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The Complexities and Promise of Standing Beside Indigenous Literacy Scholars: A Language Curriculum Analysis

Katie Brubacher et Jacqueline Filipek

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Résumé de l'article

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Katie Brubacher
University of Alberta

Jacqueline Filipek
The King's University

Abstract

Literacy is an essential component of any elementary-school classroom. To address shifting understandings of literacy and how to teach it, Alberta has developed a new language-arts curriculum. This curriculum, however, was developed in a context where schools have a long history of not serving Indigenous children well, including not meeting their needs through literacy programs (Hare, 2011). Alberta Education, through the English Language Arts and Literature (ELAL) curriculum, claims to better address those needs. The purpose of this research is to examine how the ELAL curriculum and its implementation aligns with the field of language and literacy, and in particular, Indigenous literacy scholarship, namely Peltier's (2016/2017) Wholistic Anishinaabe Pedagogy and Reese's (2018) Critical Indigenous Literacy. Data included both an analysis of the curriculum and semi-structured interviews with literacy instructors/scholars and in-service teachers. There were several key findings: English only processes, sparce attention to feelings throughout the curriculum, an absence of critical literacy, and inappropriate text selection. This paper is significant, as it shows the complexities and promise of being a non-Indigenous literacy scholar, thinking deeply about places of resonance and tension in literacy in ways that Indigenous scholars are already writing about.

I do know that literacy in an Indigenous context includes building and sustaining relationships, engaging in conversations, and telling and hearing stories of the ways we make sense of the world (Cardinal, 2015, p. 6).

Purpose and Context

Literacy is an essential component of any elementary-school classroom. How it is shaped and understood by the policies and procedures that govern classrooms can deeply impact the professional development of teachers, and, in turn, the activities that they take up with their students. Since 2019, Alberta has been developing and implementing new curricula in kindergarten to grade 12 classrooms across most core subject areas. It was developed in a context where schools have a long history in Canada of not serving Indigenous children well, including not meeting their needs through literacy programs (Hare, 2011). To address some of these key concerns, the Alberta government claims the following:

> To honour the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Alberta is committed to rebalancing the education[al] system by including the history and legacy of residential schools and local Indigenous knowledge, wisdom, and oral traditions in the curriculum to advance reconciliation for all Albertans. (Alberta Education, 2024, p. 19).

Wondering about this claim, along with our own concerns as teacher educators implementing the new curriculum in our elementary-education literacy courses, we initiated an in-depth analysis of the English Language Arts and Literature (K to 6) (ELAL) curriculum (Alberta Education, 2022), followed by interviews with other teacher educators and in-service teachers. Specifically, this research examines how the ELAL curriculum and its implementation aligns with the field of language and literacy, and in particular, Indigenous literacy scholarship.

We begin by positioning ourselves as non-Indigenous teachers and scholars. Katie arrived on Treaty 6 land in Alberta as a white settler over two years ago, coming with an ancestry of almost two hundred years that has benefitted from living on the Haldimand Tract in South-Western Ontario. Jacqueline began her post-secondary teaching career as a visitor on Treaty 6 land, as she was invited to teach language-arts curriculum courses in the Aboriginal Teacher Education Program (ATEP). She has been learning valuable perspectives on literacy and learning from her students and colleagues ever since. We both continue to learn what it means to be non-Indigenous educators in Alberta, particularly in finding ways that are just, respectful, and that honour Indigenous wisdom. Being immersed in enacting the new ELAL curriculum as elementary-literacy instructors at two different Alberta universities, we have many concerns about what we are not seeing in this curriculum. Our concerns come both from our experiences as teachers having incorporated other language-arts curriculum into our teaching, and also as researchers seeing how curricula can prevent new teachers from taking up inclusive approaches. We have long been called

to shift our gaze from a Western understanding of curriculum and literacy to think about, and with, Indigenous colleagues and researchers. With the release of the new curriculum, we feel ready to begin to take up that call.

Literacy Gatekeepers

This article is written in a historical moment that was greatly influenced by the resurgence of "back to basics" in curriculum and teaching, as well as the *Science of Reading* movement. Historically, politically-mandated shifts to basic/decoding literacy instruction are cyclical, frequently occurring during periods following war, or concurrent with massive social upheaval (Luke, 2005), such as experiences stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. Luke states that when making policy directions, evidence-based research should be informed by a broad variety of social-science research, rather than a narrow focus on positivists' accounts. Nations, like the United Kingdom, who have already experienced shifts towards the science of reading pedagogies in the last decade, are reporting significant challenges (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022), such as how the narrowness of the scope of *The Science of Reading,* as the primary driver for reading instruction, has resulted in fundamental gaps in building critical literacy and literacy dispositions, especially with diverse and non-native English-speaking learners (Aukerman & Schuldt, 2021). Thus, finding ways to include perspectives other than Eurocentric English ones is essential. Moreover, as Peltier (2017) states, teaching culturally relevant, culturally safe, and culturally resonant material in sensitive ways leads to greater engagement with learning processes at school, and therefore, should include communities in the generation of said material.

In addition to issues with non-culturally relevant curricula, Kee and Carr-Chellman (2019) suggest that high-stakes testing, primarily carried out in a dominant language, increases domination of monolingual spaces. This contributes to decreased literacy among Indigenous populations and leads to the erosion of minority-language conversation. Systemic gatekeeping on who has access to what literacies has been, and continues to be, utilized by states and institutions to regulate who or what groups have access to the intellectual/labour discourse of their local public (Luke, 2018). Immersing people in different experiences, on the other hand, provides a starting point for questions and dialogue, leading to objective knowledge (Marom & Rattray, 2022). For example, Hare (2011) explains that literacy development can be supported through cultural practices, such as drumming, singing, dancing, picking medicines or berries, fishing, hunting and gathering, and preparing traditional foods. Moving away from literacy as a systemic gatekeeper, begs the question of how Indigenous practices could become integral to literacy programming.

Literacies for Reconciliation

While Indigeneity had not been our shared area of research, we looked to Indigenous literacy researchers to guide our understanding of the curriculum. The devaluing of Indigenous literacies

is among the top concerns about Western imperialism (Kee & Carr-Chellman, 2019); thus, an approach that views literacy as how we make sense of the world, who we are/becoming in the stories we tell, hear, live by, retell, and relive is needed (Cardinal, 2015). For example, in her work exploring a holistic approach to literacy, Ningwakwe/Rainbow Woman (2005) discusses bringing life balance to literacy through nurturing the four parts of the Wheel of Life or Medicine Wheel—mind, spirit, heart, and body. These four elements focus more on the process of learning, rather than its outcomes. Hare (2005) further notes that Indigenous people's lives are rooted on the land—*literacy* is a cultural continuation and context of the ability to read symbols and inscribe meanings across landscapes; learning to read and understand the land's signs (e.g., knowing seasons, weather patterns), understanding animal behaviours and cycles (e.g., migration and mating patterns), and finding food (e.g., tapping maple trees) contribute to Indigenous people's survival.

With a focus on Indigenous children, Peltier (2017) asserts that in order to respect the terms of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and implement a school paradigm that honours Indigenous ways of knowing in areas of language and literacy, it is necessary to address the biases and tensions that exist between the Western/Cartesian print-based model of literacy and Indigenous orality. We were excited to see the stance the Alberta government presented in the most recent Guiding Framework for the Design and Development of Kindergarten to Grade 12 Curriculum, which states,

> Including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit histories, contributions, and perspectives in the curriculum provides a means for reconciliation and initiates healthy shifts in thinking that will build trust and improve relationships among all Albertans. The inclusion of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit historical and contemporary experiences and contributions, residential schools and their legacy, and the history and continuing importance of the treaties and agreements will help [to] rectify injustices and support better relationships. First Nations, Métis, and Inuit songs, stories, histories, languages, arts, sciences, and contributions to the rich history of Alberta need to be part of every Alberta student's education (Alberta Education, 2024, p. 19-20).

Alberta Education (2024) also asserts that

> Recognizing the diversity of Indigenous people within Alberta, teachers are required to include content of local First Nations and Métis communities. Every student in the province will learn about the diverse Indigenous peoples of this land and how First Nations, Métis, and Inuit contribute to the vibrancy and fabric of Alberta and Canadian society (p. 20).

Indigenous Approaches to Literacies

To counter the devaluing of Indigenous learners and the knowledge that they bring to school, Peltier (2016, 2017) calls for an Indigenous pedagogy in schools to support connections between cultural knowledge and beliefs, and other practices of literacy. Children need to engage in

learning that is land-based, narrative, experiential, and intergenerational. Many Indigenous learners come from literacy practices that value orality and have developed oral language comprehension (Cardinal, 2015). Much research (Hare, 2011; Peliter, 2016/2017; Styres, 2018) also supports the role of oral storytelling and its connection to present-day contexts in fostering knowledge, comprehension, and reading response. In her research alongside Indigenous families, Hare (2011) finds that there is a strong acknowledgement that literacy begins early in life through activities, such as stories, music, counting, and interacting with the world.

To provide insights into dismantling the dominant narrative in many western curricula, Indigenous literacy scholars, such as Styre (2018), call for more discussions on space, place, land, storying, and decolonization to better positioning land within classrooms. Wood (2023) states, "The land and the environment are essential in shaping Indigenous knowledge and culture. The language comes from the land and defines what is important for each indigenous group" (p. 190). Styre (2018) claims, "The concept of Land as a philosophical underpinning along with understandings of self-in-relationship draw upon deeply intimate, sacred, and ancient knowledges, thereby centering, legitimizing, and grounding teaching and learning within Land as the primary foundation of all our teachings" (p. 26). Donald (2021) discusses the importance of relationships and kinship between humans, plants, animals, water, and the earth through the nêhiyaw (Cree) wisdom concept of wâhkôhtowin, as a way to teach humans that all of creation is related and interconnected (p. 58-59). This further supports calls for a reciprocal relationship between Indigenous people and non-Indigenous literacy educators, and that children should engage in learning that is land-based, narrative, experiential, and relational.

Theoretical Framework

To understand this curriculum, two theories were brought together from Indigenous literacy scholars: *The Wholistic Anishinaabe Pedagogy* (Peltier, 2016) and *Critical Indigenous Literacy* (Reese, 2012/2018) (see Figure 1). Peltier (2016/2017), an Anishinaabe researcher and scholar, brings an important perspective to understanding what it means to meet Alberta Education's claim to include local wisdom and, thus, her work is used here as both a conceptual and analytical framework. Peltier's (2017) work arises from collaborative efforts with the NOW Play (Northern and Oral Language Through Play) project, an interdisciplinary panel of university professionals who work with parents, teachers, and childcare experts from northern Indigenous communities to improve language and literacy programming and pedagogy. Central to Peltier's (2016/2017) approach is an understanding that language and literacy are shaped by families and communities. She raises concerns that some early-childhood reading assessment models may label some children as deficient or developmentally delayed, due to failure of non-Indigenous educators to understand the knowledge Indigenous children bring to school.

Peltier's research stood out as a Canadian, Indigenous approach to literacy that combined traditional literacy practices within the school structure; however, as the examination of the curriculum continued, it became clear that what we also needed is a theoretical approach that

describes reading from an Indigenous perspective. Reese's (2012) Critical Indigenous Literacy provided both an important lens into written text choice, and how Indigenous peoples are represented within, and by, those texts. Combining the two allowed the ability to centre our analysis on Peltier's (2016) approach to Indigenous knowledge, storytelling, and land, as well as how we can go about choosing, understanding, and critiquing written texts about Indigenous peoples.

Figure 1: Theoretical framework.

In *Figure 1*, the Wholistic Anishinaabe Pedagogy (Peltier, 2016) places storying, writing, listening, and drawing as central concepts that are influenced by thinking, intuitive reflecting, experiencing, doing, relating, and feeling. An example of this pedagogy in practice is that children listen to an elder's teaching or story, and then go to a sacred place in the community or on the school playground to intuitively reflect on the story/teaching. After a period of time, the children are then invited to respond through writing, drawing, or talk—all personal and expressive modes of communication. The responses can involve feeling (emotional responses to the elders' stories), relating (personal connections with the self at the centre), and generating new knowledge. Listening is an important aspect of Peltier's pedagogy. For example, children are expected to listen to oral storytelling/storying from a place of receptivity to honour those who teach, while understanding that they are listening to the storyteller's truth, and should do so without judgment. Children must understand how space and place connect to literacy and that they can learn from the land. One way that they do this is by finding a 'sacred place' on the school yard to return to for intuitive reflection and self-awareness.

The next theory is Critical Indigenous Literacy (Reese, 2012), which focuses on asking children to read between the lines, and ask questions of literature such as who benefits from this

story, whose voices are heard, and whose are missing. It centres the historically-marginalized treatment of Indigenous stories in its understanding of reading, finding space for them to be told about Indigenous people and their history. Aligned with the key ideas of critical literacy offered by Vasquez et al. (2019), Reese, (2012, 2018) describes the important role of critical Indigenous literacies in creating space, where Indigenous knowledge, wisdom, beliefs, and practices are respected. She writes, "Critical Indigenous literacy forefronts the historically marginalized treatment of Native stories—and by extension, Native people. In addition, a critical literacies perspective gives [a] voice to how [the] stories are presented and told about people and their history" (Reese, 2018, p. 390). She encourages teaching all students to ask important questions, such as "whose story is this, who benefits from this story, and whose voices are not being heard?" (2018, p. 390). Adding Indigenous perspectives to critical literacy, Reese (2018), "asks readers to think of those questions when they read stories with Indigenous characters in them" (p. 39).

Methods

This qualitative curriculum analysis understands policy as a social practice, rather than a documentation of policy implementation (Bale et al., 2023). Levinson et al. (2009) describe policy as a social practice, which includes authorized and unauthorized, or informal communities of practice. It is teachers, the unauthorized policy actors, who appropriate policy, like the curriculum, to make new, situated, and local policies. Levinson et al. (2009) do not aim to over emphasize the enactor of curriculum, or focus only on the written policy. Instead, both are taken into consideration. For this research, two types of data were collected: the curriculum/authorized formal policy itself, for document analysis, and semi-structured interviews with teacher educators and practicing elementary school teachers for situated, local appropriations of the curriculum. In this way, we could study how policy was being enacted and understood in local, Alberta elementary schools, as well as our own analysis. The semi-structured interviews included questions about critical literacy, the inclusion of Indigenous languages and families, as well as language itself, all in relation to the curriculum. The questions of educators included those about implementation, and their experiences preparing to teach with it. For example, we asked how oral storytelling resonated throughout their grade level.

Participants

The participants for this study included two different groups: teacher educators (three), all of whom have PhDs, and practicing kindergarten to grade six classroom teachers (six). They were recruited through professional contacts and local school district ethics' protocols. All the teacher educators had classroom teaching experience, prior to teaching pre-service teachers. Their experiences ranged from one to over 30 years in classrooms across public, separate/Catholic, and independent/private school contexts.

Table 1: Teacher educators

Teacher Educator	Previous teaching experience	Current teaching context
Charlotte	30 years elementary teaching	Teacher educator
Elena	English language learners, elementary teaching (1980s), Africa, Indigenous communities (British Columbia/Alberta), college/university	Professor emerita
Sarah	BEd (mid-1980s-2002), kindergarten teacher (Ontario), learning support teacher and ESL (Africa)	Current professor

Table 2: K to 6 teachers

Teacher	Gender	Grades taught	Current Grade	Number of Years Teaching	Teaching Context
Christy	Female	K-6	3/4	32	separate
Ella	Female	2	2	1	rural public
Jill	Female	K, 2	2	3	independent
Ling	Female	2-5	2	15+	separate

Maggie	Female	K-2	1/2	3	separate
Mike	Male	6	6	1	separate

Curriculum structure

The English Language Arts and Literature Curriculum (Alberta Education, 2022) is organized into nine categories, or organizing ideas. Six of them are in place for all K to 6 grade levels: text forms and structures, oral language, vocabulary, comprehension, writing, and conventions. The category of phonological awareness is only for K to 2, phonics is for K to 3, and fluency for K to 4. Each organizing idea has its own guiding question and learning outcome. For example, for kindergarten, this is one of the text forms and structures:

> Organizing Idea: Text Forms and Structures: Identifying and applying text forms and structures improves understanding of content, literary style, and our rich language traditions.
> Guiding Question: How can ideas and information be organized?
> Learning Outcome: Children explore how messages can be organized

For each grade level, the definition of the organizing idea is the same; however, the guiding question and learning outcome change. Underneath the learning outcomes are three columns, which include knowledge, understanding, and skills and procedures. For example, following the kindergarten text forms and structures learning outcome are:

> Knowledge: Features that clarify messages can be digital or non-digital, including pictures and print size.
> Understanding: Messages can be clarified when they include features.
> Skills & Procedures: Investigate a variety of features to help clarify messages.

The participants would refer to these as the KUSPs. Generally speaking, there would be a range of **k**nowledge, **s**kills, and **p**rocedures attached to one **u**nderstanding. The skills and procedures tended to begin with verbs, and generally include observable actions.

Coding

To understand the data, a combination of several kinds of coding were used. For the Peltier (2016) model, we used a more analytical/theoretical approach to coding the curriculum three times. We also employed inductive, emerging codes (Bingham, 2023), to understand the curriculum, especially in relation to critical literacy. With the aim of better organizing the emergent codes, we

categorized them using the Four Resources Model, that describes readers as drawing from four areas of knowledge and skills as they read: code breaker (semiotic system), text participant (understanding texts), text user (how to use a text), and text analyst/critic (positioning) (Freebody & Luke, 1990). The curriculum was coded three times, using this model, and also to better verify how it fit into these four categories. As these two theories were brought together, it became clear that reading needed to be better understood through an Indigenous lens as well. The text analyst/critic section that was coded using the Four Resources Model allowed a look at the themes that had been collected from the curriculum, through Reese's (2018) critical Indigenous literacy.

Findings

There were a number of key findings: English-only processes, feelings and Indigenous knowledge, and an absence of critical literacy.

English-only processes

The dominance of English has been, and continues to be, a strong colonizing force in Canada, contributing to the erosion of Indigenous languages and literacies (Haque & Patrick, 2015). By narrowly understanding literacy as an English-only process, the curriculum negates the importance of Indigenous languages. We begin by situating the curriculum within this English, colonial context. The understanding of literacy as situated within English is even reflected in the title of the document of the curriculum, which chooses to put English in front of Language Arts and Literature. One of the teacher-education instructors, Sarah, reflects on her interpretation:

> It's all about interacting in English, and so, we're not seeing the resources that those home languages provide to students. We're not seeing guidance for teachers to really think about those home languages. It's all about getting students to use English, and use it only in school contexts, so there's a real privileging of the English language in that way.

Sarah observes, as we have, how the curriculum privileges English at the expense of other languages, like Cree, for example. For Jill, the curriculum guides her to equate immigrants and not Indigenous students as diverse language speakers with slow learners: "I know [that] my kids, especially my lowest and ESL students, really benefit from [the idea that] 'This is the sound [that] we hear, and here's all the different spellings that make that sound.'" When reflecting on how the curriculum integrates diverse languages, she states, "But in terms of being able to integrate their languages in, it's a lot more in terms of the sharing circles and what not, where they might share something in their language." Jill does see spaces for Indigenous cultural practices, but not language.

This centering of English is further solidified by the over-emphasis on English morphemes. One of the teacher educators, Elena, reflects on this narrow understanding of vocabulary:

> If you have, let's say, kids that [sic] recently arrived from somewhere, or Indigenous kids that [sic] are speaking Cree, then bring in morphemes from that language as examples, right? So, the idea is to bring in examples that the kids can explore and investigate and learn. I mean, just drilling it down to Latin and Greek.

When the formal curriculum was examined, there was very little mention of Indigenous languages or multilingualism at all. Instead, as Elena pointed out, there was an over-focus on English morphemes. For example, in the Grade 3 vocabulary section of the curriculum, morphemes are described as having bases and affixes with affixes, including beginnings (prefixes) and endings (suffixes). Although there is nothing particularly remarkable about this, the curriculum then continues by specifically outlining the prefixes that must be addressed in Grade 3: "re, un, in, dis, non, mis, mal, sub, and super" (Alberta Education, 2022, Knowledge section). These all fall within the Latin and Greek paradigm that Elena referenced earlier. There are no Cree, Blackfoot, or Dëne morphemes, to name a few, listed.

By so didactically specifying morphemes that are English-based, the curriculum does not leave room for Indigenous languages, or even metalinguistic comparison, where children could compare the language structures of English to an Indigenous language. Again, in grade 5, there are a series of affixes listed from the English language:

> Affixes change the meaning of a word when applied to a base and include <ous>, <ious>, <al>, <ial>, <ian>, <ic>, <ical>, <ment>, <ity>, <ant>, <ent>, <ance>, <ence>, <circu>, <per>, <trans>, <ad>, <sub>, <ob>, <com>, and <ex>.
>
> (Alberta Education, 2022, Vocabulary)

Finally, in Grade 6, the vocabulary section of the curriculum does refer to words of Indigenous origin by stating, "Words that are specific to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit languages can be found in the people, places, and things that surround us." And then later, "Study the origin and meaning of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit words in local environments." However, at this point, the reference to words from Indigenous communities feels like it was added in as an afterthought, rather than being an integral component to the students' literacy development.

Most notably, this English-only focus meant that many of the teacher participants in this study enacted the curriculum by turning to monolingual English phonics programs that were not developed with, and for, Indigenous communities. For example, Ling reflects on two phonics programs that she had implemented in her classroom: "*UFLI [University of Florida Literacy Intervention]* is digital, whereas [when using] *Phonics Companion*, you have to photocopy to get kids cutting, and what's the use of that?" Likewise, Ella's school uses "*Heggerty and UFLI.*" Christy also talks about her attempt to incorporate a phonics lesson into her classroom, stating, "I tried one of these phonics, little mini lessons that turned out being Monsterland. There's no 'mini' about it. It takes a long time for those kids to do all the copying in there, and it's like, I didn't like

it." Christy's words reflect the amount of time that these decontextualized phonics programs take from literacy programming, ensuring that little time is spent with metalinguistic comparison, or contextualized and culturally- responsive literacy practices.

Feeling and Indigenous knowledge

There are some spaces, throughout the curriculum, where there is an attempt to include Indigenous knowledge, but not in the ways Peltier (2016) describes in her Anishinaabe framework, particularly in how feeling and emotion play an important role in drawing, writing, and talking. As Sarah points out, there is very little integration of emotion in the curriculum:

> I think that in the Anishinaabe framework, or even, you know, the framework that I work from, which is around affect and embodiment, would see that very differently: that literacy is used in different ways and contexts, for different purposes; and [that] the body is very much a part of that use of literacy, where this framework is very, very much cognitively focused. It's all above the jaw line in their minds.

In our analysis of the formal curriculum, we found that there are no explicit mentions of feeling, in relation to Indigeneity, throughout. In other words, in the few places where land-based literacies, or sharing circles, are mentioned, feelings and emotions are not. This may be because the word, land, appeared to be added to the lists of text forms, almost as an afterthought.

Although feeling, in relation to Indigeneity, appears to be absent from the curriculum, there are mixed interpretations of how the curriculum included Indigeneity in general. One of the teacher-educator participants, Charlotte, who works with Indigenous teacher-education students, comments on her students' engagement with the new curriculum:

> There's quite a few outcomes related to that, and I tried to incorporate the new curriculum with my Indigenous literacy students, and they did quite well. They did find [that in] things like storytelling [and] traditional knowledge sharing, there are outcomes [where] asking for elders to come in and share their knowledge [would be beneficial]. So, I think [that] they did not do too badly on that strand. Again, your teachers out there do not know how to interpret that, those outcomes.

Within Charlotte's local community of practice in her teacher-education classroom with Indigenous teacher candidates, she quite easily found ways to connect the curriculum to Indigenous ways of knowing. However, this is in opposition to what the practicing teacher participants in this study reflected on, stating that there was very little to any mention of Indigeneity throughout the curriculum. Mike comments:

> I see it directly in social studies, and [with] ELA, I don't see it. It's not as prominent for sure. Like most of my learning and outcomes regarding Indigenous, Métis, and so on is

> [sic] [all] based off social studies, and then, I just tie it into ELA outcome[s], cross-curricular.

Another participant, Maggie, mentions that she does talking circles at the beginning of the school year; however, this is the only ELAL curriculum-based work that she feels is related to Indigeneity. Both Mike and Maggie describe themselves as working at a school that places emphasis on being inclusive of Indigenous knowledge and practices. They feel led to this work by the social studies and science curriculum, but not the ELAL curriculum. They express that anything related to Indigeneity and literacy that is taught in the classroom must be cross-curricular, or about a teacher's choice. Agreeing with the practicing teachers, later in her interview, Charlotte, the teacher-educator who works with Indigenous pre-service students, states that she sees no intuitive reflection, feeling, and relating in the curriculum at all, when asked about the Anishinaabe pedagogy framework. The contradiction between Indigenous teacher education students, practicing teachers, and Indigenous literacy scholarship needs to be further explored with Indigenous communities.

Also, in this analysis of the curriculum, five codes were identified connecting writing and feeling, and another five for oral language and feeling. These are places where the curriculum could be stretched to include Peltier's (2016) ideas of story circles, but not through explicit connections or references. For example, in the kindergarten section for oral language, there are two such codes:

> Guiding Question: In what ways can listening and speaking communicate feelings, ideas, and information?
> Understanding: Ideas, information, and feelings can be shared through listening and speaking. (Alberta Education, 2022, Oral Language)

The following two outcomes for Grade 3 are also found in the Oral-Language section:

> Knowledge: A combination of verbal and nonverbal language can be used to communicate ideas, information, and feelings.
> Effective communication involves consideration of an audience's situation, thoughts, feelings, [and] beliefs.

In addition, in Grade 4, there is a final mention in the comprehension section of the curriculum:

> Knowledge: Respectful interactions include behaviours that consider the contributions, feelings, points of view, and needs of [the] participants.

We are not sure why the connection of feeling to oral language is left out of Grade one, two, five, and six. In the organizing idea on writing, five codes were found that connect writing to feeling, but they all pertain to poetry or personal writing. Interestingly, with the four organizing ideas on

phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, and vocabulary, there is no mention of feelings at all, supporting Sarah's statement that the curriculum, especially reading, is very cerebral and disconnected from the body and emotion. The various participants in this research had different experiences engaging with the curriculum, in terms of Indigeneity; however, they were quite consistent about the lack of feeling found in the expressive dimensions of talking, drawing, and writing.

Critical Indigenous literacy

With critical Indigenous literacy, Reese (2018) encourages readers to ask questions about who benefits from texts, and whose voices are not being heard in texts with Indigenous characters. Critical literacy is a key component in meaning making, as it brings context to the reading experience, and promotes questioning beyond the author's intended meaning. The original document analysis in this study of the curriculum, using the Four Resources Model (Freebody & Luke, 1990), revealed that, particularly in the early grades, there is strong emphasis on code-breaking skills, and little attention paid to learning to be a text analyst. To be clear, codes pertaining to metacognition, point of view, the author's message, and bias within the text analyst section were included. These are all essential components of critical literacy in learning to interrogate texts.

Both the teacher educators and teachers in this study found that there was an absence of attention paid to critical literacy throughout the curriculum. Sarah, a teacher educator, comments on this apparent over-emphasis of skills:

> But I think, just in general, in the way that it is just so focused on the skills of literacy, that you know, those wider perspectives on different ways of reading the world and in reading the word are just not included. There just doesn't seem to be any kind of an appetite for that, or any kind of a sense that this might be an important way to go, or practice, to continue.

This point is reiterated by teacher, Maggie, who commented, "If I'm being honest, I don't know how much text analyst we do in grade[s] one and two, just probably, because I follow the curriculum, and if they're not in the curriculum, I probably don't do much of it." Ella also tells, "When I'm looking at the new curriculum, I had to find and go out of my way to find places to actually implement critical literacy." Neither of these teachers feel guided by the curriculum to implement a full literacy program in their classrooms that includes important elements of reading and thinking.

Text selection, and how those texts represent Indigenous people, are also an important aspect of Reese's (2018) model. During the interviews, the teachers were asked about direct connections in the curriculum to Indigenous knowledge, and how they were engaging students in that learning. Some of the teachers mentioned using folktales or legends, such as Ella, who stated,

> There were touches, for example, like the sharing [the] circle element, and then the part talking about legends and stuff. I was able to find a lot of books that were able to make connections between legends and Indigenous culture, and how they [are] use[d], like the legend of the Black Raven, to explain different things that they believe.

Interestingly, folk tales and legends are only specifically referenced in grades two and five in the Text Forms and Structures Knowledge sections (Alberta Education, 2022). There is no reference to Indigenous knowledge, stories, groups, or wisdom :

> Imaginary (fictional) stories include folk tales and legends. A folk tale is a story typically passed on through word of mouth. (grade two)
> A legend is a story about a famous historical event or person that may or may not be true. (grade two)
> A tall tale is an exaggerated folk tale that describes a central legendary character with extraordinary physical features or abilities. (grade five)

It is quite telling that the teachers, when enacting this curriculum, are guided to present Indigenous knowledge as folktales.

In relation to text selection, an outcome in grade two related to sharing circles was referenced more than one time by participants. The outcome is from Oral Language, and has two parts: Sharing circles are traditional Indigenous practices, with protocols for listening and speaking that involve everyone having an opportunity to speak and respectfully listening when others are speaking (Knowledge section) and participate in a sharing circle (Skills and Procedures section). There is little guidance, however, as to which Indigenous groups use sharing circles, or why or when they are used, only that protocols exist for respectful communication, making the outcomes seem tokenistic. Elena noted,

> This curriculum is not inviting children to bring their language and experience into the classroom, and to bring their families into the classroom... It's going to hurt Indigenous families and immigrant newcomer families more than it's going to hurt other families, so they're kind of on the margins. I don't remember seeing an emphasis on Indigenous children's literature either. I think that's a big omission.

As stated earlier, the curriculum is quite English-centric; however, Elena finds little guidance around Indigenous children's literature as well. Jill also came to a similar conclusion:

> I know storytelling, there's elements for sure, storytelling, and whatnot, traditions and passing that down. That's important, but that's also important in everyone's culture. It's a little, yeah, at a surface level, it's a little superficial.

As an enactor of the curriculum, Jill did not feel that there was any depth of attention paid to the importance of storytelling in Indigenous traditions.

Discussion

In the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) calls-to-action, language is an important component. For example, Call 14 of Language and Culture states: "i. Aboriginal languages are a fundamental and valued element of Canadian culture and society, and there is an urgency to preserve them" (Government of Canada, 2023, Language and Culture section). This call, however, does not seem to be reflected in either this study's analysis of the English Language Arts and Literature curriculum, or the teachers' enactment of it. Research affirms the need for proper literacy education, but the majority of Indigenous students are still forced to learn in spaces where the dominant language is the only one taught (Kee & Carr-Chellman, 2019). In Alberta, there are bilingual schools, like the Awasis (Cree) School and Prince Charles School, but most students are being educated in English medium spaces and guided by this curriculum (Edmonton Public Schools, 2024, August 30). The curriculum spends very little time leading teachers towards incorporating Cree, or any language other than English, in their literacy programming. Moreover, the over-emphasis on English morphemes works as a barrier to language integration.

Hare (2005) states that stories told within Indigenous traditions hold the answers to larger questions; Indigenous knowledge is created and passed on in the learning process through storying. Feeling, and its association with story, is an important aspect of Peltier's model (Peltier, 2016), but the curriculum left little, if any, space for children to connect their emotions to writing and talking in response to storying. As Sarah reflected in her interview, the curriculum is missing the embodiment that she incorporates into her own understanding of literacy, like Peltier. Interestingly, western researchers consider interconnectedness to be a new concept, which Hackett (2022) writes is already well-established in Indigenous ontologies. These Indigenous literacy colleagues are far ahead in understanding the interconnection between literacy and feeling. As seen in the curriculum analysis and educators' reflections on the curriculum, feeling is an integral aspect of contemporary understandings of literacy.

Starting in kindergarten, incorporating critical literacy, with a focus on reading in greater depth, as it relates to thinking, is essential for all students. For example, one of the approaches that Luke (2003) finds that does work well is blending decoding with critical literacy skills to prepare students for higher-order thinking. This does not mean investing in a single program for every student in the school, as many of the teachers in this study described doing over the previous year. Instead, as we reflect with Indigenous critical literacy, we can see that one-size fits all approaches to reading that have not been developed with Indigenous communities are highly problematic.

How teachers choose texts in relation to Indigenous knowledge and representation is another important aspect of this analysis. Reese (2018) describes how Indigenous stories are often viewed as myths, legends, or folk tales. There are other stories, like Christian creation stories, that

are seen as truths, yet Indigenous creation stories are categorized as fiction. The formal curriculum perpetuates that perspective, by describing the creation stories as imaginary, leading to some teachers enacting Indigenous stories as fiction. Furthermore, Reese (2018) explains that stereotypical representations of Indigenous peoples must be unlearned, and harmful narratives replaced with accurate information and understandings, thus, requiring teachers to develop critical Indigenous literacies in their classrooms, through reading appropriate books, having conversations about language and the text, and questioning unjust representations. Reese challenges the categorization of Indigenous stories in this way by asking, "Whose voice is not heard in the way that stories are categorized? Whose ideologies are implicitly valued by categorical labels?" (p. 390). We ourselves are left wondering why Alberta teachers referenced folk tales, or legends, as Indigenous content, when there is not an explicit connection between them in the written outcomes. Perhaps there is much more work to do, and questions to ask, in order to continue to develop critical Indigenous literacies amongst teachers.

Earlier in this paper, we shared the government's intention to include Indigenous knowledge in each of the subject area curricula. In our document analysis and interviews, we discovered that there are only some direct references to Indigenous knowledge or practices. As Styres (2018) states:

> One of the main goals of critical literacy is to open up opportunities for learners to understand themselves first[,] and, [sic] through critical self-reflection[,] and [sic] to gain a better understanding of each other[,] and the ways power, privilege, and colonial relations continue to inform our ways of knowing and being in the world." (p. 26).

In consideration of Reese's ideas of critical Indigenous literacies, we unfortunately found that the outcomes are not specific to the First Nations in Alberta, and appear to position Indigenous peoples, culture, practices, and language as subjects of study (2013, p. 252), rather than "stepping away from critical pedagogies that 'retain the deep structures of Western thought' and inadvertently function as homogenizing agents" (Grande, 2004, p. 3 in Reese, 2013, p. 253).

Significance

In their critical work on language, learning, and culture in early childhood, Anderson et al. (2015) write about the importance of moving away from decontextualized, narrow understandings of early childhood, and push for children's cultural and linguistic knowledge to be included in school, and not just neurobiological understandings, which often influence government policy. How can this be done? In practice, this could mean bringing the Cree language that children are learning in homes and communities into their literacy programming. It may also mean incorporating transliteration in a writer's workshop, where young children learn to write using all their oracies, while playing around with different alphabetic codes within written language (McClain & Schrodt, 2021). It also means including Indigenous communities in

the writing and implementation of the curriculum. According to one of the participants, Elena, Indigenous scholars and teachers were included in her previous experiences of writing curriculum:

> The Indigenous teachers and scholars did… I think there was at least 15 of them… and they had meetings every day as a group. They would meet as a group, and then they would disperse and join our tables. So, if there's five people at a table, one of them would be a member of the Indigenous group.

This is a model we all need to strive towards.

As Cardinal (2015) declares, literacy also includes vulnerability in sharing stories. The significant gaps in literacy, as it relates to Indigenous knowledge and language, throughout the curriculum demonstrate a concerted movement away from contemporary understandings of what literacy is. Connecting literacy to students' feelings, by creating space for vulnerability, is an important part of that process, as is choosing appropriate texts. Reese (2012) writes that histories of the United States, (and also of Canada), "are replete with references to Indigenous people as 'primitive' and/or pagan,'" but that critical Indigenous literacy challenges that perspective by demonstrating that Indigenous values and knowledge are "worthy of the same respect accorded to Western epistemologies" (p. 252). It is important for Indigenous students to see Indigenous culture, people, knowledge, and language valued, but also for non-Indigenous students to learn about a culture that might be unfamiliar (Reese, 2012).

Teachers need guidance on how to work towards incorporating Indigenous critical literacy practices with space made for children to express their feelings, and intuitively reflect in response to teachings and reading. All children have the right to access literacy programming that recognizes all components of what is necessary to become literate in today's world. This includes exposure to a range of meaningful texts, contextualized reading practices, opportunities to learn about and practice inferring, taking time to look at points of view, and understanding the author's message. However, it is the apparent lack of consistent collaboration with Indigenous communities that is most concerning about this curriculum.

Finally, methodologically, this research demonstrates the complexities and promise of non-Indigenous scholars thinking deeply along with Indigenous literacy scholars. We found places of resonance and tension between our participants and scholars; Indigenous scholars were already writing about embodiment and emotion. This initial analysis of the Alberta English Language Arts and Literature curriculum began within qualitative research that follows a Western paradigm. Further decolonizing research needs to be completed alongside Indigenous communities, where families, students and teachers are brought into having thoughtful and critical conversations about the impact and role of curriculum in their lives and learning.

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Author Bio

Katie Brubacher is an assistant professor in elementary education, specializing in language and literacy, who joined the Faculty of Education after almost twenty years of teaching children in K-to-12 schools. Her research interests include translanguaging, the sociality of emotion, students of refugee backgrounds, raciolinguistics, working with children as researchers, school and community-based humanizing research, multimodal literacy practices, identity, belonging, multiliteracies, emerging print literacy, curriculum and policy analysis, and teacher education for multilingual children. As a member of the Language and Literacy Researchers of Canada (LLRC) executive, she works closely with researchers and educators across the country, organizing annual conferences and facilitating the dissemination of research-based practices on language and literacy. She is currently looking at the connection between laughter, belonging, and translanguaging with racialized children of refugee backgrounds, who teachers perceive as traumatized. Katie has also worked as both an instructor and researcher in teacher education to co-author a book entitled, *Centering Multilingual Learners and Countering Raciolingustic Ideologies in Teacher Education*.

Jacqueline Filipek is an associate professor at The King's University in Edmonton, Alberta, where she has worked since 2018 in the Faculty of Education. Her doctorate from the University of Alberta focused on understanding meaning making across and within digital and analog learning experiences in elementary school. Jacqueline is an editor for the national journal, Language and Literacy, and enjoys working with authors and researchers from all around the world who study literacy in many diverse contexts. As a member of the Northern Alberta Reading Specialists' Council, she engages in literacy advocacy work and professional development alongside educators, administrators, and scholars. In addition to her teaching at The King's University, she also teaches language arts curriculum courses for the Aboriginal Teacher-Education Program (ATEP) at the University of Alberta. Her general teaching and areas of research involve curriculum and instruction in language arts, reading, children's literature, and educational technology. In addition to her current work on the Alberta Language Arts and Literature curriculum with Katie, Jacqueline is also exploring place stories to understand children's need for places and ways to make classrooms and schools better environments for students.

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