

# Understanding Roles and Relationships: Teachers' Work in a Northern Ontario Remote First Nations Community

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## Abstract

This article explores how teachers negotiate their roles and relationships in a Northern Ontario First Nations community. Through a case study approach, utilizing interviews and focus groups with 15 participants, I constructed four categories: (1) pedestal people, (2) educational transitioners, (3) relationship builders, and (4) community integrators, for the purpose of explaining the ways in which teachers navigate their roles and relationships in the community and the implications for their work as teachers. I argue that community integrators embody an understanding of Indigenous approaches, centralized in relational knowing and being, and model a practice most efficacious for Indigenous student success.

*Keywords:* Indigenous education, relationships, teachers' work

## **Résumé**

Cet article explore la manière dont les enseignants négocient leurs rôles et leurs relations dans une communauté des Premières Nations du nord de l'Ontario. En utilisant une approche basée sur des études de cas, par le moyen d'entrevues individuels et de groupes de discussion composés de 15 participants, je distingue quatre catégories : (a) les personnes sur un piédestal, (b) les éducateurs en transition, (c) les bâtisseurs de relations, et (d) les intégrateurs de communauté, pour expliquer les façons dont les enseignants gèrent leurs rôles et leurs relations dans la communauté, et les implications pour leur travail en tant qu'enseignants. Je soutiens que les intégrateurs de communauté incarnent une compréhension des approches autochtones centralisée sur la relation de l'être et du savoir, et modélisent une pratique plus efficace pour la réussite des étudiants autochtones.

*Mots-clés* : éducation autochtone, relations, travail des enseignants

## Introduction

Study after study demonstrates the pressing need to improve the educational achievements and experiences of Indigenous students (Assembly of First Nations, 2012; Auditor General of Canada, 2000; Canadian Council on Learning, 2009; Richards, 2008; Richards & Scott, 2009). Policies such as the *Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007) recommend culturally relevant teaching strategies and varied pedagogical approaches to improve achievement of Indigenous students, and the Association of Canadian Deans of Education's (ACDE) *Accord on Indigenous Education* (2010) emphasizes the centrality of improved teacher education. These approaches make sense given that the research literature shows a strong correlation between student success and effective teaching and teacher quality (Chell et al., 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Rowe, 2007). Furthermore, stability in the teaching force is important because teacher attrition has a negative outcome for students by compromising trust and disrupting school dynamics (York-Barr et al., 2007). It can be concluded, then, that student success and the implementation of social policies targeted at Indigenous students converge in the work of teachers. Surprisingly, however, there is little research exploring the role of teachers and their work in Indigenous education, particularly from the perspective of teachers themselves. This creates a significant gap in understanding the challenges facing Indigenous education, particularly in northern communities.

The compelling literature on the effective teaching and educational success of Indigenous students is increasingly framed within the relational complexities of colonization, self-determination and decolonization (Battiste 2013; Brant Castellano et al., 2000; Goulet, 2001). For teachers in remote First Nations<sup>1</sup> schools, these relational complexities are lived out daily in the practical experiences of their lives, and thus relationships with students, families, and communities become central to understanding the work of teachers (Burleigh, 2016; Oskineegish, 2014).

Toulouse (2013) has argued that “relationships are the grounding element in fostering educational change for Indigenous students” (p. 11) and establishing positive

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1 Throughout this article two essential terms are used. The term Indigenous is used when referring to national or international educational contexts, policies, concepts, and discourses. The term First Nations is used with specific reference to the Canadian First Nations educational context and the community research site.

teacher–student relationships has been identified consistently as central to Indigenous student success and positive school experiences (Collins, 1993; Fanshawe, 1989). More specifically, research confirms that effective and productive positive teacher–student relationships are characterized by (a) empathy, caring, and compassion; (b) a conviction that every child not only can but will learn; (c) active listening; (d) confidentiality; (e) respect; and (f) trust (Melnechenko & Horsman, 1998). As Phelan et al. (1992) observe, “Students want teachers to recognize who they are, to listen to what they say, and to respect their efforts. In classrooms where personalities are allowed to show, students respond more fully, both academically and personally” (p. 696). Furthermore, positive relationships are especially important when working in Indigenous educational contexts because the relational ontology of Indigenous ways of knowing and learning make trust a central consideration between teachers and students, and with parents and communities (Ermine, 1995; Simpson, 2000; Wilson, 2007).

While there is clear and overwhelming evidence that positive, healthy relationships can enhance Indigenous student success and create meaningful school experiences, relationships are co-created (Crooks et al., 2015; Whitley, 2019). Teachers must explore the dynamics of their roles within the classroom and the community, keeping in mind the context of colonization. However, Trotman and Kerr (2001), in a study of pre-service teachers, found that teachers draw on their own experiences to help position themselves as teachers and situate their understandings of education. When teachers draw on their own experiences, a filter is created that is riddled with expectations, definitions of success, their own educational experiences, bias, and stereotypes. These positions often embed a Euro-Western, colonial framework centralizing notions of educational success that are misaligned with those of Indigenous students (Battiste & McLean, 2005; Brown et al., 2009; Richards et al., 2010; Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000). As such, the teacher’s filter may impede the ability to assess her/his role critically in dealing with issues of difference, and may ultimately serve to reinforce the status quo (Battiste, 2005; St. Denis, 2007).

Although the teacher participants in this study were not pre-service teachers when they arrived, they were beginning a new teaching experience and brought with them their understandings developed elsewhere, largely in the urban south. Through teacher education programs and their own experiences as students, teachers have been trained to value dominant Western approaches over other ways of knowing, particularly Indigenous ways

of knowing (Battiste, 2013). So, how do teachers build relationships with students and community members who have a different worldview and different life experiences?

As part of a larger study focused on the work of teachers in a remote northern Ontario First Nations community, I found that teachers were actively engaged in a process in which they developed evolving perceptions about their roles in the classroom and community as they negotiated relationships. After summarizing the research method and describing the community, which has been given the pseudonym Grassy Hills, to situate this research, I describe four different categories that emerged from the data analysis that represent ways in which teachers negotiated their relationships with students, with each other, with families, and with the community at large. A better understanding of how teachers conceive of their roles and relationships in a teaching context is an important and underrepresented component of the literature on developing teacher–student relationships, particularly in First Nations schools. When the roles of teachers are better understood, the development of better school dynamics through trusting relationships with students, parents, and the wider community becomes more possible and may lead to improved levels of student success and teacher retention.

## **Method**

This article reports on part of a larger case study that focused on the question: What is the nature of teachers' work in a remote First Nations community in northern Ontario? Through a case study approach (Stake, 1995), specific attention was paid to the context in which teachers worked and how they conceived of their experiences both teaching and living in the remote community.

There was a total of 15 participants. Six elementary and nine secondary school teachers were interviewed in sessions that lasted from 45 minutes to three hours. Of the 15 participants, 14 were non-Indigenous. Participants ranged in age from 22 to 60-plus and included both male and female teachers. The participant pool included both experienced teachers and new teachers directly out of teacher education programs. Six of the teachers had been in the community for more than three years, and three had substantial teaching experience in Canadian First Nations communities but were new to Grassy Hills.

Following the interviews, I conducted two focus groups, one with two teacher participants and the other with three teacher participants.

A conversational semi-structured interview method was adopted because, as Patton (2002) observes, it “offers maximum flexibility to pursue information in whatever direction appears to be appropriate, depending on what emerges from observing a particular setting or from talking with one or more individuals in that setting” (p. 342). This style of interviewing, along with field observations, provided numerous opportunities to capture in-context data. An interview guide was used to ensure that major issues and themes of the inquiry were covered consistently while still providing flexibility to build a conversation around a particular issue. Thus, the order and emphasis changed in each interview to harness situational differences or respond to the context (Patton, 2002), but similar core topics were covered in each interview.

The focus groups offered an opportunity to explore specific themes and patterns that emerged from the interviews. The focus groups were not conversations directed at solving problems or making decisions, but were instead opportunities for participants to hear responses from others, to question, and to make additional comments to move thinking forward. Participants were not expected to seek consensus or argue; rather, the goal of the focus groups was to seek “high quality data in a social context where people can consider their own views in the context of the views of others” (Patton, 2002, p. 386). I facilitated the focus groups in keeping with Krueger’s (1994) suggestion that they should be strategically planned to yield the necessary data “on a defined area of interest in a permissive nonthreatening environment” (p. 6).

Throughout this article I will include one of my own stories, told in parts. From 2007 to 2010, I was a high school teacher in a remote First Nations community and, as I collected data, I began to connect some of my own experiences with the stories and voices of the participants. The skidoo story (included as italicized text) will be interspersed in several spots in this article to illustrate the convergence of the participants’ experiences with my own. The autobiographical skidoo story serves as a means of locating myself within this research as both a researcher and a former teacher (Brockmeier, 2001; Bruner, 2001).

## ***My Skidoo Trip***

*As the winter began in the North, I started to notice people in the community preparing their skidoos for the coming snowfall. The community I taught in was isolated and had variable road access during the coldest winter months. After seeing everyone zipping around on their skidoos, exploring the area and going out ice fishing, I decided I wanted one too. And so I bought one. It was in less than ideal condition but nonetheless it served its purpose until one very early and very cold morning in February.*

*I, along with a few other teachers, had decided that we would set off one Saturday to skidoo to the next community (about 300 kilometres away) to visit some teacher friends. So, off we went, skidoos loaded with gear, parkas zipped up, and nothing but the open road ahead of us. About three kilometres into the trip I started to feel the brutal -40 degree weather cut through my parka. I remained optimistic as the sun would be up soon and an exciting day was ahead of us. As we passed the 20 km marker, I saw smoke rise from under the hood of my skidoo. Not a good sign. Before I could slow down, I heard a loud snap and the skidoo stopped in its tracks. So, there we were, on the side of the ice road, in -40 degree weather, in the complete dark, wrestling with the realization that none of us knew how to fix the skidoo.*

*At this point, it was decided that the people on the other skidoo would go back to the community to get help and take my passenger with them. There were no extra seats; we had no chains to tow my skidoo, and since this whole trip was my idea (and I may have persuaded the others to come along), I stayed back with the broken skidoo, on the side of the ice road, in -40 weather, in the complete dark, absolutely alone.*

## **Grassy Hills**

For teachers living in Grassy Hills, work and personal lives become blended as they live and teach in close proximity. Teachers are often hired from southern parts of the province and, as a result, are visitors to the community, often leaving during school breaks. Teachers share housing, so colleagues become roommates and students become neighbours. The connection with other teachers is strong because family support is not immediately available and colleagues become surrogate families. The beginning of the skidoo story demonstrates a key feature to living in a community like Grassy Hills: the need for

connection. Living in isolation brings about an eventual desire to meet new people, connect with teachers from other communities, and see new places. In an isolated community like Grassy Hills where access is by air only, leisure activities are minimal, so efforts are made to find entertainment like skidooring, fishing, and hiking.

Running water is available in teachers' homes but it is not drinkable, so regularly teachers and members of the community can be seen walking with jugs to the water plant to fill up on clean water that is used for cooking, brushing teeth, and, in some cases, bathing. Walking, for most teachers, is the primary mode of transportation and is often suitable because distances from home to school are short and living arrangements dense. The distance between teacher and student is narrowed with dense living conditions and a relatively small population. In the words of one teacher, "Everything you do and say reflects on you at school, in this community, because everybody knows everything about everyone, and you can't do or say anything, even outside of school, without it reflecting on you in school." The local grocery store is a hub of activity and often employs various members of the community, so grocery shopping can also closely resemble an impromptu parent-teacher conference. Food security is a concern in the community, with limited availability of fresh produce and high costs for all other essential items. The high cost of living and high levels of unemployment compound conditions of poverty, and many students utilize the breakfast program at the schools to ensure they have had something to eat before they begin their school day.

There are two schools in the community, one elementary and one high school, with a combined population of approximately 500 students. Teachers often work with educational assistants at the elementary level but support staff, such as librarians and special education teachers, are absent due to a lack of funding. Extracurricular programs, updated resources, functioning science labs, and technology are a few of the elements lacking from the schools in Grassy Hills due to lower levels of funding for First Nations schools when compared to their provincial counterparts. As a result, teachers take on many additional duties such as fundraising, coaching community teams, and cleaning their own classrooms, as well as gathering and paying for many of their own teaching materials and resources.

Grassy Hills, despite social and economic challenges, is a culturally, environmentally, and linguistically vibrant community that welcomes teachers to become involved in local events, meetings, and community initiatives. For teachers in Grassy Hills, work and



personal lives are closely intertwined as they come to understand their roles in the community, and the lives of their students. I, too, experienced the interconnectedness of my professional and personal life when my skidoo broke down.

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*And so I waited. I am not sure how long I sat there waiting, but it was long enough for the sun to begin to rise. As I reached for my camera, I thought to myself—this is such a northern moment, the cold, the ice, the rising sun, the land—so majestic, I thought, and then I heard a noise far off to the north. It was the howl of a wolf. Wow! Then I heard another howl, this time to the south. I flashed back to being a child in Algonquin Park, learning about wolves, and remembered that there is never just one. So, there I sat, listening to the howls of the wolves around me. How would I defend myself if the wolves closed in? Should I run? No. Should I try to fend them off? No. It was a deep moment of despair. But then, in the distance, I heard the roar of a motor and from the bush I saw a skidoo coming. Thank goodness, I thought.*

*As the skidoo got closer, I realized it was not my teacher friends who had gone back for help, but someone else. The individual approached and got off the skidoo. Wearing goggles and a parka hood done up tightly, the skidoo driver was not identifiable, but I said, "Hello. Can you help me?" In response, I heard a roaring laugh and it sounded familiar. As the person took off the goggles and hood, I realized it was Mike, one of my Grade 10 students.*

*After Mike stopped laughing at me, he said, "I might be able to help you." He then proceeded to negotiate a few details of his participation in class, which included time in the "comfy teacher chair" and extra computer access after school. Once all the details were negotiated to his satisfaction, Mike got to work. He asked if I had an extra belt (apparently that's what had snapped). I didn't. But he did. So prepared, I thought. Unfortunately, the belt for his skidoo wouldn't fit on mine, and so he swiftly pulled out a chain (again, something I didn't have) and hooked me up to tow me back home.*

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My role changed that day, and so did my understanding of Mike. I began to experience a new type of relationship with one of my students. Many of the teacher participants shared with me their own student stories, some of tension, some of transition, and often within the scope of relationships and roles.

## Categories

How teachers navigate their understanding of their roles and relationships as educators working within an Indigenous context is the focus for the remainder of this article. To detail how teachers understand and explain their roles and relationships, I have uncovered, from the 15 participants and focus group discussions, four categories to describe different phases teachers experience as they negotiate their roles and relationships with each other, their students, parents, and community members. The four categories should be viewed as heuristic devices and are labelled as follows: (1) pedestal people, (2) educational transitioners, (3) relationship builders, and (4) community integrators. These categories are outlined below and are intended to be signposts inviting you to explore the dynamics of roles and relationships for the teachers in Grassy Hills and communities like it.

### **Pedestal People**

Teachers' roles in the classroom and the community are shaped by their understanding of knowledge, as well as what they have been trained to think teaching is. The influence of power and hierarchy became clear when one teacher stated, "I still see teachers as pedestal people. We are to be looked up to and admired. We are presenting the world to these kids. I have knowledge to filter down to them." One teacher finished his interview by stating, "My plan is to be the teacher that I would normally be anywhere else, and that is it. Take it or leave it."

In a community like Grassy Hills, however, students often have strengths that are unknown to the teacher. Essentially, student knowledge and gifts may not be revealed or reflected through the curriculum and, as a result, are not acknowledged in teacher assessments of students or their families. For example, one teacher commented, "The parents don't seem to give their sons and daughters the impression that they, you know, value education or [that] they think they should stay in school and get their high school diploma

and perhaps go on for further education.” This quote specifically highlights a Eurocentric way of thinking about success in school and life in general. The teacher does not acknowledge that education may be something more than schooling, and is unable to recognize what other aspects of life might be of importance. As a result, teachers on pedestals establish boundaries that uphold and protect their understanding of the education system and their role as a teacher. As one teacher explains:

I had to essentially pretend that when I'm in this building [the school], I'm in a building that's just like the south. I come in and I do my job. I do it the exact same way as I normally would, except when it comes to having conversations that are outside of school, I keep them to a very minimum. My time, like I do homework study group kind of thing at 3:30 to 4:00 or even to 4:30. It's not a time to hang out, to just chill and listen to music and talk about whatever. It's time to do school work, and if you're not there to do school work, it's time to go home.

“Pretending” that their school is just like a school in the south is an attempt to maintain a system that they understand. Renegotiating their role as a teacher would draw into question their entire educational experience, including their teacher education program.

For some teachers, the growth in their teaching and their ability to connect with students and the community is inhibited because they are not willing to unlearn the still-dominant Western conception of what it means to be a teacher, namely the person who is the central conveyor of knowledge and the authority figure who must exercise control and discipline in the classroom and who teaches a curriculum that does not often account for non-white perspectives (Fitchett et al., 2012; Gatto, 1992). A veteran teacher, who is well-connected in the community and beyond the school, discusses the implications of this for community perceptions and the resulting impact on other teachers:

I have been here for a while and people realize I am not a white asshole. They have seen so many white assholes up here it would make your head spin. I would appreciate it if you quote that [*laughs*]. They screw it up for all of us.

In some cases, teachers make strides to shift their understanding of the community and their students but position those experiences back within a framework where the role of teacher is clearly defined as one of authority based within the walls of school, as is seen in this anecdote:

I did like a traditional goose-plucking and gutting ceremony at one of the student's houses, invited by that student, and the mother and whatnot and the whole family was there. So you do get to know people on a much more personal basis. The only issue is that it does transfer into your classroom, so there is a higher level of say, viewing the teacher as a buddy, or I guess like a friend instead of saying this is someone that is a role model or in some terms an authority figure.

Rather than this teacher seeing this experience as an opportunity to connect with their students and learn about the culture and knowledge valued at home, the teacher positions the experience as problematic because it could potentially damage the perceived authority or power a teacher should hold.

Further, pedestal teachers demonstrate a longing for academically driven students who seek out and desire the knowledge and skills teachers have, as this participant noted:

I just wish there was someone who was legitimately interested in something in class and raised their hand and asked questions, stayed after school, like ask, "How do you write an essay? Can you proofread this for me?" and all those great things that learning is supposed to be about, is just not here at all.

In cases like this, not only do teachers want their skill sets, such as writing an essay and proofreading, to be utilized but they also want to centralize these skills and what "learning is supposed to be about" as most important. Students' interests only appear to be legitimate when they are within the realm of academic performance and the skills and interests of the teacher.

The nature of knowledge and who holds it is deeply entrenched in the philosophies and pedagogies of the pedestal people, and they see upholding the structures to maintain their role as imperative to their work. These teachers go as far as to "pretend" they are in schools where teachers are authority figures, and they work to uphold their perception of "normal," all in an effort to resist changing perceptions of their own roles and, ultimately, their relationships with their students.

## **Educational Transitioners**

For some teachers, a shift occurs. Critical moments can move teacher thinking away from existing perceptions of school, success, and authority to a strong realization that teachers

need to change, that teachers are responsible for reconfiguring their own understandings to support students better. This is the transition point at which teachers confront the tension of knowing that a change needs to happen, while not yet grasping how to realize that change. One teacher edged toward this transition when she said, "I think the way I teach now is not the way I was taught to teach. I had to do something different." Teachers are beginning to acknowledge that what and how they were taught, both as students in the education system and in their teacher education programs, may not serve the students of Grassy Hills. A teacher new to the community illustrated how she was in transition when she explained that it was important that "the teacher has to change, not the community."

Transitioners identify flexibility as a key principle: "You have to learn to be very flexible. You have to be like an educational gymnast." By acknowledging that teachers must be flexible, transitioners open the door to becoming relationship builders.

## **Relationship Builders**

Relationship builders demonstrate a commitment to establishing relationships with students to improve classroom conditions for both themselves and their students. Underlying the effort to reach beyond the walls of school and into the lives of students was the teachers' desire to more effectively attend to the curriculum, ease tensions in the classroom, and improve their own practice. Many teachers came to realize that through relationship building their role would change, their practice and pedagogy would improve, and they would find success in implementing the curriculum. As one participant noted:

There are so many barriers and once you just make the effort to actually break those down and talk to a child, and have a conversation with them instead of talking at them, there's a big difference. Why would I just come home and watch TV when I can go out, see what else is going on around me? I want to know what's going on, and I want to know what's up in their life, so it actually makes it better for me to teach them.

Although the underlying commitment is strongly centred on the curriculum, these teachers have also shifted their understanding of their role to be alongside students rather than positioned above them like the pedestal people. One teacher explained it this way:

My teaching, like I teach the curriculum obviously, but I teach my kids first, then I teach them the curriculum. I can see when a child comes in if they're having a bad day they're not going to want to do addition and subtraction and life cycles. They are not going to want that. They are going to want you to just listen. They are going to want to know that when they come into the class, that you will see and hear them.

Another teacher reiterated the necessity of establishing friendships with students who challenge their perception of teacher–student relationships in order to not only benefit the classroom experience but also to make the experience in the community “easier.” Of course, tensions remained and considerable effort was made to distinguish among particular elements of relationships with students. This teacher spent time detailing what friendship with a student looks like versus friendship in the way “we use it”:

I think because the fundamentals of teaching here are different than the south, and I was told this almost as soon as I got off the plane. I was told to be their friend, not their teacher. And as much as I hate that quote, I find it to be very true here. In the south I think it would be the complete opposite. So you get to a point where you try being a teacher, to whatever that means in the south, and it doesn't work because your attendance will plummet and you are going to face much more harassment and scrutiny from the community, from the administration, from everywhere. If you think of it as the friend and teacher on a spectrum, if you lean kind of towards friend, and I don't mean that as a friend the way we use it, but more accommodating and more personal in some way, then your life here in and out of the classroom will be much easier.

The relationship builders are dedicated to meeting the outcomes of curriculum, and if doing so requires shifting their understanding of their own role and establishing relationships with their students outside the classroom, then substantial efforts are made to do so. Coaching community sports teams, volunteering time for community events, fundraising, and supporting a variety of extracurricular activities are all additional evidence of the work taken up by relationship builders to attend to their students.

## **Community Integrators**

Community integrators are invested in connecting their personal and professional lives by establishing lasting relationships in the community. Community integrators seek to build relationships without the direct intention of improving conditions in the classroom in order to deliver the curriculum effectively. Action is a significant component for community integrators who explore how stories of experiences and actually doing things within the community provide opportunities to build relationships. As one teacher explained:

It is kind of the action of doing it. Even to have a story about doing it that you share with the kids. I had a canoe, yes, but if they've seen me in it, then we have something. You have a commonality or understanding and the kids all get excited. Go hunting and then you connect with the kids and everyone in the community because you have done it and most importantly you have a sense of what it means for them, why it matters, ya know?

Connecting with people in the community through action-oriented and community-based activities is a nexus where people, language, culture, traditions, and ways of knowing and being come together. These experiences prove to be most fruitful for community integration.

The action-oriented and community-based activities are seen to have value in and of themselves, and one teacher revealed the new understandings about education that community integrators develop:

What I really like is that band-run schools are more sensitive to the fact that kids need time outside of school to learn. I know as teachers we are supposed to try and keep them in, keep them in desks, in classrooms, in the school but the kids don't want to be in all the time. They don't want to be sitting behind a desk every day and I think there is a lot of wisdom in saying we need to go and take them out into the community. On school breaks they need to see the land and learn from the land. They [the community] don't put it all on our shoulders to do that. They are very willing to take their kids out and do those things with them and to teach them their ways. And then when it's time for them to come back to school, they are more ready. They want to be here. And that makes it more enjoyable for us, as teachers.

Seeing the community as part of the students' learning and education exemplifies that this community-integrated teacher sees that other people and sites can play an important role in student learning, placing responsibility beyond the school, the curriculum, and the Western conception of who a teacher can be.

Reflectively, this veteran teacher finishes an interview by saying,

and until we are willing to share, until we are willing to really include others, we are going to have it hard. Whether it is in education, teacher retention, child attention and attendance at school, it's got to come down to start including each other in the community.

Community integrators seek experiences and action-oriented opportunities to build relationships within the community for the purposes of integration, but also point out the necessity for student interests to be met through an all-inclusive model of learning that involves the community.

Pedestal people, educational transitioners, relationship builders, and community integrators categorically represent teachers' experiences as they work to understand their roles and their relationships. Although these categories have been isolated here for descriptive and analytical purposes, they should not be seen as independent of one another. They should be visualized as a set of overlapping, interconnecting, and non-linear spheres of understanding that teachers are exploring as they position themselves. What is most important about these categories is that teachers are always working within and between them. As one teacher said, "I would say that no outsider is really in a permanent position. Depending on the time, depending on the day, depending on how others are feeling at the moment, you could be 'all good' temporarily, then it all changes."

## **Understanding Roles and Relationships**

Relationships among educational stakeholders are key elements in Indigenous education (Collins, 1993; Fanshawe, 1989; Toulouse, 2013). These relationships require a caring approach that is meaningful and aligns with culturally appropriate protocols (James, 2012). The day my skidoo broke down on the ice road, my understanding of my role and relationships shifted, and this knowledge challenged my previous perception of my role



as a teacher. I had learned through my own educational experiences that teaching was about control and leadership. However, on that day, my role and my relationship with my student changed. My student established leadership and was in control, and I realized I did not need the control I perceived to be of such value when I began teaching. The broken-down skidoo and the help of my student forced me to rebuild myself and my understanding of knowledge.

Walker et al. (2012–2013) identify five tenets of a “welcoming environment” (p. 3) for Indigenous students: (1) cultural and language-based curriculum and professional development that is transparent in the activities of staff at school; (2) integration of Indigenous content with cross-curricular instructional opportunities where all students are taught this as core knowledge; (3) connections with the Indigenous community by opening up school facilities for extracurricular events; (4) practising cultural proficiency by having a diversity of Indigenous resources in the library and experiential learning applications; and (5) meaningful relationships between Indigenous students and their teachers that are based in authenticity and real-life conversations. Each of the five tenets is relational in nature and involves the community, the students, and the teachers, requiring a closer look at how teachers conceive of their own roles. Of most relevance is the final point that calls for meaningful relationships based in authenticity and real-life conversations. I would ask, though, in whose “real life” are teacher–student conversations primarily based? When my skidoo broke down, the authenticity of the conversation was within the realm of my student’s knowledge and my lack of knowing and lack of preparedness. In the northern Indigenous context, especially, there is a need to examine the elements of teachers’ work that facilitate the development of a welcoming environment.

The community integrators demonstrated a number of the tenets of a welcoming environment outlined by Walker et al. (2012–2013). Specifically, they were able to value culture and language and see its role in the students’ learning within school and in the community. Also, community integrators were able to develop meaningful relationships with their students through action-oriented and community-based activities, and this created authentic and relevant points of communication and interaction with the students. Although each of the four categories I outlined offers insight into teachers’ work, the community integrators most closely demonstrate an understanding of mutual respect and meaningful relationships with students and community. By engaging in the community as a community integrator, teachers ensure that student learning is better supported and

more positive school experiences are created for students and their families. The community integrators demonstrate a strong ability to build and sustain a welcoming environment for students.

## **Becoming Community Integrators**

If community integrators best demonstrate the capacities that this research confirms are most likely to benefit students, what practical options are there for teachers, administrators, and educational stakeholders to initiate a transition toward integration? I suggest three practice-based recommendations that can be taken up by individual teachers, small working groups, or entire school communities. In isolated communities, access to professional development opportunities is limited and often schools and teachers become responsible for setting out their own professional development agendas. As a result, there are three suggestions offered here that are intended to be used at the local level and are aimed at facilitating transitions toward becoming community integrators: professional learning circles, Elder mentorship programming, and community-based activities.

Professional learning circles would provide space and time for critical dialogue among teachers. Led by principals or by teachers, learning circles would draw on case issues, readings, discussion about relevant topics such as colonization and decolonization, and shared ideas about curriculum, pedagogy, school-wide issues, events, and activities. This would be one way to initiate dialogue and support teachers in understanding their roles and the system they work within. Professional learning circles would also provide a platform for talking about and planning school-wide initiatives, especially as related to cultural activities and opportunities to bring the community into the school.

Elder mentorship programming would match teachers or small groups of teachers with Elders from the community willing to provide guidance, mentorship, and support. An Elder mentor would provide teachers with a connection to an important member of the community who could share specific teachings that would support the development and growth of teachers. It could also bring respected members of the community into the school, thus strengthening the community-school relationship by demonstrating that teachers value traditional knowledge.

Community-based activities developed by students with the support of adults would showcase activities that allowed students to display their interests and expertise and teach their teachers. Events featuring language, traditions, drumming, dancing, feasts, sports, beading, and other activities are all opportunities for students to share and demonstrate their interests and skills with their teachers. Community-based activities would create formalized opportunities for the teachers to interact with their students in the community in ways that are typically beyond the school curriculum. Community-based activities would build teachers' knowledge about their students, the community and its history, culture, language, traditions, and ways of knowing and being, and shift teachers' perceptions about their students' knowledge, skills, and abilities.

Some of these suggestions require funding, and all need willing participation on the part of the teachers, the students, the Local Education Authority, and members of the community. Members of the school community, including teachers, principals, and the Local Education Authority, could seek funding from various sources to create local professional development opportunities that would directly affect their own school community. Although full participation, willingness, and funding are not always in place, these suggestions are offered as starting points to initiate discussion, encourage the pursuit of new opportunities, and explore what works for each community and school.

What worked for me was taking risks, like the one with my skidoo, and in the end that experience began a transition for me.

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*As Mike towed me back, I was so amazed at his composure and preparedness and, most of all, his knowledge. After three university degrees, I didn't have the knowledge I needed. What I thought I knew didn't count; it really didn't matter in that moment. But what Mike knew did count. This was the beginning of my new understanding about the nature of knowledge and of asking questions about whose knowledge counts and when. It was also the beginning of a new understanding between Mike and me and ultimately a new understanding of all my students and my role as their teacher.*

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In one critical experience with my broken skidoo, the pedestal crumbled, and I transitioned to a new understanding about what my role could be and how I could better establish meaningful relationships with my students. I thought I was knowledgeable and prepared for my work teaching in the north. But in reality, I learned one of my most valuable life lessons that day, and I learned it from my student. I learned to ask questions about the nature of knowledge and whose knowledge counts and when. I learned to question the authenticity of my role and what type of relationships would matter to my students. These simple questions reshaped my philosophy of teaching and learning and ultimately brought me not only to a new understanding of my role and relationships with my students, but also with the participants in this research. The recommendations offered above are intended to bring about new lines of inquiry similar to the ones my skidoo breakdown raised for me. Intentional efforts to assist teachers in isolated First Nations schools transition to a more integrated role in the community could potentially bring about more positive and successful school experiences for First Nations students.

## **Conclusion**

The work of teachers and how they negotiate their roles and relationships was the focus of this research. During the fieldwork, it became apparent that teachers were at various stages of understanding and questioning with respect to their roles in the school and community, as well as their relationships with their students, the families, and the community at large. Trust, mutual respect, and a welcoming environment are all aspects of improving the school experiences of Indigenous students (Melnechenko & Horsman, 1998; York-Barr et al, 2007). Each of these aspects is relational in nature and includes the teacher. Literature has firmly established that relationships are vitally important for Indigenous student success (Burleigh, 2016; Oskineegish, 2014), and “the roles non-Native teachers play need to be discussed in order to be in sync with First Nations educators and communities” (Oskineegish & Berger, 2013, p. 114). This research has emphasized that exploring how teachers conceive of their roles and how they negotiate their relationships has substantial impact for teacher education programming and mentorship programming, and provides some much-needed insight into the struggles, opportunities, and experiences of teachers' work. Together, this creates a stronger explanation of the nuances that affect

teacher retention, teacher quality, and ultimately student success and school experience (Chell et al., 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Rowe, 2007).

The ways in which teachers negotiate and understand their role and relationships in Grassy Hills has been situated within four categories to highlight and explain the dynamics of their work. The pedestal people demonstrate that differing worldviews about power and hierarchy converge in the role of the teacher. When the teachers position themselves as all-knowing, it makes establishing authentic relationships with students more difficult because the relationships are always dependent on the teachers' interests and skills, which are normally within the realm of school and academics and in opposition to the highly valued relational ontology in many Indigenous worldviews (Ermine, 1995; Simpson, 2000; Wilson, 2007). The educational transitioners play a vital role in progressing beyond Western conceptions of a teacher's role, which is so often cited as being detrimental for student school experience (Battiste, 2013). Educational transitioners demonstrate that critical realizations prompt questioning, which can assist in identifying a need to change and transition toward integration. For many, the change is a shift in how they connect with students and how they re-establish their role in the classroom and community. Relationship builders establish relationships with their students to support an improved learning environment for both the students and themselves. To do this, teachers' roles are redefined to include connecting with students outside the classroom and around activities beyond the school. And, most importantly, community integrators seek out action-oriented involvement within the greater community to find understanding through common experiences. Community integrators see the value in learning beyond the classroom and acknowledge that education can come from others in the community who have knowledge and skills to share.

Thus, through the community integrator lens, the idea of who a teacher can be is more inclusive, education is seen more holistically, and relationships with students, families, and community members are valued for the meaningful connections and sense of belonging that is fostered. In these ways, community integrators embody a relational ontology that is a foundational factor that has been identified as the most efficacious for Indigenous student success (Battiste, 2013; Darling-Hammond, 2000). The connection between student success and teacher quality meets at the nexus of how teachers in First Nations communities conceive of their work, the roles they assume in doing so, and, most importantly, how they are able to unpack and resist the colonial nature of their

own educational experiences and teacher education. Developing opportunities in teacher education and early career mentorship is essential for cultivating community integrators who contribute to increased retention and an overall improved educational experience for themselves and their students.

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