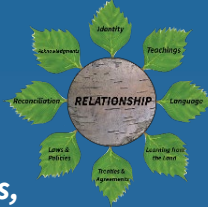


A Virtual Circle: Bridging Traditions – The Influential Role of Indigenous Knowledge Keepers in Provincial Education Systems

Īyethka Knowledge Keepers Philomene Stevens, Ollie Benjamin, Tracey Stevens, and Virgle Stephens with Nadine Dack-Doi



The intent of a CASS Learning Guide is to apply research, deepen understanding and enhance professional practice within the Alberta context. With a focus on optimum learning for all students, a Learning Guide provides an opportunity to grow system leader knowledge, resulting in quality school leadership and quality teaching throughout Alberta.

Summary

Building Effective Relationships

Ensuring First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education for All Students

The [Guide to Relationships and Learning with the Indigenous Peoples of Alberta](#) reflects the knowledge and wisdom of many, including one of the lead developers, **Crystal Clark**, of Nehiwayak, Denesuline, and Métis ancestry and an Indigenous Education Consultant. The [Guide's](#) visual flow of leaves from a birch tree is significant. The birch tree was chosen as the concept for the Guide to remind us of our deeply rooted connection to the natural world.



This virtual circle was built on the insights of the [Guide](#) and related CASS resources including: [A Virtual Circle with Elders](#); [Establishing and Sustaining Respectful Relationships for Student Success](#); and, [Improving Success for Indigenous Students](#).

Each of these resources represents a leaf flowing from the [Guide](#) and the birch tree, reminding us of the importance of building and sustaining respectful, reciprocal relationships. They underscore the need for learning as highlighted in [Optimum Learning For All Students: Implementing Alberta's 2018 Professional Practice Standards](#).

In this webinar, participants were invited to sit in a virtual circle featuring the journey of relationship between **Īyethka, Stoney Nakoda Knowledge Keepers and Canadian Rockies Public Schools (CRPS)**. Knowledge Keepers **Philomene Stevens, Ollie Benjamin, Tracey Stevens, Virgle Stephens**, and CRPS' Indigenous Services Coordinator **Nadine Dack-Doi** highlighted the steps they have been taking to support learning for youth in schools. Practical ideas to engage Knowledge Keepers and tools to support building respectful and reciprocal relationships were shared. Watch the [full recording here](#).

(SLOS/LOS) Whereas: Superintendents, principals and school jurisdiction leaders play a fundamental role in establishing the conditions under which the learning aspirations and the potential of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students will be/are realized.

Beginning in a Good Way

Crystal welcomed everyone and emphasized the importance of coming together in a good way to build and honour relationship. [\(view\)](#)

Nadine Dack-Doi, Indigenous Services Coordinator, CRPS, introduced herself and the Knowledge Keepers. She offered tobacco to each of the Knowledge Keepers on behalf of CASS and CRPS to ask them to share teachings and show respect for their cultural protocol. She asked Virgle if he would open with a prayer. [\(1:16\)](#)

Acknowledgements

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Knowledge Keeper Virgle Stephens opened the circle with a beautiful blessing. **The recording was turned off to honour this sacred time** and resumed after the blessing.

Acknowledgement of Land

Dr. Dianne Roulson, a white settler with Icelandic and French roots and CASS Leadership Consultant, highlighted lessons she has learned from Elders and Knowledge Keepers. These included:

- the importance of showing respect for the contributions and ways of knowing of Indigenous Peoples reflected through stories and songs that have lived on this land for thousands of years;
- a teaching from Ikiinayookaa (Marlene Yellowhorn, Kainai Nation, Principal, CBE) that land acknowledgement is not something you do, rather, it is something you feel – a lesson passed on to Ikiinayookaa from her grandfather; and,
- a teaching from Lori Pritchard (Métis and Ukrainian from Saskatchewan, Education Director, CBE) that identifying a commitment to action must always be connected to land acknowledgement. ([3:56](#))

Invitation to the Circle and Land Connect Moment

Crystal invited participants to imagine themselves on the land and settle into a spot around a fire as they prepared to listen, connect, learn, and reflect. She emphasized the pedagogy of Indigenous learning that brings us together in circle.



She also provided an opportunity for participants to connect to land through their imaginations and hearts. This was done to set the tone for the virtual circle while modelling the need to acknowledge and become aware of our deeply rooted relationships to

one another and the natural world. ([9:07](#))

Spirit and Intent and Navigation of the Guide

Crystal, one of the key developers of the [Guide](#), talked about the birch tree image featured throughout as representing our connection to one another through land, life and breath. She described the [Guide](#) as a starting point; a branch or leaves on a tree that represent a small part of the whole tree within a forest. It was developed in 2019 and updated in 2022 to support system education leaders begin the process of deepening their

understanding. The real work, she said, is connecting and working with Indigenous Peoples and community and building respectful relationships over time. ([14:33](#))

Resources Growing from the Guide

In the spirit of strengthening relationships, Dianne highlighted the three additional resources that flow from the [Guide](#) and represent leaves on the birch tree ([A Virtual Circle with Elders](#); [Improving Success for Indigenous Students](#); and [Establishing and Sustaining Respectful Relationships for Student Success \(ESA Guide\)](#). The latter focuses on Education Service Agreements (ESAs) and is directly tied to the webinar topic; building respectful and reciprocal relationships. ESAs are agreements between First Nations and provincial school authorities. They come into place when students living on reserve attend provincial schools and when students living in the city attend school on reserve. The [ESA Guide](#) offers heartfelt and honest guidance from many leaders, including members from the CASS First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Education Action Committee. ([18:59](#))



Building Respectful Relationships with Îyethka -Stoney Nakoda Knowledge Keepers



Protocols: Building Bridges in a Connected World Nadine began by highlighting the relationship that has been developing between CRPS and the Knowledge Keepers over the past 9 years. She talked about how following cultural protocols has provided the foundation for the development of deep, lasting relationships. Offering tobacco to show respect and request teachings from the Knowledge Keepers is something young people now practice in each of their schools. CRPS also has worked with the Knowledge Keepers to develop a respectful land acknowledgement. Knowledge Keeper Virgle talked about how the land acknowledgement includes teachings from one of their ancestors, Walking Buffalo, George McLean. Nurturing relationships with nature, their ancestors, and throughout the school district has been an essential part of supporting young people and connecting them to their identity. ([22:18](#))

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The Creative Process: From Idea to Concept

Nadine described the process they have gone through together over time to build a respectful relationship. A guiding principle and value in their work has been, “there is no learning without collaboration.” She said the Knowledge Keepers guide their work each step of the way and they have constant, ongoing communication. They began by having tea together 9 years ago and talking about how to remove barriers for students. Over time, they came up with steps they could take to support students and families. Their wrap-around approach has been multifaceted and involved school personnel, the Knowledge Keepers, and families. CRPS took the important step of adding the role of system coordinator for Indigenous Education. They also have established a process for schools to access support from the Knowledge Keepers. At this time, Indigenous and non-Indigenous students have access to rich and diverse cultural teachings (e.g., stewardship of the land, traditional government, traditional herbs and plants, Indigenous sports and games, smudging, beading, storytelling, tanning a buffalo hide). Steadfast support from the Superintendent has been key to the success of their work together. [\(28:46\)](#)



Collaborative Partnerships –Honouring Student Attendance

Knowledge Keeper Tracey talked about growing up with traditional teachings and ways. When she and her brothers accomplished something as children, their mother always made little gifts for them to acknowledge their learning. They looked forward to receiving the gifts and what they could accomplish next. Beginning 9 years ago, they followed her mother’s teachings in their approach to supporting student attendance at one of the schools. They began by making gifts for 4 students who had 80% attendance. It jumped to 30 students the very next month and has climbed steadily since then. They are in their 9th year now and, she said, sometimes they get to bed after midnight because they are so busy making the gifts! The most important thing is that “students feel good in here,” she said, touching her hand to her heart. When they accomplish something, they challenge themselves with something more. [\(33:42\)](#)



Collaborative Partnerships –Teaching Language and Connecting with Students and Families

Knowledge Keeper Philomene described their work to teach the Stoney language in the district. They started many years ago by

teaching the days of the week, then the weeks and the months, and then the seasons. Now they have alphabets and numbers in place in the schools and are working on the 5th volume of a language dictionary. When they visit schools, it is commonplace for them to be greeted with, “Âba wathtech, doken yaû?” (hello, how are you doing?). The students have learned that the Knowledge Keepers are there for them and are excited to be part of the learning. At times, the Knowledge Keepers help with home visits. When they do so, families open their doors and let them in. With invitations and encouragement from the Knowledge Keepers, families are increasingly comfortable showing up at school events and participating in the school community. The students say hi when they see them on the streets in Canmore. Knowledge Keeper Philomene reported that not only do they feel good about these encounters they can see that their work makes a difference. Nadine said the Knowledge Keepers are like treated like celebrities by students on the streets of Canmore. [\(35:35\)](#)



The Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report as a Guidebook

Knowledge Keeper Virgle talked about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) calls to action. At the time of Treaty, he said, their people didn’t speak a word of English and their agreements were never recorded or documented. Now, through the stories of the ancestors, the words spoken by their people in 1877 are documented and will help with building respectful relationships. He encourages students and their families to read the TRC and talk about it; to share their feelings. Use it as a guidebook, he said, so that what happened will never happen again. [\(41:12\)](#)



Empowering Indigenous Youth

Nadine talked about the CRPS student survey, Your Voice Matters. They ask students to comment about, for example, strengths in their schools, areas for growth, barriers they face, supports they need, and celebrations they would like to see in their schools. When staff attend carefully to the results, students are able to see the difference their voices are making. [\(44:11\)](#)



Collaboration for Learning

Through their guidance, the Knowledge Keepers have influenced processes and structures in the district. They provide learning opportunities in schools that range in length from 20 minutes to an hour. Each class visit begins with an offering of

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tobacco from students. Learning is interactive so students can ask questions and build a relationship with the Knowledge Keepers. Learning opportunities are co-created and outcomes are aligned with the curriculum. ([45:54](#))



Change Across the District

Trustees, senior leaders, parent councils, and school leaders have been part of a unifying learning journey with the Knowledge Keepers over time. This has been a key part of their steps toward reconciliation. Knowledge Keeper Philomene talked about a tipi project involving high school students as well as Trustees and staff. The tipi is part of the graduation ceremony. Requests for learning with Knowledge Keepers are steadily increasing, indicating great interest and growing relationships for the benefit of student learning. ([48:58](#))



Walking Together in Kinship

Nadine highlighted 7 areas that have been key in their journey of walking together. These include: respectful relationships; ongoing communication; refinement of structures with schools, Knowledge Keepers, and the district; clear policies (e.g., administrative policy on smudging); clear communication to families from all schools and divisionally; and, consultation with Knowledge Keepers (e.g., graduation ceremonies). Knowledge Keeper Virgle talked about changes they have made to the graduation ceremony to follow their ways and make sure everyone feels welcome. Knowledge Keeper Philomene described the graduation ceremony as a highlight that everyone looks forward to; it shows how we're making a difference and that the school board and teachers believe in and trust us, she said. The increasing number of graduates, family participation, the involvement of leadership from the Stoney Nakoda Nation, and the ways of honouring the graduates all underscore the progress they are making. ([51:38](#))

Closing Words from the Knowledge Keepers

Listen to the honest and heartfelt words from each of the Knowledge Keepers as they offer final words of wisdom and guidance. ([1:01:25](#))

Exploring the Resources

Dianne encouraged participants to explore the various resources highlighted in the webinar including the [Guide](#) and related CASS resources including: [A Virtual Circle with Elders](#); [Establishing and](#)

[Sustaining Respectful Relationships for Student Success](#); and, [Improving Success for Indigenous Students](#). ([1:05:59](#))

Gratitude and Honouring Knowledge

As part of the closing, Dianne and Crystal expressed gratitude to all who were part of the circle. Crystal offered a gift to the presenters in the spirit of reciprocity and to honour their knowledge and time. It was made by **Shieda Meechance** of O'Chiese First Nation and is a beaded leaf on birch bark. Shieda offered protocol to a birch tree and harvested the bark from her back yard. She designed the gift specifically to honour our collective work and to exemplify our relationships with one another and the natural world. The gift was made with love and clearly embodies the symbolism of the birch tree as a reminder of continued relationship to one another and the natural world to support student success. ([1:05:59](#))

Questions for Reflection and Dialogue Within Your Context

1. How are we working to build and sustain respectful relationships with local First Nations, Métis and Inuit?
2. How are we engaging and collaborating with First Nations, Métis and Inuit to optimize learning success for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students? How do we know?
3. What differences are these relationships making for young people and their learning? How do we know?
4. What are our next steps and how will I put one learning from this webinar/learning guide into action?

Resources for Building System Leadership Capacity

- [A Virtual Circle with Elders](#)
- [Establishing and Sustaining Respectful Relationships for Student Success](#)
- [Guide to Relationships and Learning with the Indigenous Peoples of Alberta](#)
- [Improving Success for Indigenous Students](#)
- [Learning How to Co-Design With Elders: On the Nature of Unlearning, Dr. Sharon Friesen](#)
- [Successful Practices in First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education: Collaborative Frameworks Building Relationships Companion Resource, 2012](#)



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- [Indigenous Education | Cultural Protocols, Calgary Board of Education](#)
- [Optimum Learning For All Students: Implementing Alberta's 2018 Professional Practice Standards](#)
- [Walking Parallel Paths, Together, in a Good Way. The Office of Indigenous Engagement and ii' taa'poh'to'p, University of Calgary](#)



Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard

Quality superintendent leadership occurs when the superintendent's ongoing analysis of the context, and the superintendent's decisions about what leadership knowledge and abilities to apply, result in quality school leadership, quality teaching and optimum learning for all students in the school authority.

ALBERTA EDUCATION MINISTERIAL ORDER #003/2020

- 1 Building Effective Relationships
- 2 Modeling Commitment to Professional Learning
- 3 Visionary Leadership
- 4 Leading Learning
- 5 Ensuring First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education for All Students
- 6 School Authority Operations and Resources
- 7 Supporting Effective Governance

Leadership Quality Standard

Quality leadership occurs when the leader's ongoing analysis of the context, and decisions about what leadership knowledge and abilities to apply, result in quality teaching and optimum learning for all school students.

ALBERTA EDUCATION MINISTERIAL ORDER #002/2020

- 1 Fostering Effective Relationships
- 2 Modeling Commitment to Professional Learning
- 3 Embodying Visionary Leadership
- 4 Leading a Learning Community
- 5 Supporting the Application of Foundational Knowledge about First Nations, Métis and Inuit
- 6 Providing Instructional Leadership
- 7 Developing Leadership Capacity
- 8 Managing School Operations and Resources
- 9 Understanding and Responding to the Larger Societal Context

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