

ABORIGINAL TEACHER EDUCATION
PROGRAM (ATEP)

Finding Family: Minimizing Barriers to Indigenous Student Success Through Online Education



Research Team

Elder Calvin Cardinal

Dr. Evelyn Steinhauer

Dr. Randolph Wimmer

Kelly Ryan

Danielle Gardiner Milln

*Prepared for the Rideau Hall
Foundation, Indigenous
Teacher Initiative*





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Introduction

The Aboriginal Teacher Education Program (ATEP) at the University of Alberta, established to address the need for culturally responsive teacher education, has evolved into a leading program in Indigenous teacher education, supporting Indigenous preservice teachers through accessible, community-centered, and culturally grounded approaches. ATEP is continually innovating in the space of Indigenous teacher education, looking for opportunities to improve equitable access to postsecondary education while increasing the number of Indigenous certified teachers across Canada. With the support of the Rideau Hall Foundation, we undertook a student-centered research project to ask: What does online, Indigenized Bachelor of Education programming need to include to be successful in minimizing institutional barriers and supporting students' academic, professional, and personal goals?

ATEP is a flexible program offering online and on-campus options and currently serves approximately 231 students across 11 cohorts. Participants are either enrolled full-time or part-time. The cohort model remains one of the program's most prominent feature allow students to learn alongside their peers, through their year of study. Many of the ATEP students are spread across Canada, with the majority coming from Alberta.

While ATEP remains grounded in nêhiyaw (Cree) values and teachings, the program welcomes students from various Indigenous nations, languages and backgrounds and encourages students to take the learning and adapt to their community needs and worldviews.



ATEP Guiding Values

Introduction

This project was carried out under the guidance of Elder Calvin Cardinal, of Saddle Lake Cree Nation, who continues to provide cultural guidance and care to our team and all ATEP students, staff, and educators. Dr. Evelyn Steinhauer, also of Saddle Lake Cree Nation, provided project leadership and unending support for the researchers and participants, building on her leadership of over two decades as the ATEP Director, Professor, and Associate Dean, Indigenous Teacher Education at the University of Alberta. Dr. Randolph Wimmer, a Professor at the University of Alberta, walked alongside the project team from inception to completion to support the research design, data collection, and analysis; his relational work in Indigenous teacher education provided invaluable grounding for the research team and the student participants. Emerging Indigenous scholar Kelly Ryan, from Kikino Métis Settlement, collaboratively shaped the project from its initial research design to the final report, bringing her exceptional professional insights as an ATEP alumni, certified teacher, and kiskinwahamakew (Academic Auntie) to every phase of the project. Danielle Gardiner Milln, ATEP's Research Coordinator and PhD student in higher education policy at the University of Alberta, led the development of the project and is privileged to have held many staff roles in ATEP over five years. Our team came together, in community with the Rideau Hall Foundation, to gain a deeper understanding of what online programming can offer Indigenous students seeking to fulfill their dreams of becoming teachers, and to identify what programmatic facets need to be prioritized to ensure multifaceted success. This project was an effort of the heart, and we humbly offer this report to inform other teacher education programs, educational leaders, and online degree programs across disciplines in service of advancing Indigenous student success through the increasingly accessible option of online postsecondary learning.



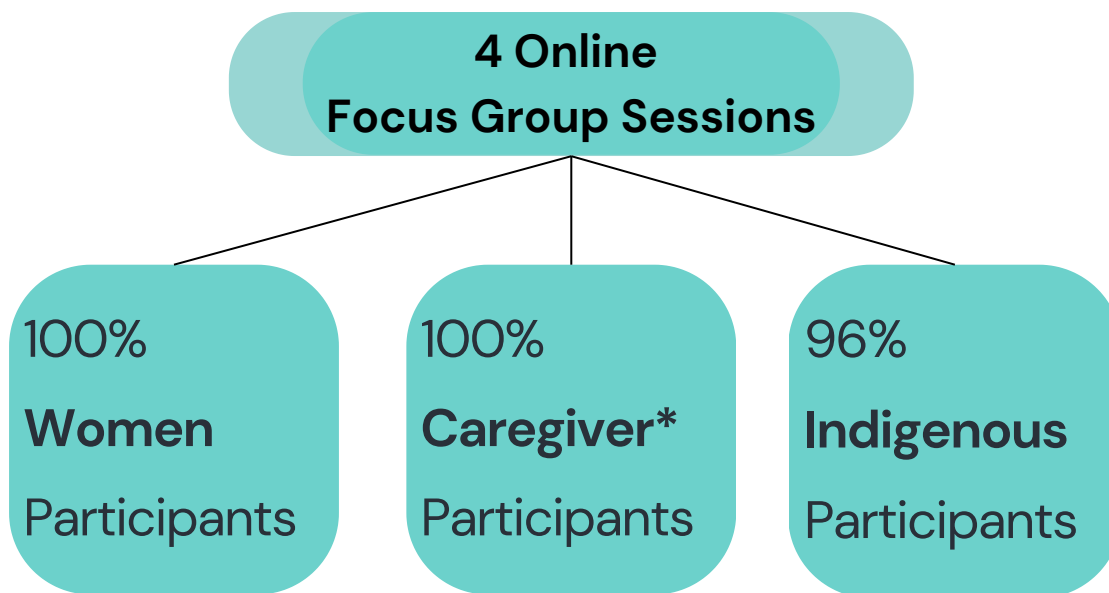
Left to Right: Danielle Gardiner Milln, Kelly Ryan, Dr. Evelyn Steinhauer, Danielle Steele & Dr. Randy Wimmer



Left to Right: Elder Calvin Cardinal, Levi Wolfe, & Dr. Randy Wimmer

Introduction

This study examined the experiences of students enrolled in the Aboriginal Teacher Education Program (ATEP) and identified six key thematic findings that highlight the program's impact on student success, community engagement, and cultural preservation. In addition to these six thematic findings, we highlight three areas of opportunity that emerged from the focus group discussions to direct future programmatic energies of ATEP and other teacher education programs (TEPs). We engaged undergraduate students, primarily Indigenous (n = 20 out of 21) and all female-identifying in small focus groups to share their experiences with an online, Indigenous teacher education program. We then thematically analyzed the findings to arrive at the six core facets any online postsecondary education program should focus on, particularly when serving Indigenous students. These findings underscore the value of culturally responsive, accessible, and community-centered approaches to teacher education; notably, our experiences facilitating the focus groups made visible the incredible community the students have built with one another and the *sâkhitowin* (love) they share freely with their fellow students.



Key Thematic Findings

Importance of Family and Community Support

A critical finding of this project is how ATEP's online education model enables students to remain in their home communities while pursuing their degrees. Participants consistently emphasized how an online program allowed them to retain the support of their families and local networks, which are key drivers of fulsome success. For many students, especially those who are parents, studying from home offers an opportunity to keep their children connected to their local community while inspiring them by modeling perseverance and commitment to postsecondary education. This intergenerational impact of online learning underscores its transformative potential, extending beyond individual students to their families and communities.

Relationships with Educators and Staff

The relational model of support offered by ATEP, particularly through the role of academic aunties (kiskinwahamakewak), was highlighted as a cornerstone of student success. These staff members provided holistic support that extended beyond academics, fostering trust, accountability, and belonging. This care-driven approach contributed to ATEP's low attrition rates and helped students develop relational skills that align with Indigenous values of community and interconnectedness, fostering stronger connections within their communities. The program's emphasis on positive relationality prepared students to excel academically and also facilitated meaningful connections that will persevere into their professional lives as educators.

Cultural Grounding

Engagement with cultural learning opportunities was identified as vital to students' personal and academic development. Participants highlighted how traditional practices, language learning, and intergenerational knowledge sharing deepened their connection to their heritage while grounding their future teaching practices in Indigenous worldviews and knowledge. These culturally grounded experiences empowered students to contribute to Indigenous cultural resurgence while navigating the demands of postsecondary education and gaining essential competencies for the teaching profession. By integrating cultural learning into their studies, participants found a sense of purpose and belonging, particularly drawn from their collective strength as a learning community, that supported their academic success.

Intentional Scheduling

The program's intentional scheduling practices, which prioritize flexibility and consistency, were identified as a crucial support mechanism for students balancing academic and caregiving responsibilities. Scheduling courses at predictable times and accommodating common family obligations allowed participants to secure time for their studies while managing other commitments. This approach was particularly impactful for student parents, who reported that these structures supported their mental health and well-being while enhancing their capacity for time management and self-care.

Clear Employment Pathways

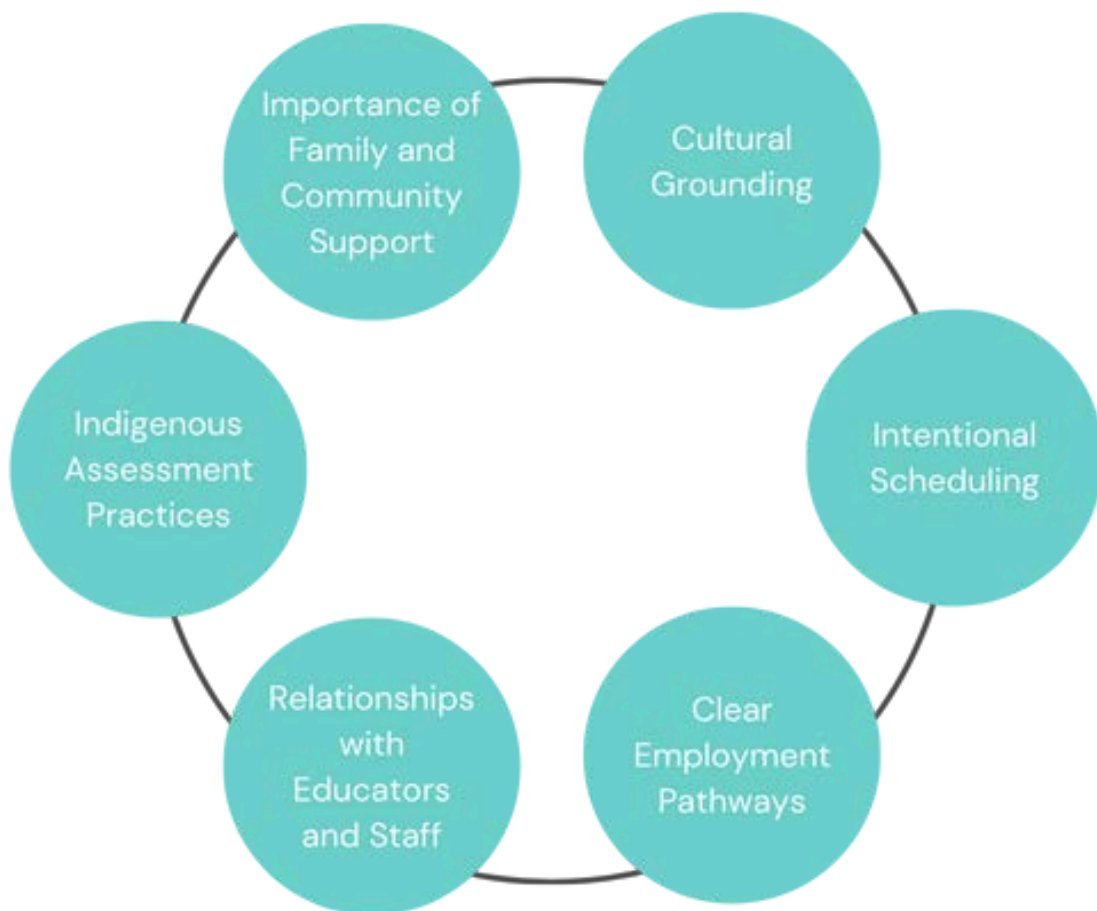
Expanding on the previous themes of cultural grounding and the robust benefits of being able to remain at home while pursuing teacher education, another key theme emerged – clear pathways for local teaching positions facilitated by the ATEP program with online program options. Teaching is truly a work of heart, and longevity in the profession can be supported by ensuring preservice teachers have realistic expectations of what working in a classroom with youth entails. An online programmatic route was necessary to allow students to maintain connection with the schools they previously worked in, or where their family or friends attended or worked. This provided students an exceptional opportunity to integrate themselves into the school communities before they formally assume a teaching role.

Indigenous Assessment Practices

ATEP instructors prioritize assessment strategies aligned with Indigenous worldviews, supporting relational approaches that move beyond Western assessment models of regurgitating information to focus on relational and culturally grounded ways of identifying knowledge acquisition. The study suggests that participants began to view their own pedagogical practices and assessment development in alignment with their own learning and positionality. It is important to recognize that participants in the study explored various aspects of assessment including reflection, with one student stating "It's about finding your way of teaching, your way of caring for your students, and what I've learned from this program."

Six Key Themes

What does online, Indigenized Bachelor of Education programming need to include to be successful in minimizing institutional barriers and supporting students' academic, professional and personal goals?



Areas of Opportunity

Attending to Technological Needs

Technological knowledge, internet connectivity, and access to proper equipment emerged as persistent barriers for preservice teachers in ATEP, significantly impacting their online learning experience. Many participants reported challenges due to the lack of familiarity with digital tools, which added to their workload and stress as they navigated course requirements. Reliable internet access was another recurring issue, particularly for students in rural, remote, or on-reserve communities where the connectivity is often limited or inconsistent. These barriers not only hindered students' ability to engage fully with course materials and discussions but it also created inequities among participants based on their access to technology and infrastructure. Addressing these disparities is essential to ensuring that online programs do not inadvertently exclude or disadvantage students who already face systemic barriers to education. To create a successful online program, thoughtful measures must be taken to mitigate these technological challenges. Institutions should provide comprehensive technical support, including onboarding sessions for students on how to use digital tools and provide ongoing training and troubleshooting resources.



Supporting Local Connections

Improving the localization of content, perspectives, and partnerships is a critical area for enhancing the efficacy of online teacher education programs like ATEP. While the accessibility and convenience of online programming are undeniable strengths, participants highlighted the challenge of tailoring programming to reflect the specific knowledge and identities of diverse Indigenous communities across Canada. Students expressed that a greater integration of localized knowledge, including representation from Elders and community organizations, would have enriched their learning experiences. This presents a significant logistical challenge, given the geographical and cultural diversity of students, but also an opportunity for teacher education programs to foster collaboration with Indigenous communities.

Mixing It Up – Broadly Conceptualizing Cohorts

Intentionally mixing cohorts to encourage exposure to diverse peer perspectives emerged as a valuable component of ATEP's structure, offering students meaningful opportunities to connect with individuals outside of their primary groups. Participants who adhered to ATEP's predetermined course progression noted the excitement and benefits of meeting new peers when students from different cohorts were introduced into their classes. One student highlighted the strength of the cohort model by stating, "...one of the greatest advantages of ATEP is keeping people together in cohorts." Another peer discussed the immense benefits of having peers from other cohorts work alongside them to expand their connections with other ATEP students. The findings suggest an opportunity to conceptualize cohorts as flexible rather than fixed units, allowing for strategic cross-pollination between groups. By intentionally expanding the exposure students have to one another, teacher education programs can create collaborative environments that foster broader engagement to enhance peer learning and connectivity. Flexibly designed cohorts can help maximize the benefits of online teacher education by ensuring that students build diverse networks of professional and personal support.

Literature Review

Indigenous learners face unique challenges in postsecondary education, exacerbated by institutional barriers, limited cultural inclusion, and the need for holistic support. The development of an online, Indigenized Bachelor of Education program requires a framework that integrates Indigenous perspectives, fosters community, and minimizes systemic barriers. This review synthesizes relevant research to identify key elements for maintaining an online, Indigenized Bachelor of Education program.

Addressing Institutional Colonialism

Several authors discuss the impacts of colonialism in post-secondary institutions (Tupper, 2022; Carr-Stewart, Balzer & Cottress, 2013; Sanford et al., 2012; Gallop & Bastien, 2016). Many Indigenous students must adapt to institutional norms and values to succeed in their programs (Gallop & Bastien, 2016; Pigeon, 2008). Kirkness and Barnhardt (1999) discuss Indigenous students' perspective of "going to the university" versus "coming to the university" as viewed by institutions (p.2) and how postsecondary institutions remain spaces where Indigenous students struggle to connect with the sociocultural environment. Indigenization and Decolonization remain to be prevalent terms for initiatives directed towards combating institutional barriers (Tupper & Omoregie, 2022; Pigeon, 2016). Pidgeon (2016) states that "From Indigenous perspectives, Indigenization of the academy refers to the meaningful inclusion of Indigenous knowledge(s), in the everyday fabric of the institution from policies to practices across all levels, not just in curriculum" (p.79).

Fostering Relationships and Connections

Many authors (Chickekian & Bragoli-Barzan, 2020; Reedy, 2019; Delahunty, Verenikina, & Jones, 2014; Gallop & Bastien, 2014) identified the impact of developing relationships and making connections as part of online learning as critical to creating a strong sense of belonging and connection for Indigenous learners. Research shows that online education can often lead to feelings of isolation, which can be mitigated through intentional community-building efforts. Delahunty, Verenikina, and Jones (2014) stress the importance of fostering socio-emotional connections in online learning environments. Additionally, Reedy (2019) outlines the value of virtual cultural interfaces and peer collaboration in enhancing engagement and retention. In facilitating peer and mentor relationships with their Indigenous tutoring scheme, Nakata et al (2019) reinforces the learning and supportive relationship that occurs.

Cultural Relevance and Indigenous Worldviews

The inclusion of Indigenous knowledge, values, and pedagogies is fundamental to the success of Indigenous students. Specifically, Kirkness and Barnhardt's (1991) "Four R's" framework— respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility—remains a cornerstone for Indigenizing education to guide ethical engagement with Indigenous communities, including in educational contexts. Bartlett, Marshall, and Marshall (2012) discuss "Two-Eyed Seeing"— an awareness of Western and Indigenous worldviews that further illustrates the need to balance Indigenous and Western knowledge systems to honour and uplift traditional wisdoms, culture, and history while successfully navigating the Western world concurrently. In examining their Bachelor of Education program, Kitchen, Hodson and Raynor (2012) continue the conversation to ensure that students are able to navigate western and Indigenous worldviews in education.

Henderson (2000) explains that Indigenous worldviews see all life forms as interconnected, with the survival of each depending on the survival of all others. These worldviews also acknowledge that the life force driving all living beings originates from an unseen, yet knowable, spiritual realm (p. 261). In this view, all life is sacred and interconnected, with no life form above or below another in the circle of existence. Everything that exists is part of a unified whole, a singular heart. Indigenous teachings encourage humility, reminding people that they are just one strand in the web of life. In this circle, humans rely on all other forces for their survival. Moreover, Indigenous worldviews emphasize that humans are meant to share life according to their abilities, nurture and renew the web of life. This responsibility calls for deep respect and reverence for all life forms, often referred to as the process of humility (p. 259).

Worldviews shape language, knowledge, unity, and social order. While each Indigenous worldview is tied to specific locations and peoples, the shared understanding of interconnectedness unites all Indigenous groups. Graveline (1998) succinctly captures this notion by stating, "We are like one big family with all our relations. Nothing we do, we do by ourselves; together we form a circle. That which the trees exhale, I inhale. That which I exhale, the tree inhales" (p. 56).

In contrast, the Western worldview sees history as a linear sequence, where events unfold from beginning to end. Indigenous worldviews, however, view history in spatial terms, with events understood as occurring within specific spaces. Duran and Duran (2000) further explain that Native American worldviews are grounded in a process-oriented approach to life, unlike the content-driven approach of Western thought. Process thinking emphasizes action and event, rather than the object-subject relationships that dominate Western thought. In this view, the individual is part of all creation, living as one system, rather than existing separately from one another.

Holistic Approach to Student Success

A strong sense of belonging and connection is critical for Indigenous learners. Research shows that online education can often lead to feelings of isolation, which can be mitigated through intentional community-building efforts. Delahunty, Verenikina, and Jones (2014) stress the importance of fostering socio-emotional connections in online learning environments. Additionally, Reedy (2019) outlines the value of virtual cultural interfaces and peer collaboration to enhance student engagement and retention. Shah and Widin (2010) state that the quality of teachers remains integral to the retention success of students and that adult Indigenous learners must be made to feel welcomed and safe in their learning community. Furthermore, to foster cultural and holistic wrap around support for students, it's important to provide opportunities for interaction with Elders and knowledge keepers within the program (Wallin & Scribe, 2022).

Summary

A successful online, Indigenized Bachelor of Education program must be designed to minimize institutional barriers while supporting Indigenous students' academic, professional, and personal goals through a holistic and culturally relevant framework. Addressing institutional colonialism requires meaningful Indigenization efforts that embed Indigenous knowledge, perspectives, and values across all levels of the institution, not just within the curriculum. Cultural relevance is essential, with frameworks such as the Four R's (respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991) and Two- Eyed Seeing ensuring that Indigenous and Western knowledge systems are integrated equitably (Bartlett, Marshall, & Marshall, 2012). Building strong relationships and fostering connections within online learning environments is critical to combat feelings of isolation, reinforcing a sense of belonging through peer support, mentorship, and community- building efforts. Ultimately, a holistic approach that includes culturally responsive teaching, engagement with Elders and knowledge keepers, and student-centered supports will create a learning environment that empowers Indigenous students to thrive academically, professionally, and personally.

Research Methodology

This qualitative research was guided by the epistemological positioning of Indigenous Research Methodologies. An Indigenous Research Methodology is grounded in a framework that draws upon the inherent wisdom, values, and beliefs of Indigenous peoples. It is deeply rooted in the natural laws of love, respect, courage, honesty, humility, wisdom, and truth, which are considered gifts from the Creator, meant to guide Indigenous communities toward unity whenever they come together to share and celebrate their knowledge (Makokis, 2001, p. 50). This methodology allowed us to move beyond the confines of Western theories, creating space for Indigenous ways of knowing. “Recognizing and activating Indigenous knowledge today is an empowering act by Indigenous people” (Battiste, 2002, p. 4). This shift has led to a growing recognition within Western academia of the richness of Indigenous languages, worldviews, teachings, and lived experiences.

Battiste (2002) emphasized the value of Indigenous knowledge in relation to contemporary Western educational systems:

“**Indigenous knowledge highlights the limitations of Eurocentric theory—its methodology, evidence, and conclusions—while re-envisioning the resilience and self-reliance of Indigenous peoples. It emphasizes the importance of their philosophies, heritages, and educational practices. Indigenous knowledge addresses the ethical and intellectual gaps in Eurocentric education, research, and scholarship. By bringing the voices and experiences of the ‘cognitive other’ into the educational process, it creates a more balanced perspective and a new way to analyze Eurocentric education and its methods**” (p. 5).

Methods

To center student voices in answering our research question, we conducted four online focus groups via Zoom with current online ATEP students. A focus group interview method approach offered a rich and dynamic way to understand the perspectives of Indigenous students in an online teaching program. We chose this method as it allows researchers to gather qualitative information by engaging participants in discussions where they share their experiences, viewpoints, and insights. By facilitating group interactions, focus groups create a space for participants to express their perspectives in their own words and explore collective experiences. This approach is particularly valuable when examining the perspectives of Indigenous students, as it aligns with Indigenous methodologies that value storytelling, community dialogue, and relationality, which explicitly aligns with the Indigenous Research Methodology approach. The collective nature of focus groups fosters a sense of shared understanding and can reveal themes that may not emerge in individual interviews. This was particularly evident in our focus groups wherein students expanded one another's answers, as expected, but hearteningly, students demonstrated immense support and care for one another as they provided their knowledge for this project.

To ensure the effectiveness and cultural appropriateness of this approach, focus groups were designed with sensitivity to the cultural values and needs of Indigenous participants. This included creating a safe and inclusive environment where students feel comfortable sharing their perspectives. Elder Calvin Cardinal was involved from the outset in designing the focus group questions and format for the discussions, sharing his exceptional wisdom to support cultural and personal safety in these spaces.



Kelly Ryan began each focus group with a smudge and a prayer, setting a positive tone for the discussions. Introductions were made in the language that participants and facilitators felt most comfortable with. We used semi-structured questions to create space for open conversation, allowing participants to share their stories and insights naturally. To foster a more intimate and detailed discussion, we kept the groups small, limiting them to no more than 8 participants

While not intentionally mirroring the format of a Talking Circle, the conversations flowed in a similar fashion wherein participants listened respectfully to one another before responding, and held space for equitable participation in the group. Facilitators made it clear at the outset of each focus group that not everyone needed to say something, but every participant ended up contributing generously to the group. This information gathering process reflected a strong sense of relationality and respect, which flowed into their answers about how they approached their ATEP community broadly.

Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and insights, done collaboratively with the research team to maximize the knowledge emanating from our unique, individualized experiences. We conducted the data analysis collaboratively using Excel spreadsheets and regular conversations between the research team to cross-check our thematic findings and how we are interpreting and framing the students' responses mindful of their cultural context as much as possible. By leveraging focus groups to understand the perspectives of Indigenous students in an online teaching program, we were privileged to gain deeper insights into their experiences and challenges, ultimately informing more culturally responsive and equitable educational practices in ATEP and other Teacher Education Programs (TEP) throughout Canada.

Theme 1:

Importance of Family and Community Support

“As an online program, I have learned more about relationships through a screen than I think I could ever have learned through a mainstream program sitting side by side somebody else.”

Our research study emphasizes a significant benefit of ATEP’s online education model: enabling students to maintain the support of their families and communities by staying at home throughout their academic journey. Participants consistently highlighted the importance of this support, affirming that familial and community connections play a crucial role in fostering academic success. For Indigenous students in particular, these relationships provided stability and encouragement, helping them navigate the challenges of postsecondary education. The narratives shared by participants illustrate how studying from home allowed them to remain deeply connected to their support systems and spiritual networks, reinforcing the well-documented link between community support and educational achievement.

One of the most profound themes that emerged from the study in relation to family and community connection was the impact of ATEP’s online model on student parents. Participants with children described how attending class from home provided an opportunity for their children to witness their hard work and dedication firsthand. For many, this visibility was deeply meaningful, as it allowed them to model the values of perseverance and commitment to education. Student parents spoke of the pride they felt in showing their children that obtaining a university degree was achievable, planting the seeds of aspiration and confidence in the next generation. These personal stories underscore the transformative power of accessible education in shaping intergenerational attitudes toward learning.



The study also highlighted the broader, systemic implications of ATEP's online education model. Beyond individual benefits, participants noted how the program's accessibility contributes to long-term community development through enabling students to become certified teachers in their own community post-graduation. By enabling students to remain in their communities while earning their degrees, ATEP helps ensure that local schools have access to qualified, culturally informed teachers who are deeply embedded in the community's values and needs. This approach supports the sustainability of educational systems in rural and remote areas, addressing the persistent challenge of teacher shortages while reinforcing the holistic fabric of these communities.



ATEP Bachelor and Master graduates attending convocation

In conclusion, the research highlights that keeping students connected to their communities not only enhances access to teacher education and promotes overall academic success but also nurtures intergenerational inspiration and drives systemic change. The findings emphasize the importance of community-centered education that considers the lived experiences of Indigenous students, especially those with caregiving responsibilities or strong ties to their communities and support networks. This approach presents a compelling model for broadening the reach and impact of teacher education, showing its potential to transform both individuals and the communities they serve.

Theme 2: Cultural Grounding

"I wanted to learn more about our worldviews, our culture, our history, our languages and [ATEP] looked like an amazing opportunity, and I love to jump on opportunities that excite me. And the fact that it was online, it was just too perfect."

Our study underscores the critical role of cultural learning opportunities in fostering the academic and personal success of Indigenous students. Participants highlighted that engaging with traditional practices, languages, and community-based teachings provided a powerful connection to their heritage and identity. These opportunities served as more than supplemental aspects of their education; they were foundational to their overall development. Students described how cultural engagement deepened their understanding of themselves and their communities, reinforcing their sense of belonging and purpose within both academic and cultural contexts: "[ATEP] involves your Indigenous experiences, and it gives you that connection to who we are. And in the beginning it was tricky doing it online, with the connection, but it's really built up to have a good connection between everybody." This integration of cultural learning into their educational experience emerged as a key factor in their success, particularly creating culturally safe spaces where students can gain confidence as Indigenous educators with rich knowledge that is needed for certified teachers to be grounded in their own Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

A central finding of the study was the role of cultural learning opportunities in supporting students' personal development and resilience. Many ATEP students are in the process of (re)connecting to their culture and expressed deep gratitude for the continued opportunities to embrace their own culture while learning about other Indigenous cultures practiced and embodied by their classmates. Embodying this, one participant emotionally noted: "I've always wanted family... ATEP's really been that." Participants emphasized that being rooted in their cultural heritage helped them navigate the challenges of postsecondary education, including feelings of isolation or disconnection. Another participant eloquently described this notion as feeling "natural":

“*This really feels natural to me, they're allowing me to spend real time on things that matter, and then, the content as well, you know, the majority of the content has been seen to be really well vetted and making sure that you know they're coming from a credible sources in terms of like Indigenous academics and Indigenous authors. And what I've learned is that this, the content that you know, is produced by these Indigenous researchers or educators, you know their research is being done through culture, through ceremony, and through language and through Elders.*”

By fostering a sense of pride in their identity and grounding them in their communities' knowledge, practices, and worldview, culturally-centered learning empowered students to overcome obstacles and remain motivated in their academic pursuits. This sense of cultural resilience enables students to balance the demands of their studies with the complexities of contemporary life and prepare to confidently enter into the teaching profession.

The study also highlights the broader societal impact of cultural learning in the context of Indigenous education. Participants reflected on how their engagement with traditional practices and languages positioned them as active contributors to the movement of Indigenous cultural resurgence, including by threading culture into every assignment. One participant reflected that "...honouring the Indigenous knowledge in an inquiry plan [assignment] was really impactful for my sense of self in connection to culture," demonstrating the importance of honouring culture in seemingly small moments of one's academic journey that ultimately have a large impact. By participating in and promoting cultural preservation efforts, they saw their education as a means of contributing to the revitalization of knowledge systems that had been historically suppressed through processes of colonialism and systemic racism. This perspective imbued their academic journeys with a deeper sense of responsibility and purpose, aligning their personal success with the well-being of their communities.



Intergenerational knowledge sharing became a key element in these cultural learning experiences. Participants highlighted how engaging with Elders and educators who possess deep cultural knowledge helped pass down wisdom, traditions, and practices. This process was especially effective in combining traditional knowledge with essential skills for contemporary teaching. These exchanges not only deepened students' understanding of their heritage but also emphasized the importance of preserving these connections for future generations. By integrating cultural and spiritual teachings into their education, students take on the roles of both learners and guardians of their cultures, contributing to the revitalization and endurance of Indigenous cultures across what is now Canada.

This study emphasizes the importance of cultural learning opportunities for Indigenous students, highlighting that they are essential, not just supplementary, for academic success. By connecting students to their culture, these opportunities help them overcome challenges, contribute to cultural revival, and promote intergenerational well-being in Indigenous communities. The findings stress the need to incorporate culturally relevant practices into education to support Indigenous students in a holistic way, preparing them to enter the teaching profession and pass on cultural knowledge to future generations.

Theme 3: Clear Employment Pathways

"I always questioned why didn't I have an Indigenous gym teacher? Why didn't I have an Indigenous math teacher? I would always see Indigenous EA's, but not teachers, like it wasn't common. And so that's what really, truly motivated me."

Building on the themes of cultural grounding and the significant advantages of staying home while pursuing teacher education, another key theme emerges: establishing clear pathways to local teaching positions supported by ATEP through its online offerings. Many ATEP students in the online program first discovered their passion for teaching through paid roles as Educational Assistants or through other work within educational settings. While searching for programs that could meet their needs, including the flexibility to continue working while pursuing a teaching degree, many chose to enrol in an online program. Teaching is a deeply heart-driven profession, and ensuring pre-service teachers have a realistic understanding of classroom life is key to fostering long-term success. The online format was crucial for these students, allowing them to stay connected with the schools where they had previously worked, often schools with ties to their families or friends. This connection provided valuable opportunities to become immersed in school communities before formally transitioning into teaching roles. The online program design of ATEP embraces this, allowing students to integrate their practical experience into their coursework, benefiting the entire cohort.

Reducing barriers to both the coursework and practical aspects of a teaching education program enables Indigenous students to envision and realize clear employment pathways into the education field. Pursuing a degree is a significant investment of time, money, and energy, and it is crucial to ensure that students successfully enter the teaching profession. This is important for the students and their families and the young people they will go on to positively impact in their own classrooms. Participants consistently emphasized the value of staying connected to their communities, noting that culturally relevant learning was key to seeing themselves in classroom environments, either through practicum or employment. By earning their degrees in their home environments, students can tailor their teaching to meet the specific needs of their communities, enhancing their education with practical tools and culturally informed perspectives. This approach benefits local youth and families, as students, equipped with rich local knowledge are more likely to remain in educationally underserved communities



A graduation cap done by an ATEP alumni

Our findings also highlight the importance of having community-centered education to address systemic challenges faced by rural, remote, and on-reserve communities. Participants reflected that teachers who understand the specific needs and cultural dynamics of their local communities, are better equipped to create meaningful and lasting impacts in the classroom. They drew this knowledge from their own experiences as students, as employees in schools, and as student teachers for those who have completed one or more teaching practicums.

Similarly, students noted that staying in their communities during their studies enhanced their practical teaching experiences by allowing them to engage with local schools, families, and cultural practices. This hands-on exposure ensured that their practicums were both theoretical and deeply integrated into the lived realities of their communities. These experiences enriched their teacher training, fostered meaningful connections with future colleagues and students, and provided rich opportunities for self-reflection and growth, as asserted by one participant:

“A lot of my journey was, you know, self-discovery and really truly finding who I am as a person and what I want to project as a mother... whether that's a mother, an educator, a friend, a sister. It's really helped shape who I am.”

This localized approach to teacher education, acknowledges and honours all aspects of a person's identity and highlights the crucial value of Indigenous educational practices. It emphasizes that participants' roles/identities as educators are deeply interconnected with the other roles they play in their lives. This sense of empowerment carried over into their teaching practice, where they relied on the relational skills and cultural grounding modeled by their academic aunties. Participants shared how the program's emphasis on connection and care equipped them to not only succeed academically but also to foster and maintain meaningful relationships with their future students, colleagues, and communities.

In summary, our findings demonstrate that online teacher education programs that allow students to remain in their home communities provide a dual benefit: fostering individual academic and professional success and addresses systemic educational needs in underserved areas. By staying connected to their communities, students gain culturally relevant learning experiences, practical exposure, and opportunities for long-term employment that directly benefit their local contexts. This model prepares students to be effective educators and also strengthens the social and educational fabric of their communities, making it a powerful strategy for sustainable development in rural, remote, and on-reserve environments.

Theme 4:

Relationships with Educators and Staff

“The focus isn't about what's in the books with ATEP. The focus is about what's inside, and how we project that, and how we work with people, and how we build relationships and capacity and all those types of things.”

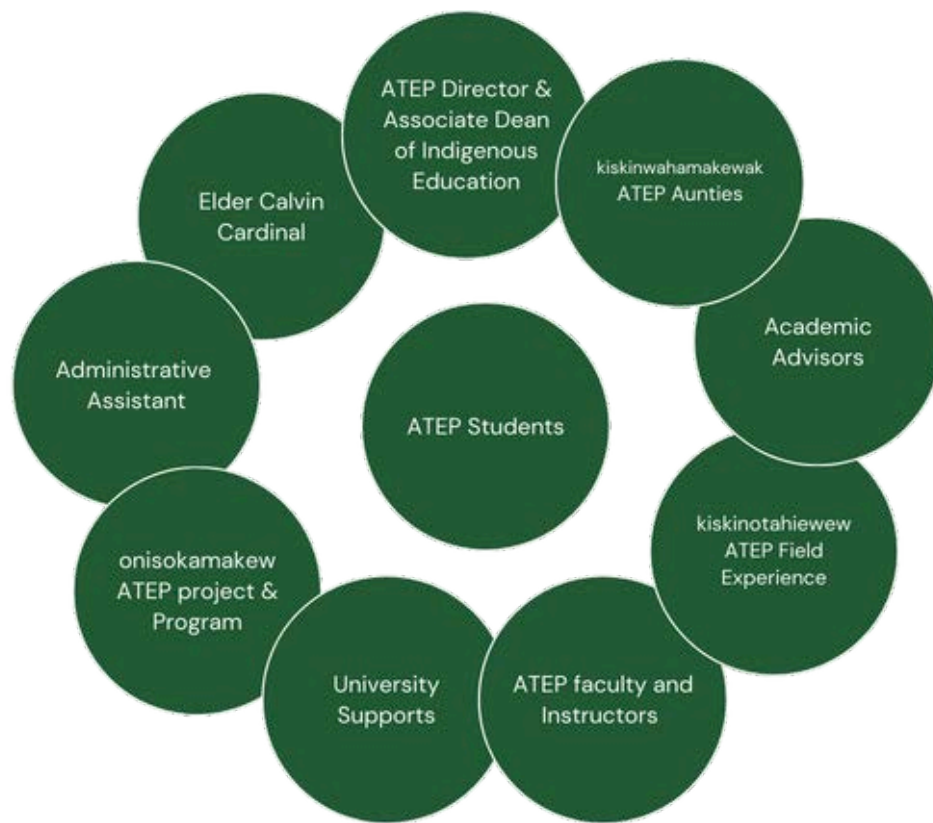
A central finding of this research study was the critical role of close-knit relationships between students and staff in supporting the academic and personal success of participants in ATEP. Currently, there are two hundred thirty-one (231) students that are actively enrolled in ATEP spanning four years of study. ATEP staff includes twelve (12) members, who are supporting students as part of the relational network of academic advisors, administration and program officers, field experience, and a resident Elder. Central to this relational framework is the role of kiskinwahamakewak, or academic “aunties,” certified teachers employed to walk alongside students throughout their teacher education journey within ATEP. One participant affirmed that “ATEP worked hard to create those safe spaces”, and the aunties are essential to crafting these spaces. These aunties provide individualized support that extends beyond conventional academic assistance, encompassing personal encouragement, after-hours communication, and shared moments of celebration. Students emphasized how this model of care grounded in relationality fostered a profound sense of belonging and value within the program, which they credited as a foundational element of their success.



ATEP staff and students sharing space together

In our context, a relational approach to student care focuses on meeting students where they are and acknowledging the complexities of their experiences as the foundation for designing our services. We maintain ongoing communication with students to support their overall well-being, referring them to specialized community or campus resources when needed, while always keeping a human-centered approach to assist them throughout their academic journey and beyond. By showing genuine care and attention, staff foster an environment of trust and safety, allowing students to excel both academically and personally.

This relational model of support fosters a sense of belonging and a culture of accountability among students. Participants shared that they felt a strong motivation to meet academic expectations because of a deep respect for the dedication and care shown by their academic aunties. This sense of reciprocal respect reinforced students' commitment to their studies, as they sought to honour the relational efforts invested in their success. The study attributes ATEP's low attrition rate, which outperforms mainstream teacher education programs at the University of Alberta, due to this care-driven approach. By prioritizing relationships over transactional interactions, ATEP has created a model that empowers students to remain engaged and persevere through challenges.



ATEP Support Model

Moreover, the staff's relational practices modeled principles of positive relationality for students, including active listening, mutual respect, and reciprocity. These practices extended beyond academic guidance, offering students a template for building meaningful relationships within their own communities and future classrooms. Participants noted that the aunties' behaviour provided valuable insights into how to foster connections rooted in trust and care, which directly aligned with Indigenous cultural values of community and interconnectedness. This relational alignment reinforced students' sense of identity and purpose, helping them see how these values could be integrated into their teaching practices and professional relationships.

The relational support model also had a profound impact on students' confidence and resilience. Feeling seen, valued, and supported by staff encouraged students to embrace their roles as educators and strengthened their belief in their ability to succeed. One participant provided an emotional reflection of a salient moment between her and one of her aunts:

“*[An auntie] reached out to me, personally, texted me in April just to check in and say ‘Hey, we haven’t seen you around. Haven’t heard from you. I just want to make sure you’re okay.’ And it was just so unexpected that I was like, oh my gosh somebody from ATEP is just checking in on me, you know, because I’ve been flying under the radar. So that really sat, sat with me, and that just support is just unmatched.*”

This sense of empowerment translated into their practical teaching experiences, where they drew upon the cultural grounding and relational skills modeled by their academic aunts. Participants described how the program’s focus on connection and care prepared them to excel in their studies and to build and sustain relationships with their future students, colleagues, and communities.

In summary, ATEP’s focus on relationality, particularly through the role of academic aunts, showcases the transformative power of care-driven support in teacher education programs. This approach demonstrates how authentic relationships built on *sâkihitowin* (love), trust, and accountability can create an environment where students feel valued and motivated to succeed. The findings highlight the importance of relational practices in fostering a sense of belonging and connection to cultural values, ultimately preparing students to incorporate these principles into their teaching. ATEP serves as a powerful example of how culturally responsive, relationship-centered programs can support the academic and personal journeys of Indigenous students, offering a model for other teacher education programs to follow.

Theme 5: Intentional Scheduling

“The way that our class schedules have been structured, especially the last few semesters, you know, not having class on Fridays, has been such a blessing. Because I feel, as a hockey parent as well, sometimes we have to be on the road by Thursday night for a Friday morning game, in the heat of hockey season. And so it's really been nice to have that extra day off, especially if you need a catch up day.”

A key finding from the research study is that ATEP's intentional scheduling practices significantly supported Indigenous students' success by accommodating their dual responsibilities of academic work and caregiving responsibilities, such as caring for children or elderly relatives, challenges that are often more pronounced than those faced by traditional postsecondary students. Many Indigenous students encounter this distinct challenge of balancing their school life and family obligations.. The focus group participants were primarily mothers, and one reflected that: “I wanted to be able to be home with my kids. Needed me to be home. So that was a big part of it, on top of the blessings that I would get through the program myself that I had no idea I was going to be getting.” ATEP's scheduling strategy addresses this by ensuring classes end before school pick-up times and leaving Friday's open, when instructor availability permits.

These accommodations demonstrate a deep understanding and respect for the students' lived experiences, enabling them to fully engage in their coursework while still fulfilling their caregiving responsibilities. Participants consistently expressed appreciation for this structure, noting that without these considerations, maintaining regular attendance and participation would have been far more difficult.

The consistency of scheduling courses across multiple terms was also identified as a key factor in the program's success. Students emphasized the advantages of having regular, predictable schedules, allowing them to allocate dedicated time for academic work. This consistency was especially important for students who were the first in their families to pursue postsecondary education. Unlike traditional students who may receive familial support in managing academic responsibilities, these students often faced these challenges on their own. A stable schedule gave them a solid foundation to develop effective time management skills, fostering a sense of control over their academic commitments and establishing a routine that supported their educational progress.

Participants also expressed a strong preference for synchronous courses that enabled them to connect with one another in real time while providing an accountability mechanism to get the work done. One participant reflected: “Being online, I think, as challenging as it can be, and as alone as maybe you might feel initially like first year was pretty lonely, but trust the process and by the time first year was over, I have a lot of lifelong relationships.” Students faced more academic challenges in asynchronous coursework compared to the synchronous format, which mirrors a traditional in-person class with set class times and mandatory participation. Many of the assessment strategies used in the synchronous course offerings (comprising the vast majority of ATEP’s online degree offering) are relational – students are expected to participate in circles, discussing course content and other information relevant to their learning journey, and work collaboratively to build strong relationships. Synchronous course offerings provide an essential opportunity for students to connect with one another in an online video format, creating spaces of accountability and contributing to the academic and professional success of the whole cohort.

The findings further revealed that the scheduling approach had positive impacts on the well-being of female students with caregiving responsibilities. One student mother noted that “I thought that was cool [that the course ended at 2:00], because it really worked with my kids school schedule.” Many of these students noted that they often prioritize the needs of their families over their own, leaving little room for personal growth or self-care. However, the structured and predictable timeframes offered by ATEP allowed them to carve out consistent time periods to focus on their academic goals and connect with their cohort. This intentional allocation of time became a source of emotional and mental relief, providing a space where they could prioritize their personal and professional aspirations. Participants described these periods as cathartic, contributing positively to their mental health and overall well-being.

Additionally, the study suggests that ATEP’s scheduling practices may offer broader benefits to support educators’ longevity in their profession. The self-care and time management strategies that students reported developing align closely with established practices for mitigating burnout among in-service teachers. By fostering habits of protecting time for professional growth and personal well-being, ATEP supports students in their academic pursuits and equips them with skills that could enhance their resilience and sustainability in future teaching careers. Further research could investigate this potential connection, exploring how intentional scheduling during training influences long-term professional outcomes.

In summary, ATEP’s thoughtful scheduling practices demonstrate the value of culturally responsive and student-centered program design. By aligning course schedules and synchronous course offerings with the realities of students’ lives and responsibilities, ATEP has created an environment where Indigenous students can thrive academically while managing caregiving duties. The study underscores the importance of designing programs that consider the holistic needs of students, recognizing that academic success is deeply interconnected with personal well-being and stability. These findings highlight a replicable model for fostering success in similar educational contexts and point to the broader benefits of integrating intentional scheduling practices into programmatic design.

Theme 6: Indigenous Assessment Practices

"...every instructor we've encountered, or I have encountered, is really mindful about us being Indigenous and about our non-indigenous peers, and learning aside and letting us all be teachers in that situations."

Participants frequently highlighted the impact of holistic assessment practices employed by instructors throughout various postsecondary courses. They were particularly aware of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous instructors who were considered "friends of ATEP" and had created learning environments where knowledge was co-created with students, compared to the colonial approach of knowledge being simply deposited and regurgitated. While each ATEP instructor maintains full academic freedom to shape their teaching methods according to their own philosophy, ATEP offers ceremonies to welcome students and staff along with orientation sessions to foster a unified approach to learning and assessment. While participants described assessment styles in different ways, a common theme emerged: students felt actively engaged in their learning. One participant summed this up by saying, "This really feels natural to me, like they're allowing me to spend real time on things that matter."



The results indicate that participants began to align their pedagogical practices and assessment development with their own learning and personal perspectives. It is important to note that participants explored various aspects of assessment, including reflection. As one student shared, "It's about finding your way of teaching, your way of caring for your students, and that's what I've learned from this program." Many students also appreciated the opportunity to examine and question their own learning and positions, while simultaneously reaffirming the lived experiences and knowledge that have shaped them.

Anecdotally, we have encountered skepticism both within and outside of educational contexts regarding online learning, particularly concerns about effectively integrating Indigenous teaching practices in an online format. In line with the previous theme, it is important to note that from the start of our online programming, we have prioritized synchronous courses, offering asynchronous options primarily for junior-level courses during Spring or Summer terms to improve accessibility for students. Participants, as well as ATEP students in general, expressed a strong preference for synchronous online learning, emphasizing that "the instructors really do matter" and that synchronous learning allows them to connect with instructors and peers, resembling an in-person class environment. Given that online education and asynchronous courses are often seen as synonymous, we believe that prioritizing synchronous offerings is crucial for fostering meaningful community building and ensuring the success of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in online learning.

Areas of Opportunity

Attending to Technological Needs

Technological knowledge, internet connectivity, and access to proper equipment emerged as persistent barriers for preservice teachers in ATEP, significantly impacting their online learning experience. Many participants reported challenges related to insufficient familiarity with digital tools, which added to their workload and stress as they navigated course requirements. Reliable internet access was another recurring issue, particularly for students in rural, remote, or on-reserve communities where connectivity is often limited or inconsistent. These barriers hindered students' ability to engage fully with course materials and discussions and also created inequities among participants based on their access to technology and infrastructure. Addressing these disparities is essential to ensuring that online programs do not inadvertently exclude or disadvantage students who already face systemic barriers to education.

To craft a successful online program, thoughtful measures must be taken to mitigate these technological challenges. Institutions should provide comprehensive technical support, including onboarding sessions for ongoing training, supports on how to use digital tools, and access to troubleshooting resources. Additionally, programs must work toward ensuring that all students have access to reliable internet and appropriate equipment, such as laptops or tablets, through initiatives like subsidized technology loans or grants. Designing courses with low-bandwidth options and offline accessibility features can also help accommodate students in areas with poor connectivity. One student reflected:

“***I'd agree in the beginning, I struggled, as it was hard because every class was a little different on how they laid it out online. But once you got to actually understand and go a couple weeks and you can understand what the teacher was doing, it became a lot easier. I also had never been on Zoom in a breakout room, so I wasn't sure how the group meetings were going to work. I thought we would just have to do them on our own all the time. So I was really impressed [with the online support].***”

By addressing these practical barriers, online teacher education programs can create a more equitable and supportive learning environment, allowing students to focus on their academic and professional growth without being limited by technological obstacles.

Areas of Opportunity

Supporting Local Connections

Enhancing the localization of curriculum content, perspectives, and partnerships is crucial for improving the effectiveness of online teacher education programs like ATEP. While the accessibility and convenience of online programming are clear strengths, participants noted the challenge of adapting the curriculum to reflect the unique knowledge and identities of various Indigenous communities across Canada. Students expressed that incorporating more localized knowledge, including input from Elders and community organizations, would have enriched their learning experiences. This presents a significant logistical challenge, considering the geographical and cultural diversity of students, but also an opportunity for teacher education programs to collaborate with cultural communities. Creating dedicated cohorts, such as those for Blackfoot or Dene students, and partnering with local knowledge holders and services could offer students a more culturally relevant educational experience.

At present, many connections to local knowledge and resources are driven by the students themselves, as they are often community leaders with established ties to cultural networks. While staff have tapped into these connections to assist other students in specific communities, this reactive approach could be shifted to a more proactive strategy. By identifying and cultivating relationships with key local cultural resources and knowledge keepers ahead of time, teacher education programs could more effectively connect students who may not already have access to these networks. This proactive approach would not only enhance the cultural relevance of the program but also strengthen students' sense of belonging and support, ultimately boosting their academic and professional success.

Areas for Opportunity

Mixing It Up – Broadly Conceptualizing Cohorts

Intentionally mixing cohorts to encourage exposure to diverse peer perspectives emerged as a valuable structural component of ATEP, offering student's meaningful opportunities to connect with individuals outside of their primary groups. Participants who adhered to ATEP's predetermined course progression noted the excitement and benefits of meeting new peers when students from different cohorts were introduced into their classes. These interactions frequently led to the development of long-lasting relationships and enriched the overall learning experience by incorporating diverse viewpoints and lived experiences. While staff and students sometimes expressed concerns that new students might feel unwelcome or disconnected when joining an unfamiliar cohort for specific courses, participants consistently highlighted the positive outcomes of such arrangements. These experiences demonstrated the potential for creating a more dynamic and inclusive program structure through thoughtful cohort mixing.

The findings suggest an opportunity to conceptualize cohorts as flexible rather than fixed units, allowing for strategic cross-pollination between groups. By intentionally expanding the exposure students have to one another, teacher education programs can foster broader engagement and enhance peer learning. Flexibly designed cohorts can help maximize the benefits of online teacher education by ensuring that students build diverse networks of professional and personal support. Structured approaches to mixing, such as periodically rotating students between cohorts or creating shared spaces for inter-cohort collaboration, can ensure that all participants feel welcomed while enriching the exchanging of ideas and experiences. This approach aligns with the broader goals of teacher education programs that aim to prepare educators to thrive in diverse and interconnected learning environments.

Suggested Areas for Further Exploration

Online education provides a valuable pathway to increase access to post-secondary education for Indigenous students, reducing barriers to success and contributing to a higher number of Indigenous certified teachers. Exploring the key factors that make online Indigenized education effective, as well as identifying areas for growth, will be crucial for prioritizing transformative student experiences and improving educational access for future generations. Future research should focus on the role of cultural and local community support in promoting success for Indigenous students in online learning environments. As this study shows, staying connected to their communities allows students to engage in culturally relevant learning, preserve intergenerational knowledge, and maintain strong familial and social networks. Students find new community within ATEP, particularly fostered by their aunties holding numerous staff roles in the program. ATEP's model of employing experienced teachers and higher education administrators to embody a role of an auntie, walking alongside each student to support their multifaceted success, illustrates how impactful crafting dedicated community via value-driven staff engagement can be. Similar to the educators teaching each course, the relationships with each student may be mediated by technology, but is characterized by *sâkhitown* (love) and predicated on recognizing the brilliance in each student, including their unique ancestral wisdoms, along their academic journeys. Further research could explore how these factors contribute to resilience, academic success, and long-term professional outcomes to expand the benefits of this model to new Indigenous communities, and to advance reconciliation through extending this type of education model to non-Indigenous teachers who can contribute to positive systemic shifts in school environments. Additionally, it would be valuable to investigate how programs can better integrate community and cultural engagement into online learning models, ensuring these elements remain central to students' educational experiences. Such research would offer critical insights into enhancing program design and fostering culturally grounded education.

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