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How Alberta Education's First Nations, Metis, and Inuit Policy Framework influences students' attitudes towards the Indigenous Peoples of Canada

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About the author

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Abstract

For decades, Indigenous education in Canada has implemented policies that provide a more culturally relevant curriculum for Indigenous students. It is thought that such a curriculum will improve morale and academic success in Indigenous students. Despite these efforts, a gap still exists between Indigenous students and their counterparts. Little attention has been given to the role that race and racism plays in the lives of Indigenous students. This study examines whether a need exists for race and racism to be addressed in the public school system. Using an Indigenous research methodology, a survey was administered to elicit non-Indigenous attitudes towards the Indigenous peoples of Canada. It was found that in the absence of an antiracist education, non-Indigenous students held negative perceptions of Indigenous peoples, as well as lacked an understanding of racism and its significance.

Keywords

race and racism; racial attitudes; racialisation; anti-oppressive education; Indigenous education; Aboriginal education

Background context

Through my educational experiences, I have come to understand that past events have a hand in shaping our current and future circumstances. I have learned how profoundly true this is for my Blackfoot People (I am a member of the Blood Tribe of the Blackfoot Confederacy, which is located in South Western Canada and North Western United States). Under the Indian Act (1876) there were two main educational policies the Canadian government used for over a century to try to assimilate Indigenous children (Prete, in press). The first educational policy was assimilation through segregation, where Indigenous children were segregated from the rest of Canada and kept on-reserve to receive their education. One of the most famous school models of this time period are the residential schools (Prete, in press; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC], 2015). The second regime was referred to as assimilation through integration, where Indigenous children were sent off-reserve to integrate among and be educated with non-Indigenous children (Dubensky & Raptis, 2017; Prete, in press; Raptis, 2011, 2018; TRC, 2015). An amendment to the Indian Act in 1985 gave the responsibility for educating Indigenous children to their respective provinces and territories (Indian Act, 1985).

I grew up during the assimilation through integration regime and attended a public school in Alberta on my people's traditional territory. During the elementary and part of my secondary experiences, in response to the amendment to the 1985 Indian Act, Alberta Education came out with its first policy framework regarding Indigenous education called the Native Education Project (NEP; Alberta Education, 1987). Through some of the NEP's initiatives, I attended Blackfoot kindergarten, and for one week out of each year of my elementary years, we had Native Awareness week where we engaged in Native American crafts, Blackfoot language learning, and Blackfoot dancing. As I progressed in my years, such programming came to an end, as did the NEP. It was found in NEP's first and only progress report that the policy framework was not meeting the needs of its students, and many of the First Nations were dissatisfied with the results (Alberta Education, 2000).

In an attempt to better meet the needs of Alberta students, Alberta Education published the First Nations, Metis, and Inuit Policy Framework (FNMIPF; 2002), which is the current policy framework in place. FNMIPF included the following: integration of "First Nations, Métis, and Inuit governance, history, treaty and Aboriginal rights, lands, cultures and languages" (Alberta Education, 2002b, p. 10) in all core classes from Kindergarten to Grade 12; and (b) the creation of culture classes: Aboriginal Studies 10-20-30. To date, there have only been two progress reports published (Alberta Education, 2004, 2008), the last being published well over a decade ago in 2008.

Alberta Education's FNMIPF is not unique; many of the other provinces within Canada have similar policies as well (Blood, 2010; Kanu, 2005; Shaw, 2002). Research across Canada has found that while the policy frameworks are in place, very few school districts, administrators and teachers are implementing the policy framework and objectives (Blood, 2010; Kanu, 2005; Shaw, 2002). For several decades, numerous sources have indicated that the attrition rates for Indigenous peoples have the highest early school departure rates[1] (Alberta School Boards Association, 2011; Assembly of First Nations, 2012; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP], 1996). The implementation of the FNMIPF has not had much success in changing these negative statistics, as Indigenous people still have high early departure rates when compared to non-Indigenous people (Statistics Canada, 2016). Many Indigenous scholars believe that the high departure rates are a result of the pervasive issue of racism that Indigenous students face during their educational experiences (Dehyle, 2009, 2013; Lenardo & Grubb, 2019; Sockbeson, 2011; St.

Denis & Hampton, 2002; Véronneau et al., 2008). Neither the NEP nor FNMIPF address such an issue, and this may be one reason why Indigenous students have higher departure rates.

Currently, Alberta Education does not have an antiracist policy. Instead, the only policy Alberta Education has in place to address differences in race is their inclusive education policy. The policy is described as "an attitude and approach that embraces diversity" (Alberta Education, 2020a). Additionally, it also boasts that it is "a way of thinking and acting that demonstrates universal acceptance and promotes a sense of belonging for all learners" (Alberta Education, 2020a). Inclusive education is built upon six principles of inclusivity, and only one that is of interest to our discussion, which is: anticipate, value and support diversity and leaner differences (Alberta Education, 2020b). Alberta Education suggests schools that are "[w]elcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments create a sense of belonging for all learners and their families" can achieve their goal of valuing and supporting diversity (Alberta Education, 2020b).

I observed that in order to graduate from high school, I was not required to know anything about Indigenous peoples. My education had not prepared me to face the world as an Indigenous person. Instead, my public education experiences reinforced a meritocratic ideal upon me; however, through my experience of being a racialised person, I have discovered that meritocracy does not exist to the same degree for everyone. As a Blackfoot person living in Canada, I have struggled with, but not exclusively, the following: finding people who are willing to rent to me a place to live, gaining access to healthcare, being admitted to businesses, attending university, and being treated poorly by those businesses and healthcare providers who eventually admit me to their services. I have come to realise that this attitude has nothing to do with anything that I have said or done; rather, it is a general attitude towards Indigenous peoples stemming from an historical context of being colonised. In other words, my people's history with being colonised has influenced the way in which we are presently perceived and treated. I wondered how such attitudes could be reversed.

I later entered into graduate studies where I was interested in researching ways in which public schools could increase their Kindergarten to Grade 12 students' knowledge and understanding of the Indigenous peoples of Canada. This article is part of my doctoral work examining Alberta Education's policy frameworks for Indigenous education. I examined how effective the First Nations, Metis, and Inuit Policy Framework (FNMIPF) is at achieving its learning objectives (i.e. First Nations, Métis, and Inuit governance, history, treaty and Aboriginal rights, lands, cultures and languages) and how it might be strengthened (Alberta Education, 2002b). Effectiveness, for the purposes of this article, is the extent to which the Kindergarten to Grade 12 students develop understandings and knowledge of the FNMIPF learning objectives.

While I was interested in learning how effective the FNMIPF was in supporting schools to achieve the stated objectives, I was also interested in learning more about students' attitudes towards Indigenous peoples. How might the discrimination I have experienced as an Indigenous person be mitigated? Is there something that can be done to our public education systems to learn how to respect all people, regardless of their race or ethnicity?

Alberta Education's FNMIPF was meant to be a "living document", as it is "expected to change over time" (Alberta Education, 2002b, p. 8). While the policy framework has specific learning objectives for all Albertan students to learn, missing from this policy is an antiracist education program. Before I could ascertain whether an antiracist education program might be beneficial, I first needed to understand the perceptions that the Albertan students attending public school off-reserve held of the Indigenous peoples of Canada. Thus, this article explores the ways in which

the students perceive Indigenous peoples. The research question that guided this study was: "How do Albertan students' perceive the Indigenous peoples of Canada under the current First Nations, Metis, and Inuit Policy Framework?"

The literature reviews the history of Indigenous education in Alberta and the theories used to create the policy frameworks that inform Indigenous education today. Little attention has been given to the role that race and racism plays in public schools. Therefore, I hope this work will contribute to scholarly research and to Indigenous education in public schools. Finding ways to mitigate race and racism in public schools might be critical to the success of Indigenous students.

Literature review

In order to better understand the issues of equity, disparity, social justice and change and how these concepts relate to race, a brief review of the literature is provided on how race has been constructed in Canada for Indigenous peoples. Additionally, a brief overview of the history of education in Alberta for Indigenous peoples, including instrumental policy frameworks, is given.

The way in which race is conceptualised in Canada in relation to Indigenous peoples has largely been influenced by three documents, which are: three papal bulls, doctrine of discovery, and terra nullius (Assembly of First Nations, 2018). Each document is further discussed as to how it relates to the treatment of Indigenous peoples within Canada.

A papal bull is a decree issued by the pope of the Roman Catholic church. While there are many papal bulls, for the purposes of this discussion there are three from the 15th century that are of the most interest. First is the Dum Diversas, written in 1452, in which the pope decreed an attempt should be made to convert any "pagan" found, but if resisted it would result in their enslavement (Aborigine Intercontinental Good Will Society, 2021, p. 1). Such a decree equated to the slavery of non-Christians. Second is the Romanus Pontifex, written in 1455, where the pope gave dominion over discovered lands inhabited with non-Christians (Papal Encyclicals Online, 2020a). This decree allowed the dispossession of a people who already had dominion over the land. Last is the Inter Caetera, written in 1493, which established the law of nations, meaning a new Christian nation could not interfere with lands already dominated by a Christian nation (Papal Encyclicals Online, 2020b).

The implementation of these three papal bulls were instrumental leading into the age of discovery when European nations began to explore and colonise lands across the world. The age of discovery justified their actions through the policies laid out in terra nullius and the doctrine of discovery. Terra nullius originally meant "land belonging to nobody" and would later extend to "devoid of civilized society" (Erlank, 2015, p. 2504; Gustavus Adolphus College, n.d., para. 3). The doctrine of discovery allowed Christian explorers to lay claim to territories inhabited by no one, or by non-Christians. In this manner, the explorers could call their actions as having "discovered" the lands. Because Indigenous peoples were not of the Christian faith, they were considered not human, reinforcing the concept behind terra nullius.

These five documents have had several long lasting and negative implications, not just for Indigenous peoples, but for all Canadians. Such policies have advocated for the creation of a racialised hierarchy based on national origin, race, and religion, ethnic or cultural differences, and which created a white-Euro norm to be evaluated against (Sefa Dei, 1995; St. Denis, 2007). Historically, the documents were used as political and legal arguments to justify the course of action the colonisers took to subjugate, dispossess, discredit and dehumanise Indigenous peoples

from their traditional territories (Fabris, 2017; Latty et al., 2016). Understanding these policies is vital to understanding the unbalanced power relations they have created between the colonisers and Indigenous peoples. The discourse in these policies has set a precedent in the way that colonisers think about, treat and value Indigenous peoples in all facets of society, including the education system.

Since the colonisation of North America, education for the Indigenous peoples of Canada has traditionally been a federal responsibility for over a century. The Canadian laws and legislation have always made provisions for Indigenous children to receive an education (British North American Act, 1867; Indian Act, 1876; the numbered treaties). It is beyond the scope of this article to relay the more than a century of history entailing education for Indigenous children prior to the 1980s. During that century, mission schools and day, boarding, industrial and residential schools were used (see TRC, 2015). This literature review focuses on education for Indigenous children after the 1985 revision to the Indian Act, when provincial and territorial governments were given responsibility to educate Indigenous children in their jurisdiction (Indian Act, 1985). Today, this type of education is commonly referred to as Indigenous education.

During the 1960s, in the transition time between Indigenous children moving from residential schools to public schools, it was found that non-Indigenous children were outperforming their Indigenous counterparts (TRC, 2015). Originally, this phenomenon was thought to have resulted from a curriculum that lacked cultural relevancy for Indigenous children, and it became known as the cultural discontinuity theory (Ogbu, 1982). This was a rather attractive theory as it did not place blame on either the school or student, but rather placed blame on the cultural misunderstandings between the school and student (Erickson, 1987). It was thought that creating a culturally appropriate curriculum would remedy this problem and that Indigenous students would find success in the public school system (Agbo, 2001).

In 1987, Alberta Education launched its first policy framework called the Native Education Project (NEP) to address education for Indigenous children. One of the policy initiatives of the NEP was to "provide opportunities for all students in provincial schools to recognize and appreciate Native cultures, histories, and lifestyle" (Alberta Education, 1987). The NEP was imbued with an ideology that a more culturally relevant curriculum would help Indigenous students find success (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Prete, 2018a). However, it was found that such a curriculum did not increase the number of Indigenous students graduating from the public school system (RCAP, 1996). In its policy review, it was found that the NEP was not meeting the needs of Alberta students and it was discontinued in 2000 (Alberta Education, 2000).

In 2002, Alberta Education announced its latest policy framework, called the First Nations, Metis and Inuit Policy Framework (FNMIPF), which is currently in place. Two of the four policy statements are of interest to this discussion. The first is that it aims to "[i]ncrease and strengthen knowledge and understanding among all Albertans of First Nations, Métis and Inuit governance, history, treaty and Aboriginal rights, lands, cultures, and languages" (Alberta Education, 2002a, p. 10). The second is to "[p]rovide First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners with access to culturally relevant learning opportunities and quality support services" (Alberta Education, 2002a, p. 10).

Such policies are problematic for several reasons. First, the second policy statement indicates that the FNMIPF is still operating under the assumption that a more culturally relevant curriculum is needed in order for Indigenous students to find success. Research has found that creating a culturally relevant curriculum often leads to cultural components that bring a superficial awareness

of a group of people (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006), exclusion of learning about the peoples' oppression (Kaomea, 2003), and stereotyping (St. Denis, 2010).

Second, while the FNMIPF expanded the number of objectives from the three outlined in the NEP to seven, it did not address the role that racism plays in education. In recent years, research has indicated that the number one pervasive issue Indigenous students are facing in education is racism (Dehyle, 2009, 2013; Sockbeson, 2011; St. Denis & Hampton, 2002; Véronneau et al., 2008). Neither the NEP nor the FNMIPF addresses such an issue, and this may be one reason why Indigenous students have higher early departure rates (Prete, 2018b).

As just reviewed, numerous studies investigating the high Indigenous early departure rates indicate the need for culturally relevant curriculum and inclusive education. While these theories may possess some merit, they do not address the racism that Indigenous students face in schools, nor do they have the ability to stop such injustices (Banks & Banks, 2010; St. Denis, 2007). In order to overcome the perpetuation of the negative narratives that have occurred for generations, Metis/Cree scholar, Dr Verna St. Denis believes that it is imperative that a critical race analysis is implemented in school systems in the form of antiracist education (St. Denis, 2007). Antiracist education examines the unequal power relations that exist, alongside the belief that racist behaviours should be confronted by addressing the root of the problem instead of dealing with the symptoms of racism (Sefa Dei & McDermott, 2013; Sellars, 1992). Thus, examining the perpetuation of race through society and institutional structures affirms that race is a social construct rather than a biological construct (Sefa Dei, 1995; Simmons, 1994). Engaging in antiracist education moves beyond "the celebration of culture" to "disrupt[ing] ideologies of racial superiority and inferiority" to create systemic change and minimise social oppression (St. Denis, 2007, p. 1085). Furthermore, it aims to explore "the practices, processes, and ideologies of racialization, which includes a study of not only how racism disadvantages some but also how racism advantages others, and how whiteness gets produced and constructed as superior" (St. Denis, 2007, p. 1087). Antiracist education has the power to dismantle the white superiority rhetoric that is so prevalent in society today, and is a result of the five documents outlined earlier.

This literature review has outlined the history of Indigenous education in Alberta and the theories employed to create the policy frameworks. While much effort has been made to try and improve the educational experiences of Indigenous students, missing from the policy framework is a way to address race and racism. This study attempts to address whether or not Alberta Education should consider amending the FNMIPF to include antiracist education. Could Alberta students benefit from a more concrete plan that tackles race and racism?

Methods

For this quantitative research study, Beadworking (Prete, 2019) was used as a research paradigm and theoretical framework, while being grounded from a Blackfoot worldview. The three principles of Beadworking were applied to the study. The first principle is an act of resistance and entails resisting colonial research that has oppressed Indigenous peoples. Instead, I will return the colonial gaze through my research and engage in research that benefits Indigenous peoples (Prete, 2019, p. 43). The second principle is an act of knowledge transmission and consists of utilising the *Kitomohpipotokoi,* or the natural laws of the Blackfoot universe, as outlined by Bastien (2004), which include reciprocity, interconnectedness, kindness and generosity, respect, balance and harmony, and sharing and giving. The natural laws will guide me as I design and undertake my research projects (Prete, 2019, p. 44). The last principle is an act of resilience that teaches me to be poised in adaptability, which allows me to take Western research methods if needed and

adapt them to my purposes and needs as an Indigenous researcher (Prete, 2019, p. 47). Additionally, an Indigenous research methodology is used, as informed by Martin (2008), Weber-Pillwax (2001), and Wilson (2008), which advocates for the privileging of Indigenous voice, the interconnectedness of all living things, and consciousness of the impact that motives and intentions have on individuals and communities. With reference to the method, descriptions of the research site, participants, instrument used and data analysis are provided below.

Research site

After the colonisation of Indigenous peoples in what is now Canada, the Crown entered into what is called the numbered or peace treaties[2] within the different regions. My Blackfoot people entered into Treaty 7,[3] which is found in Southern Alberta. The research site was selected based on its location in the Treaty 7 area. In additional to following the standard Alberta curriculum, it is one of a few public high schools in the Treaty 7 area that offers optional Aboriginal programming courses. The first course is Aboriginal Studies 10, consisting of four themes: origin and settlement patterns, Aboriginal worldviews, political and economic organisation, and Aboriginal symbolism and expression (Alberta Education, 2002b). The second is Blackfoot language and culture 10-20-30, where "Blackfoot 10 deals with aspects of the students' immediate environment; Blackfoot 20 assists them to develop an understanding of community relationships; and Blackfoot 30 expands their world view" (Alberta Education, 1993, p. 2). Aboriginal Arts 10 was also offered and developed by the school.

The research site also has a high population of Indigenous students (nearly one third of the student population is Indigenous). Such a high population of Indigenous students made the research site ideal, as students would have experience in engaging with Indigenous people in order to study their attitudes towards them. The high school has an enrolment of between 300 and 500 students; I have masked the number for confidentiality purposes.

Participants

Participants ranged from Grade 10 through Grade 12, and all the student in these grades were invited to participate. The Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta approved the study and allowed me to treat students aged 15 and older as mature adults. They were therefore allowed to sign their own consent forms to participate in the survey. Participation occurred during school hours at their respective school. I assigned numeric identification codes to avoid identifying participants by name. I invited a total of 350 students to participate in the survey; 232 completed the surveys, which is a 66% return rate. The Principal (personal communication, 25 May 2016) informed me that it was normal for 100 students to be missing from school on any given day, which meant that a return number in the low 200s was average for questionnaires and surveys. This study examined how non-Indigenous students perceive the Indigenous peoples of Canada; therefore, only the non-Indigenous students' data is presented in this article.

Instrument

A survey was used in this study that consisted of two sections: demographics and attitude questions. The demographic questions were multiple choice and revealed the participants' gender, grade and ethnicity. The second portion consisted of 11 items in a structured format that incorporated closed-ended questions and one open-ended question. Additionally, the survey rated the responses on a Likert-type scale. The survey was a self-administered paper-and-pencil

questionnaire. This helped to maintain the anonymity of the respondents, and is considered to be more likely to produce honest and accurate answers (Mertens, 2015).

Data analysis

Demographics were used to determine students' ethnicities as I was interested in identifying non-Indigenous students' (i.e. not of Indigenous heritage) attitudes towards the Indigenous peoples of Canada. I employed three methods: (a) survey, (b) open-ended questions, and (c) students' notes (students wrote messages on the back of the survey to voice their opinions on the survey itself), to reveal students' perceptions of the Indigenous peoples of Canada. Univariate analysis was used to analyse the attitude portion of the survey (explained in more detail in the next section).

Findings and discussion

There were three focus areas in the survey, which are discussed as the main three findings: (a) survey scores, (b) students' opinions on racism at the school using quantitative data, and (c) students' opinions on racism at the school using qualitative data. The findings offer a glimpse into how Alberta Education's First Nations, Metis, and Inuit Policy Framework (FNMIPF) influences students' perceptions of the Indigenous peoples of Canada.

Survey scores

Descriptive statistics of the mean distribution scores for each of the 11 items in the survey are reported below by group: (a) First Nations and (b) non-First Nations. For analysis purposes, survey questions were clustered into two categories: (a) relationships with Indigenous peoples, and (b) perceptions of Indigenous peoples. Frequency distribution tables were converted into numeric values and then percentages to report an average for each question posed to the students. Percentages were rounded to the tenth decimal. Converting the data to a single numeric value allows the reader to more easily understand and make inferences about the data. A value was assigned to each response type in order to report the numeric value for each question. Table 1 was created from a Likert-type scale of four responses (*comfortable, somewhat comfortable, uncomfortable, neutral*), and all categories were used to determine the percentages in the table. Table 2 was created from a Likert-type scale of five responses (*strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree*), and all categories were used to determine the percentages in the table.

Table 1. Participant attitude survey regarding relationships with Indigenous peoples: Average agreement with how comfortable students felt regarding each statement

The extent to which students felt comfortable with:	%
Someone with an Indigenous background moved next door to me	44.5
I work with someone who is an Indigenous person	52.8
I am dating someone who is an Indigenous person	32.2
I have Indigenous friends	57.8
My friend is dating an Indigenous person	46.2

In terms of creating and sustaining relationships with Indigenous peoples, the majority of the students did not feel comfortable with this idea. Table 1 results suggest that students felt more comfortable having an Indigenous person as a co-worker or friend, but not as someone who is either a neighbour, significant other, or their friend's significant other. The data demonstrates that

at some point prior to entering high school, non-Indigenous students have already developed attitudes around what type of relationship they would or would not hypothetically engage in. Thus, such attitudes need to be addressed prior to entering high school.

Potentially, all of the students included in this study could have received their Kindergarten to Grade 12 education experiences under the FNMIPF, in which all Albertans in Alberta Education schools are meant to learn about Indigenous "governance, history, treaty and Aboriginal rights, lands, cultures, and languages" (Alberta Education, 2002a, p. 10). Provinces across Canada have similar policy frameworks in place; however, research has found that these policy frameworks are not being implemented (Blood, 2010; Kanu, 2005; Shaw, 2002). The school principal also admitted the research site did not focus on the FNMIPF (personal communication, 25 May 2016). Had the policy frameworks been in place, how might these statistics be different? Is it a lack of understanding of these seven educational goals that has led to the discomfort non-Indigenous people feel around Indigenous people? Or is there a colonial rhetoric present in the curriculum that denotes a power imbalance in the way that Indigenous peoples are represented in the classroom? Such statistics may point to Alberta Education's lack of antiracist education policies to help mitigate the colonial narrative of Indigenous peoples that is so prevalent in Canadian society.

The results shown in Table 2 signify that just over half of the participants agreed that Indigenous peoples are an important part of Canadian history. However, less than half of the students agreed that: (a) they liked having Indigenous people in their school, (b) they liked learning about Indigenous peoples, (c) Indigenous peoples are an important part of society, (d) Indigenous people are contributing members of society, and (e) racism exists in the school. Similarly to other studies (Zurzolo, 2006), these survey results indicate that the students entered high school with preconceived ideas about Indigenous peoples. Such results may also indicate why non-Indigenous students did not feel comfortable with the idea of engaging in relationships with Indigenous peoples, as noted in Table 1.

Table 2. Participant attitude survey regarding perceptions of Indigenous peoples: Average agreement for how strongly they agreed with each statement

The extent to which:	%
I like having Indigenous people in my school	31.7
I like learning about Indigenous peoples in class	28.5
Indigenous peoples are an important part of Canadian history	54.4
Indigenous peoples are an important part of Canadian society	45.7
Indigenous peoples are contributing members of society (i.e. workforce)	33.4
Racism exists in my school	42.7

The results of Table 2 have implications for Alberta Education and Indigenous students as they indicate what the school climate may be for Indigenous students and how their peers, including the school administrators and teachers, may treat them. Such a school climate may lead to early departure rates for Indigenous students. The degree to which a student feels acceptance and belonging is an indicator of whether students will stay in school (Riley & Ungerleider, 2012; Wolf et al., 2017). The survey results also seem to indicate a problem with either curriculum delivery or the curriculum content itself, as within the interview portion of the larger research study of which this paper is part, a participant revealed that the same content was taught year after year with regard to Indigenous peoples, making learning less engaging (Prete, 2018a). Thus, new and engaging ways to make student learning more meaningful may need to be conceptualised, or students may

benefit from a critical race analysis in order to analyse why they do not feel it is important to learn about Indigenous peoples.

Just over half (54.4%) of the non-Indigenous students felt that Indigenous peoples are an important part of Canadian history. This demonstrates a gross error in the way the school system portrays Indigenous peoples in their own history. Canadian history is Indigenous peoples' history too; they are not separate but are part of the same history. Canadian history would not exist without Indigenous peoples. The results indicate that our curriculum needs to be modified to make this more explicit and to improve the quality of our education and curriculum concerning Indigenous peoples. It is imperative that the negative perceptions of Indigenous peoples be changed. Wilkinson (2000) warns that the extent of racial prejudice held by high school students is a significant indicator of current and future attitudes these students may hold towards minority groups and Indigenous peoples. Furthermore, Wilkinson found that negative biases held by high school students entering high school were relatively the same as those held by students in their senior year. Kanu (2005) found that teachers' beliefs, understandings, knowledge and attitudes toward Aboriginal peoples influence how they deliver the content, which ultimately affects and shapes students' beliefs and values.

Students' opinions on racism at school – Quantitative

The survey asked the students a short-answer question: "Do you feel like racism exists within your school?" Four schools of thought were predominant in the answers. The students used the terms "Natives" and "Whites"; for the purposes of this article, I will use the terms "Native" and "non-Native" in reference to the four groupings that emerged from the research: (a) Natives are racist, (b) Racism does not exist, (c) Both Natives and non-Natives are racist, and (d) Natives experience racism. The students generally accepted that the Indigenous students in the school faced racism; that is, 33% of the student population answered that Native people experience racism (see Table 3).

The survey results revealed that the students in the school did not clearly understand racism or how racism works: (a) 33% believed that Natives face racism, (b) 27% did not believe that racism exists in the school, (c) 27% of the student population believed that non-Natives are racist, and (d) 13% of the student population believed that Native students are racist. The results indicate that there appears to be an underlying systemic issue of racism in the school. If the school addressed the issues of race and racism, these results might be different. Researchers have identified racism as a reason why visible minority students are less likely to graduate from high school, but they have paid little attention to the effects of racism on Indigenous students' school performance (Deyhle, 2013; Goulet & Goulet, 2014).

Table 3. Students' opinions on racism at school

	Natives are racist	Racism does not exist	Both Natives and non-Natives are racist	Natives experience racism
Percentage	13%	27%	27%	33%

Findings relating to racism at school – Qualitative

In the survey, students shared their thoughts and beliefs on racism. I have organised these according to the results shown in Table 3.

Natives are racist. Responses from non-Indigenous students demonstrated a lack of understanding of what racism is and what it entails. Racism includes an imbalance of power relations where one group receives advantages at the disadvantage of a different group (St. Denis, 2007). Additionally, racism also includes a racial hierarchy in which whiteness is seen as superior (St. Denis, 2007). Thus, in this understanding of racism, it is not possible for Indigenous people to engage in racism as they do not possess the same privileges and powers that whiteness affords white Europeans. The following quote by a student demonstrates how the non-Indigenous student participants lacked an understanding of racism, and how they are a part of the unbalanced power relation: "Often people who are First Nation shame people who are white for being racist, but are being racist themselves." It may be that what this student perceived as "racism" was actually Indigenous people pointing out the existence of a power imbalance. Such a statement seems to indicate a lack of understanding of the definition of racism. Pointing out this power imbalance does not take away any of the privileges that the white European student enjoys, as again, racism exists when one group of people enjoy advantages at the expense of or disadvantaging of another group of individuals. The aforementioned comment indicates that the non-Indigenous student does not understand the true definition of racism or how it affects people's lives.

Racism does not exist. Believing that racism does not exist ignores the basic assumptions that Canada is predicated upon, including the five documents (papal bulls, doctrine of discovery and terra nullius) as discussed in the literature review. Such a statement also speaks to the privilege that the individual enjoys in the racial hierarchy, where they have benefitted from their whiteness and may be oblivious to the oppression and disadvantages that their privilege affords them. A select number of quotes demonstrate the privilege that non-Indigenous white students enjoy in the school. As one non-Indigenous student noted: "None. I haven't seen a single hint of racism all seven years I've gone to school here." Another non-Indigenous student shared: "I myself have not noticed hard core racism." Despite Indigenous participants having shared multiple experiences of racism at school, the comments of the non-Indigenous participants demonstrated a lack of awareness of this racism. This may speak to the white privilege and white superiority (Bonds & Inwood, 2016) of these students in that they presume racism does not exist because they have no recognition and/or experience of it and they assume this experience extends to others.

Both Natives and non-Natives are racist. This belief again demonstrates a lack of understanding of the definition of racism in which a power imbalance in relationships occurs. While Indigenous people may express racial prejudice against non-Indigenous or Euro-Western students, they lack the ability to oppress non-Indigenous or Euro-Western people (Sockbeson, 2011), whereas non-Indigenous or Euro-Western people possess the power to oppress Indigenous people. This is an unequal power relation where one has the power to oppress and the other only to insult (Sockbeson, 2011). Following is one quote that demonstrates how racism was not well understood at the research site: "All of them [Indigenous and non-Indigenous students' present in the school] there are high amounts of racism and division in our school between First Nations and Caucasians [and] neither side helps the issue either." Another non-Indigenous student shared: "I think most people believe that racism is just coming from Caucasian people but it definitely goes both ways." Again, this statement demonstrates an imbalanced power relation where the Euro-Western student has the power to oppress Indigenous students, and Indigenous students can only possess the power to insult but not oppress Euro-Western students (Sockbeson, 2011).

Natives experience racism. There were some students who believed that Indigenous students did in fact experience racism, but their comments did not seem to illustrate their understanding of the magnitude or effect that racism plays in Indigenous students' lives at the school. The following

quotes demonstrate this lack of understanding: "Probably Natives, but I don't think it's too bad" and "I think the Natives experience some racism. But not always in a completely negative way." These statements indicate that the Euro-Western students believed that degrees of racism exist but that the racism suffered by some Indigenous students was not as serious as the research suggests. This speaks to the students' white privilege and superiority in thinking they could name the degree to which Indigenous peoples experience racism. Others shared the following: "Maybe the natives. We live near the reserve and on the reserve it's common to find drugs and other harmful substances, so since I'm LDS I generally stay away from people who are addicts" and "Natives. Lots of people have jokes towards them and often are laughing at them." The first student had a stereotyped view of Indigenous peoples based on what they had heard—a damaging narrative that has kept the individual from befriending Indigenous students. This may also be why students were reluctant to engage in any type of relationship with Indigenous peoples, as identified in the survey results of this article. The last student shared one way that Indigenous people experience racism from their classmates, as having jokes made at their expense. The jokes have the power to oppress Indigenous students and create an unwelcoming environment that can lead to early departure rates (Riley & Ungerleider, 2012; Wolf et al., 2017). With such a small group of Indigenous students surrounded by Euro-Western students and educators, to make similar jokes about the Euro-Western students would not have the same effect because of the imbalance in the power relation.

Based on the students' written opinions regarding racism at the school, the results infer that students lack an understanding of the history of racialisation and how it affects the group of people who have been racialised. Students could benefit from the addition of a critical race analysis to the school curriculum to combat this lack of understanding (Davis & Harris, 2015).

Limitations

A limitation of this study was reactive arrangement, which involves the participants' reactions to the design of the research study. Their responses to the study may have been a direct result of their awareness of participating in the study, which could have confounded the findings. Therefore, this study was limited by the participants' responses; that is, how truthfully the participants responded to the questions was limited to the information that was gathered from the survey.

Recommendations

Based on the results of the study, several recommendations were formulated for educational policy and future research. In relation to educational policy, the survey results indicate that racism is not a concept that the students understand well. Thus, it is recommended that Alberta Education include an antiracist curriculum as part of the Kindergarten to Grade 12 curricula (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Husband, 2016; Sockbeson, 2011; St. Dennis, 2007). There should be a focus in the early elementary years to eliminate race biases and to create a better inclusive school environment in which all Albertan students can learn and feel safe and accepted. A further recommendation is that this study be repeated to investigate the differences between division 1 (Kindergarten–Grade 2), division 2 (Grades 3–6), division 3 (Grades 7–9), and division 4 (Grades 10–12) for racial biases. At what division do students begin to hold onto their racial prejudices? Such a study would indicate which division would greatly benefit from an antiracist intervention. A further consideration would be to repeat this study at each division and analyse for differences in ethnicity. Do ethnic minorities hold a more positive view of Indigenous peoples? Is there a point in their educational years that they too begin to hold negative perceptions of Indigenous peoples?

Conclusion

The overall findings indicate that students could benefit from the inclusion of antiracist education to rectify their lack of understanding of race and racialisation. Antiracist education is not a onetime experience; instead, it should be integrated into the curriculum so students are exposed to antiracist education on a daily basis. The results also indicate that students enter high school with already preconceived negative notions about Indigenous peoples. Thus, the inclusion of an antiracist education should occur before high school to help ensure that students do not graduate holding negative perceptions of Indigenous peoples into their adult lives. School systems are considered sites of political and social reproduction; thus, it is imperative that school systems rectify this problem and stop the production of racial hierarchy and discourse (Grande, 2000; MacLeod, 2018; Makokis, 2009; Troyna & Hatcher, 2018). The inclusion of an antiracist education in the school system is a step towards reconciliation with the original inhabitants of Canada.

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[1] I take the position that the manner in which Eurocentric Western school systems educate Canadian Indigenous peoples is a systemic issue that has led to the low achievement of Indigenous Peoples in public schools. Therefore, I choose to use the terminology "early departure rate" rather than "dropout rates" as factors exist that are beyond the control of Indigenous peoples that have led to their low graduation rates.

[2] Please read the following article on the numbered treaties:

https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/numbered-treaties

[3] Please read the following article on Treaty 7: https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/treaty-7