

Education for Reconciliation Leadership and Practice: Working Alongside Elders and Supporting Indigenous Student Retention

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ABORIGINAL TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAM



Situating Ourselves: charis auger



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Situating Ourselves: Dr. Zahra Kasamali



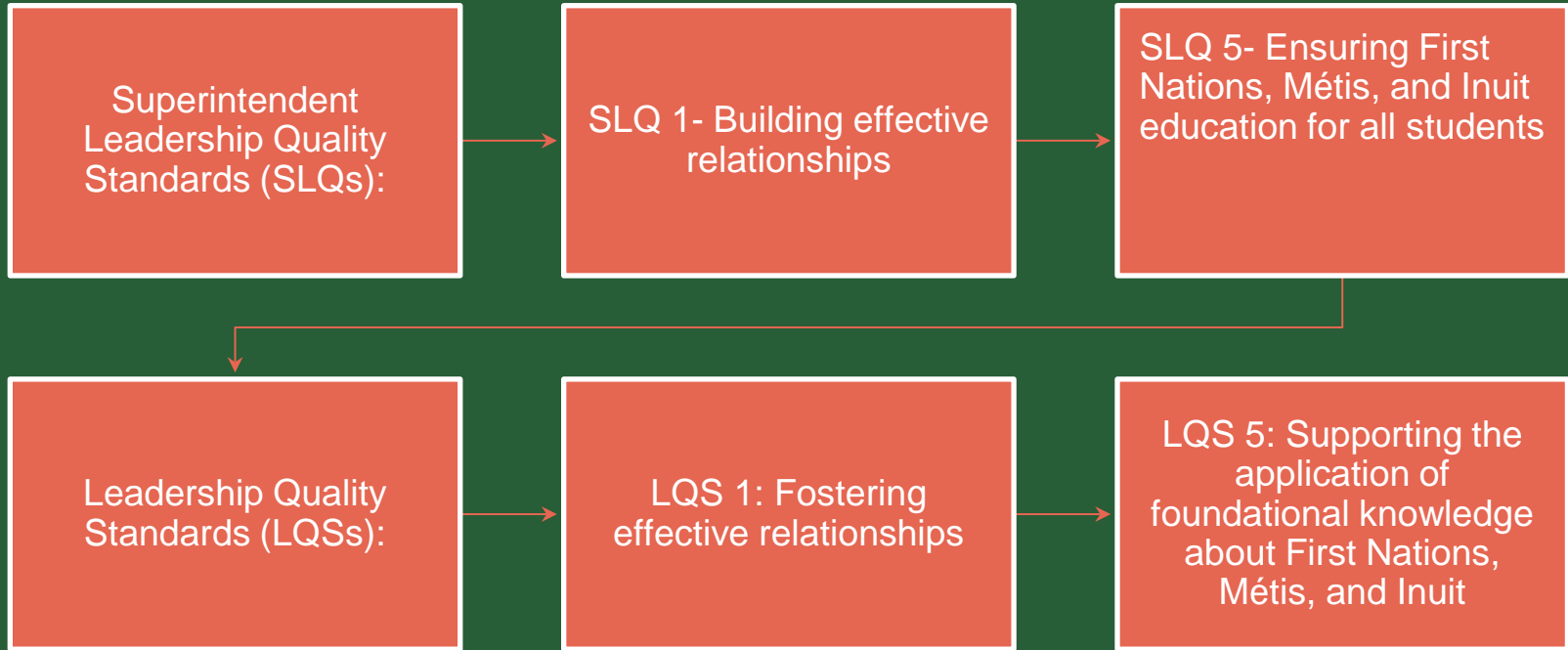
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Session Abstract

The proposed session will articulate key findings from the funded research study “Interweaving Elder Knowledges”, and their significance to the role of education leaders in ethically enhancing Education for Reconciliation, and meaningfully enacting Leadership Quality Standard 5: Supporting the application of foundational knowledge about First Nations, Métis, and Inuit for the benefit of all students. The study explored how Elder wisdoms, and teachings better support ATEP (Aboriginal Teacher Education Program) students’ experiences of belonging, wellness, healing, balance, and retention while completing their BEd studies and how Elders seek to work alongside non-Indigenous communities in institutional spaces.

This research addresses a limited area of study that underscores the necessity to interweave local and more distant Indigenous knowledges, value systems, and practices that are integral to supporting Indigenous cultural revitalization and unlearning colonialism (Coulthard & Simpson, 2016; Wildcat et al., 2014;). Existing literature reveals how guidance from Elders, partaking in land-based education, and enacting Education for Reconciliation on the terms of Indigenous philosophies and worldviews, can support Indigenous students to honour the knowledges that flow from their lands of origin, and seek guidance from traditional knowledges and Elder teachings in daily life (Ilokepa-Guerrero et al., 2011; Stagg-Peterson, 2021; Kasamali, 2022; Latremouille et al., 2016). The study’s research findings can assist education leaders in their continued commitments to ethically work alongside Elders, deepen their understanding of culturally appropriate and safe ways to support Indigenous youth and communities locally, and cultivate approaches to Education for Reconciliation leadership and practice that bring into balance Indigenous and Western ways of knowing and being.

Professional Practice Standard Competencies



What is your Why?

- Why did you show up to this session?
- What does this work mean to you?

ATEP Mission

The Aboriginal Teacher Education Program (ATEP), a Bachelor of Education within the Faculty of Education, was developed in 2002 to increase the representation of Aboriginal teachers and improve school experiences for the growing population of Aboriginal students.

While the program has attracted students from diverse Aboriginal groups and communities, ATEP's foundational approach is based on nehiyaw values, which together describe a way of learning and being together.



ATEP GUIDING VALUES



wâhkôhtowin
kinship

sâkihitowin
mutual love

manâtisiwin ekwa manâhchitowin
respect and respect for each other

mâmahwohkamâtowin
working cooperatively

mîyo wîcehtôwin
getting along together

kiskanowapâhkewin
keen sense of observation

pikiskwestamowewin
speaking on behalf of others

kiskinwasimôwewin
accepting guidance

tâpwewin ekwa kanacisowin
honesty and clean living

kisewâtisiwin
compassion, loving, kindness

nanahihtamowin
obedience, to listen with an open heart

wîcihitowin
sharing

okihtowihewin
generosity

tapateyimisôwin ekwa ekakisteyimisowin
humility



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ATEP Student Demographics

244

students are currently
enrolled in ATEP

ATEP students are
predominantly women,
making up approximately

89%

of current students

81.6%

of students are
Indigenous

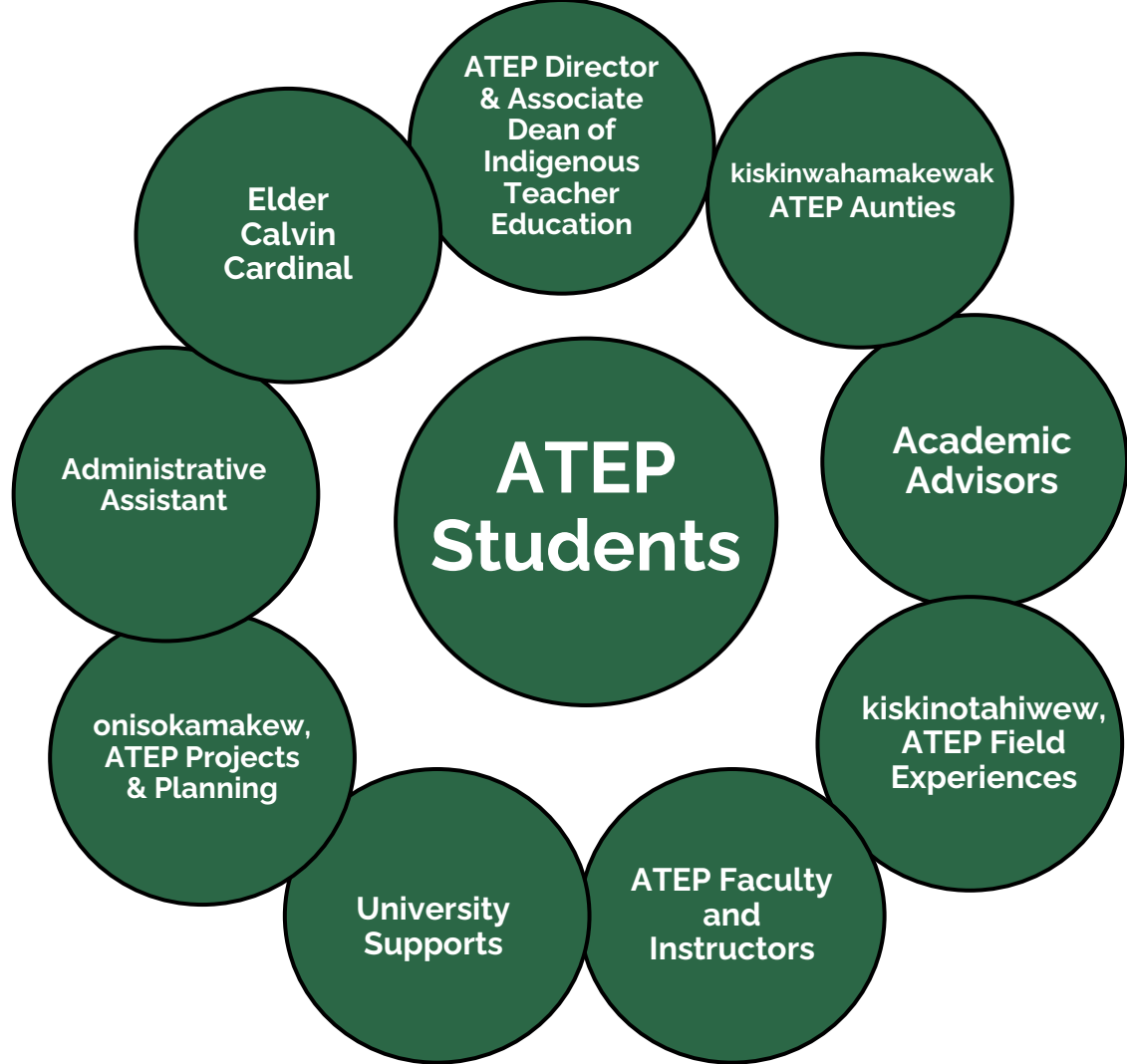
The age range of current
ATEP students is

18 to 58
YEARS OLD



Support Model

ATEP is committed to modelling “the way” for pre-service teachers by creating a culture that honours Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing.



Study Background & Intent in a Relational Context

This research was funded by the Support for the Advancement of Scholarship (SAS) Operating Fund, University of Alberta



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Methods

Google Forms Surveys

Optional, one-on-one
hour long semi-
structured interview(s)

Participants

-14 participants in total reflecting the voices of Elder Calvin Cardinal of Saddle Lake Cree Nation Alberta, ATEP's Resident Elder, 4 ATEP students (online/ in-person cohorts), 9 ATEP faculty members and instructors

In this presentation, excerpts from transcripts showcase perspectives from:

- Elder Calvin Cardinal, of Saddle Lake Cree Nation, Alberta, ATEP's Resident Elder
- Victoria Yellow Wings, member of Peepeekisis Cree Nation, ATEP student (online)
- Shelby Potts, member of Pigeon Lake Four Nations, ATEP student (in-person)
- Veronica (Ronnie) Pomerleau, of Siksika Nation, resides on Treaty 6 in St. Paul, ATEP student (online)
- Karen West, member of Sucker Creek First Nation, amiskwaciy is home, ATEP Instructor
- Kimberly Fraiser-Airhart, Métis woman from amiskwaciy-wâskahikan, ATEP Instructor
- Rafael Pellizer Soares, born and raised in Brazil, guest in amiskwaciy-wâskahikan, ATEP Instructor

Data Analysis & Key Themes

Interviews were immediately transcribed and shared with research participants via email. Data was coded to highlight common and divergent findings.

Key Themes Include:

1. Relationships
2. Slowing Down
3. Safety
4. Wisdom Relationality (Aboriginal Epistemology (Ermine, 1995))
5. Pan Indigenizing
6. Epistemic validation

Relationships



Elder Calvin

I'm touching a bit on how things flow in nature. And that's how we have to try and approach things with students: very gently, very kindly as we look at all these elements that do their job every day in creation. I try to do my best to role model that way of teaching which is to be careful, to always have that kindness, so that from my heart to the other person's heart, as the old people say, "did you hit them in the heart?" And I always, think about that when I'm sitting in ceremonies. I invite you to know these grandfathers, these grandmothers, to understand them, and to ask them to help me through my own spirit. If I can say the right things, I can teach the appropriate things at the right time, whatever that situation is, whether it's classroom visits, whether it's being a social butterfly on the seventh floor with the students and with the staff. So, there's always that flow of relationships in a kind way. So just being able to spread that and to nurture those relationships where you have absolute trust, right? Nobody's walking on eggshells around here with staff and students, everybody knows that there's people you can trust here. They are not going to turn the blind eye to your needs and that's what I think my role for students is to know that they can rely on me, they can trust me, and that I'm not going to tell them anything that I do not know. I always do my best to provide clear direction. If I don't know the answer, then I'll tell them I don't know if I can help you. There are students that have come to me with some questions that they wanted certain things resolved at the snap of the fingers, and I said, it doesn't happen that way. I'm sorry to tell you, but I don't have those answers for you. And so, just having that honesty is so key to the students you know, and with, having honesty, you're going to earn their respect, and there's nothing better when you can earn people's respect, because that relationship of respect becomes mutual.

Victoria

I think I've seen two sweats so far. And there's a grief and loss [ceremony] with Elder Cal and his wife. And I think those are really important especially where I come from. My brother in law is the one that holds the lodge around here, we have a rain dance, and we sweat throughout the year and everything. But when I have a bad day, that's who I phone, and he's who listens without judgment. And I know that a lot of Elders do that. There's Elders, and then there's old people, and you know a true Elder will come at you with love and understanding, and instead of pointing fingers or talking about you and stuff like that. So I've been very fortunate to have that in my life and have it so close, and I feel like there's lots that we can learn from them. So when I think of that, how much compassion they have because of their lived experiences that they've had throughout their life, it softens them and to know that they're not gonna go and be like, oh, you know why did Vic[toria] do this? [Instead they'd say] she was just having a hard time about it. That's the ultimate safe space for me. It's like sitting with my brother in law, sitting in the lodge and just holding that space, right. It's a completely safe space.

Shelby

I do not have access to Elders or Knowledge Keepers where I am currently living. I live within the city and my family isn't from here so it can be challenging to have such access or know where to go. This is emotional for me because there are times where my spirit just needs connection with an Elder such as a grandmother or grandfather. Without access to an Elder at ATEP I wouldn't really have the opportunity to connect with one as often. What's most important to me in terms of learning from Elders and having access to traditional teachings is by doing so, we are honouring what has always been a foundational piece within our people's practice. It's acknowledging our cultural ways and for those of us who didn't necessarily have this in our upbringing, it's a gift to have it within our adulthood. It's never too late to connect and learn from an Elder, what's important is that it happens and that it can be nurtured. I genuinely and confidently state that having Elders present in our program has helped nurture my identity as a nehiyaw iskwew (cree woman). After each ceremony and teaching with our Elder I leave feeling filled with inspiration and I'm reminded again of who I am. I'm a nehiyaw iskwew (cree woman) and I have a daughter who I aspire to guide and teach using our traditional practices. Therefore I value having opportunities to be guided and taught using our traditional practices.

Ronnie

Yes, I feel like even having Elders as guest speakers during a course reinforces the idea of wholistic learning. As an educator it is my job to ensure the children that walk alongside me are whole, they can come to self actualization because it's a basic need. It's modeled a way to begin to bridge the gap between Western institutionalized learning and wholistic ways of being. School in any capacity should nurture the students' heart and spirit just as much as the mind.

Karen

One of the things that I've noticed in the students when they have sat in ceremony is that they're able to make such a deeper connection to the learning and why they're actually doing this learning as educators, which is so beautiful to watch. I think they take on a deeper sense of responsibility when they're able to go beyond the surface colonial understandings of education, but it's deeply seated in ancestral practices that have been ongoing for a very long time. And it's really beautiful to watch the young ones show up in beautiful spaces, and I know many of them are doing amazing things in their communities as well.

Slowing Down



Elder Calvin

It's really not that difficult to have balance in life, but because of today's society we have stress, we have anxiety, we have depression, and we have mental health issues. People have that stress of going to work everyday, and they shouldn't feel like that because of their jobs. To help these young people become teachers shouldn't be a stressful thing. That's how I see it, as a spiritual advisor, when we can role model to slow down. Not, you know, slow down and not do things. Do things in a slow manner. Think about it. Providing that guidance and that insight to the students is so important: to slow down, to slow our minds down, and take time for each other. And by that, I mean putting our cell phones, our laptops down, and actually having human contact with each other, right? So that's what I mean by slowing down.

Victoria

I definitely think that it can be done. I also think that it's a very great idea, because when you think about all of your land based teachings and everything, it always comes from the old people. They know the meanings, they know the distinguishing factors, they know everything, right? I worked in Southern Alberta, in a rez school, and I had the opportunity to go and teach a group of grades four, five and six students. We went to Waterton and we found rat root. We went and we found bear root. We didn't pick anything, but we showed the kids. There was me and three teachers, and that was it for probably a group of over 100. We took three busses down, and not once did I have nobody out of line. I guess you can say they were all listening intently. And it was beautiful. We picked sage and everything. And my mom, who's been in education since '95-'96 is a firm believer of that as well- bring any kid outside, and you'll have a whole different child.

Shelby

Combining Elder teachings and wisdoms with different ATEP course offerings would help me both personally and professionally. It would nurture my spirit, my entire well-being. It would inspire my teaching practices while nurturing wahkohtowin. I sense that it would inspire me with real-life experiences that validate how to shift the current curriculum to honour Indigenous methodology. The time is now.

Karen

It would be beautiful to spend more time just being outside in the context of class time and to sit in conversations with Elders. That's part of my hopes is to have those spaces more accessible, taking students outside what has been known as traditional education, Western education, but also extending them beyond these opportunities. But how can we envision learning in spaces that are guiding students to see beyond the physical understandings of what has traditionally been taught as science education [for example] but to understand and listen with our whole being in outsourced settings would be really beautiful. The other things that I think are really important as an instructor, teaching alongside these students is such a beautiful opportunity to share in these moments in collective and collaborative ways. So participating in ceremony with students is such a beautiful space that helps me learn. I always share with students that I'm here to help guide and facilitate, but I too, am also a learner. I model that as much as possible that I don't know all the answers, and I really want to give students the space to share their knowledge as well because I believe they have something to share.

Safety



Elder Calvin

Things are going to flow like the rivers. You know, we just have to think about the North Saskatchewan River, how that continues to flow. And that's how I like to look at life. You know, if you have a nice constant flow, just like how the rivers teach us you're never going to see that same flow of water, that same ripple of water. Again, in life you're going to see different flows. Sometimes those flows are going to be a little rough. Sometimes they're just going to be so smooth. That's what life is about, and that's what I want to be able to provide guidance and direction with students, because these young students, they come with a lot of that anxiety. And when we can provide them with the skills and how to deal with themselves, when they go, when they experience that, they far better off.

Ronnie

For me it is learning something that may seem like second nature to many or common knowledge among the community. This is not the case for me because of my dad's adoption. I grew up ashamed of who I was and desperately tried to hide the fact I was Indigenous because I am white in passing and more fair skinned like my mother. When I say we had zero connection to family and culture I mean zero. We found my biological family about 9 years ago and we are slowly making connections. I recently spoke to my Auntie Maria Bigsnake who is the president at Old Sun Community College located in Siksika Nation and she said when I am ready to come to my homelands and learn about my family they are waiting with open arms. I just need to stop the excuses and get there, but there is still a fear.

I hold a lot of guilt for how I used to feel but the more I learn from Elders, traditional teachings like sweat lodge teachings from Elder Cal, and just listening to him speak about his own story, his own life, it's a friendly reminder that we are human, and we have time to heal and walk in a good way in this life and that our past doesn't define us. It's hard to put into words the positive impact on my personal life, health and wellness that having access to Elders and their teachings have had on me.

Karen

I can say that when I come up here to the seventh floor, I can feel the energy in my heart that isn't something I can feel everywhere I go, here on campus and the students, I think, I also can sense that safe place as well, that these settings provide an extension beyond just learning, but learning through deeply seated ancestral practices. When you watch in witnessing, when Elder Cal walks into the room, you can see students' body language shift in such beautiful ways, they seem calmer. And it's an extension of that spirituality, I guess in a sense that shifts the energies within a room that you really can't articulate through words. It's almost like an unknown feeling that you can just sense.

Pan-Indigenizing



Further Insights

Kimberly Fraiser-Airhart, ATEP Instructor:

Not all the students connect to that approach and that way of being right, because Elder Cal has a Cree background. But I remember when I was a student a while ago now having a Métis guest makes a big impact for the Métis students. And so, like, you mentioned something about representation, right? And it's complicated because we don't want to pan-Indigenize our invitations and our approaches.

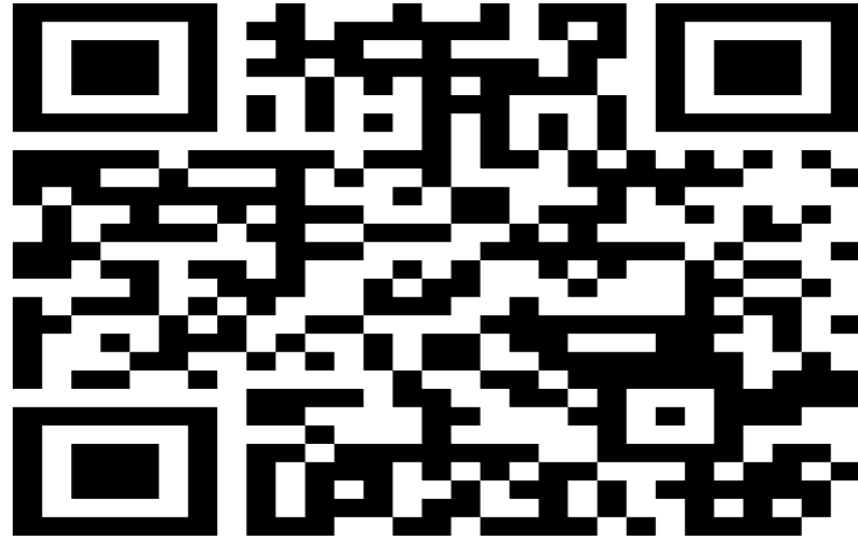
Rafael Pellizer Soares, ATEP Instructor:

Elder Cal is incredible, and he offered many teachings, but many [students] came to me later, telling me, okay, but this doesn't make sense for us to our community. And that's fine, because they were able to say I know what he's saying. I know why he says this, but from our perspective it is a little bit different. So it's important for them to know this too. And of course, they spoke specifically about the Blackfoot community and the Blackfoot Elder. They feel comfortable with him. They know him, so it's important for them to have him as someone who they trust. And they know how he teaches, how he tells stories.

Leadership Implications

- Ethical considerations coming alongside Elders and building relationships.
- Close attention to honouring specific protocols and place-based knowledge systems.
- Responding to concerns of pan-Indigenizing through avoiding universalized/ blue-print models that further assimilate Indigenous ways of knowing and being.
- Paying close attention to the fact that Indigenous worldviews are intimately connected to Spirit. The material and spiritual are intertwined and cannot be bifurcated.

Word Cloud Insights, Table Talk, Q & A



Thank you for attending our session!



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miyo pimâtisiwin (*living a good life*)

Elder Cal Cardinal of Saddle Lake Cree Nation, provides cultural and spiritual supports for ATEP students, staff and the broader Faculty of Education Community.



Ceremony Room