offered in more specialized circumstances, are *Etudes acadiennes 11* and *Gaelic Studies 11*. According to all six of the teachers in this study, *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* appears to be growing in popularity at their schools and multiple sections are offered each semester.

A "Bird" Course

The topic that every participant spoke about first was the idea that *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* is often still thought of as a "bird" course, or at least an easier option than *Canadian History*. Francesca reported that students coming into the course have told her that the reputation around her school is that the course is interesting, but you don't have to do a lot of work to get the credit. By the time students leave her course most of them say they have enjoyed it, "but they do end up doing more work than they expect[ed]." Claude's information came primarily from other teachers, who he said told him that students see *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* as a more manageable option than *Canadian History*, especially if you don't want to write essays. He did add, "I'd like to see it [*Mi'kmaw Studies 11*] approached with a bit more respect . . . not just as the default last choice". Shari is seeing a change at her school, which has a reputation as quite academic. She admitted that students thinking that *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* was an easy option did happen when she began teaching the course, but now

> we've created a course that now the kids don't call a bird course anymore . . . I find I have just as many really high achieving students as I do struggling students in the course. It used to draw a certain clientele . . . [but] not anymore.

Annette's major concern is that both administration and the guidance department funnel large numbers of English as an Additional Language learners into *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*. In her estimation "they're [EAL students] getting dumped [into *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*], they're getting put in wherever there is room in the class schedule [because] there's still this idea [from administration] it's an easy course."

What Students Learn

Mi'kmaw Studies 11 is a course that by its very nature teaches students the difficult knowledge of how Canadian society has and does treat Indigenous people. Each of the study participants felt that this aspect of the course required a considered response. As mentioned earlier, Shari addresses what she views as the covert and latent racism against Indigenous people by students in her classes with an open question and answer session which she and the Indigenous Support Worker conduct within the first week of class. In her view, these attitudes are becoming less common amongst students, and when she asks students how they came to choose *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*, "They say that their parents told them they should take it . . . because I should learn something about the Mi'kmaw people, or it's relevant right now. A lot of them get positive encouragement at home." Annette talks specifically to her students about how some information in the course may be difficult to hear, and how people her age weren't taught about this in school:

> I always say to them, and I find they get excited by this, I say your parents probably don't know this . . . I didn't know this; we weren't taught this. So I'm always going back to you know more than your parents know.

She finds that the approach of providing what the students perceive as "new" information creates a willingness to hear as opposed to what students may perceive as an atmosphere of accusation.

Francesca talked about what she thinks students learn in her course about both Mi'kmaw and other Indigenous people living in Canada, and how this knowledge can be difficult to accept:

> Many, most, would not know what it means to feel obligated to hide who you are from your children to keep them safe or to give them an easier time, or if you get into status and losing status, gaining status, do you want status. There's just so much about what its like to be an Indigenous person in Canada that the average Canadian will never experience and is largely ignorant of that I think is illuminated well in this course.
>
> A student that I taught a couple years ago in particular was quite shocked and quite upset to discover that many of the things they had been taught about reserve economics by their parents and grand parents was completely inaccurate. So things like that housing is free on reservation . . . like Indigenous people don't pay taxes, which is not true. So, I know there are students who are very surprised when they hear about the economic side of having status in Canada or living on reserve or in community. A lot of students find it eye opening to talk about intergenerational trauma in a way where they can see that the bootstrap mentality that is prevalent in white culture won't work in this situation . . . So just empathy and clarifying misunderstandings I would say are the two biggest benefits of being a white student in a *Mi'kmaw Studies* course.

Paul has had kids push back hard against information about the effects of colonialism on the Mi'kmaw, telling him "this isn't fair . . . you're making me think, and I didn't take this course to think." He shared a story about how exposing students to information, even when they initially pushback, can be a key to future learning:

> I remember one kid coming back. He wrote on his exam, and he repeated all the information that I had told him, and he passed because he was able to do that. But he told me that he didn't agree with any of it. And then, four years later there's a knock on my classroom door, and it's this kid who is four years older who has now got a degree in Indigenous Studies, who was introduced to it in university and slowly over time figured it out.

Theme Three: Connecting *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* To Reconciliation

The inspiration behind this study comes from the Truth and Reconciliation Report's *94 Calls to Action,* specifically Calls to Action 62 and 63 which speak about public education in Canada as an important path for creating understanding and empathy toward the life circumstances of Indigenous people as they move through a majority culture dominated by an institutionalized colonial state. Within the Nova Scotia curriculum, *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* is categorized as a history course (Nova Scotia Department of Education, n.d.), but it is more than that. On page one of the *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* curriculum document the following statement is made: "Through taking this course students should become more informed, active citizens who have a holistic understanding of the relationship among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Nova Scotia and Canada" (*Mi'kmaw Studies 11,* p. 1). With this statement in mind, as well as being one of five options for students to gain their Canadian history graduation requirement,

Mi'kmaw Studies 11 is also an opportunity for Nova Scotia high school students to participate actively in the process of reconciliation.

A Catalyst For Change

All six teachers in the study felt a connection to the concept of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* as a vehicle for social change. As the teacher who has been with the course the longest, both as *Mi'kmaw Studies 10* and then as it transitioned into *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*, and as the only participant who identifies as Mi'kmaq, Paul has strong feelings about reconciliation as a part of the course. Speaking about Canadian society more generally, Paul said,

> You're always going to have the Proud Boys . . . They're always gonna be there, whether they're embedded in the Canadian military or whether they're hiding around the corner. When they took down the statue of Cornwallis, I went on to some of the news sites and I looked at what people were writing and I just thought the level of ignorance is incredible. A course is not gonna change that. Until we're free to sit kids down and tell them the God's honest truth and do it without fear of reprisal then its not gonna happen. Until you get to the kids and say we all have to learn to love each other . . . And until we teach kids that, that we can't just tolerate one another but we have to love one another.

In Paul's experience, *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* is a microcosm for society at large, and he points out the disparity between what is taught and what is learned or acted upon.

Francesca, the non-Indigenous teacher with strong personal connections to the Mi'kmaw community, has also thought deeply about the nature of reconciliation and the role *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* can play in it for non-Indigenous students. She said,

> you can't have reconciliation without understanding, and you can't have understanding without the truth, right? So I see the Mi'kmaw Studies course as being part of the truth telling that has to happen. I see it as being a door to the conversation of reconciliation for a lot of young people who are open, much more open than prior generations would have been in many ways. They are open and want to learn and understand and are primed and ready in a lot of ways . . . And so that truth telling piece has to happen. Reconciliation is the end that we hope for, but there's a lot that has to happen in between the truth telling and the reconciliation too. I think justice is like the missing word from this conversation, it's that you tell the truth and then there has to be justice.

She went further, with a reflection on what reconciliation in action means to her and how she talks about it with her students:

> And there has to be restitution. You can't have love without sacrifice right, or reconciliation without restitution . . . we [Francesca and her students] talk a lot about how messy it all is, cause a lot of people their favourite go to is so you think that like an Indigenous person can come in to your house and they just own it [referring to land-back claims]? Right, so no I don't think that. But I also don't not think that, right, it's messy. It's messy, reconciliation is messy, and painful . . .
>
> What can I do? So I mean the obvious thing here is that teaching I see, in my role as a teacher I see as part of my contribution towards reconciliation . . . I think personally it is possible at the personal level and at the neighbourhood level, and at the school level even. Schools are colonized institutions but students still have a great deal of autonomy within that institution to modify their behaviour, to learn in a different way, to relate to people differently.

Claude sees the relationship as informational for students who have either no or limited awareness of what reconciliation means. He explained, “We talked about how today like you know its not about feeling guilty but it’s about how do I move forward in the spirit of the treaties, sharing the land . . . it [reconciliation] is something that has come up in a lot of our conversations.” Laura sees her role in helping students understand reconciliation as showing them that they can take action, especially at a personal level. She invoked the idea of reconciliACTION, a six part plan of action designed for non-Indigenous Canadians by the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation to start meaningful progress toward reconciliation.

> And where do they[students] have a part in it [reconciliation]? And maybe the part is what they could do personally . . . like become more acquainted with Mi’kmaw language, be listening more as far as discussions, contribute to discussions, learn an Indigenous craft, or know something about a treaty, or know where the Indigenous people live in their community. It’s called reconciliACTION.

Laura wants her students to understand that they have agency and can begin a personal journey toward reconciliation with Indigenous peoples.

A Historical Perspective

Both Shari and Annette teach about reconciliation from the perspective of the history created by colonialism and promises made by the Canadian federal government since the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was released in 2015. Their teaching backgrounds also include law and economics, and as a result they do deep dives into the documents provided by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Shari starts by asking students about the meaning of truth and reconciliation:

> So we talk a lot about the truth is that historically people weren't encouraged to know the truth. And so the government has made a commitment so that every Canadian will know the truth, because even when people said the truth there were people who said that's not how it happened or they just want money . . . And then we talk about the settlement agreement, the components of the settlement agreement, right. How some of it was experience payments, some of it was commemorative. And the idea is that we have to collect all this history so that we never repeat ourselves . . . And so we talk about just what is reconciliation going forward.

She also spends specific classes reflecting on the actions that non-Indigenous people can take to begin the change necessary for reconciliation to happen. Again, a focus that comes up in her classes is on land claims and land back (Palmater, 2021):

> Yeah, we talk about the land claims thing. So we can't give them [the land], so what do we give them[the Mi'kmaq]? And we talk about land back a little bit. It's like you know small little things. I mean maybe when I die I can will my land if I want to the Indigenous people to be stewards of for the next seven generations. They don't want all of it, they want a part, they want a say, they want to help, they want involvement. So why can't we do that? And I think as we grow these kids up and they see it that way that it'll just become the norm. That's what you hope for, right?

Annette places discussion about reconciliation within the final weeks of her course, as she does view *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* as a history course and so uses a sequential chronology as the organizing method. Her focus on reconciliation is specifically on the work of the Truth and Reconciliation commission and the ways forward that she sees established by that report:

> I can't go in and talk about reconciliation if they don't know about residential schools [and] if I don't talk about the Indian Act . . . they have to have some background . . . I try to keep it positive, the good things that are happening now, the role models. What's happened even since Trudeau came in office, with what's happened with Truth and Reconciliation . . . We go into the apologies, and the recent apology from the pope and they're floored to learn that that only came within the last couple years.

Theme Four: Future Dreams for *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*

At the close of each interview, I asked participants to look to the future of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* and talk about their dreams of how the course can be further supported by the Nova Scotia Board of Education and more fully developed to fulfill its purpose "to provide opportunities for learners to gain an understanding of how they are connected to the history and culture of the First Peoples of the Maritimes" (Nova Scotia Curriculum, 2023, p. 1). As each participant told the story of their experiences teaching *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*, it became clear that their past recollections will influence how they develop this course for the future. This is the power of story, for

> all our stories, can create a pathway for a stronger, validating education, but we do have to listen. For the stories will teach each of us—if we are willing and can learn to listen to them—how we might serve as an agent for change. (Armstrong, 2013, p. 61)

Each participant's experience with *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* is unique, but there are common themes in their narratives that may well inspire positive change for the future in the course.

Learning From The Land

A first dream for the future of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* is to take the course outside a traditional classroom setting. Field trips have almost come to a standstill for these teachers and their classes, seemingly as a result of post pandemic restructuring, lack of funding, increased teacher workload, and administrative red tape. The Millbrook Cultural and Heritage Centre is the overwhelming destination of choice for all the participants to enrich their students' understanding of Mi'kmaw culture. Five of the six participants described attempting to go on this field trip since the pandemic. None have succeeded, being thwarted by the conditions raised above. Annette's simple words reflect the frustration of all the participants who have tried to make this happen for their students: "it was too hard to do . . . there's no support."

A larger aspect of the same dream is land-based education. Although she is writing specifically about education for Indigenous people, there are echoes of Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's words, "Indigenous education is not Indigenous or education from within our intellectual traditions unless it comes through the land" (2014, p. 9) in the experiences of these teachers who understand that land-based education is not a luxury but a necessity for their students. Francesca would like to see a model where a component of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* is actually mandated and supported with funding:

> Kind of like the phys-ed leadership or you know, those courses where it is expected that the students are going to have, you know, overnight experiences, and that they are going to spend time outdoors. They are going to spend time in the natural world. I think that would be a great change . . . I would like to see it actually be built in to the course.

Paul described what he does now with the constraints that are in place around land-based learning and then reflects on how that limits the course:

> I also try and bring stuff about the land into everything that we're doing as well. It could be something as simple as me asking the kids to tell where north is on a compass. And I want you to figure that out, what are the different ways you can figure that out. There's that whole section on time, where we look at astronomy and celestial navigation. Go outside and take a look at where your shadow is. Did I ever get em out in the woods? No. There are times when I get them out around the school and try to show them stuff about lichen on the north side of the tree, that stuff. There wasn't a whole lot of land-based stuff [supported by the school] . . . it's mostly what can I do within the classroom because we were always tied [to the classroom].

Learning From Mi'kmaw People

The second common dream for the participants was meaningful access to Mi'kmaw Elders, knowledge keepers, and scholars, for both themselves and their students, and to see more Mi'kmaw teachers actually teaching *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*. Annette would like "conversations with Mi'kmaw Elders, which we've never had, we don't get that. That would be great." Shari made the suggestion that with appropriate funding, schools might be able to access

> Elders who rotate through and create relationships with kids. Teach us, tell us stories, for the kids to actually see storytelling as not just entertainment . . . Really appreciate storytelling, cause I tell them [students], you tell a story different than you write. It's a whole different way to communicate when you tell a story. Kids relate to stories.
>
> I think there's so much [to learn]. [Elders] teaching the Mi'kmaw language would be great, right? Incorporating more Mi'kmaw language because it's so rich right, and it means so much . . . the richness of the culture is embedded in the language.

Paul emphasized the perspective that without access to Elders and knowledge keepers, how do *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* teachers even know what the Mi'kmaw community thinks should be a part of the curriculum, explaining, "the most important thing that kids need to know are what the Elders say is the most important thing that kids need to know."

Francesca believes that the most important thing the education system can do for *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* is to have it taught whenever possible by Mi'kmaw people, and this dream is also reflected on by Shari and Annette. Francesca believes that there are systemic issues in the Nova Scotia education system preventing Mi'kmaw people who could be teaching this course from becoming involved. She then provides a clear perspective of what needs to happen to spark change:

> Ideally, the ultimate thing would be for Mi'kmaw people to be teaching this course. There's an awful lot of work that needs to be done before Mi'kmaw people will feel welcome and feel willing to become part of a public education system that has not been respectful of them to this point. I would like there to be a lot more Mi'kmaw representation at the Centre for Education in terms of informing policy and especially around just equity in our schools and the way we do things, the way we respond to situations, the way we support students . . . representation matters, having a discussion around who is qualified to do a certain job versus who has a narrow set of credentials that we're saying are required to be in this position . . . So the value of a lived experience and cultural expertise versus someone who has a degree in something that has been traditionally valued by our institutions, how do we change that?

Professional Support

The final dream that runs through the responses of all the participants is the need for time and support to develop the course and their understanding of Mi'kmaw culture, pedagogies, and world views. In many ways, these educators are expressing the professional development needs of teachers in the wider community. Sancar et al. (2021), in a literature review of research on teacher professional development needs, wrote, "when designing the PD process, there is a need to focus on teachers' . . . dreams" (p. 2). They further recognize the request brought forward by the teachers in this study with the statement that comes from the conclusions of their work, that "pd is more effective when teachers are able to choose and direct their own PD process" (p. 10). Additionally, the study participants have been faced with a very specific workload intensification (Pacaol, 2021): the increase of the teaching assignment from six of eight courses to seven of eight courses in one school year, that began in the fall semester of 2021 (News, 2021). The impact of this increase is being felt keenly by all the participants in the study.

Paul stated the problem succinctly in reference to the increased workload and how it stops teachers from continuing to either improve the *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* course for students or grow their own skills and knowledge: "Seven out of eight doesn't allow that . . . because we don't have time. We don't have the time to improve our teaching methods, we don't have time to learn the things we need." The phrase "seven of eight" followed by a reference to overwork occurs in the transcripts of five of six participants. Only Claude did not directly reference the additional course. As a new teacher, he had no experience teaching in a system that did not demand a course load of seven sections. A particularly poignant moment occurred in Shari's interview when she looked at me after referencing the "seven of eight" situation and said " I'm so tired Susan, I'm just so tired . . . [I need] time, time."

In terms of professional development (PD), Shari stated bluntly, “I think from a course standpoint, it’s imperative that teachers who teach the course receive PD . . . PD that is designed and given by people in . . . Indigenous communities.” Shari continued, saying, “I want some time to be able to sit down and collaborate with many different people about how to do this [teach *Mi’kmaw Studies 11*] and how to do it well.” Annette echoed this perspective, saying, “I would love to hear what other teachers are doing . . . If they [the centres for education] really care we need time for more teachers to work together.” Her specific suggestion was a google drive or moodle available to all *Mi’kmaw Studies 11* teachers with available resources, and again she emphasized, “it goes back to sharing.” As mentioned previously, a method Paul and other teachers of *Mi’kmaw Studies 11* have used for professional development in the past that worked is finding ways to just share with each other. He remembers, “It was very much like the way Mi’kmaw culture had been kind of disseminated. Word of mouth, it was handed on person to person.” He does believe that resources are available, but acknowledges “it can be extremely daunting if you don’t know where to go.” Annette summed up the empathy they feel for new teachers in this system faced with seven of eight courses who haven’t taught *Mi’kmaw Studies 11* before:

> I think it’s scary if you’re a teacher doing seven of eight now, and as a new teacher coming in . . . if I was teaching five new courses a year and I was a new teacher and I was trying to come up with this on my own I just feel like I wouldn’t do it justice necessarily.

Chapter Summary

This chapter represents recollected lived experiences of the research participants in this study. A majority of the chapter was generated from the transcripts of the participants’ interviews, and their stories about teaching *Mi’kmaw Studies 11* are the foundation of the results

discussed in chapter five. The experiences of the participants have been horizontalized and then categorized following Moustakas' (1994) method. Additionally, themes that emerged from the process have been organized as reflections on common experiences. The discussion that follows in chapter five will bring together these experiences to suggest a context of what it is like to teach *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* in the current public education system in Nova Scotia.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Introduction

"Phenomenology aims to come to a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences. It asks, 'What is this or that kind of experience like?'" (van Manen, 1984, p. 37). The discussion of my research is presented from this perspective. The specific question that this work seeks to address is "What is it like to teach *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* in a public high school in Nova Scotia?" Listening to and reflecting on the answers the study participants have given to this question provides both specific understandings of how and what it means to teach this course in the current socio-economic moment (Styres, 2019) and how *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* may be a part of something larger in the context of reconciliation education in the public school system (van Manen, 1984).

As a prelude to presenting the reflections generated from listening to the lived experiences of the study participants, I wish to revisit the phenomenological construct of the reduction, the process of bracketing, of looking beyond preconceptions that may arise as one studies the lived experiences that are a part of research (Tufford & Newman, 2010). The idea of bracketing, for me, has morphed from a strict idea of holding oneself outside the process of another's experience to instead becoming a personal awareness of how I see, hear, and am part of the experience being shared with me by study participants (Baksh, 2018). The lived experiences of teachers documented for this project are their own, and yet I acknowledge that simply by asking particular questions, by reacting to their perceptions, by empathizing even without words as they speak, I am becoming a part of those stories and not just a passive recorder. I'm not sure how it could be otherwise. What I am attempting to do is be reflexive about this process. To understand that because I am a teacher working under many of the same conditions as the

participants I am not without bias; I see myself and my teaching journey in them. I strive instead to be accurate in my recording of their words and the intent behind those words. To curate sympathetically and to acknowledge my place in the process as one whose function gives voice to experience (Conklin, 2014).

Teaching The Course

Oftentimes, the first question brought forward to teachers of a course is about what they are teaching, that is the formal or overt curriculum (Wilson, 2024). This is, of course, an important inquiry, but what may be of greater significance in terms of education that seeks to be a step on the road to reconciliation is how the course is taught, the pedagogy or enacted curriculum or the curriculum-as-lived: "the curriculum experienced by students and teachers as they live through school life" (Aoki, 2005, p. 322). *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* is characterized by the Nova Scotia Department of Education as a course "that provides opportunities for learners to gain an understanding of how they are connected to the history and culture of the First Peoples of the Maritimes" (Department of Education, 2016, p.1), connecting directly to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Call to Action 63, which speaks to creating and supporting a climate "for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect" (TRC, 2015, p. 7) between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. To that end, the curriculum document published by the Nova Scotia Department of Education for *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* allows teachers a significant amount of flexibility in terms of the pedagogical approach with which they choose to teach the course (Department of Education, 2016). This opportunity for diversity is evident in the methods the six study participants described as they reflected on their personal teaching of the course.

Each study participant spent time talking about how their course was structured in comparison to a typical Eurocentric class, where much of the focus is on testing, outcomes, a narrow body of literature or text, and a hidden curriculum that prioritizes compliance to authority (Cornbleth, 1984). From these discussions, I identified three areas of common concern amongst participants: formal testing and final examinations, project-based and individual interest learning, and specific incorporation of Indigenous pedagogies as teaching tools.

Each of the six participants spoke with feeling about formal testing and a final examination as evaluation structures for *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*. It appeared that the participants either used both tests and exams or neither. Four of the six teachers chose not to include tests and exams, while two did include tests and exams. It did appear that those who chose not to use these traditionally Eurocentric evaluations felt that the choice was theirs, and those who did use tests and exams felt pressure from colleagues and administrators to conform to an expectation that this type of evaluation was necessary to ensure a kind of fairness with students taking other courses (e.g., Canadian History) to fulfill the same graduation requirement. Shari was particularly open about why she kept this type of evaluation: "I definitely don't feel like I have the freedom that I would like . . . and some of it's peer pressure from colleagues who I have to align with . . . they're [colleagues and administrators] watching very closely." Shari specifically stated that she would prefer not to do an exam, but felt too pressured to stay in line with other Canadian history teachers to make the break away from this type of pedagogy, even referencing the term "equity" being thrown back at her as a reason why a formal, written examination must remain a part of the course. Looking to Unterhalter's (2009) definition of equity in education, which

> entails some acceptance of a space of negotiation in which particular concerns . . . on say curriculum content or the form of assessment are negotiated not on the basis of majority

> rule . . . but through a process of reasonableness and reflection that considers each person participating in the discussion [and] what is most valued is the process of establishing considerate and fair relationships that support negotiation, questioning and discussion (p. 417),

it appears that equity and equality are being erroneously conflated in this circumstance. Urrietta (2016) speaks to this issue in his examination of the history of colonizer school systems throughout the Americas imposing and insisting on western measures of instruction and evaluation, under the guise of creating equal opportunity in a global society, for Indigenous school systems and students: "The further expansion of Western-style schooling . . . often justified by nation states and international interests as a form of economic development in terms of human resources . . . is a way to further encroach into . . . Indigenous communities (p. 170). Reflecting on the Canadian school system (which is provincially controlled), and specifically using the province of Ontario as subject, Campbell (2020) wrote,

> defining equity of outcomes in terms of standardised achievement results is a narrow, inadequate and problematic approach [to education] . . . being proficient in reading, writing and math are essential knowledge and skills and graduating high school successfully is associated with a range of future benefits throughout a person's life . . . However, [there are] concerns about the cultural relevance and bias, lack of attention to Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing . . . in the design, administration and reporting of provincial standardised assessments. (p.419)

The result of this false construct of equity as a direct equality in all classrooms that are granting a Canadian history credit is an example of forcing a Eurocentric pedagogy onto a course of study created to allow students an opportunity to learn about a culture where a "final examination" is

not relevant, raising the question of how this situation is either equitable or "provid[ing an] opportunity for learners to gain an understanding of . . . the First Peoples of the Maritimes" (Department of Education, 2016, p.1)? It is interesting to note that Annette and Shari (who do use exams and testing) teach in schools with parent populations focussed on traditional western forms of high academic achievement (grades and university acceptance rates) and where the school administrators are highly cognizant of parental scrutiny. In Shari's words,

> this school has a reputation of being like the *crème de la crème*. It's [name of community redacted] and there's a lot of competition for scholarships . . . a lot of high achieving students . . . and I think because of that the administration keeps their thumb a little bit more than schools . . . where parents aren't going to complain or be vocal.

Conversely, the remaining four participants who do not use testing or examinations made no specific mention of peer pressure to make *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* conform to a particular pedagogical standard for the compulsory Canadian history credit. These four teachers also felt supported by their administration in their choices of how to teach the course, and all described positive interactions with student parents and guardians about how the course was being delivered. Reflecting on the experiences of the teachers who felt pressure to conform to western methods of evaluation versus those who did not, the primary difference focusses on parental concerns about post-secondary pathways for students and the worry that somehow students will not gain the skills they require to be successful in their grade 12 year and beyond without traditional test taking and a formal examination (Altenhofen et al., 2016; Mistry & Elenbaas, 2021).

All six participants affirmed that project-based learning combined with individual interest learning made up the majority of the work asked of students in their courses. Four of the six

participants spoke extensively about topics for projects being generated by students as a result of in-class learning and personal interests/information brought to the classroom by students. Reviewing the instructional approaches laid out in the *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* curriculum document, there is acknowledgement that there will be some transmission type learning in order for students to receive new information or be guided through the deconstruction of complex ideas. It is recommended, however, that the majority of the learning be through

> transactional and transformational approaches . . . allow[ing] for the active participation of students as they evaluate the relevance of what they are learning, bring their perspectives and prior knowledge to the process, and are involved in decisions about what they are learning. (Department of Education, 2016, p. 12)

Francesca spoke about her own transformation from being primarily a traditional western style teacher until she met up with her *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* teacher mentor and began teaching the course. She felt that "the *Mi'kmaw Studies* curriculum, the way it's laid out is very different from how many of the other social studies curriculums are organized . . . it's more of an experience", and as a result her own teaching style morphed to follow that pedagogy. She now sees her role in the classroom as more focussed on facilitation of learning and helping students make choices of how and what they want to learn about rather than following a specifically mandated curriculum, saying, "I tend to err more on the side of freedom within a structure of support . . . a lot of students really appreciate that . . . they want to explore something that appeals to them." Her experience with the open nature of the course, which allows teachers to present students with options that match their own learning interests, is mirrored by Shari, Laura, Claude, and Paul. Annette also uses project-based learning as a major component of the course but is uneasy with too much leeway from the historical curriculum focus that she perceives to be

necessary for *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* to stay congruent with the other course offerings that make up the mandatory Canadian history credit. It is notable that Annette is one of two teachers in this study that feels pressured to include formal testing and examinations as a part of her curriculum. Although project-based and individually centred learning are not pedagogies used only by teachers attempting to work toward decolonizing their classrooms, they are methods that prioritize students and their interests, as opposed to more traditionally Eurocentric methods that prioritize specific western canons and teacher-centred learning (Freire, 2005).

The question posed to the participants about how they taught *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* that resulted in the most diverse responses was about using specific Indigenous pedagogies. Keeping in mind that the majority of students enrolled in *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* do not identify as Indigenous, there are still central constructs in education theory that suggest how the curriculum is taught is as significant as what is taught (Demmert, 2011; Singh, 2011; Wolf, 2011), and therefore a course that purports to teach people outside a culture about that culture might well be expected to employ specific forms to support content. Additionally, curriculum studies scholars in Canada do challenge the still all too present Eurocentric constructs in education, where "curriculum acts as an agent of the state . . . to inculcate [only] the knowledge and culture of the dominant group" (Balzer et al., 2020, p. 2), and suggest that a part of actively decolonizing the curriculum involves utilizing culturally specific "pedagogies [to] provide paths for teachers to introduce multiple perspectives to their students" (Balzer, 2024, para. 1).

As stated in the results chapter, only three (Shari, Francesca, and Paul) of the six teachers specifically looked to and incorporated Indigenous pedagogies in their classrooms. These practices most often looked like greater student autonomy (including attendance and learning environments), choices of what students wanted/were interested in learning, practicing specific

listening and speaking skills (talking circles and storytelling), and respect for multiple world views. After considering this breakdown, I would posit that the participants with the most experience (both professional and personal) with both the course and Indigenous ways of being and knowing, and who received the most freedom for course development from their administrative teams, were the ones who implemented Indigenous pedagogies regularly. Looking to Rollo (2022), there is an understanding that keeping students constrained into a pedagogy that prioritizes "the colonial legacy of controlling and managing children's bodies, imposing metrics and valuations of worth on children" (p. 122) is part of the disingenuous iteration of moving toward reconciliation through content only. It is particularly difficult to not get bogged down in specific curriculum details in a course like *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* that is siloed as a Canadian history credit. This happens as a result of teachers being pressured to create a course in the western transmissive model for social studies, which demands a focus on dates and "facts", as opposed to allowing an unfolding of story and a discovery of truths (McGregor, 2017; Stanley, 2015). It is critical that teachers of a course (*Mi'kmaw Studies 11*) designed as a relationship builder between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people recognize that "in the Canadian context of schooling, the assimilative function of coercive colonial pedagogy must be identified and examined" (Rollo, 2022, p. 121; see also Simpson, 2014). Rollo makes clear that if *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* teachers are not consciously looking to the how as well as the what of teaching the course, they are quite possibly missing the point of what they are teaching, no matter the content that is covered. If the intention is to decolonize the classroom and provide alternative ways of being and knowing to students in order to work toward reconciliation, "centering Indigenous teaching and learning methods is one way to bring about much needed change in our society" (Jacob et al., 2021, p. 279). Rollo (2022) provides a most succinct description of both how and

why Eurocentric standards of the western academy must be purged and Indigenous pedagogies must be included in courses (like *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*) that purport to work as vehicles of relationship between non-Indigenous and Indigenous people if the purpose of that education is decolonization. He asserts that educators must "repudiate[e] . . . (1) colonial pedagogies predicated on control and management . . . such as mandatory attendance . . . [and] (2) imposed valuations of children's worth such as learning outcomes, standardized assessment, and standardized advancement" (Rollo, 2022, p. 133), and that if we do so not only will we be matching form to content but also acting to heal the damage of settler colonialism on all students present in a classroom by providing education that prioritizes consensus over competition in an atmosphere of collective growth (see also Jacob et al., 2021).

Resource Availability

A portion of how one teaches is governed by the resources available to support that teaching. *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* has been taught by the study participants primarily in standard, western style classrooms within the confines of a seventy-five minute period five times per week over the course of a five month semester. These teachers are working hard with what they have to create meaningful curriculum and experiences for their students, but they also recognize that they are limited as a result of the constructs imposed by the system in which the course is presented. The restriction identified by the participants that is most problematic is the lack of a land-based component to the course (Simpson, 2014; Styres & Kempf, 2022; Wildcat et al., 2014), mostly as a result of a lack of resources (funding, materials, access to Indigenous knowledge keepers and Elders for cultural support) and red tape, including school administrators implementing nebulous board policies that seem to work against teachers attempting to get students out of the traditional Eurocentric classroom even minimally. There are multiple

instances in the participant interviews where the topic of land-based learning is referred to and then, in Francesca's specific words that echo the experiences of all six participants, "even something that should be pretty easy to arrange is difficult . . . it's [school based/administrative] logistics." None of the schools where the study participants teach are truly rural, but that should not be an impediment to providing opportunities for land-based learning "because all land on Turtle Island is Indigenous land" (Bowra et al., 2021, p.134), and the land is "a powerful tool in the decolonizing process of engaging non-Indigenous peoples in discourse surrounding Indigenous ways of knowing, teaching, and learning" (Bowra et al, 2021, p. 139; see also Banga et al.; Paperson, 2014; Scully, 2020). Unfortunately, the lack of support for allowing students to get onto the land, even in their own neighbourhoods, is a direct impediment to creating an atmosphere of authentic learning, as "the land is the key to life, language, culture, and knowledge for Indigenous people" (Bowra et al., 2021, p. 139). As a result, despite their best intentions, the teacher participants in this study have had little success implementing even simple land-based learning experiences for their students in the years since Covid 19 restrictions have been lifted, limiting the efficacy of the course as a tool of relationship building and decolonization through increased cultural knowledge.

Another important resource for course development is access to community members, knowledge-keepers, and Elders. Unfortunately, that area is also lacking for the participants in this study. Each of the teachers interviewed wanted community connection, but none reported any specific assistance from their centres for education to support those relationships. It is important to note that there are many established guidelines for respectful creation of relationships with Elders working with teachers and students, as well as protocols for honoraria and correct compensation (Bear, 2012; Northwest Territories, 2013; Telegraph-Journal, 2024), and so it

would appear that there are boards of education who are providing this support backed by written policy. It was noted by three of the study participants that they are aware of possible Mi'kmaw community connections (personal friends and persons with whom they share relationships) who could provide professional development to them as teachers and who might be able to come into classrooms, but that there was not compensation available through school budgeting for these services. The remaining three study participants lacked personal connections to any potential Mi'kmaw knowledge keepers, communities, or Elders, and so did not even have the possibility of accessing culturally responsible professional development (see also Peters, 2015; Peters, 2016a). Sadly, for all participants whether connected or not, the knowledge and learning of Indigenous people were, for the most part, not available to them as a result of lack of funding, time constraints to explore avenues of working with (or even locating) Indigenous organizations who offer to come to schools at no cost, and once again, the inevitable red tape generated by a school system awash in bureaucracy. Ironically, the one Indigenous resource person who consistently made themselves available to each of the participants was the Indigenous student support worker assigned to the school. According to the job description for Indigenous student support workers, their job is to work directly with Indigenous students in the school to "ensure improved achievement and a positive school experience" (Halifax Regional, 2024, Scope of Responsibilities section, para. 1) for Indigenous students, not to assist teachers with culturally relevant programming. Nonetheless, the experience of the study participants was that the Indigenous support workers in their schools did take time from their already oversubscribed daily schedules to help *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* teachers with curriculum development and Indigenous pedagogies. Listening to the experiences of the participants, the teachers in this study are using every resource available to them that supports Indigenous ways of being and knowing,

and then taking the generously offered opportunities to meet with and learn from Indigenous support workers as they work to create a course that more closely follows cultural pedagogies. It is unfortunate that those resources are not supported more directly through their centres for education. Wotherspoon and Milne's (2020) policy analysis examines the resource commitment to reconciliation of school systems across Canada. Their conclusions reflected the experiences of the teachers in this study, as they wrote,

> the policy documents and statements [of school boards] represent a kind of public performance—idealized broad statements and wish lists with . . . few concrete statements on tasks and timeframes. The implementation of initiatives in response to the TRC Calls to Action across provincial and territorial jurisdictions in Canada . . . appear to be somewhat piecemeal with little concerted centralized efforts or communication at the national (see for example Government of Canada, 2018), provincial and territorial, or local levels . . . If progress is going to be made towards reconciliation, stakeholders at all levels of the education system need to put words into action. (p. 16)

Similarly, as school boards and post-secondary educational institutions across Canada work to address the TRC's *Education for Reconciliation Calls to Action*, it is clear that adequate funding for Indigenous knowledge-keepers to be added to those systems to work with educators is a necessity for programs to succeed (Newhouse & Quantick, 2022; Trimbee, 2020).

Context is always a part of teaching. The teachers in this study understand how their own positionality along with the circumstances of their schools and the larger society that surrounds them all work in concert to create the *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* course they bring to students. With five of six participants not identifying as Mi'kmaw or Indigenous, there were feelings expressed during the interviews of unease about presenting culturally specific subject matter and

pedagogies that, coming from a non-Indigenous person, might appear appropriative or disingenuous. This worry is not without reason, as when one is not of a culture one will, without intended malice, make errors and may create offense as a result of ignorance or incomplete knowledge. As an example, the Mi'kmaw language, like the languages of many Indigenous people (Fontaine, 2018), is considered sacred. In response, certain non-Indigenous teachers in the study have expressed trepidation in teaching its vocabulary as they worry about creating unintentional offense with mispronunciation or incorrect translation. This worry about making mistakes is addressed within the literature (Bascuñan et al., 2022; Carroll et al., 2020; Downey, 2018; Koops, 2018; Rice et al., 2022). The overall conclusion of the researchers writing about this trepidation is that mistakes are a part of learning, and that a greater good on the road to decolonization and reconciliation is achieved with the attempt to impart knowledge knowing that the learning may be imperfect rather than to stay silent, that "halting education due to worries is not an option" (Bascuñan et al., 2022, p. 185), and

> moving from anxiety and feelings of discomfort to action is necessary for educators in all settler colonial contexts . . . Although we can never be 'perfect' as settlers, we can aim to be imperfect accomplices – always striving to work with and for Indigenous peoples on their lands. (Carroll et al., 2020, p. 17)

Without negating the idea that being imperfect accomplices to Indigenous people is better than not engaging at all, there must also be recognition that there is no actual getting around the fact that settlers are trespassers who have no intention of leaving. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) address this specifically through the concept of settlers' moves to innocence—that when faced with the understanding that they, "enlightened" settlers, are still complicit in trespass and colonization of Indigenous lands and crimes against Indigenous people there is resistance to

accepting this responsibility. Bascuñan et al. (2022) write about moves to innocence as almost inevitable for settler teachers, and advise that "teachers can mitigate these risks by always questioning their own actions and motives" (p. 194). As mentioned previously, five of the six participants in the study are settlers. Each of these teachers talked about their own understandings of responsibility toward decolonization and admitted that not only do they have feelings of guilt about Canada's relationship to Indigenous people, but they recognized that their own commitment to a more just society is limited by personal constructs of what they have and why. Returning to Bascuñan et al. (2022), to address how one makes their way, as a teacher, through the cognitive dissonance of teaching reconciliation while continuing to trespass on Indigenous land, "we urge educators to continue to self-reflect, bring treaty-based curriculum and Indigenous communities' authentic collaboration into their classrooms, and trouble their trespass on stolen lands" (p. 197).

Beyond the personal introspection of positionality for the study participants are the external factors of educational policies in Nova Scotia and the working conditions for high school teachers more generally. It is interesting to note that while all the *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* teachers interviewed said that they try to be student centred and find that the course is best suited to a project-based format, there were concerns voiced about school board policy statements around evaluation, which prioritize outcomes-based education (Department of Education, 2022). The difficulty for the majority of participants centres around the outcomes-based principle of concept mastery, deemed best demonstrated through traditionally western assessment tools like formal testing (Brady, 1996) that clash with more wholistic pedagogies which allow individualized learning that they wish to use in the course. Within the literature is the

acknowledgement that outcome-based learning uses the modal verb will as a central tenet of the pedagogy; there is no plural perspective that "students should, might, could, can, or may . . . and not some or most or many, but 'students will.' [demonstrate the outcome]" (Wien & Dudley-Marling, 1998, p. 407). Reflecting on the principles behind this pedagogy, it becomes apparent that the teachers in this study, who want to provide multiple modalities for learning, may not find this supported or encouraged while working for an educational ministry that seems ready (by reason of their published policies) to support a philosophy (outcome-based learning) that discourages holistic learning choices (Cox et al, 1997; Wien & Dudley-Marling, 1998). Looking to the words of Aoki (1993),

> curriculum developers and curriculum supervisors should heed thoughtful practicing teachers . . . giving legitimacy to the wisdom held in [the] lived stories of people . . . most importantly, curriculum developers and curriculum supervisors need to learn to listen to the wisdom of practicing educators. (p. 267)

Teacher Workload

A final consideration of how the participants teach the course is the establishment of workload. Again, the teachers interviewed for this study all voiced concerns about how they are tasked with what they teach, the increasing number of courses and students they are assigned as a result of contract negotiations, and how there seem to be no considerations of what is optimal for either teachers or students within those agreements (Global News, 2024). The most common observation about how courses are given to teachers by administration is the "one and done" assigning of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* sections to teachers with no background or particular interest in the course. As Shari said, it's

> always the new teacher [who] gets "stuck" with a section . . . and they . . . make up some stuff . . . and it might fit it might not . . . and [they] go ugh I hope I don't have to do that again.

This observation brings to light a practice that places particular courses in an academic class hierarchy, where a credit that is not particularly valued-or is seen as a "bird" course- is simply foisted onto whoever is convenient (new teachers), and that teacher, often with little to no support, simply bears the burden until they have enough seniority to get the courses with more perceived value (Andrews & Quinn, 2004; Feng, 2010).

There was also indirect mention of the continuing trend toward a neoliberal view of education as valuable only as it provides a perceived direct economic advantage for students as a step on the road to future employment (Carpenter et al., 2012; Scheutze et al., 2011). Both Paul and Annette explicitly discussed their experiences with lack of support for teacher professional development and course funding of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* as tied to the perception within their schools and centres for education that *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* is an arts course and, as a result, not worthy of any extra expenditures to support either new or experienced teachers to deepen their understanding of the course material and methodologies. In their experience, the Nova Scotia education system is marginalizing its investment in both the course and its teachers because there is no perceived economic gain for students flowing from the credit. Their experiences are reflected in the literature, which comments on this trend toward educational systems directing resources primarily to skill-based education:

> Everywhere we look these days there is evidence of education being understood as an economic good. Parents navigate 'education markets' in the hope of choosing 'the best' school for their children. Policymakers talk about the economic benefits of increasing

> young people's literacy and numeracy skills . . . public schools increasingly operate like private businesses . . . More than ever before, school principals are positioned as managers, accountable to the needs and wishes of 'clients' (parents and students) . . . The content of school curricula is also being reimagined in line with changing economic demands . . . Traditional 'academic' curricula are being transformed, with new 'twenty first century skills' and a focus on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). (Savage, 2017, p. 143)

The workload issue most often referenced by the participants in the study is the increase in 2021 in teaching time from six out of eight courses over the school year to seven out of eight (Nova Scotia Parents, 2021; Saltwire, 2021). As of the 2022/23 school year, high school teachers have had significantly less time in the day to provide help to students and to prepare for class. The addition of more students (through the extra seventh course) then creates an exponential effect on teacher workload, as those students require teaching and support as well. According to the organization Nova Scotia Parents for Public Education, this removal of unassigned instructional time occurred "at a time when students need more help than ever" (2021, Claim 3 section, para. 1). New teachers like Claude found that a timetable with this extra course meant that there was literally no time in the school day for him to meet with mentor teachers or other support staff (including the Indigenous student support worker). It should be noted that many support staff positions in Nova Scotia high schools are either part time or split between more than one school, and so not being able to meet with these staff members during their actual work hours meant that there was no way to meet at all. Mentor teachers are also in the same position with work day time challenges, and so to schedule professional development with other teachers did mean looking to the pre or post school day, which also presents challenges.

This dilemma of more students and less time is once again an educational construct created on a capitalist business model of neoliberal ideals that value most "efficiency and accountability through measurable performance standards and extensive standardized testing" (Scheutze et al., 2011, p. 79), demonstrating the change in school culture(s) from "a collectivist and public orientation to norms of individualism and . . . parental choice that is the result of neoliberal economism" (Scheutze et al., 2011, p.79). Without the time to work with colleagues, to connect with students, and to just think about the process of course building, the teachers in this study are being moved away from becoming what Giroux refers to as transformatory intellectuals (2003) who work with students to think about why things are not just "how to". The participants in the study recognized Giroux's concern that being tasked with more courses to manage every day is resulting in "the devaluation of critical intellectual work on the part of teachers and students" (Giroux, 2003, p. 2) and that as a result "teaching is reduced to training" (Giroux, 2003, p. 2).

What Participants Heard From Students

The intention of this study was to provide teachers of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* an opportunity to relate their lived experiences of teaching the course, and subsequently to reflect on those experiences in relation to the concept of reconciliation and relationship building between Mi'kmaw and non-Mikmaw people through public education. As teachers, our experiences in classrooms are entwined with the experiences of students, and so it is important to listen to what teachers hear from students about the courses they teach. In this study, I did not speak directly with students concerning their experiences of the course but focused instead on teachers' perceptions of how students view *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*. As a result, the student experiences in this reflective piece are curated through the eyes of the participant teachers.

Mi'kmaw Studies 11 is one of five possible options students may choose in order to fulfill their Canadian history credit requirement to graduate from high school in Nova Scotia. During their interviews, each of the participants expressed the idea that *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* is often not viewed as academically equivalent to the other available choices for a Canadian history credit within the school system. This perspective is reflected in the literature as a delegitimizing of curriculum and pedagogies that diverge from the western canon (Gillies, 2023; Peters, 2016b; Sarangapani, 2022). Students are influenced by what they hear and see as valued versus "easy" choices put forward by guidance departments; parents and guardians are often concerned with enacted curriculum that does not reflect school as they remember it and so press for courses that appear to be more valued academically from a Eurocentric perspective. According to four of the six teachers, the option that is perceived by students to be the most academically challenging from a typically Eurocentric perspective is *Canadian History11*. The *Canadian History 11* course is usually presented with a traditionally western social studies pedagogy of note taking, paper writing, formal testing, and a final examination. The two teachers (Annette and Shari) who did not feel students at their schools view *Canadian History 11* as the "harder" option are also the teachers who construct their *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* courses using many of the same traditional western pedagogies (formal papers and testing/ examinations) as the *Canadian History 11* course. *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*, as discussed in the previous chapter, has been taught by study participants primarily with a pedagogical focus that is student-centred and project-based, and this seems to contribute to a feeling from many students that the course is less academically rigorous.

The concern expressed by all of the participant teachers is that *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*, when taught with pedagogies that are less western and more Indigenous, has been perceived by their administrators and guidance departments as an easier credit option, and as a result, within

participant schools, a particular demographic of student gravitates to or is encouraged/pushed toward the course. Both Shari and Annette described guidance departments in their schools adding large number of students whose first language is not English to sections of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*. Annette has been told by guidance counsellors that they perceive *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* to be an easier option for these students to get their Canadian history credit than either *Canadian History 11* or *African Canadian Studies 11*. This practice of finding the "easy" credit may not be overtly intended as colonialist, but it does reflect a tendency of questioning the competence of learners "who do not speak the language of the host country . . . This 'deficit' view of newly arrived migrant students is inscribed within nationalist and imperialist ideologies, rooted in colonialism and white supremacy (Welply, 2023, p. 63; see also Hall, 2019). The result for EAL learners is the addition of a layer of colonial paternalism to their Canadian education.

Claude, Paul, Francesca, and Laura have all experienced students telling them that they chose *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* because they either feared the western academic expectations of *Canadian History 11* or were told by guidance counsellors that it might be a better fit for them because they were not "academically minded" and would probably be more successful in *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*. There is a long and documented history of course stratification in North American high schools that is predicated on perceived difficulty and prestige, with sciences and mathematics courses being the most prestigious and all other disciplines falling into line behind those two (Davies & Aurini, 2011; Delany, 1991). Even within a single discipline (Social Studies), there is perception that because a course is presented with material and methods that stray aware from the traditional western canon it is somehow an easy option or not to be granted as high a valuation on a transcript (Khoramshah, 2019), and as a result student expectations of what may be expected of them when they take *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* are sometimes skewed.

Depending on the individual student and the particular teacher, students of the teachers participating in this study have increasingly expressed their receptiveness to their teachers for what might be termed the alternative methods of learning (outside the expected Eurocentric construct) that most of the participants employ in the teaching of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*.

Returning to Francesca's reflections in the previous chapter, the overarching discussion for the majority of students enrolled in *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* (according to the participants) is coming to terms with the hard truths about Canada's, both historic and present day, treatment of and relationship with Indigenous peoples. In her words, "they [non-Indigenous students] don't understand how all of these things have happened and how they have shaped the experience of being Indigenous in Canada". Francesca, Paul, and Shari's teaching experiences of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* all include students who began the course disbelieving documented historical truths about treaties, reserved lands, and residential schools, often as a consequence of family or community beliefs. Each recalled that over the course of the semester there was progress for many students towards an acceptance of these truths. Additionally, Shari said that just in the past few years students are more willing to engage with difficult truths from the start of the semester, and she "feel[s] like more than other courses, it's the one that goes home and . . . the kids get really proud of what they've learned". A reading of related literature supports this lived experience with students, as the process of having to unlearn lies about Indigenous people told to let us (settlers) sleep at night follows a documented pattern "of working through . . . the feelings that initiate resistance (fear, anger, sadness, guilt)" (Rice et al., 2022, p. 26) as a necessary step in the road to reconciliation. *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* students are normally sixteen or seventeen years old. This is a time of life when adolescents are evaluating information and making judgements more independently than early teens (Steinberg & Morris, 2001); they are able to abstract the

experiences of others into their own psyches and thus are both uniquely ready to learn "the hard stuff" but still more emotionally vulnerable than adults (Jobson, 2020; Setiawati & Endrastuty, 2019). The experiences of these three teachers reflects this developmental reality, as they describe students who talked about the shame they felt identifying as colonizers and settlers as a result of the material they learned during *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*. Paul in particular reflected on the process of gifting difficult information to students, giving them time to sit with it (sometimes for an extended period of days or weeks), to consider the "process of unlearning and relearning" (Brant, 2022, p. 235), and then revisiting the work. Brant (2022) writes about the same process, invoking Elder Albert Marshall's concept of *Etuaptmumk*, of looking at the world with more than one perspective and describing the "work [of] having difficult conversations that confront the past, revealing the hard truths, and working through those stories" (p. 237). All three teachers related what they saw happening for many (but not all) of their settler students who faced the truths they were presented with, grappled with the emotions of guilt and anger they felt, and then moved toward empathy and action (Brar, 2024; Koelwyn, 2018). Brant (2022), without disrespect, synopsizes the process as work "intended to inspire compassion and empathy through transformative and cross-cultural understandings that encourage all to become part of an informed dialogue as we advance equity, justice, and action" (p. 236).

Connecting *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* to Reconciliation

Mi'kmaw Studies 11 is one course in a growing number of curriculum offerings for public high school students across Canada designed with an Indigenous focus. Although Nova Scotia has not made an Indigenous studies course a mandatory graduation requirement, as British Columbia and Ontario have (CBC, 2023a; CBC, 2023b), *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* is, according to the participants in this study, growing in popularity each year and is quickly becoming the most

often chosen of the options available to students to fulfill their Canadian history requirement for graduation.

Looking to the literature generated around reconciliation and public education since the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, there is discussion from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous allied scholars of how Calls to Action 62 and 63, which refer directly to the role of public education as a necessary component of reconciliation, must be actioned in the Canadian school system. Cannon speaks to this point most succinctly, saying,

> Each and every Canadian ought to receive mandatory education about law, land, and the history of settler colonialism . . .[for] efforts toward reconciliation are almost sure to fail us so long as Canadians are not taught in schools about Indigenous nationhood, shared sovereignty, interdependence, and the criteria established by courts and Canada to dispossess us of land (Cannon, 2018, p. 173).

With these thoughts in mind, *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* is well positioned to become a course that fulfills the section of Call to Action 63 that looks to build "student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect" (TRC Calls to Action, 2015, p. 7) and assist in strengthening the relationship between non-Indigenous and Indigenous people in Nova Scotia (Battiste, 2013; Hanson, 2017).

Reflecting on the experiences described by the study participants, an enormous challenge that they all faced was how to work toward a climate of reconciliation with classrooms full of teenagers who may or may not want to be there, who often have understandings of Indigenous people and their histories that have been formed in error by their families and communities, and who may or may not wish to participate in the often painful process of examining and perhaps changing their own belief systems. In the words of Paul's student, "this isn't fair . . . you're

making me think". Newhouse and Quantick's "Teaching Indigenous Studies in a Time of Reconciliation" (2022) is a description and analysis of their creation of the mandatory first year Indigenous credit requirement at Trent University (Peterborough, Ontario) in 2017. Although the credit Newhouse and Quantick created was for university students, there is a remarkable similarity in what they and the study participants experienced as teachers of an introductory Indigenous course. Reflecting on those same challenges, they write,

> Teaching about reconciliation requires . . . that we challenge the world that many of our students grew up in. We must also challenge our students' understandings of how the world works and their positions, often of privilege, in it. Teaching about reconciliation means that we create trouble for our students who then go on to create trouble for their parents and at some point . . . create trouble for the country in which they live, challenging it to live up to its ideals. (Newhouse & Quantick, 2022, p. 247)

Newhouse and Quantick's reflections on these issues might provide some insight for *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* teachers. Looking to ways of teaching, the authors explain, "Indigenous pedagogical approaches ask us to start where the students are and where we are" (Newhouse & Quantick, 2022, p. 263). A specific example involved the discussion with students to explicitly talk about guilt as not an intent of the course, and instead to ask students to reframe those feelings as part of learning about the past in order to go forward to a better future for all people, "that learning the past was the best way of ensuring that it didn't happen again" (Newhouse & Quantick, 2022, p. 263). The action of teaching the information, asking students to acknowledge the material, and then using the knowledge to move toward the work of reconciliation is the beginning of transformation. Newhouse and Quantick use Thomas King's *The Truth About Stories* as a central reference text throughout their chapter, and as they close their reflection they

return to King, who quotes from Nigerian author Ben Okri's *A Way of Being Free*. Okri writes, "If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives" (as cited in King, 2003, p. 153), and this is exactly what Newhouse and Quantick and the participants in this study want for their students—a life change, a desire to work meaningfully toward reconciliation.

Future Dreams for *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*

The final formal question that I asked participants during their interviews was about their future dreams for teaching *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*. I attempted to phrase this question as widely as possible, telling participants that they should feel able to speak about everything they wished for themselves as teachers of the course and for their students. I even invoked the "pie in the sky" (Brittanica dictionary, n.d.) metaphor, hoping to convey that all possibilities were welcome, no matter how far outside the practical. The considered responses that came back to me were "dreams" about three things: the opportunity to engage in land-based education with students, to learn from Elders and Mi'kmaw knowledge keepers, and to have more time available to be with each other for professional development.

As I consider their "dreams", I reflect on what seem to be requests that are so reasonable, and I question why they have to be dreams and are not simply available supports for course development that should be regularly granted by the participants' centres for education. These teachers are looking for a future *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* that includes Mi'kmaw people as accessible scholars fairly compensated and treated as respected subject matter experts by the Nova Scotia education system. They want opportunities outside of a western classroom setting to engage in meaningful Indigenous pedagogies with their students. Finally, they want the dream of almost every teacher I've ever worked with, and that I share: time to work with each other to create more meaningful and rich learning opportunities for their students (Rose & Whitty, 2010). In

Jennifer Tinkham's 2013 dissertation examining the decolonization of Canadian history courses in Nova Scotia, she called for these same supports for social studies teachers, asserting that educators who are given the opportunity to develop cultural knowledge can better meet the needs of all their students. Over a decade has passed since her work was published, and little has changed. Michelle Pidgeon (2022), in "Indigenous Resiliency, Renewal, and Resurgence in Decolonizing Canadian Higher Education" provides a reflection for educators, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous to consider how education might look in a decolonized future where meaningful change has been implemented. She writes:

> Pause . . . Close your eyes . . . Take a deep breath . . .
>
> You are outside. You can feel the fresh spring grass underneath you.
>
> You hear the rustling of the leaves and the sounds of the birds above . . .
>
> You also hear a drum, like a heartbeat, gently present around you.
>
> You have a sense of calm and balance upon smelling the aroma of
>
> sweetgrass and sage lingering in the air.
>
> Open your eyes.
>
> You are in a circle.
>
> An Elder has just opened with a cultural prayer.
>
> You are part of the journey.
>
> You are here to do the work.
>
> You belong.

> You are part of the circle. (p. 32)

What a dream it would be if this scene was a part of the not too distant future for *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* teachers.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

Although this chapter is technically called the conclusion, I would like to reframe it instead as the final curve of a circle, a process that ends only to begin again with another question (Absolon, 2020; Atleo, 2008). As a settler researcher working at the edges of Indigenous knowledge, I chose phenomenology as the methodology for my work because I was curious about the specific experiences of teachers of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* and found connection between this very western curricular structure and the Indigenous pedagogy of story (Cajete, 1994; Deloria, Jr. & Wildcat, 2001; Pack, 2019; Struthers & Peden-McAlpine, 2005). The stories told in this project come from six teachers talking about their experiences teaching *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* in public high schools in Nova Scotia. Their stories are their own, and from those words emerged common themes concerning how they teach this course. They spoke about their experiences with course material, pedagogical choices, students, the support (or lack thereof) from administrators, centres for education and the community, the concepts and actions that come into play when one is teaching about a living culture from (mostly) the outside, and their understandings of reconciliation as a stepped process that must begin with the truth that comes from listening, unlearning, relearning, and taking action (Brant, 2022; Hare, 2022; Palmater, 2019).

In this concluding chapter, I first offer a discussion of recommendations for teaching the course addressed to the education system in Nova Scotia inspired by the stories of the study participants. This is followed by a consideration of the limitations of this particular study and how other perspectives might be useful in follow up work. The chapter concludes with my final thoughts about the project and a musing on how to go from the performative to the active in support of creating education for reconciliation.

Recommendations

Access to Mi'kmaw Knowledge Keepers And Elders

Teaching *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* is made more complicated for the participants in this study because those who are not Indigenous shared feelings that maybe they aren't qualified, that they are unsure about whether they can ever be the right teacher for this job. Two settler teachers in this study stated emphatically that the best circumstance would be for Mi'kmaw people to teach this course. Despite this acknowledgement, every one of the participants agreed that they want to teach this course, that in fact it is often the portion of their teaching assignment they enjoy the most. To this same point, every participant, both settler and Mi'kmaw, wanted more direct support from Mi'kmaw people and Mi'kmaw authored resources to develop the course.

Following their expressed needs, my first recommendation to the Nova Scotia Department of Education is to create funding structures and access models for *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* teachers to work with Mi'kmaw knowledge keepers and Elders, on the terms of the Mi'kmaq themselves, in the ongoing development of the course. It is time for the Nova Scotia Department of Education to provide direct support and opportunities for teachers to work with the Mi'kmaw community to support the creation of course resources.

Update The Curriculum Document

On page one of the *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* curriculum document, the following key principle is provided to teachers as the focus of the course: "through inquiry into Mi'kmaw issues past, present, and future, students will be able to answer the question, 'How am I connected to the First peoples of Nova Scotia?'" (Nova Scotia, 2023, p. 1). At close to the ten year mark since *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* was launched, much has changed in the creation and

implementation of introductory Indigenous education courses at both secondary and post-secondary institutions.

It is time to refocus the *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* curriculum away from a settler-colonial perspective of "how am I connected . . ." (Nova Scotia, 2023, p. 1) to Mi'kmaw people, which implies a Eurocentric concentration on the individual understanding the world in terms of themselves. Instead, an updated curriculum that works toward a reconciliACTION (National Centre, n.d.) method of pedagogy beginning with historical learning and leading to actions that "address historical injustices and present-day wrongs" (National Centre, n.d., ReconciliACTION Plans, para. 9) would provide teachers of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* with a more direct path to anti-colonial teaching. The teachers in this study recognized that it is no longer enough to show students who they (students) are in relationship to Indigenous people; it is now time for the classroom to be a space for real change. This recognition is a beginning, but these teachers are ready and willing to engage with so much more.

Looking to Dion (2007), the teachers in this study are reflective of her assertion that teachers in the Canadian public school system are encouraged (on the surface) to include Indigenous content and pedagogies in their classes and yet are provided with so little beyond the dominant discourses to create understandings for themselves. Indeed, "until teachers have an opportunity to investigate and transform their understandings . . . of the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada" (Dion, 2007, p. 330) then meaningful curriculum and teaching toward reconciliation cannot occur. These teachers want the support of a curriculum that allows them to intentionally politicize their classrooms as they work toward a pedagogy of anti-colonial education. In the words of Haig-Brown and Green (2022), "The calls

are out. The directives are there. Read, listen, and learn. Let us begin the next phase of this long overdue work" (p. 220).

Land-Based Teaching

Bowra et al. (2021) reflect on the importance of non-Indigenous people learning from the land as an act of reconciliation, describing land-based learning as a "a powerful tool in the decolonizing process of engaging non-Indigenous peoples in discourse surrounding Indigenous ways of knowing, teaching, and learning" (p. 139). Unfortunately, the study participants reported there was little to no support for land-based learning opportunities for students in *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*, with the main barriers being lack of funding and cumbersome school and board policies hampering students from leaving regular classrooms.

Something meaningful must be done, and a model for it has been created in the environmental science course called *Netukulimk 12* currently being piloted in Nova Scotia public high schools. This course has a specific focus on land-based learning and is providing these opportunities for students (CBC News, 2024; Nova Scotia, 2024). One might ask why these resources are available for one course and not another? Study participant Paul commented directly on this situation, remarking that *Netukulimk 12* is a senior level science course and Mi'kmaw Studies is a grade 11 social studies course, so "make the connection". An examination of the difference between who is expected by the system to be in a senior science class (*Netukulimk 12*) versus an open social studies class (*Mi'kmaw Studies 11*) points to a bias of resources like land-based learning opportunities being made available to university bound science students rather than the perceived remedial students in a project-based social studies class. Now that a precedent exists in the school system with *Netukulimk 12* in Nova Scotia to support land-based learning for a course, the time is here for teachers and school administrators

to expect the Nova Scotia Department of Education to provide these same resources for *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*. There is need for a course whose enrollment is growing, that is accessible to more students than a senior level science class, and whose specific mandate is relationship building and cultural understanding, to have access to land-based learning. Returning to Bowra et al. (2021), whose words lend direct support to land-based learning as necessary for non-Indigenous people:

> For settlers on Turtle Island, being on and with the land is also a time of reflection on the ways in which settler capitalism has and continues to wreak havoc on the land and its inhabitants. In this way, the land is a place of decolonization and reconciliation . . . Indigenous-centred land-based learning is a means to promote decolonizing goals. (p. 134)

Education Reform

In addition to their specific reflections on *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*, the participants spoke about an education system they see failing in front of their eyes. They spoke of students out of control, of workload increasing yearly, of less time for planning, fewer options for students, less time to devote to extracurricular activities and the life of the school, of colleagues leaving in unprecedented numbers, of simply being burnt out (CBC, 2022; Global, 2024a; Global 2024b; Kelloway et al., 2015; Halifax Examiner, 2022; Halifax Examiner, 2024; News-NSTU, 2021; Pacaol, 2021). According to the study participants, the breaking point was reached two years ago when their workload was increased from six out of eight teaching sections to seven out of eight (Nova Scotia Parents, 2021; Saltwire 2021). A telling statistic is revealed in Agyapong et al.'s (2024) quantitative analysis of burnout in Nova Scotia teachers, with data collected during the

2022/2023 school year, which reports emotional exhaustion in 77% of the teachers who responded to the survey.

The first step for the study participants to recovering their work/life balance is for the provincial government to restore that stolen time to the teaching day. Every one of the teachers in this study saw a return to teaching six out of eight classes as an enormous step in the right direction to lessening their feelings of burnout. By restoring the high school teachers' workload to six courses, the Nova Scotia Department of Education would be choosing a path that "valu[es] emotional work, collegiality and collaboration and establish[es] a workplace climate that respects teachers' professional decisions and encourages a healthy work-life balance" (Acton & Glasgow, 2015, p. 110; see also Agyapong et al., 2024; Kelloway et al., 2014).

Avenues For Further Research And Study Limitations

Having now discussed the recommendations of my study, I will turn toward a discussion of its limitations and potential areas for further research that arise from it. This study focusses on the experiences of six specific teachers of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* working in a primarily urban setting. Additionally, the study asked those teachers to talk about their own memories, which are inherently limiting. Our time together was also limited, and so there were topics that were not explored as a result. Also, these are the recollected memories of only six people, and I recognize that there are many other teachers who care about Indigenous education in Nova Scotia high schools who could provide more perspectives on the research question, especially those working in geographical areas away from large, urban areas.

In the next paragraphs, I have listed groups of people invested in *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* who could provide important insights for the future of the course and more generally Indigenous studies courses in Nova Scotia secondary schools.

The first group whose voices are not heard directly in this work are the students of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*. Although the participants spoke about their experiences with students, there is much to be gained by hearing from the students themselves. There are three distinct groups of students who might shed insight on the course: students thinking about enrolling, students currently in *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*, and students who have completed the course.

Again, as my focus was current teachers of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*, I did not have the opportunity to hear from members of the Mi'kmaw community directly about their impressions of the course and its mandate to provide Nova Scotia high school students with an opportunity to discover their "connect[ions] to the First Peoples of Nova Scotia" (Nova Scotia, 2023, p. 1). As I reflect personally on this particular limitation of the work, I am grateful for the reading of my research proposal by Mi'kmaw Ethics Watch (Eskinuapimk) (Cape Breton, 2024) and their assent for this research to proceed under exemption.

There is also room in this circle of voices for the administrators, policy makers, and politicians. The provincial government passes instruction about educational mandates to their department of education who create policies. Policies are then administered by the eight regional centres for education in Nova Scotia. At the school level, principals work through policies and their implications in the real world of schools. Every one of these levels of leadership has a role in how schools are run and what gets approved and funded. Knowing what the people who control the funding and the implementation of policy are thinking would be a valuable resource for the ongoing development of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* as a resource of anticolonial education.

Finally, there were the limitations created by my position as a teaching colleague for the participants. Several I know well; all are people who I have some relationship with as a result of working in the school system of their centre for education. As well, because I am a teacher, there is a kind of innate knowledge that is difficult to bracket out of the work. There may have been moments in the interviews when someone who is not a teacher within the system would have asked for clarification that I did not see or understood intuitively. The participants may also have spoken to me with a sort of teacher shorthand that would have been more fully explored by a researcher who did not share so many of their direct experiences. Finally, despite the confidential nature of the research and the anonymizing of the participants, I do think there are topics that might be addressed more fully with a research platform that is fully anonymous, or conversely by a researcher who is completely external to the public education system in Nova Scotia.

Final Thoughts

I started this project with an intense interest in the specific formal and enacted curriculum choices that teachers of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* were making as they taught the course. Throughout my own teaching career, I have spent countless hours creating curriculum and considering how best to present it in meaningful ways to my students, and so I thought this focus, which I understood innately, would allow me to pose authentic questions to other teachers and gain some insight into their classroom worlds. This did end up being true, but it also became so much more for me.

Using phenomenology as my organizing methodology required that I consider how to bracket my own biases about teaching and education as I listened to the study participants describe their experiences of teaching *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*. I discovered exactly how deeply I was influenced by western pedagogies and what it meant to be "the teacher" in the room.

Hearing from certain participants who were so completely confident in letting their students direct learning and create curriculum was eye-opening. Their descriptions of teaching gave me a deeper understanding of what Michelle Pidgeon (2022) meant when she described a core tenet of Indigenous praxis as "everyone [as] a learner and a teacher at the same time" (p. 29), and to accept with humility that to disregard the two-way nature of the relationship is to miss the entire point of so many Indigenous pedagogies. During the course of this work, I have spent many hours considering what I've been told by the participants and what I've read in support of their reflections. It has all brought me to a place where I now feel a bit more comfort with my own discomfort, of wanting to trust that it's going to be okay if students make more of their own decisions about what they want to learn and how. In some ways it has become a relief to accept that I don't necessarily have to manage it all, but instead can work with a class to create a consent based model of education where students opt in to "hav[ing] an adult assist them in their education" (Rollo, 2022, p. 125), not control it.

In her blog post "Moving from performative to accomplice", Carolyn Roberts describes what it means to be an accomplice to Indigenous people:

> An accomplice is someone who is always learning more, asking more questions, and always taking it upon themselves to do better in the spaces they are in. Knowing that in education, the narrative is always shifting and it will always be a learning journey, not a destination. (Roberts, n.d., para. 8)

As a settler who is working to be an accomplice, I cannot leave this work without a reflection on my own settler "moves to innocence" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 9), which are centred squarely in "Moves to innocence IV: Free your mind and the rest will follow" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 19).

It's a long quotation, but I believe in this case it makes sense to bring the words of Tuck and Yang (2012) directly to the page:

> Another settler move to innocence is to focus on decolonizing the mind, or the cultivation of critical consciousness, as if it were the sole activity of decolonization; to allow conscientization to stand in for the more uncomfortable task of relinquishing stolen land. We agree that curricula, literature, and pedagogy can be crafted to aid people in learning to see settler colonialism, to articulate critiques of settler epistemology, and set aside settler histories and values in search of ethics that reject domination and exploitation; this is not unimportant work. However, the front-loading of critical consciousness building can waylay decolonization, even though the experience of teaching and learning to be critical of settler colonialism can be so powerful it can feel like it is indeed making change. Until stolen land is relinquished, critical consciousness does not translate into action that disrupts settler colonialism. (p. 19)

In this research, I have focussed on critical consciousness, and I get stuck in my head thinking about what needs to be done to support decolonization and the rights of Indigenous peoples to reclaim all that has been taken by European colonizers (of whom I am one). But what am I really doing to make change? Even in this work I've asked mostly settler teachers to reflect on their classrooms filled with mostly settler students about a course whose organizing principle is expressed through the almost paternalistic question that focusses the course away from Mi'kmaw people and onto non-Indigenous people, "How am I connected to the First Peoples of Nova Scotia?" (Nova Scotia, 2023, p. 1). My research asks, "What is it like to teach *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* in a public high school in Nova Scotia?" and, looking at this question from the perspective of Tuck and Yang's (2012) fourth move to innocence, it is uncomfortable to consider

that a majority of what I do in support of anticolonialism is more performative than active. This same issue is reflected in the experiences of the participants; they have been disempowered by an education system that makes it uncomfortable to present students with the hard truths about decolonization. More than one of the teachers participating in this work has spoken about the difficulty of working with students toward a level of consciousness raising that might make it possible to engage in meaningful steps toward acts of reconciliation. When an education system pays lip service to reconciliation and decolonization but is unwilling to support students knowing the harsh truths about Nova Scotia's relationship (historic and present) with Mi'kmaw people, teachers are left in a place of unwilling disingenuity that becomes synonymous with Tuck and Yang's (2012) ironic "free your mind and the rest will follow" (p.19). In this moment of personal discomfort, and uncomfortable empathy for the position of the study participants, I look to Rachel George's (2022) words, "that reconciliation and justice cannot be rooted in the performative inclusion of Indigenous knowledge, but instead must manifest in tangible actions that honour and respect Indigenous knowledge, authority, and self-determination" (p. 105). The complications of how to get beyond the performative and to the tangible actions of reconciliation are the next steps for me, the participant teachers in this work, and ultimately Canadian society. To reprise the words of Michelle Pidgeon (2022), "You are part of the journey./ You are here to do the work"(p. 32).

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Footnotes

[1]Mi'kmaq people are the original inhabitants of the land that is currently called eastern Canada (this includes Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland, and the Gaspé Peninsula of Quebec). Their traditional lands also include northeastern Maine (U.S.A.). The Mi'kmaq have lived in this region, which they call Mi'kma'ki, for approximately 13,500 years. [1]

[2] As a historical note, *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* is a replacement course for *Mi'kmaw Studies 10*, a social studies course offered to Nova Scotia high school students initially in 1996 in response to initiatives created by Mi'kmaw communities in Nova Scotia (J. Boutilier, personal communication, October 11, 2023). *Mi'kmaw Studies 10* was created by the Nova Scotia Curriculum Authority in concert with Mi'kmaw Elders and scholars. *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* was written as a grade 11 program in 2011-2012 in response to complaints that *Mi'kmaw Studies 10* was being ghettoised in schools and not viewed as fulfilling its original mandate as an opportunity for students in Nova Scotia high schools to learn about Mi'kmaw people, their culture and history (J. Boutilier, personal communication, October 11, 2023). Despite the fact that *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* was created before the publication of the TRC's Calls to Action, it is currently well positioned to join the growing list of courses across Canada that aim to be a part of reconciliation through education.

[3] I use "western" here as an approximation for Eurocentric, that is focusing on the tradition of a European education system as superior.

[4]Mi'kmaq is plural or collective. Mi'kmaw is singular. It may also be used as an adjective where it precedes a noun. See Cape Breton University. [2020, October 9]. *Commonly used Indigenous terms & phrases you may not be familiar with*.

[5]See Faye et al. (2006) "Nazi foundations in Heidegger's work".

[6] "Western culture often perceives time as a linear progression that advances from past to present to future in a straight line. In contrast, many Native American cultures observe that the rhythm of the world is circular . . . time tends to be experienced as cyclical and rhythmic, rather than linear and progress oriented" (Brown & Cousins, 2001, p. 9).

[7] See First Nations Tax Commission (2024).

Appendix A

Questions provided to participants for them to consider explicating during the interview.

1. How would you describe your teaching in this course? (Prompt: thinking about curriculum development, classroom teaching, evaluation. / Can you describe anything you do differently in this course in terms of teaching than you do in other courses?)
2. How would you describe your experiences with students enrolled in this course? (Prompt: Can you think of specific responses from the students or stories from your classroom?)
3. Do you see what you might consider personal growth in students in terms of their understandings of Mi'kmaw people and culture as a result of taking the course? (Prompt: Can you share stories or experiences from your classroom?)
4. As you reflect back on teaching this course, what do you feel are the benefits of the course? (Prompt: Can you reflect on any problems/difficulties you see in the course?)
5. Have you found any constraints on how you teach the course or what you teach in the course? (Prompt: Can you reflect on this from the perspective of your positionality, your school culture, your student population)
6. Can you describe any specific support you receive for teaching this course from the school or other sources?
7. Can you describe any access you have to Mi'kmaw scholars or Elders?
8. Is there an opportunity for students to experience land-based teaching in the course?
9. How is reconciliation addressed in the course? (Prompt: Can you share stories or experiences from your classroom?)