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## **First Nations Authority of First Nations Education in the Yukon: A Path Forward**

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Master thesis in Governance and Entrepreneurship in Northern and Indigenous Areas  
IND-3902: August 2021





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*Fall 2021*

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## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to extend gratitude to all the participants and the Yukon First Nations they represent for sharing their time, knowledge, and experiences with me. Without their contributions, this research would not be possible. My hope is that this research supports a unified way forward with education that benefits all Yukon First Nations.

This research was completed as part of my graduate degree at The Arctic University of Norway and University of Saskatchewan under the dedicated supervision of Dr. Kurtis Boyer. I am thankful for the mentorship and guidance that he provided throughout this process. His feedback and support are very much appreciated.

I am thankful to my First Nation, the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyak Dun, for all the support I have received. From Chief and Counsel to the community, I have felt encouraged to develop my knowledge and skills.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the incredible support I have received from my family. I could not have finished this without them. My two amazing daughters put up with me as I dedicated many hours to this research. They are my motivation for completing this.



## **Abstract**

As Yukon First Nations prepare to regain authority over education, there is greater opportunity for individual First Nations to collaborate and create a unified approach to education. While each First Nation has their own vision and approach to education that must be honoured, there are also similarities. The purpose of this research is to present these similarities to create a unified, holistic approach moving forward. This research fits within an Indigenous research methodology, meaning it supports relational accountability, benefits the local community, and honours Indigenous Knowledge. Through a review of Indigenous education pedagogy and three case studies of Indigenous communities throughout Canada who have authority over education, four common themes for a First Nations education system emerged: culturally based, culturally relevant, culturally responsive, and locally controlled. These themes remained consistent with the results from the in-depth semi-structures interviews with representative from several Yukon First Nations. By creating a First Nations education system that reflects these common themes, a holistic approach to education can be developed that meets the needs of each Yukon First Nation. Opportunities for collaboration and unity will encourage Yukon First Nations to share resources and capacity, learn from each other, and create a stronger voice, benefiting all Yukon First Nations as they move forward. Yukon First Nations can create a clear path forward as they take this step toward regaining authority of First Nations education.





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# 1 Introduction

As Yukon First Nations prepare to regain authority over First Nations education, opportunities to collaborate lead to a stronger unified approach to First Nations education, even as each First Nation follows the path toward authority over their education that works best for their community. After generations of Elders and leaders emphasizing the importance of integrating culturally appropriate models of education into the education system, a Yukon First Nations school board offers the potential for meaningful and positive change in the education of First Nations students. Yukon First Nations completed negotiations for the First Nation School Board Framework Agreement with the Government of Yukon in March 2021, representing the long-overdue initial step toward First Nations authority over First Nations education in the territory. Ten of the Yukon First Nations signed onto the First Nations School Board Framework Agreement as an intermediary step to an autonomous education system. The remaining four Yukon First Nations have not signed onto the Framework Agreement for varying reasons, including pursuing a fully autonomous education system through a Regional Education Agreement and being unsure how the First Nations school board will serve their community. However, these four First Nations are able to join the First Nations school board at any time. Now, the focus turns to negotiating the implementation of the First Nations school board.

While all fourteen Yukon First Nations share a vision of regaining authority over education, each First Nation has a unique vision of what this education system looks like and how to get there. However, even with these unique visions — which are influenced by each First Nations' distinct culture, history, and ways of knowing — the potential for shared components within a First Nations education system is clear. Collaboration and unity create

opportunities to share resources and capacity, learn from each other, and create a stronger voice, benefiting all Yukon First Nations as they move forward to build an Indigenous education system that meets the needs of their communities.

## **1.1 Background**

“Yukon First Nations peoples were the first peoples here and ... will always be the original people” (Southwick & Wood, 2020, p. 1). Because of their long-established history connecting them to this place, First Nations peoples living in what is now known as the Yukon developed an intricate education system customized to living in the harsh conditions of the North. While at the centre of traditional education is the collective responsibility and the wider community, learning is based on individual strengths and readiness (Southwick & Wood, 2020). Under the guidance of Elders, when children are ready to learn a new skill, they move through the different phases of learning: “observation, conceptualization, practical application, and concrete experience” (Southwick & Wood, 2020). Children learn by observing first, and then when ready, by doing. Additionally, by maintaining the importance of collective responsibilities, a sense of accountability and belonging to the rest of the community is encouraged (Southwick & Wood, 2020). Despite several Canadian government assimilation policies, Yukon First Nations have held onto this approach to education.

Several federal government policies and developments contributed to major disruptions within First Nations communities, and they continue to impact First Nations communities today. Due to the Yukon’s isolation, residential schools did not arrive in the territory until decades later than southern Canada, and the establishment of the first residential school in 1911 coincides with the building interest in natural resources in the North (Castillo, Schreyer & Southwick 2020). Children were forced to travel hundreds of kilometres to attend residential schools, preventing them from seeing their families and

communities sometimes for years at a time (Castillo et al., 2020). In addition to the devastating interruption to family bonds, children were forced to suppress their traditional cultures and languages, and there are countless accounts of physical and sexual abuse (Castillo et al., 2020). The intergenerational legacy of residential schools continues to have negative impacts, contributing to the current state of education in First Nations communities.

Despite targeted efforts to assimilate First Nations children into the Euro-Canadian society, many First Nations people held onto their traditional beliefs and ways of knowing (Castillo et al., 2020). While the legacy of residential schools and other assimilation policies continue to greatly impact First Nations communities, many residential school Survivors and intergenerational Survivors are working together to revitalize and reclaim traditional ways of knowing and doing (Castillo et al., 2020).

### **1.1.1 Final and Self-Government Agreements**

During the 1970s and 1980s, Yukon First Nations were the most united they have ever been, greatly influencing the successful signing of the Umbrella Final Agreement (UFA) in 1993 — the framework for final and self-government agreements in the Yukon (Castillo et al., 2020). By being unified, Yukon First Nations had a stronger voice, shared human capacity, learned from each other, and created a common way forward; however, leaders also ensured that each First Nation was able to negotiate their own final and self-government agreements that best fit their needs and priorities.

Unity during these negotiations was motivated by several unique histories and circumstances. For nearly one hundred years, federal and territorial government policies had imposed a Euro-Canadian way of living and infringed on First Nations rights to governing their Traditional Territories, to living their traditional livelihoods, and even to raising their children (Penikett, 2020). Yukon First Nations people were forced to relocate and live in

permanent communities, send their children far away to residential schools to be educated in a Euro-Canadian system, and abandon their traditional ways of living. Unlike many First Nations living in southern Canada, Yukon First Nations had not signed treaties, creating a unique opportunity to negotiate a modern treaty. During the negotiations of the UFA, Yukon First Nations united under the Council of Yukon Indians (now known as Council of Yukon First Nations) to assert their inherent right to be self-governing Nations. They negotiated an agreement to regain self-determination and improve the lives of Yukon First Nations people.

This settlement is for our children, and our children's children, for many generations to come. All of our programs and the guarantee we seek in our settlement are to protect them from a repeat of today's problems in the future. You cannot talk to us about a bright new tomorrow when so many of our people are cold, hungry and unemployed. A bright new tomorrow is what we feel we can build when we get a fair and just settlement (Yukon Indian People, 1973, p. 17).

In addition to the Yukon First Nations uniting, there are several external forces that influenced the outcomes of these negotiations. The federal government was beginning to recognize the injustices that they had imposed on Indigenous Peoples, which were continuing to impact Indigenous communities throughout Canada (Penikett, 2020). With the Alaskan Native Land Claims Settlement Act in 1971 leading the way for final agreements and the Berger Inquiry in 1977 impacting future developments in Indigenous communities throughout Canada, the movement toward reconciliation and self-determination were being acknowledged by the Canadian federal government (Penikett, 2020). Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, an increase in interest in the North due to economic development opportunities motivated the territorial government to support Yukon First Nations through

negotiations and attracted the federal government to begin negotiations (Penikett, 2020). The unity among Yukon First Nations and these external forces made it possible for the Yukon First Nations, Government of Canada, and Government of Yukon to successfully negotiate and sign the UFA.

With the signing of the UFA, and the subsequent individual final and self-government agreements, a new relationship between First Nations and non-First Nations developed. This relationship is based on a partnership for managing resources and making decisions that impact common interests (Castillo et al., 2020; Penikett, 2020). Additionally, these agreements recognize the inherent right of First Nations people to be self-determining and govern themselves. Through the self-government agreements, a First Nation is able to draw down jurisdiction over programs and services when they decide they are ready to assume control (Castillo et al, 2020). This inherent right to develop and control various programs and services that impact Yukon First Nations citizens, including the right to First Nations authority over education, child welfare, justice, and heritage, is legally protected through these agreements (Castillo et al., 2020). While only a few examples exist of individual First Nations drawing down programs and services due to capacity limitations within communities, a huge momentum is currently building with First Nations education in the Yukon.

Even though the UFA was signed nearly 40 years ago and eleven individual Yukon First Nations have signed final and self-government agreements, the process of implementing these agreements continues. These agreements will evolve as successive generations continue to negotiate the implementation of provisions within the agreements, creating new visions and opportunities for both First Nations and non-First Nations people living in the Yukon (Penikett, 2020). It is critical to recognized that “[a]ll Yukoners are affected by [final and

self-government agreements] and are partners in how it works — all Yukoners are treaty people” (Penikett, 2020, p. 2).

### **1.1.2 The Last Fifty Years of Education in the Yukon**

Like many First Nations communities in Canada, First Nations students in the Yukon are struggling to engage with their education. A recent Office of the Auditor General of Canada’s report (2019) on education in Yukon highlights that the Department of Education in the Yukon is failing First Nations students. While there have been attempts to include culturally appropriate education in the territorial curriculum, this inclusion has been superficial and dependent on individual teachers. Additionally, First Nations students are facing unique and complex challenges due to the intergenerational legacy of colonization, and they are being educated in an education system that does not reflect their cultures or realities. These challenges have formed systemic barriers for First Nations students, creating a disconnect where First Nations students are struggling to engage in their education.

Yukon First Nations have a long history of advocating for a more inclusive and culturally appropriate education system. In 1973, Yukon First Nations leaders presented the document *Together Today for our Children Tomorrow* to the Prime Minister of Canada, outlining the challenges First Nations people in the Yukon were facing and encouraging a positive path forward. Education was identified as integral for making this change.

We believe that all education must have two main goals, the stimulation of pride in one’s culture and background and the development of those skills and that knowledge which is necessary to compete in today’s world (Yukon Indian People, 1973, p. 50).

This call for action has continued throughout the last fifty years, and a path forward has been asserted in several reports, agreements, and action plans by Yukon First Nations.



Since First Nations students were integrated into the public education system in the Yukon in the 1960s, the education system has continually struggled to engage First Nations students and reflect First Nations cultures and realities. Several reports, agreements, and action plans dating back to 1960 have highlighted how the education system is failing First Nations students (YFNED Timeline, 2021). Despite recommendations to improve relationships with First Nations communities, and to review and revise curriculum and approaches to teaching to be more culturally relevant by nearly thirty documents spanning over fifty years, the same challenges continue today. “The ongoing issues of poor attendance, academic performance, and post-secondary participation highlighted the limited success of the government supports” (YFNED Timeline, 2021, p. 7). The most recent Auditor General’s report on Yukon education was released in 2019, and it repeated the same systemic concerns and need for change that it did in the previous two Auditor General’s reports in 2000 and 2009 (YFNED Timeline, 2021). It is clear that meaningful change needs to happen for First Nations education, and the First Nations school board is a long-overdue and integral step toward creating an education system that reflects the needs of First Nations students.

This last year has seen the largest momentum for change in the education system that Yukon First Nations have seen. With leadership from the Chiefs Committee on Education (CCOE), the Yukon First Nation Education Directorate (YFNED) — a centralized and unified education organization — launched a wrap-around model of education support in the summer of 2020 (YFNED Annual Report, 2021). Additionally, YFNED has supported Yukon First Nations in negotiating the First Nations School Board Agreement with the Government of Yukon, initiating a clear way forward for Yukon First Nations to regain authority over First Nations education. Even though the impacts of these initiatives and

agreements will not be immediate, Yukon First Nations are united in their efforts to create an education system that reflects the needs and realities of First Nations students.

## **1.2 Methodology**

This research works within an Indigenous research methodology, meaning it moves beyond consultation and collaboration with the First Nations community. In addition to meaningful participation, an Indigenous research methodology supports relational accountability, benefits the local community, and honours Indigenous Knowledge (Porsanger 2004; Steinhauer, 2002; Ulturgasheva, Rasmus & Morrow, 2015). By focusing on an issue that is currently impacting Yukon First Nations and identified as important by Yukon First Nations, this research benefits Yukon First Nations by providing a unified path forward. In addition to contextualizing the research within the histories and realities of Yukon First Nations, this research emphasizes the importance of honouring individual Yukon First Nations visions and voices.

### **1.2.1 Self-Location**

My name is Lauren Wallingham. I am Northern Tutchone from the Wolf Clan, and I am a citizen of the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyak Dun. I was born in Mayo Yukon, within the Traditional Territory of my ancestors. I was raised and continue to live in Whitehorse, Yukon, within the Traditional Territories of the Kwanlin Dün First Nation and Ta'an Kwäch'än Council.

I identify as Northern Tutchone and I continue to feel a strong place-based connection with my Northern Tutchone culture; however, as a First Nations person who is not visibly First Nations, I have lived a privileged life. I spent much of my childhood on the land at my family's cabin, connecting to the same lands and waters that my ancestors once used for their

livelihoods. Although I did not grow up in a particularly traditional way, my grandmother passed down many stories and teachings, encouraging all of her grandchildren to reclaim our Northern Tutchone heritage. While I am fortunate to maintain my connection to my traditional lands and I continue to have the opportunity to reclaim my culture as a First Nations person, I have also benefited from my Euro-Canadian background. I have not experienced discrimination based on the colour of my skin and I have not had to overcome systemic barriers to get to this point in my education. I am honoured to be a Northern Tutchone woman, but I acknowledge my reality as a First Nations woman is limited.

My education and professional background are in First Nations education. After completing my Bachelor of Education from the First Nations University of Canada in southern Saskatchewan, I returned to the Yukon. I focused my career on working within alternate education programs with students at risk of dropping out of school. I eventually made my way back to Mayo, where I started the Individual Learning Centre at the community school — an alternate education program intended to re-engage students that have disengaged with their education. It is through this experience that I began to purposefully reflected on how the current education system is failing First Nations students. The entire education system, from the yearly calendar to the curriculum, does not reflect the cultures or realities of First Nations students. I chose to pursue my master's, focusing on successful Indigenous education programs across the Circumpolar region and throughout Canada. As one of the requirements for my graduate degree, I worked with First Nation of Na-Cho Nyak Dun educators, Elders, and community members to develop a framework for the education programs that the First Nation has authority over. These experiences led me to my current job as a First Nation Education Advocate at YFNED. My findings from both my

research and experience support the necessity and the inherent right of First Nations authority over First Nations education.

My connection to this worldview and my experience in the education field guided my research and represent the place from which I research, learn, and write.

### **1.2.2 Methods**

To complete this research, the main methods used include a review of the literature and in-depth, semi-structured interviews. A thorough review of the literature includes a background study on Indigenous education pedagogy and three case studies, building the foundation for Indigenous education models. By understanding Indigenous education pedagogy, the common themes in the case studies are evident. The three case studies are the Kativik Ilisarniliriniq and Cree School Board in Quebec, the Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey in Nova Scotia, and the First Nations Education Steering Committee in British Columbia. Each of these case studies provides lessons learned and successes that can help guide Yukon First Nations through this beginning stage of regaining authority of First Nations education. Additionally, the review of the literature provides guidance for the interview process by focusing interview questions on integral common themes established in the Indigenous education pedagogy and the case studies. (Please see Table 1.)

Following the review of the literature, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with representatives from several Yukon First Nations were held to gain a better understanding of the needs and visions for First Nations education in the Yukon. The Education Director from each Yukon First Nation was contacted as an initial contact, ensuring a recognized representative of the First Nation who is involved in education was interviewed. Several Education Directors, a few First Nation Education Department teams, an Elder and former Chief who has been instrumental in education within his community, and a Chief who also

sits on the CCOE were interviewed. Each interview was recorded and transcribed, and each participant was given the opportunity to review the transcription of their interview to make changes, additions, and deletions as they felt necessary. Additionally, each participant was given an opportunity to review and provide feedback for all quotes and references to the interview used within the results section. A small gift was given to each participant as a sign of respect and appreciation for their time.

Unfortunately, due to a COVID-19 outbreak and limited time, it was not possible to interview a representative from each of the fourteen Yukon First Nations. In total, interviews with representatives from eight Yukon First Nations were completed. Some of the participants were comfortable with being identified by name, while others preferred to remain anonymous, which is reflected in how quotations are cited in the results section.

Results from the interviews are organized into the broader themes identified in the review of the literature. During analysis, common priorities shared by participants were identified to find commonalities across the Yukon First Nations that were interviewed. A plain language briefing note outlining the results and recommendations was completed to share with each of the fourteen Yukon First Nations.

By learning the priorities and visions of Yukon First Nations, the common themes among the First Nations included in this research became apparent, allowing for recommendations on how unite the fourteen First Nations moving forward.

*Table 1 – Interview Questions*

<b>1</b>	How do you see education as being important for self-determination?
<b>2</b>	What are the priorities for (First Nation) as the First Nation works to regain control of education? (Either through the First Nations school board or through an autonomous education system.)
<b>3</b>	How important is curriculum development for this process of regaining control of education to be successful?

4	What are the priorities (First Nation) regarding the development of a curriculum that reflects the needs and culture of First Nations?
5	What is the role of inter-community collaboration with the First Nations in Yukon in achieving the priorities in questions 2 and 4?
6	How could this inter-community collaboration look?

### 1.3 Objectives and Research Questions

Yukon First Nations can create a clear path forward as we take this step toward regaining authority of our education. The purpose of this research is to make recommendations on how to use the similarities of each First Nation’s vision to unite the fourteen First Nations moving forward, while honouring each First Nation’s individual vision. The primary research questions are to identify the following: 1) what can Yukon First Nations learn from Indigenous communities that have authority over their education, 2) what are the priorities for each of the fourteen Yukon First Nations in regaining authority over their education, 3) what are the commonalities between the fourteen Yukon First Nations, and 4) how can these commonalities unite the fourteen Yukon First Nations moving forward.

## 2 Review of the Literature

Education is foundational for the well-being of a community; however, equitable access to quality education programs that are culturally relevant to Indigenous students are often non-existent in Canada’s North. This review analyzes Indigenous education pedagogy and how some Indigenous communities across Canada have Indigenized their education system and improved the academic achievement of their students, positively impacting the overall well-being of their community. First, literature on Indigenous education pedagogy is reviewed. Next, the approach that specific Indigenous communities within Canada have taken

to regain control over their education is reviewed. A culturally based, culturally relevant, culturally responsive, and locally developed approach to education are essential to closing the gaps between Indigenous students and non-Indigenous students. Learning from the research and other Indigenous communities will provide valuable guidance for Yukon First Nations, as they are on the verge of regaining control over the education of their youth.

## **2.1 Indigenous Education Pedagogy**

Closing the education gap between Indigenous students and non-Indigenous students is an integral piece to improving community well-being in northern Indigenous communities. While there cannot be a blanket approach to Indigenous education because each Indigenous community has a unique set of traditions and experiences, Yukon First Nations can learn from the Indigenous education pedagogy that has emerged. McCarty and Lee (2014) argue that to Indigenize an education system, a culturally based, culturally relevant, and culturally responsive approach to education is crucial. Additionally, they emphasize the importance of education to Indigenous self-determination, requiring a locally developed and controlled education system. By creating an education system that is rooted in the needs and cultures of Indigenous students, a holistic approach to education that engages students and focuses on the strengths of students will develop.

Although the terms culturally based, culturally relevant, and culturally responsive education are often interchangeable in the Indigenous education literature, each term holds an important piece to holistically Indigenizing education. (Please see Table 2.) For the purpose of this research, these concepts are differentiated using McCarty and Lee's (2014) article as a guide. A culturally based approach to education seeks to sustain, reclaim, and revitalize Indigenous languages and cultures. While a culturally relevant approach works to meet the contemporary needs of Indigenous youth, as defined by the local Indigenous community.

Additionally, an important piece to creating a holistic Indigenous approach to education is recognizing the intergenerational legacy of colonization, and the ongoing impacts it is having on Indigenous students. A culturally responsive approach to education recognizes and addresses these impacts, creating opportunities for healing. These three distinct approaches to Indigenous education — culturally based, culturally relevant, and culturally responsive — are dependent on each other to create a holistic Indigenized education system.

Central to an Indigenized education system is a culturally based curriculum that is grounded in the local Indigenous language and culture. A common caution when Indigenizing education is to ensure that traditional ways of knowing and doing are foundational to the curriculum and not merely add-ons to the Euro-Canadian curriculum (Munroe, Borden, Orr, Toney & Meader, 2013; Raham, 2009). Too often Indigenous cultures and traditional skills are stripped of context and taught in isolation within a Euro-Canadian curriculum (Munroe et al., 2013). By creating an education environment where learning is rooted in traditional ways of knowing and doing, students will develop a resilient sense of cultural identity and become more engaged with their learning (Bell, 2014; Munroe et al., 2013; Raham, 2009). Raham (2009) identifies several characteristics of a culturally based education that are all necessary for a successful program, including integrating traditional languages, teaching strategies, cultural activities, knowledge, and spirituality throughout the curriculum and education environment. A culturally based curriculum that reflects the local culture is essential to an Indigenous education system; however, to successfully Indigenize an education system, the education system needs to move beyond integrating Indigenous content into a Euro-Canadian curriculum.

An education system that is culturally relevant for students in today's world is essential to an Indigenous education system. Several researchers stress the necessity that



education prepares Indigenous students to “walk in two worlds” (Bell, 2014; Munroe et al., 2013; Raham, 2009). This need for “walking in two worlds,” or “two-eyed seeing,” emphasizes the complexity of Indigenizing an education system. Indigenous communities want their children to be grounded and strong in their traditional world, while successful in the Euro-Canadian world (Munroe et al., 2013). To create an approach to Indigenous education that is culturally relevant, a parallel curriculum that meets the literacy and numeracy outcomes of the Euro-Canadian curriculum through local traditional land-based activities, Traditional Knowledge, local history, and contemporary realities is necessary (Raham, 2009). Additionally, Vick-Westgate (2002) adds that the realities of our students are continuously changing and dynamic, requiring education systems to constantly be adapting to meet the needs of the students.

Due to the intergenerational legacy of colonization, a culturally responsive education is also an integral piece to Indigenizing an education system. Munroe et al. (2013) and Bell (2014) highlight the role of education in healing for Indigenous communities struggling with intergenerational trauma. Indigenous “education should seek to heal and transcend the effects of colonization ... [and it] cannot ignore the reality of colonization but rather must address the issue directly” (Munroe et al., 2013, p. 320). A holistic approach to education that recognizes the interconnectedness of the whole child — spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional — will foster students that are connected to their culture, emotionally and spiritually healthy, and academically successful (Bell, 2014). In addition to learning about the history of colonization and the intergenerational impact this has had Indigenous communities, Bell (2014) highlights that education needs to include opportunities to participate in traditional healing circles and ceremony, and counselling that reflects the needs and traditions of individual students. By responding to the cultural needs and realities of Indigenous

communities, education can play an important part in healing intergenerational traumas that continue to impact Indigenous communities.

In addition to the importance of a culturally based, culturally relevant, and culturally responsive education to an Indigenous education system, local control and building capacity within the community are key to its success. Raham (2009) emphasizes the importance of community participation, including leadership, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and parents within the local Indigenous community during all stages of program development, implementation, and evaluation. While there may be a shared “set of assumptions and theoretical foundations” among Indigenous communities, education “will vary from one Indigenous context to another” (Sollid & Olsen, 2019, p. 38). Even though an Indigenous education pedagogy has emerged and commonalities can be identified among successful Indigenous education systems throughout Canada, each Indigenous community has unique traditions, knowledge systems, and histories, creating unique priorities. These unique aspects must be acknowledged and respected. McLeod (2010) argues that if education validates and nurtures the local culture, it will create an environment where students can develop their true sense of self and “feel good about themselves, their family, community and cultural group” (p. 3). Additionally, McLeod (2010) highlights that a program that is culturally relevant must have the local people and culture at the foundation. To engage Indigenous students with their education and ensure they are successful in both their traditional world and the Euro-Canadian world, Yukon First Nations need to see their own people, language, culture, and way of life throughout their education.

## **2.2 Case Studies**

By looking to Indigenous communities from across Canada who have regained control over the education of their children, Yukon First Nations can learn best practices as

they begin to Indigenize their education system. The following case studies demonstrate that this increased control over education has led to improved outcomes in a variety of ways, including educational achievement, personal well-being, and community well-being. Furthermore, these improved outcomes are linked to increased control over the priorities of education, allowing for Indigenous worldviews and approaches to learning to be at the heart of education. While there are many successful examples of Indigenous education — worldwide, within Canada, and at the individual school level — the three case studies chosen for this review of the literature most closely resemble the potential for First Nations authority over First Nations education in the Yukon because of the political situation and the possibility for collaboration between several Indigenous communities. By looking to the Kativik Ilisarniliriniq and Cree School Board in Quebec, the Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey in Nova Scotia, and the First Nations Education Steering Committee in British Columbia, Yukon First Nations can learn best practices to guide them as they begin to regain authority over the education of their children.

Before exploring the best practices learned from these case studies, it is important to introduce each education authority and their community's approach to regaining authority over their education. The inherent right to be self-determining Nations is central to regaining control of Indigenous education. Like eleven of the fourteen First Nations in Yukon, the Inuit and Cree of Northern Quebec have negotiated title to their Traditional Territories and a self-government agreement that includes the right and power to control their education. On November 11, 1975, the Inuit and Cree of Northern Quebec, Government of Quebec, and Government of Canada signed the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (JBNQA) — the first comprehensive modern treaty in Canada (Vick-Westgate, 2002). This Agreement gave the Inuit and Cree the power to establish school boards under the Quebec education

system (Vick-Westgate, 2002). The Kativik Ilisarniliriniq, representing fourteen Inuit communities, and the Cree School Board, representing ten Cree communities, are the centralized service providers among their respective communities; however, each community operates autonomously (Vick-Westgate, 2002; Visser, 2014). Additionally, the powers these two school boards have go beyond the powers most school boards have in southern Canada (Vick-Westgate, 2002). As two of the first Indigenous-run school boards in the world, the Inuit and Cree needed to develop an education program that met their needs without other examples to look to (Vick-Westgate, 2002).

Although the Mi'kmaw have not negotiated modern-day comprehensive agreements — rather their Indigenous Rights are tied to historical treaties and the Indian Act — they have signed an agreement to be self-determining over the education of their children. In 1997, nine of the thirteen Mi'kmaw communities signed the Mi'kmaw Education Agreement with the federal and provincial governments, and later three more Mi'kmaw communities signed onto the Agreement (Paul, Borden, Orr, Orr & Tompkins, 2019). This Agreement led to the creation of the Mi'kmaw Education Act of 1998 and the central education organization Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey (MK) (McCarthy, 2001; Paul et al., 2019). While each Mi'kmaw community has jurisdiction over their own education, MK supports each member community. The creation of MK served a dual purpose: (1) meeting the obligation to the federal government for administrative accountability; and (2) starting a central organization that united the Mi'kmaw communities, shared capacity, and provided support to all the member communities (McCarthy, 2001).

While few First Nations throughout BC have signed modern-day comprehensive agreements with the federal and provincial governments (Williams, 1997), like the Mi'kmaw, First Nations in BC are regaining control over their education through self-governing

education agreements. First Nations jurisdiction over First Nations education in BC comes through several agreements made with the Government of British Columbia, including the BC Tripartite Education Agreement (BCTEA) and First Nations Education Jurisdiction Agreements (FNEJA) (FNESC & FNSA, 2020). Unlike the Cree School Board, Kativik Iisarniliriniq, and MK, the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) was established before these education agreements with the BC government. With a mandate “[t]o facilitate discussions about education matters affecting First Nations in BC by disseminating information and soliciting input from First Nations,” FNESC is a central education organization that provides support to over 200 First Nations throughout BC (FNESC & FNSA, 2020, p. 4). FNESC negotiated the framework with the provincial government for the BCTEA and FNEJA, and the Committee provides ongoing support to First Nations to negotiate their own First Nations Education Authority (FNEA) under these frameworks (FNESC & FNSA, 2020). Currently, twelve First Nations are actively negotiating their own FNEA and fifty-four First Nations are interested in beginning negotiations (FNESC & FNSA, 2020). In addition to supporting First Nations throughout BC to regain control of their education, FNESC also provides support in program and curriculum development, and capacity building to First Nations throughout BC (FNESC & FNSA, 2020).

Even though the Kativik Iisarniliriniq and Cree School Board, MK, and FNESC have differing origins, they have all played an integral role in supporting their respective communities to regain control and jurisdiction over Indigenous education and they all have similar priorities. Foundational to all these models of Indigenous education is a culturally based, culturally relevant, and culturally responsive curriculum. Each of these education organizations highlight the need for education to reflect Indigenous ways of knowing and doing, prepare students to walk in both the Euro-Canadian world and their traditional

Indigenous world, and ensure the spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional well-being of all students remains the focus of all programming.

In all these case studies, the respective culture guides the development of all classes and programs, creating a culturally based approach to education. For example, each of these districts have emphasized the importance of Indigenous languages. “Language is the heart of a culture and Indigenous people’s knowledge of their cultures is integral to their wellbeing” (Paul et al., 2019). Both the Cree and Inuit immediately established their traditional language, Cree and Inuttitut respectively, as the main language of instruction at the primary level, with English and French being progressively introduced at the secondary level (Vick-Westgate, 2002; Visser, 2014). Language revitalization is a priority for the Mi’kmaq, and MK has supported the communities to develop language resources and curriculum materials, including an immersion program in one of the communities (Paul et al., 2019). Additionally, MK has partnered with St. Francis Xavier University to develop a language pedagogy certificate, emphasizing reading and writing in Mi’kmaq and creating resources for teaching in an immersion program (Lewington, 2019). FNEC has also developed language learning supports with and for the communities it serves, including a mentorship program for language teachers (FNEC & FNSA, 2020).

Interweaved with the traditional languages, each of the education authorities have developed culturally based curriculum with the local Indigenous culture at the foundation of programming. MK supported Mi’kmaq teachers to develop the *Show Me Your Math* program, bringing together Elders, community members, and students to create research and inquiry projects that explore community knowledge and math, and students then share their projects at an annual math fair (Paul et al., 2019; Show Me Your Math, 2021). Past projects have included understanding the importance of time, measurements, longitude and latitude,

estimation, and average when lobster fishing; measurements, counting, and patterns when weaving traditional baskets; geometry, angles, patterns, and measurement when making traditional blankets with the Mi'kmaq eight-pointed star; and specific causes and impacts of erosion over an extended timeframe (Show Me Your Math, 2021). All these projects involve extensive and complex math concepts that students need to know at various grade levels, but that also tie into traditional culture and topics that are meaningful to the students. Teacher's in Mi'kmaw schools also "encourage students to build science fair projects every year that draw on the idea of 'two-eyed seeing'" (Paul et al., 2019). FNEESC has developed several courses, units, and supporting resources, including English First Peoples; Math First Peoples; Science First Peoples; First Nations Land, Title and Governance; and Indian Residential Schools (FNEESC & FNSA, 2020). The Kativik Ilisarniliriniq developed an Inuit Environmental Science curriculum based on Inuit knowledge of the land and structured around the seasons (Watt, 2018). These are just some of the examples of how these jurisdictions are working toward building a culturally based education system.

Although programming is rooted in the local traditional culture, by listening to and supporting local communities, a culturally relevant approach to education is evident. Curriculum development and programming reflect the contemporary realities of Indigenous students, creating an approach to education that supports students to be successful in both their traditional world and the modern world, while bridging the gap between the two worlds. Etuaptmunk — or Two-Eyed Seeing — guides MK as they develop their programs (Marshall, Knockwood & Bartlett, 2018). Through Indigenous movements and the recognition of the injustices that Indigenous Peoples have faced and continue to face, including Idle No More, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Actions, Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women, Indigenous Rights of the Wet'suwet'en and the

Trans Mountain pipeline, and confirmation of over a thousand (known at this time) unmarked graves at former residential schools, the realities Indigenous communities are facing are clear (Watt, 2018), and they need to guide education. Each of these education authorities has developed curriculum that integrates Indigenous Knowledge, while continuing to meet the provincial outcomes. These programs not only reflect traditional ways of knowing and doing, but also reflect contemporary realities that Indigenous students are facing.

A holistic and culturally responsive curriculum is also needed to heal from the legacy of colonization and assimilation practices that continue to have negative impacts on Indigenous communities. Kativik Ilisarniliriniq delivers services and develops curriculum and programs that “are rooted in the Inuit definition of Inuguiniq, an education process that seeks to develop the human being as a whole through direct engagement with the environment and the community” (Kativik Ilisarniliriniq, 2017, p. 4). Marshall et al. (2018) emphasize MK’s priority in creating a culturally safe space. By ensuring the spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional parts of the students are nurtured and balanced, Indigenous students will feel safe and supported to heal from intergenerational traumas.

In addition to programs that are rooted in the local Indigenous cultures and realities, the Cree and Inuit, Mi’kmaw, and BC First Nations have all prioritized local Indigenous authority over education and building capacity within the local communities. While each of the case studies have a central education organization, all four of these organizations provide support to and serve the communities, while the communities themselves have jurisdiction over education. The Inuit and Cree recognize the importance of creating a culturally based approach to education and involving Elders and community members as the Knowledge Keepers when developing their curriculum from the ground up (Vick-Westgate, 2002). Additionally, each Inuit and Cree community in Nunavik has an Education Committee, and



one of their main objectives is to engage parents, Elders, and community members in the planning, developing, and delivery stages of the education programs at their respective schools (Vick-Westgate, 2002). MK is proud of the fact that they exist “to support community-based aspirations, initiatives, and needs” (Paul et al., 2019). All these education organizations are not there to control education, rather they are there to support the communities, provide a collective voice, and share capacity and resources.

Building capacity from within the communities encourages higher education and allows Indigenous students to envision themselves in leadership positions. The Inuit and Cree developed a partnership with McGill University to develop training programs for Inuit and Cree teachers (Vick-Westgate, 2002). Like Kativik Ilisarniliriniq and the Cree School Board, MK has partnered with St. Francis Xavier University to develop a teacher training program to train Mi’kmaw language teachers to revitalize the Mi’kmaw language (Lewington, 2019). FNEESC has partnered with BC universities and several other Indigenous and government organizations to advance Indigenous post-secondary education (FNEESC & FNSA, 2020). Additionally, Kativik Ilisarniliriniq and the Cree School Board, MK, and FNEESC all provide numerous professional development opportunities to educators. Opportunities to move into leadership roles are also clear in all these case studies. By supporting those within the community to develop their knowledge and skills, Kativik Ilisarniliriniq and the Cree School Board, MK, and FNEESC are supporting an education system that encourage local Indigenous students to stay in the community.

While there continues to be challenges facing these Indigenous communities due to the intergenerational legacy of colonization, these case studies highlight how communities can transform the education system to meet the needs of Indigenous students. After generations of oppressive approaches to education, these four education organizations have

made significant steps to decolonize education, empowering Indigenous students to be successful on their own terms. With many Indigenous languages at risk of being lost, the Inuit and Cree in Nunavik have established Inuttitut and Cree as the language of instruction in their respective communities for the primary grades (Vick-Westgate, 2002). Mi’kmaw students have one of the highest graduation rates in the country — among Indigenous students and non-Indigenous students — at more than 94 percent, and MK’s responsive and community focused approach has played a huge part in this success (Mi’kmaw Kina’matnewey, 2019). Additionally, MK schools have an average attendance rate of 91 percent (Mi’kmaw Kina’matnewey, 2019). In addition to providing invaluable support to First Nations to negotiate their own education agreements, FNEESC has developed several culturally based courses that meet the BC curriculum standards, allowing for these courses to be offered in both public schools and First Nations schools (FNEESC & FNSA, 2020). Because of the support and services these education organizations provide, student achievement, and student and community well-being are improving. Like the Inuit, Cree, Mi’kmaw, and BC First Nations with an education system that reflects the needs and wants of the local community and supports culturally based, culturally relevant, and culturally responsive approaches to education, Yukon First Nations can positively impact the well-being of First Nations students and communities, allowing for greater self-determination.

*Table 2 – Components of an Indigenous Education System*

	Definition	Examples	Impacts
<b>Culturally based education</b>	A culturally based approach to education seeks to sustain, reclaim, and revitalize Indigenous languages and cultures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Traditional languages</li> <li>• Land-based, seasonal activities</li> <li>• Traditional Knowledge</li> <li>• Safety and survival skills</li> <li>• Elders and Knowledge Keepers as teachers</li> </ul>	Students will: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a resilient sense of cultural identity</li> <li>• Become more engaged</li> </ul>

<b>Culturally relevant education</b>	A culturally relevant approach works to meet the contemporary needs of Indigenous youth, as defined by the local Indigenous community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local history, including before colonization and up until today</li> <li>• Contemporary realities, including final and self-government agreements, Indigenous political and social movements, intergenerational trauma, resiliency, role models, challenges living in “two worlds”</li> <li>• History and impacts of colonization, including residential schools and assimilation policies</li> </ul>	<p>Students will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feel confident to “walk in two worlds”</li> <li>• Successfully meet Euro-Canadian education standards, while being confident in their traditional world</li> </ul>
<b>Culturally responsive education</b>	A culturally responsive approach to education recognizes and addresses the impacts of intergenerational trauma, creating opportunities for healing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Holistic approach to education, meeting the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of a person</li> <li>• Traditional healing circles and ceremony</li> <li>• Creating a culturally safe environment</li> </ul>	<p>Students will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have opportunities to heal from the impacts of intergenerational trauma</li> </ul>
<b>Locally controlled education</b>	A locally controlled education ensures community participation, including leadership, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and parents within the local Indigenous community during all stages of program development, implementation, and evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local authority to make decisions regarding education</li> <li>• Capacity built from within the community</li> <li>• Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and community members engaged as active participants in the education of First Nations youth</li> <li>• Community-based initiatives</li> </ul>	<p>Students will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feel supported by their community to be successful</li> <li>• See themselves in leadership positions</li> <li>• Have a holistic education system that reflects their own culture, history, and reality</li> </ul>

### 3 Results

Participants representing eight Yukon First Nations shared their experiences with education in a variety of settings, including the public education system, education programs that the First Nations support, and education that comes from the families and communities. Examples of successes, challenges, and priorities moving forward were shared, providing a comprehensive understanding of an education system that represents a life-long, holistic approach to learning. Each participant stressed that education is key to being self-determining

Nations — to reclaiming traditional languages and teachings, and to fully implementing final and self-government agreements. Even though each participant emphasized the importance of Indigenizing the education system, each participant also stressed that this Indigenous education system would not exclude non-First Nations students and must be available to any student that wants to participate in an education system that is based on Indigenous pedagogy. Additionally, a general openness and desire to work together as Yukon First Nations and with other education partners to achieve First Nations authority of First Nations education was evident. All participants spoke to the collaboration and sharing of information that is already happening among Yukon First Nations, emphasizing strength in numbers, and the importance of sharing resources and capacity.

Although each Yukon First Nation has unique histories and cultural practices, it is not surprising that the priorities for each First Nation interviewed remained consistent with the themes identified in the review of the literature: culturally based education, culturally relevant education, culturally responsive education, and local authority over education. The results are organized in a similar way to the review of the literature, allowing similarities to be more easily identified from within Indigenous pedagogy, between Indigenous communities across Canada, and among First Nations communities throughout the Yukon. These themes represent a holistic approach to education that is commonly shared by Indigenous communities. Yukon First Nations agree that there is a long-overdue need for the education system to change to reflect First Nations culture, histories, and realities, and that these common themes provide a unified way forward.

### **3.1 Culturally Based Education**

During the interviews, all participants highlighted culturally based programming as being integral as Yukon First Nations build an Indigenous education system. Even though

participants recognize the First Nations programming currently available in schools, it is not consistently integrated throughout all courses in every classroom. It is dependent on how comfortable the teacher is with First Nations ways of knowing and the relationships between the schools and the local First Nation(s). Erin Pauls, the Director of Education at Champagne and Aishihik First Nations, shared one reason why culturally based programming is inconsistent:

I think most teachers get scared when they're trying to incorporate curriculum into the classroom because they don't want to make a mistake. They want to do a good job, but they don't want it to be tokenism. They don't want to be disrespectful to someone or give false information (personal communication, April 22, 2021).

This hesitancy to integrate culturally based programming into the classroom could be improved with proper training and support. In addition to inconsistency, this programming does not move beyond including First Nations content into the existing curriculum. Each participant stressed the importance of developing a culturally based curriculum that has at its foundation cultural teachings, land-based experiential learning, traditional languages, and Elders as teachers.

### **3.1.1 Cultural Teachings**

Cultural teachings provide opportunities for First Nations students to build confidence as First Nations people and they need to be integrated into all aspects of education. However, currently, cultural teachings are limited to isolated culture camps or add-on activities. Several First Nations host annual culture camps centred around seasonal activities and Traditional Knowledge. Caley Boulter, the Director of Human Resources, Education and Training at Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, shared that Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in has four one-week culture camps that

they put on throughout the year. The First Nation has developed a curriculum that has been approved by the Yukon Department of Education to go with the culture camps, so students are able to earn one credit for each camp that they participate in. Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in is currently overhauling the curriculum and looking at increasing the number of credits that students can earn (personal communication, May 10, 2021). Several other First Nations are looking to accredit the culture camps that they run in their communities; however, no other First Nation has managed to do this because it is a difficult bureaucratic process. Even though culture camps provide meaningful opportunities for students to engage with the local First Nations culture, participants agree that these cultural teachings need to move beyond isolated culture camps and be a regular part of the education system.

### **3.1.2 Land-Based Experiential Learning**

Each participant highlighted the importance of land-based learning to creating a culturally based approach to education. One participant explained why a land-based curriculum is essential to Indigenizing the education system:

Everything that we were taught historically happened on the land, whether it was the language, the tradition, the culture. We need to somehow tie the curriculum into the cultural activities that we have, and try to balance the two (personal communication, May 19, 2021).

Additionally, Erin Pauls listed several culturally based skills that students need to know when on the land:

[F]or them to be proficient on the land, for them to be able to take care of themselves, to be safe in the woods, to be able to harvest animals safely and ethically, to be able to take care of themselves, and be able to trap muskrats,

get gophers or rabbits, those types of things, so more living on the land

(personal communication, April 22, 2021).

Additionally, outdoor classrooms provide opportunities to integrate cultural teachings into the curriculum, while engaging all students. The Chief of the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyak Dun, Simon Mervyn, shared his vision of a modernized, integrated land-based curriculum that encourages a culturally based approach to education:

Our Nation purchased the Partridge Creek Farm, so we want to develop a program where educators can go there and integrate the wellness issues, the social issues, the political issues, the environmental issues into an absolute land-based education (personal communication, June 24, 2021).

To integrate a culturally based, culturally relevant, and culturally responsive education, Chief Simon Mervyn spoke about food sustainability and the impacts climate change and overharvesting on the land and animals, while learning about the history of First Nations people and Traditional Knowledge (personal communication, June 24, 2021).

### **3.1.3 Traditional Languages**

A language holds a people's way of knowing and their belief system, making it an essential component of culturally based programming. Few fluent First Nations language speakers are left in the Yukon, and this is a direct result of the residential school system and government assimilation policies. Because of this history, few families are able to pass down their traditional language, making the school system an integral piece in reclaiming Yukon First Nations languages. Jessica Bryant, the Citizen Development Manager at Ta'an Kwäch'än Council, shared that Elders are telling us "it all comes back to the language. Kids need to know who they are. They need to understand their culture. They need to learn their language" (personal communication, April 22, 2021).

Currently, nearly all the schools in the Yukon do have a First Nations language class, representing the First Nations language spoken within the Traditional Territory the school is located. However, the attainment of language proficiency of these language classes is very limited and varies depending on the language proficiency of the teacher, and the support the language teacher receives from the school, the community, and the First Nation. Additionally, the First Nations language program is often limited to 15 minutes per day and does not have a curriculum or adequate resources, preventing consistent and common progress among students.

In addition to the First Nations language classroom, it is important to integrate the language throughout the curriculum, and have all teachers become comfortable in using the language. This is not to say that all teachers need to be fluent speakers, but some of the participants spoke of teachers being able to say basic greetings and introduce themselves in the First Nations language where they live and work. To achieve this, Jessica Bryant shared a positive initiative:

One school invited a Ta'an Elder to work with teachers to learn Southern Tutchone (Ta'an dialect) and to guide them on how to weave language into the curriculum. It's important to support these positive steps to bring language into the schools, but valuing language and expanding learning opportunities for students needs to be a bigger priority for the education system in the Yukon (personal communication, April 22, 2021).

Several participants spoke to the importance of early childhood education and how if we want our children to learn the language, it needs to begin as young children. To create a successful approach to learning traditional languages that is culturally based, Elder David



Johnny Sr. emphasized several components in how language is currently taught that need to change:

We have to teach the young *young* generation. We have to really concentrate on them, if we want to bring the language back. And it should be a few hours a day to teach the language. It should be more. When we were learning our language at home, my grandma would call us over and we would sit there and listen to them talk and tell stories. And that's how we learned our language. It wasn't in the classroom setting. ... But now we take our language and we break it down and we split it into the European way of teaching (personal communication, July 16, 2021).

Erin Pauls shared that the Language Nest program at Shawkwunlee Daycare plans to have one language teacher in each classroom for the entire day, providing more opportunities for young children to reclaim the traditional language. She emphasizes a more culturally based approach to learning the language:

We need to create opportunities for children to live in the language ... without focusing on all the words, but really focusing on things that the children do all the time, like washing their hands, getting dressed to go outside, eating a meal, cleaning up (personal communication, April 22, 2021).

These practical opportunities to learn the language are essential, if students are ever to become proficient speakers.

### **3.1.4 Elders as Teachers**

In addition to figuring out what to include in the curriculum and where learning should take place, each of the participants also spoke to the knowledge and wisdom that Elders and Knowledge Keepers hold, which is essential to creating an authentic culturally

based education system. Each First Nation already draws on the knowledge of their Elders and Knowledge Keepers when developing education programs; however, in the current school system, these Elders and Knowledge Keepers are too often left out or used as an add-on to programming. One participant highlighted a shortcoming in the current education system, negatively impacting culturally based programming: “In the education system, Elders are not recognized as our teachers because they are not certified teachers, which is unfortunate” (personal communication, June 22, 2021).

However, with more control over the education system, First Nations will be able to ensure Elders and Knowledge Keepers are involved at all stages and in all aspects of program development, implementation, and evaluation. When developing curriculum, our Elders and Knowledge Keepers know what should be included in the curriculum, and they need to be recognized as teachers to implement the curriculum. Several participants shared how they already employ Elders and Knowledge Keepers to guide the development process and teach Traditional Knowledge to students. However, Judy Dean, the Director of Education and Capacity Development at Carcross/Tagish First Nation, also highlighted that to ensure a culturally responsive approach to education is created:

We need to understand where our Elders come from — from that trauma experience with education — and we need to be kind and gentle with our questions that we ask them. It’s okay to not know everything because not one person knows everything. They’re still able to share their stories that they remember. And it’s the stories that the younger generation can connect to (personal communication, July 8, 2021).

We need to be respectful about what we ask from our Elders and Knowledge Keepers, and we cannot put them into situations where they feel uncomfortable. Additionally, we need to follow local First Nations protocols and show our respect.

Participants highlighted several essential components that are needed to develop a culturally based approach to education. To do this successfully, culturally based programming needs to move beyond a 15-minute per day language class and an occasional unit or culture camp. Most importantly, our Elders and Knowledge Keepers need to be recognized as experts that hold invaluable knowledge, and they need to be involved as we develop a school system that reflects the Traditional Knowledge and culture of First Nations.

### **3.2 Culturally Relevant Education**

All participants clearly stated that the First Nations would like to develop a curriculum that is culturally based, while being relevant for today's world. It is about creating a balance with Traditional Knowledge and modern ways, so that First Nations students feel connected to their culture and are set up to be successful. Erin Pauls explains how a culturally relevant education can meet the needs of both a traditional education and a Euro-Canadian education and why that is important:

I think of education as two pronged — as our traditional education, meaning our culture and our ways of knowing and being, and then as what the dominant Canadian society wants us to learn so that we can be successful. They are both very important for being self-governing, implementing land claim agreements, building businesses, so that we can make a living and live a happy lifestyle, so that our basic needs are met (personal communication, April 22, 2021).

By creating real-life opportunities that reflect the realities of First Nations students, the education system can prepare students for, as one participant said, “walking two paths” (personal communication, June 22, 2021).

While several First Nations are already working with the schools to create meaningful opportunities that reflect a culturally relevant approach to education, again, these examples are limited to add-ons to the current curriculum and dependent on the teacher and school. Chief Zzeh Gittlit School in Old Crow and Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation have worked together to create a Leadership Program, where students as young as 12 years old are learning the modern-day skills needed to live off the land (personal communication, April 8, 2021). Not only are the students learning to hunt and traditional teachings needed for living off of the land, they are also learning to fix ATV’s and boat motors, getting their trapping licence and Possession and Acquisition Licence, and taking the Firearms Safety Course and First Aids courses (personal communication, April 8, 2021). This Leadership Program recognizes both Traditional Knowledge and the modern knowledge, and it prepares all students for “walking two paths.”

Another example of a culturally relevant approach to education is Selkirk First Nation and Yukon University’s science camp. The First Nation and University are collaborating to create a one-week science camp that bridges modern science and traditional science (personal communication, June 22, 2021). The camp will take place on the land at Fort Selkirk, a culturally important place to the Selkirk First Nations people (personal communication, June 22, 2021). Unfortunately, this science camp is not a part of school programming, and students who participate in it will actually be marked absent from school during the days that fall within the school year. However, this collaboration between Selkirk First Nation and Yukon

University show the possibilities in creating a curriculum that is culturally based, but still meets Euro-Canadian education requirements.

Elder David Johnny Sr. from the White River First Nation recognizes how culturally relevant teachings are already integrated into the classrooms at Nelnah Bessie John School in Beaver Creek. By building a partnership with the principal and teachers, he emphasizes how converting the Euro-Canadian curriculum to a First Nations lens is possible (personal communication, July 16, 2021). For example, Elder David Johnny Sr. shared how when he was growing up on the land, his dad would explain as he cut up the moose, “what the function of different muscles and organs were, what we use, what we eat, how we preserve it, and all that stuff. It was all there” (personal communication, July 16, 2021). These teachings are the exact same as the Euro-Canadian teachings; however, by using a more place-based approach, education can be more holistic and focus on the realities of the students (personal communication, July 16, 2021). Through an innovative partnership with the school, place-based learning is a regular part of the programming at Nelnah Bessie John School.

In addition to programming that focuses on Traditional Knowledge, a culturally relevant approach to education also includes contemporary political realities of First Nations students. An example of this is the partnership between Robert Service School in Dawson City, Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in, and The Gordon Foundation to teach a high school class about modern-day treaties (personal communication, May 10, 2021). Students participated in treaty negotiation and implementation simulations, allowing the students to better understand the history of negotiating the final and self-government agreements in the Yukon and the ongoing process of implementing these agreements. During these simulations, students were guided by experts who have been involved in the negotiations and implementation of these

agreements. By learning from experts and through experiential learning, students gain an insight into this process that continues to impact everyone who lives in the Yukon.

Each of these examples of culturally relevant education demonstrates the value in creating partnerships. They also represent how an Indigenized curriculum needs to be meaningful for today's realities. When schools and First Nations work together to bridge the gap between the Euro-Canadian curriculum and a culturally based curriculum to create a culturally relevant curriculum, the possibilities are endless. All participants recognize the importance in reclaiming traditional ways of knowing, while preparing First Nations students to live in a Euro-Canadian dominant society.

### **3.3 Culturally Responsive Education**

While not all participants specifically referred to a culturally responsive approach to education, the examples they used and concerns they had reflected a holistic approach to education. Even though the concept of the Medicine Wheel does not originate with Yukon First Nations, the traditional teachings associated with the Medicine Wheel parallel the holistic approach to education that Yukon First Nations have developed over generations. Multiple participants specifically referred to the Medicine Wheel, while others spoke to the importance of the emotional, physical, mental and spiritual well-being of First Nations students. One participant emphasized how important a culturally responsive, holistic approach to well-being is needed for First Nations students:

It's not just about going to school and going into a classroom. It's not just about the education and the curriculum and what they're learning. There are other areas that we traditionally access for our own well-being. There are emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual components (personal communication, May 19, 2021).

However, due to the legacy of residential schools and assimilation practices, intergenerational trauma continues to impact First Nations communities. To create a culturally responsive approach to education, one participant emphasized we need to start by teaching all students about this history and begin the healing process:

We need to teach about residential schools, which still plays a key role in all aspects of education, whether it is in the past, in the present, and even into the future. We need to have more knowledge and understanding on this aspect of our history (personal communication, June 22, 2021).

Additionally, Chief Simon Mervyn stressed how important it is for children to “learn the truth right from the start” (personal communication, June 24, 2021). By learning the truth about the impacts this history has had on First Nations communities, it provides an opportunity for all students to understand this history. We need to be able to have these difficult conversations to heal from the impacts this history has had on our First Nations communities.

In addition to understanding this history and the intergenerational impacts, a culturally responsive approach to education provides opportunities to heal. Erin Pauls highlights the connection between culturally based education and culturally responsive education:

Our traditional ways of knowing are important because it’s entrenched in who we are as a people, and it’s deeply connected to our spirituality. Our language, our culture. There’s so much healing in our traditional education and Traditional Knowledge. Everyone that I have ever met — my family, and throughout my life and education — have been happy and more grounded in themselves when they have that Traditional Knowledge, when they start

reclaiming those pieces of themselves (personal communication, April 22, 2021).

Truthful conversations about our history and contemporary realities our First Nations communities are facing, in addition to the culturally based and on-the-land programming provide meaningful opportunities for First Nations students to heal from intergenerational trauma. Their emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual needs can be met as students reclaim their traditional cultures and languages.

### **3.4 Locally Controlled Education**

Not all First Nations in the Yukon are taking the same path to regaining authority over First Nations education; however, each First Nation is working toward locally controlled education. Through the First Nations School Board Framework Agreement, the ten Yukon First Nations that signed onto the Agreement will have will have the authority to hire and evaluate staff, allocate funds, create policies, and establish programming. The remaining four First Nations are also working toward First Nation authority over education through Regional Education Agreements. However, even though each First Nation needs to take the path that works best for their community, one participant highlighted, “there is definitely a common goal among Yukon First Nations in having our own school system. But [we also know] we have our own traditions within that” (personal communication, May 19, 2021).

Additionally, all participants recognize the importance of collaborating with each other and other education partners. Participants agree that sharing capacity and resources are key in moving forward. While some communities already work closely together, several participants shared that collaboration between all Yukon First Nations is currently limited to four meetings a year at the First Nations Education Commission (FNEC) meetings. These meetings provide an opportunity to share what is working well with other communities, and



the challenges they are facing. However, all participants agree that there is strength in numbers and unity.

Even though unity and collaboration are important to share capacity and resources, each participant spoke to local authority over education. One participant agreed that while unity is important, “teaching the culture and tradition of each First Nation because we are all unique in our own way, makes that tradition within those students stronger” (personal communication, May 19, 2021). Each First Nation has unique histories, traditions, and realities that need to be recognized, and local authority will allow each First Nation to ensure that the needs of their students are being met.

### **3.5 Long-Overdue Change**

The current education system is not working — it is failing First Nations students. All participants had similar concerns, and these concerns were in line with the case studies in the review of the literature. One participant summed up how the current education system is not meeting the needs of First Nations students:

Right now, our students are thrown into the high school system, and if they finish high school, too often they leave with a School Completion Certificate, which means nothing, or they leave with a transcript that doesn't have the marks to enter into a college or university. Two years ago, there were 106 First Nations grads, and only something like five of them were qualified to go onto college or university (personal communication, May 19, 2021).

In addition to shared concerns, several participants insisted on the need for change. Elder David Johnny Sr. emphasized the need to change the way we approach education:

We need to stop and take a step back and say, “how do we teach our children how to be self-determinant and how to be self-sufficient in our way?” We

tried to do the European way for years and years. It didn't work for us  
(personal communication, July 16, 2021).

## **4 Discussion**

This research supports the growing literature around Indigenous education pedagogy by identifying the similarities between Yukon First Nations communities who are beginning their journey toward First Nations authority over First Nations education and several Indigenous communities throughout Canada that already have authority over their education. The themes pulled from the case studies and interviews reflect an opportunity for a unified way forward for Yukon First Nations, while allowing for individual First Nations to follow the path toward authority over their education that works best for their community. By creating an Indigenous education system that is culturally based, culturally relevant, culturally responsive, and locally controlled, these holistic themes can be developed into an overarching, shared curriculum framework that can be adapted to the needs of the local community.

As Yukon First Nations begin to develop an education system that better meets the needs and wants of Indigenous students, the literature on Indigenous education pedagogy, case studies, and interviews with representatives of Yukon First Nations provide guidance on the next steps. While long overdue, Yukon First Nations are beginning an exciting phase in education. Several similarities can be pulled from the interviews, providing a united way for Yukon First Nations to move forward. By building an overarching curriculum and wrap-around supports that meet the needs of First Nations students and communities, there is potential for meaningful and positive change.

An overarching curriculum framework provides an opportunity for Yukon First Nations to unite for the common goals shared among the fourteen Yukon First Nations, while allowing individual First Nations to maintain the local authority necessary to ground the curriculum in local needs and traditional cultures. Additionally, while curriculum developed by Indigenous communities throughout Canada can help guide Yukon First Nations during this process, it is important to move beyond borrowing and adapting Indigenous curriculum from outside the Yukon to fit within a Yukon context. By listening to our own Elders and Knowledge Keepers, and utilizing Indigenous curriculum experts to ensure curriculum goals meet the Euro-Canadian requirements, Yukon First Nations can build a curriculum that truly prepares First Nations students to “walk in both worlds.”

Several common themes found in the review of the literature and highlighted by the interview participants could guide curriculum development. A culturally based, culturally relevant, and culturally responsive curriculum will provide a holistic approach to education. By developing a culturally based curriculum — an integrated, place-based curriculum, using First Nations ways of knowing as a foundation to meet the curriculum goals of the Euro-Canadian education system — First Nations students will be engaged in their education and prepared for today’s world. Additionally, local traditional languages need to be integrated throughout all classes, providing real-life opportunities to learn and practice. This framework curriculum also needs to integrate culturally relevant learning opportunities, including the history of colonization and the impacts residential schools and other assimilation policies have had on Indigenous communities. The history of final and self-government agreements and the skills and knowledge needed to implement agreements and continue toward self-determination are also essential for being successful in today’s world. While this history is important to know and understand, emphasis should be placed on the resiliency of First

Nations people and opportunities to heal, ensuring a culturally responsive approach to education is supported. To authentically integrate a culturally based, culturally relevant, and culturally responsive approach to education into the education system, Elders must be recognized and respected as teachers. Developing this overarching Yukon First Nations curriculum framework is essential for successfully moving forward and Indigenizing the education system.

In addition to curriculum development, creating the wrap-around supports and services to ensure teachers feel comfortable implementing this new curriculum and First Nations students are empowered to overcome the systemic barriers and be successful are needed. YFNED has already implemented wrap-around services, including an Early Childhood Education team, Mobile Therapeutic Unit, Nutrition Team, and First Nations Education Advocates team to support First Nations students and families. Through an integrated approach that ensures easy access to early childhood education, healthy food, health services, cultural supports, and liaisons, YFNED has created an Indigenous-led wrap-around model for education in the Yukon.

As many participants highlighted, the amount of culturally based programming is dependent on individual teachers, and many teachers are not comfortable integrating culture into their classrooms, let alone teaching within an Indigenous pedagogy. One of the authorities that the First Nations school board will have is hiring staff, ensuring teachers and school staff work within an Indigenous pedagogy. However, professional development and support are still essential for successfully transitioning to a First Nations-based curriculum. By creating an environment where teachers are not isolated and it is okay to ask for help and collaborate with Elders and Knowledge Keepers, teachers will be more successful in this transition. In addition to these supports, opportunities to share and learn from other

communities, teachers, and education partners are necessary to successfully create an environment where all educators feel supported and comfortable working within an Indigenous pedagogy.

## **4.1 Limitations**

The findings in this research must be viewed in light of several limitations. Although efforts were made to interview representatives from all fourteen Yukon First Nations, extenuating circumstances limited the number of participants available to interview. Eight out of fourteen Yukon First Nations are represented in the findings; therefore, the perspectives and priorities of the remaining six First Nations are missing. However, this research does represent seven out of eight language groups within the Yukon, both First Nations who have and have not signed final and self-government agreements, and both First Nations who support the School Board Framework Agreement and who are going to pursue a Regional Education Agreement.

In addition to the missing perspectives, participants from each First Nation represented a limited voice within their community. Group interviews including Elders and Knowledge Keepers, educators, and youth would provide a more in-depth understanding of the priorities for each of the First Nations. However, due to COVID-19 guidelines and limited availability of participants, this was not possible for this research study.

## **4.2 Future Research**

As Yukon First Nations begin implementing the First Nations School Board Framework Agreement and Regional Education Agreements, curriculum research and development is an integral next step. Like this research, it is valuable to learn from other Indigenous communities who have developed their own curriculum; however, it is essential

to build a curriculum based on the needs and wants of the local First Nations communities.

This future research also provides an opportunity to pursue a more in-depth understanding by engaging Elders, Knowledge Keepers, educators, and youth.

### **4.3 Conclusion**

Several Indigenous communities throughout Canada have regained authority of their education and successfully Indigenized their education system, positively impacting the well-being of Indigenous students. Best practices learned from these case studies can guide Yukon First Nations on their path toward First Nations authority over First Nations education. The case studies — the Kativik Ilisarniliriniq and Cree School Board in Quebec, the Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey in Nova Scotia, and the First Nations Education Steering Committee in British Columbia — demonstrate centralized education authorities that provide support to several Indigenous communities. Even though these Indigenous communities continue to face challenges, since these centralized education authorities have been established, Indigenous students have been empowered to be successful on their own terms. Graduation rates have improved significantly for all of these communities, with Mi'kmaw students achieving a 94 percent graduation rate. Through culturally based, culturally relevant, and culturally responsive education systems and supports developed by these centralized education authorities and the local communities, the education system reflects the needs and wants of the Indigenous students and communities.

As these case studies show, Yukon First Nations will be stronger as they unite to share resources, capacity, and support through YFNED. This centralized education organization provides support to all Indigenous students in the current education system, while supporting each Yukon First Nation as they pursue education authority. YFNED supported the negotiations of the First Nations School Board Framework Agreement, and

with ten of the fourteen Yukon First Nations signing onto the Agreement in March 2021, Yukon First Nations are on the verge of regaining significant control of the education of their students. YFNED is the first centralized First Nations education organization in the Yukon that has provided wrap-around services and support to all Indigenous students and all Yukon First Nations.

In line with the case studies, the common priorities pulled from the interviews with representatives from eight Yukon First Nations highlights the importance of culturally based, culturally relevant, and culturally responsive education. A First Nations education system must support relearning, reclaiming, and celebrating traditional languages and teachings, while preparing First Nations students to be self-determining in today's world.

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