

Introducing the nurture approach to a high-needs, rural Canadian school: a case study

Corinne Syrnyk and Sepidar Yeganeh Farid

Corresponding author: Corinne Syrnyk

corinne.syrnyk@stmu.ca; Orcid ID: 0000-0002-5423-6591

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Abstract

In the UK, the nurture approach (NA) is recognised as a tenable school-based intervention for children with social, emotional and mental health issues (Ofsted, 2011), with over 5,000 schools in the UK engaging this approach (nurtureuk, 2023). In Canada, where every province legislates its own education curriculum, there is no such equivalent currently being applied. Canada also faces resource disparities between urban and rural schools, and a long-standing history of marginalising Indigenous learners. To shed light on how the NA might be applied in a rural school where the majority of learners are Indigenous this case study implemented a bespoke training programme at a small primary school in rural western Canada. On four professional growth days spread over the course of a year, 20 educators were introduced to NA theory and evidence, along with typical application methods, resources and tools (ie, the Boxall Profile®). To capture educator perceptions of the NA, data was collected via online surveys and focus groups. Analysis shows that educators were enthusiastic about what the NA could bring to their professional practice, school and students, especially those who identify as Indigenous. However, having also identified several systemic barriers, educators were less confident in the application of the NA without committed resources and training. Implications about how the NA may offer a complementary framework, especially for Indigenous learners, are discussed.

Introduction

Developed as an early intervention for learners with social, emotional and mental health issues (SEMH) issues (Bennathan & Boxall, 2012), the nurture approach (NA) is grounded in attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969). Emphasising the importance of trusting and caring relationships for children, the NA provides a bridge for children at risk of educational failure or exclusion by offering a structured environment with a balance of learning, affection and discipline (Jones et al., 2025; Scott

& Lee, 2009). Typically, the NA is applied in the 'classic' format where a small group of learners (8-12) are placed with a trained teacher and educational assistant in a classroom within a mainstream school. In this nurture group format children's socio-emotional development and readiness is prioritised over their academics as educators focus on building relationships through daily dialogue and activities. The scope of the NA can extend to include different needs and sorts of provision (MacKay, 2015) including whole-school

application (Ruby, 2018; Syrnyk, 2012). In their definition of a “nurturing school” Lucas (1999) describes how a nurturing ethos may be applied to the whole-school, resulting in a more adaptive and holistic schooling experience. The NA may be most effective when it is adhered to as a whole-school model of intervention and embedded as part of school ethos (Ruby, 2018), using the curriculum in a manner that targets wellbeing and making efforts to involve the wider community. Models of intervention that “wrap-around” the whole school are most effective for promoting social-emotional development and learning (Haight et al., 2023).

How differences in implementation may impact the efficacy of the NA has been questioned (Fraser-Smith & Henry, 2016). Recent research from Canada provides a detailed description of the “implementation fidelity” of two classic nurture groups finding that such interventions, while costly, were representative of the NA in terms of practice and principles (Cloran et al., 2022a). Existing studies on the NA’s overall effectiveness indicate positive impacts that include improvements in emotional wellbeing, social competence, self-regulation and academic performance (Cloran et al., 2022b; Cooper & Whitebread, 2007; Doyle, 2020; Gerrard, 2006; Luke et al., 2014). Research has shown that the NA helps children to form trusting relationships and respond more appropriately to social situations (Boxall, 2002; Sanders, 2007). Studies report improvements to be largely due to the secure attachments formed with educators (Colley, 2017) that seem to be facilitated by the attunement or responsive and attentive engagement of educators (Cloran et al., 2022a; Cubeddu & MacKay, 2017; Schore, 2001). As the foundational aim of the NA is to address the unmet attachment needs of learners, attunement is a pivotal skill. Requiring both empathy and self-awareness on the part of the educator, attunement is based on the principle that relational reciprocity is required for healthy attachments and can be described by specific actions (Trevarthen & Aitken, 1994; Kennedy et al., 2011). In their observational study comparing teachers in nurture groups and mainstream classrooms, Cubeddu and MacKay (2017) found that the nurture teachers demonstrated superior caregiver sensitivity because they used attunement principles significantly more often. Cloran et al. (2022b) found similar results showing attunement to be one of

the core skills and practices of educators applying the NA.

The socioemotional needs of students and rural Canadian schools

In Canada there is a significant gap in evidence-based frameworks designed to support the SEMH needs of students. The limited research available suggests that rural students are at greater risk of experiencing barriers to mental health support (Lee et al., 2009; Lee, 2023) and often lack evidence-based care within these school systems (Blackstock et al., 2018; Waddell et al., 2014). While the importance of addressing SEMH needs is widely recognised, there remains a lack of structured interventions, especially in rural settings where resources are scarce. This gap reflects broader systemic inequalities in access to health services, educational resources and community support networks in rural areas. There is no oversight between provinces or indeed school divisions in terms of the types or efficacy of resources schools employ to the needs of their students with SEMH. A recent Canadian study implementing nurture groups in Montreal likened them to what may be found in large, urban hospital child-psychiatry day programmes (Cloran et al., 2022). Rural schools frequently serve as the primary entry point for addressing students’ mental health needs, yet teachers often feel ill-equipped to meet these demands (Lee et al., 2009; Lee, 2023). Teachers in these settings express a strong desire for more training and support to address the socioemotional needs of students, but there is limited data on how these needs are perceived and managed in rural environments (Sullivan et al., 2018).

While there is growing recognition of the importance of socioemotional development in fostering academic success and overall wellbeing, evidence-based frameworks to support these needs remain scarce, particularly in rural and high-needs communities (Maximova et al., 2023). Rural classrooms face distinct and multifaceted challenges such as limited access to resources, professional isolation and socioeconomic factors (Goodpaster et al., 2012; Reid et al., 2010). Teachers in rural settings often juggle multiple roles, teaching several subjects across different grade levels due to staff shortages (Stagg Peterson et al., 2018). Despite these challenges,

rural communities often demonstrate resilience and a strong sense of community as teachers frequently highlight the supportive nature of rural environments, where close-knit relationships between educators, students and families foster a sense of belonging (Goodpaster et al., 2012).

Schools in rural and high-need areas, particularly those serving Indigenous communities, often lack the necessary resources and capacity to effectively address educational disparities. Indigenous students are more likely to report feelings of alienation and disconnection from their educational experiences, which can further contribute to mental health issues and disengagement. Pressured to conform to mainstream norms, these students often feel disconnected from their education, which suppresses their identities and contributes to lower graduation rates (Harper & Thompson, 2025; Stagg Peterson et al., 2018). Indigenous youth from low-income households often struggle academically due to a lack of critical resources and support from both their homes and communities (Brown & Fraehlich, 2012; Preston et al., 2012). Without sufficient support educators struggle to meet the needs of Indigenous learners, leaving many students at a disadvantage (Malott, 2007; Rocchetta, 2019). This lack of resources exacerbates the achievement gap and hinders efforts to foster environments that promote educational equity (Harper & Thompson, 2025; Malott, 2007). Indigenous students in rural Canada face compounded socioemotional difficulties due to the legacy of residential schools, systemic racism and economic disparities (Harper & Thompson, 2025; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). The educational system's Eurocentric curriculum often excludes Indigenous knowledge, contributing to cultural disconnection and lower academic engagement (Bagshaw et al., 2022; Battiste & Henderson, 2009).

As a result of these compounding obstacles, Indigenous students experience lower graduation rates compared to their non-Indigenous peers, with only 63 per cent graduating, versus 91 per cent of non-Indigenous students (Statistics Canada, 2023). Addressing these disparities requires culturally relevant frameworks that incorporate Indigenous perspectives, languages and holistic learning approaches (Toulouse, 2016). To address these issues, there have been calls for changes in

education programmes to recognise these unique challenges that Indigenous students face (St. Denis, 2007). Indigenous education in Canada is increasingly shifting away from its historical focus on assimilation, pushing instead for inclusion and cultural recognition. Culturally responsive pedagogy that emphasises Indigenous ways of knowing and community involvement has been shown to improve socioemotional outcomes and academic performance (Stagg Peterson et al., 2018).

The case study

While the NA has been extensively studied and implemented in other countries, particularly England and Scotland, there is a notable absence of research exploring its application elsewhere. And despite the growing recognition of the need for evidence-based interventions in rural settings, no studies to date have examined the introduction of the NA in rural Canada. Moreover, there is a lack of research focused on how the NA could align with the needs of Indigenous students, who are disproportionately affected by historical trauma, systemic racism and socioeconomic disparities. The absence of culturally relevant frameworks within Canadian education systems has been a persistent issue and the potential for the NA to provide not only emotional and behavioral support but also a more inclusive and culturally responsive learning environment remains unexplored. The fundamental values of the NA, which emphasise relational safety, emotional wellbeing and community, may align with Canadian Indigenous views of holistic education, which often focus on interconnectedness, relationships and healing. This could present an opportunity to explore how nurture could be tailored to Indigenous contexts, potentially fostering a more inclusive and culturally responsive learning environment. Additionally, while existing literature highlights the positive effects of nurture on student outcomes, such as improved social skills, emotional regulation and academic performance, there is little research examining its impact on educators. By focusing on the whole-school approach, this case study seeks to understand how it may serve students through educators.

Through teacher perceptions and surveys, this exploratory case study aims to provide insights into the main question of: What is the impact of introducing the nurture approach (NA) to a rural and high-needs Canadian school? Sub-questions

to this main question include: 1) How might the NA be received as a whole-school approach? 2) How might the NA impact the wellbeing of educators? 3) What benefits and challenges might the NA present to these educators? By its nature this case study also provides a detailed overview of a bespoke training programme applied and designed to meet the needs of this school. By using a mixed-methods approach this research intends to offer a foundation for future implementation studies and potential policy changes that support the integration of the NA into Canadian educational practices, particularly in underserved and Indigenous communities.

Method

Participants

This case study took place at a small ($n < 125$) kindergarten to grade 5 at Blackfew school (a pseudonym) located in rural western Canada, where the majority of families identify as Indigenous (92 per cent). Participants were a mix of teachers (12) and educational assistants (EAs) (8). All teachers had undergraduate degrees and three had graduate degrees. All EAs had high school diplomas with only two having further college-level training. The majority of educators identified as women (18, with two males) and white (15) or Indigenous (7) with an average age of 42.5 years (age range was 24-58). On average, educators had 12.6 years (from a range of under one to 27 years) of working experience in schools. About half (10) of the educators reported being relatively new to Blackfew school (two years or less) while the average tenure of the group was 4.1 years (from a range of less than one year to 13 years).

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the lead author's institutional Research Ethics Board (St Mary's University) and all Canadian standards of ethical protocol were followed as per the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2022). All educators elected to participate and provided their informed consent. Educators knew that they could leave at any point during the study and that their de-identified responses would be reported in aggregate for the purpose of this study.

Procedure

Training was delivered and data collected over four Professional Growth (PG) days. The first PG day, held in September, involved two 1.5 hour-long sessions that addressed 1) major contributors to healthy child development with an emphasis on attachment theory, styles and evidence, and 2) children with social, emotional mental health issues and the impact on learning and development. The second PG day, held in October, focused on 1) the NA and involved a 1.5 hour-long session that described the theoretical and foundational aspects of the NA, 2) a 1.5 hour-long session exploring what the NA looks like in practice with emphasis on the principles of attunement, with specific examples and 3) a one-hour long Boxall Profile® training session. The third PG session (February) was similar in content to the second in that it 1) 30 minutes were spent reviewing the theoretical and foundational aspects of the NA, 2) one hour again exploring what the NA looked like in practice, reviewing attunement, 3) one hour was dedicated to reviewing the application of the Boxall Profile®, and finally 4) a one-hour-long question and answer period. The fourth and final PG session in May involved an hour-long recap on the NA and Boxall Profile® and a two-hour-long session describing emotional coaching, how it complements the NA and how it can be used. Participants were informed before each PG day that data would be collected before and after the PG days and that their participation in the data collection was voluntary. They provided informed consent at each point of participation.

Materials

Since mixed methods approaches are known to generate deeper understanding when conducting original research (Greene, 2007) a combination of quantitative and qualitative data were collected.

Surveys

On every PG day, participating educators were asked to complete an online survey via Qualtrics© that consisted of an informed consent form, demographic questions, as well as bespoke Likert statement questions (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Bespoke surveys were intended to gauge educator's

perceived degree comprehension for key concepts shared and discussed over PG days. These related to knowledge of early child development, their understanding of the pillars of the nurture approach (NA) and the impact PG day content made on them (see **Tables 1–3**).

Focus groups

Qualitative research is particularly well-suited to examining how individuals make sense of their experiences, environments and relationships. It enables in-depth exploration of meaning, context and complexity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). In an effort to understand the key themes that resonated with participating educators, at the end of all four PG days educators were invited to participate in focus group discussions. In groups of up to 10 (yielding one to two groups per PG day) educators engaged in semi-structured group discussion on a relevant topic, moderated by the researcher who promoted discussion by asking open questions based on the main research question and that touched on content relevant to each of the four PG days (Appendix 1). The researcher encouraged educators to articulate, justify and assert their needs and interests in their school and its students, while also allowing flexibility to explore or clarify responses. Prior to each focus group participants were reminded of the anticipated duration (20 to 60 minutes), assured in person and in writing that their participation was voluntary and confidential to the group. Following the transcription of all focus group data (conducted by a professional service) analysis was conducted by a research assistant familiar with the project to reduce the potential for bias.

As the dataset comprised participants' accounts of both personal and school-wide experiences, thematic analysis provided an appropriate and flexible framework for identifying patterns of meaning and capturing the nuanced, layered realities described by participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method offered practical insights into the educational environment while allowing for the identification of recurring themes across a diverse set of experiences. Thematic analysis also aligned with the case study design, which required a method that allowed for both rich description and cross-participant comparisons. Its flexibility, accessibility and capacity to produce a detailed yet

organised account of a complex dataset made it especially effective for examining individual voices while drawing broader insights relevant to the school as a whole (Braun & Clarke, 2006; King, 2004). Moreover, by using an inductive approach, themes were closely tied to participants' lived experiences rather than predefined categories, ensuring that the findings emerged directly from the data itself, an approach that complements case study research.

Analysis was conducted using direct transcripts from all four focus groups. We followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps as the framework of the analysis: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) writing the report. During analysis, transcripts were read multiple times for familiarisation and initial codes were generated manually from the data without applying a pre-existing theoretical framework. These codes were then organised into potential themes, guided by recurring patterns and their prevalence across the dataset. The research assistant and researcher collaboratively reviewed and refined these themes through discussion, ensuring coherence and consistency. Thematic analysis provided a rigorous yet flexible method for exploring educator perceptions, capturing key insights into the challenges faced by the students and the school, as well as the continuous changes experienced in implementing the NA within a rural, high-needs context.

Training

Calls have been made for school systems to adopt more evidence-based student support models and resources (Hagermoser Sanetti & Collier-Meek, 2018). However, doing so requires that these initiatives are aligned with the ethos of the school and that school administrators and educators are provided with adequate training (Forman et al., 2009). When nurture is implemented as a whole-school approach Warin (2017) identified two critical factors: 1) committed school leadership and 2) comprehensive training and support for all school educators. The principal (headteacher) of Blackfew school was enthusiastic about introducing a framework to the school that complemented schools needs and focused on attachment and child development. Blackfew had

also started undertaking its own Indigenisation process two years earlier by integrating the Circle of Courage © (Brendtro et al., 2013) into its everyday routines and practices. This Indigenous model of positive learning recognises that healthy development requires that children have opportunities for belonging, mastery, independence and generosity. Taken together the researcher and principal worked together to devise a procedure that embraced an introduction to whole-school NA while complementing the ethos of the school.

The result was four professional growth (PG) training days designed by the lead researcher

and principal, delivered by the researcher (a developmental psychologist) and a UK-expat teacher trained and experienced (10 years) in the nurture approach. Sessions were designed to build on each other, starting with: 1) furthering educator knowledge of the typical and atypical psychosocial development of children with a focus on the role of attachment and probabilistic outcomes for at-risk children, 2) introducing educators to the nurture approach and training them in the fundamentals of its principles and application, including the Boxall Profile® (Bennathan, 2018), and 3) providing educators with additional supports to cope with the emotionally taxing aspects of their work.

Results

Surveys

Table 1. Survey data collected from educators (n = 21) at the start of PG day 1

Questions	Mean (SD)	% Responding with "strongly agree"
1. I understand the key factors behind healthy early psychological development.	4 (0.93)	28.57
2. I know a lot about attachment theory.	3.19 (1.18)	14.29
3. I have a strong understanding of the issues and outcomes that can result when children's early psychological development was troubled.	3.95 (0.90)	23.81
4. I am confident in managing learners with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties.	3.76 (0.75)	14.29
5. I am familiar with Maslow's hierarchy of needs.	3.25 (1.51)	28.57
6. I am good at regulating my own emotions.	4.14 (0.64)	23.81
7. It is important that I model adaptive behaviour in the classroom.	4.7 (0.56)	71.43
8. Transitions during the school day are important times for challenging students.	4.48 (0.91)	71.43
9. Student behaviour is a form of communication.	4.86 (0.47)	90.48
10. I am considerate of the language I use when communicating with my students.	4.76 (0.53)	80.95
11. My classroom acts as a safe space for students, especially those with social, emotional or behavioural difficulties.	4.52 (0.96)	71.43
12. Children's learning is based on their developmental status, not their age.	4.76 (0.53)	80.95

Table 2. Survey data collected from educators (n = 21) at the end of PG day 1

Questions	Mean (SD)	% Responding with "Strongly agree"
1. Today's session has improved my understanding of the factors that contribute to social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) issues in students.	4.36 (1.39)	75.25
2. Today's session has demonstrated the importance of good SEMH for student wellbeing and learning.	4.36 (1.39)	75.25
3. I want to continue to learn more about SEMH.	4.71 (1.03)	80.70

Table 3. Survey data collected from educators over PG days 2-4

Questions	PG day 2 (n = 14)		PG day 3 (n = 10)		PG day 4 (n = 20)	
	Mean (SD)	% Responding with "Strongly agree"	Mean (SD)	% Responding with "Strongly agree"	Mean (SD)	% Responding with "Strongly agree"
1. Today's session has improved my understanding of the factors that contribute to social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) issues in students.	4.36 (1.45)	78.57	4.5 (0.53)	50	4.84* (0.37)	80.00
*1: exact wording used on day 4: "These PD sessions have helped me to understand the reasons behind challenging student behaviour."						
2. Today's session has demonstrated the importance of good SEMH for student wellbeing and learning.	4.36 (1.45)	78.57	4.89 (0.33)	80	4.79* (0.42)	75.00
*2: exact wording used on day 4: "My understanding of the factors that contribute to SEMH issues in students has improved over the past year."						
3. I understand what the nurture approach is.	4.50 (1.09)	71.43	4.7 (0.48)	70	4.84 (0.37)	80.00
4. I understand how the nurture approach works.	4.36 (1.08)	57.14	4.5 (0.52)	60	4.68 (0.48)	65.00
5. I understand how to apply some of key techniques of the nurture approach	4.29 (0.83)	42.86	4.7 (0.48)	70	4.68 (0.48)	65.00
6. I understand how to apply the Boxall Profile®.	4.29 (0.91)	50.00	4.4 (0.52)	40	4.11 (0.81)	35.00
7. The Boxall Profile® will be useful for me to better meet the needs of my students.	4.36 (1.15)	64.29	4.7 (0.67)	70	4.11 (0.99)	45.00
8. I am excited to apply the Boxall Profile® to my students.	4.36 (1.15)	64.29	4.5 (0.71)	60	4.16 (0.90)	45.00
9. I am excited to apply the nurture approach in my classroom.	4.57 (1.09)	78.57	4.7 (0.67)	80	4.89 (0.32)	85.00
10. I think the nurture approach would be a good fit for our school.	4.71 (1.07)	92.86	5 (0)	100	5.00 (0.00)	95.00
11. I want to continue to learn more about SEMH.	4.71 (1.07)	92.86	5 (0)	100	4.84 (0.37)	80.00
12. I want to continue to learn more about the nurture approach.	4.71 (1.07)	92.86	5 (0)	100	4.84 (0.37)	80.00

Before the first PG session, educators' survey responses to questions about their degree of knowledge about the content to be covered that day (see **table 1**) indicated they felt fairly confident in classroom management and confident in managing their own emotions. Educators also expressed strong support for the tenets of the NA before being exposed to them. Follow-up questions at the end of PG day one showed that educators were receptive to engaging with the content and desired further knowledge (see **table 2**). Survey results from PG days two to four (see **table 3**) suggest that educators perceived progress in terms of their understanding of SEMH and the NA, along with application of the NA in general. While educators appeared consistently enthusiastic about the NA there was more variability in their understanding and application of the Boxall Profile®. Educators were trained in the Boxall Profile® over PG days two, three and four, however given that there was no one staff member fully versed with this measure on site following training, it is possible their confidence with this standardised technical assessment may have floundered somewhat without consistent scaffolding. Overall, educators strongly believed that the NA would be a good fit for their school and expressed a continued desire to learn more about their students' needs and the NA.

Focus groups

Given the volume of qualitative data gleaned from the four focus groups, results here were collapsed to address the project's sub-questions (see **Figure 1**). Excerpts of participant responses can be found in Appendix 2.

1) How might the nurture approach be received as a whole-school approach?

Advocacy and support

During the group discussions, educators highlighted the importance of advocating for the school. They emphasised that this advocacy should take two forms: 1) addressing the challenges the school faces, and 2) showcasing the positive developments. Educators noted that advocacy initiatives within the community positively transformed the school's image. They stated that through the principal's efforts, the community began seeing the school in a new light.

Routine

Participants observed that consistency and maintaining a routine play a significant role benefiting both students and the school as a whole. They noted that although the pandemic introduced

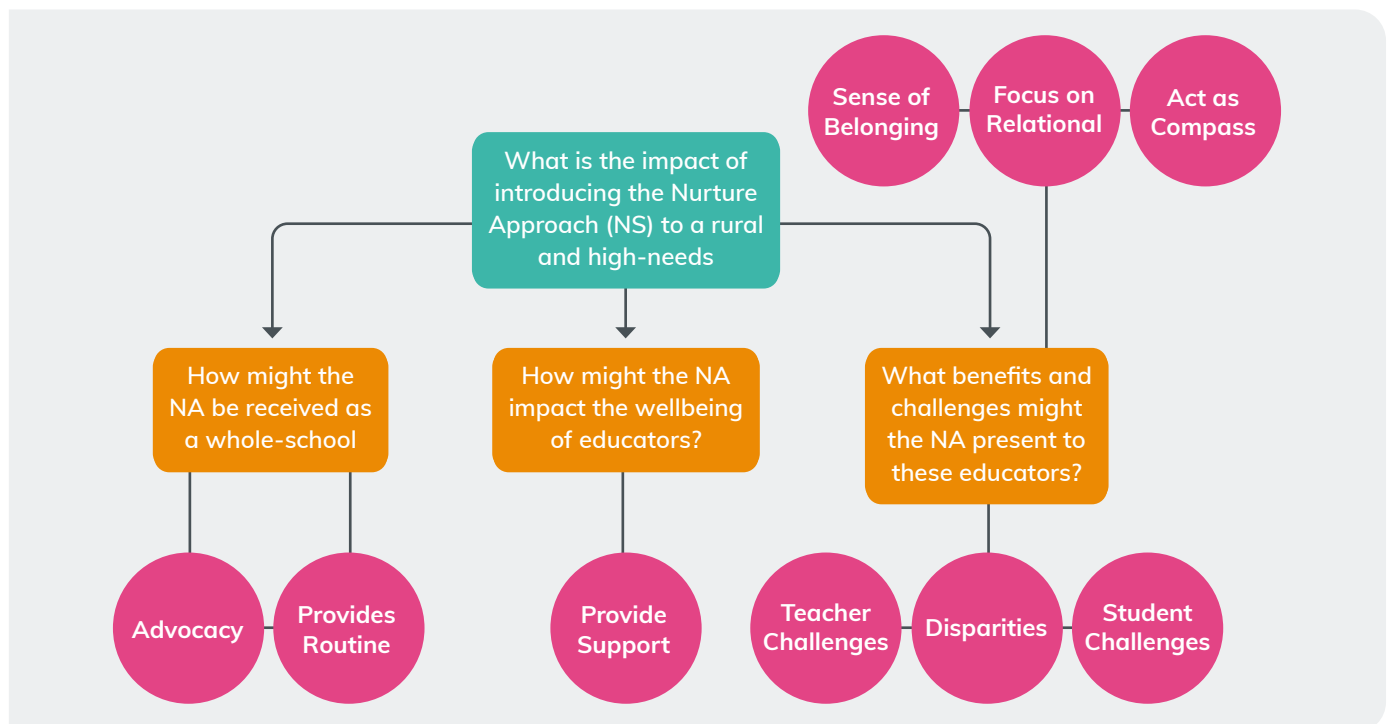


Figure 1. Thematic map from focus group data

many challenges here, there was a broader pattern of disruptions inherent to the school. Many participants declared a need for a “mundane routine.” Another area where participants identified a need for consistency was in having the same teacher over multiple years. Lack of substitute teachers was also discussed as a deterrent to consistency.

2) How might the nurture approach impact the wellbeing of educators?

Teacher support

Educators expressed the need for support for their mental health and wellbeing. One specific idea that emerged was the need for “venues” to connect and communicate with one another. They highlighted the lack of time allocated for collaboration and the importance of creating “safe and open” spaces for teachers to debrief, learn and strategise together. Participants expressed a hope that training such as that received through this research would help them as a team. They also expressed the desire to learn for continued training especially related to development and disorders.

3) What benefits and challenges might the nurture approach present?

Freedom to focus on things other than academics

Educators expressed that the NA validated their belief that it was acceptable to deviate from traditional educational expectations because of the unique needs of their students. They discussed feeling pressured to assess students or maintain academic standards, and how the NA empowered them to prioritise what they considered important (eg building relationships and teaching life skills). Educators talked about the freedom the NA gave them to target individual students’ developmental needs. Participants felt that trying to keep up with the curriculum just meant many of their students would fall behind. The feeling of “not feeling guilty” and having the “freedom” to spend time with students and focus on things that arise as important for each student resonated. Educators saw the NA as a means to help build better connections with students as its practices (shared meals, small groups, emphasis on social-emotional activities) motivated them. Educators shared that

this framework could relieve some of the pressure of conforming to conventional standards and give them the freedom to engage in meaningful activities that foster emotional connections and holistic development.

Sense of belonging and recognition

Educators’ responses showcased the importance they placed on creating an environment where students feel recognised, valued and supported. They expressed that this sense of belonging is crucial for the students’ emotional regulation and overall wellbeing. They also recognised that the NA aligns well with this view, highlighting both community-building and personal growth for the students. Educators found value in integrating nurturing activities throughout the school day as this helped students form friendships and leave the school in a positive, regulated state. The importance of integrating cultural elements into the school environment to foster a sense of belonging was also emphasised. Educators highlighted that in their school, incorporating Indigenous practices was essential and noted that the NA echoed a vital aspect of Indigenous culture: the sense of family. They explained that the NA approach mapped well to the Circle of Courage© model (Brendtro et al., 2013) currently in place.

Educators also highlighted the latent potential within students, emphasising the importance of support in unlocking their abilities and talents. Acknowledging the challenges faced by the school, educators remained optimistic about the impact of the NA in providing necessary support to uplift the students and highlight their capabilities. Educators also discussed the NA becoming a framework that belongs to all students, where they can be celebrated and where positive role modeling could take place.

Guiding focus and uncovering strengths

Educators shared that the NA and the Boxall Profile® were useful in providing actionable insights, creating a clearer focus and direction in their teaching. They highlighted that in their high-demand classrooms the NA offered clarity that helped prioritise actions for students with multiple challenges. They appreciated knowing where to start with each student, making the process less overwhelming. Educators valued the practical

application of the information gathered through the Boxall Profile®. They emphasised that this helped to identify patterns of behaviour and that having this information would guide their practice and planning. The Boxall Profile® was perceived to be very useful in keeping track of individual and classroom behaviours, for personal use in teaching as well as to showcase to others. The Boxall Profile® was also seen to help identify common strengths and challenges individually and within the group, enhancing classroom management and planning. A specific benefit of the Boxall Profile® identified by educators was gaining a vocabulary that would unite the teachers and staff and better communication skills.

Disparities

Educators believed that one of the school's primary challenges stems from a need to transition from an 'equality-based' to an 'equitable-based' model of funding. The feelings of being unheard and the downfalls of the current model of funding was a shared agreement amongst the group. They highlighted significant challenges arising from a lack of understanding about the unique needs of the school, creating further barriers to support, noting that funding for urban schools far outpaced rural ones and that there was disparity between the school's challenges and the available resources. They expressed concerns that this disparity hindered their ability to provide the best possible education to children and emphasised that while advocacy efforts were underway, there was an immediate need for the community to actively support and take action. Additionally, challenges identified within the school included staff shortages and staff fatigue. Educators discussed how the absence of sufficient staffing not only poses difficulties for other staff but also has a negative impact on the students.

Student-specific challenges

Educators agreed that home life was the biggest challenge the students faced and identified intergenerational trauma as a central component impacting the lives of students and that while parents strived to do their best they were often ill-equipped. This was attributed to a "vicious cycle" of limited resources and inadequate support that adversely affects families. Educators discussed how poverty, addiction and inadequate housing

contributed to significant generational trauma in the school population. Further challenges such as student displacement from home were also discussed here as students often experienced "a lot of back and forth" and had to move halfway through the year. The following behaviours in the classroom were identified as manifestations of the challenges students experienced in daily life: defiance, crying, tantrums, aggression. A compounded challenge that was noted included students not acquiring certain skills at home, placing an additional responsibility on the teachers. They felt they had to first focus on basic behaviour and language deficits before they could focus on the academic curriculum. Educators also expressed their concerns regarding absenteeism and the negative impact this has on learning, as well as access to supplementary resources and programmes that are often based on need and attendance. The consequences of absenteeism were seen to be magnified by the fact that students often have to move to another location and enrol in a different school due to their family circumstances. Educators explained that challenges that students in this school face are "multiplicative problems", indicating that the difficulties are deeply interconnected and have a compounding effect.

Teacher challenges

The primary concern shared was that, as educators, they felt unable to effectively cater to the needs of all their students. Educators delved into the emotions of guilt or remorse arising from the perception of "not meeting their [students'] needs" as there were too many things to attend to and a variety of behaviors to address and manage. Concern was expressed for the inability to effectively teach academics due to the high needs of many students. Educators expressed having to play multiple roles beyond being a teacher: "We are a lot of other things before we can actually teach."

A recurring theme that emerged was the prevalence of burnout and feelings of loneliness among the educators. One contributing factor was the lack of opportunities for connection and communication. Given the overwhelming responsibilities they must manage on a daily basis, educators relayed that chances to connect with one another were severely limited. This lack of connection further exacerbated their sense of

isolation and hindered their ability to seek support and camaraderie from their colleagues. The group concurred that participating in this study provided a welcomed opportunity to engage with one another.

Discussion

In addressing the question ‘What is the impact of introducing the nurture approach (NA) to a rural and high-needs Canadian school?’ data from this case study show that Canadian teachers at a small, primarily Indigenous rural school responded enthusiastically to training and implementation of the NA.

Surveys suggested that educators resonated with the tenants of the NA before and after learning about this framework for intervention. Focus groups held with the school’s teachers and support staff shed light on the multifaceted challenges and strengths within the school environment. Key challenges identified included insufficient funding, staff shortages, lack of communication and student-specific difficulties rooted in home life and intergenerational trauma. Despite these obstacles, the school community also recognised several positive aspects, such as the development of compassion and equity among students, mutual support among teachers and the creative, flexible approaches to teaching that accommodate the unique needs of their student population. Furthermore, the importance of routine, advocacy and teacher support emerged as critical areas to meet the diverse needs of its students and staff.

Over the course of the year they spent learning about the NA and the etiology of SEMH in students, educator enthusiasm to learn more about both continued to be high. While it seems that introducing educators to the NA over the course of a series of dedicated professional growth days is possible and desirable, educators were less confident about the application of the NA itself, including the Boxall Profile®. It is clear from survey and focus group data that these educators felt that the NA was a good fit for their school and students, and yet they yearned for more dedicated training to help bolster their own abilities so that they could better support learners. Educators voiced that the NA and Boxall Profile® could provide a structured framework that helps teachers feel more confident and effective in addressing their students’ needs.

By focusing on actionable, measurable outcomes, educators believed the NA would allow them to create a more supportive and directed learning environment. Currently formal training in the NA is only offered in the UK and at considerable expense. However, this study demonstrates that it has the potential to be adapted and adopted to meet the needs of a unique Canadian population. This is strengthened by the previous research from the province of Quebec, where NA was drawn on to inform Kangaroo Care, a school-based intervention for students with SEMH (Lavoie et al., 2017).

A strength of the NA is the fact that it does not, yet, have strict protocols in terms of its application or implementation. That is, the NA has not been reduced to a specific set of steps or techniques. The fact that it retains a malleability allows it to stretch and grow to meet the needs – social, emotional, cultural or otherwise – of different schools and their communities, like that of Blackfey. As a framework the intention of the NA is similar to clinical programmes in that it aims to improve outcomes for children with exceptional socioemotional and behavioural challenges. It has even been likened to paediatric psychiatric programming (see Cloran et al., 2022a). Clinical programmes are difficult to access and often only accessible to the most severe cases and they often are based on a medical model that keeps patients and clients at arms length. However the NA was designed to be delivered by educators in classrooms. This is especially pertinent to the rural school, which this study shows face additional challenges. Educators perceived the NA fostered a sense of belonging and identity which may serve as a protective factor against the negative impacts of systemic barriers. Perhaps it can be leveraged to implement nurturing, community-driven educational frameworks that address socioemotional needs while reinforcing the strengths of rural schools.

The superpower of the NA is that it is centred on what every good educator sets out to create with students: safe and trusting relationships. Through the many hours spent together in the everyday experience that is school, educators have the ability to form meaningful relationships with pupils that allows them to address their attachment needs. Moreover, as this case student demonstrates, educators desire a way to understand and work with challenging pupils and are highly receptive to

what the NA offers.

This is even more important when considering the primarily Indigenous background of Blackfew school. Systemic failure to incorporate Indigenous knowledge, languages and values into the curriculum contributes to the cultural marginalisation of Indigenous students. The predominantly Eurocentric curriculum in Canadian education has limited Indigenous students' engagement and motivation, making it difficult for them to succeed (Dufresne, 2021). Pressured to conform to mainstream norms, Indigenous students often feel disconnected from their education, which suppresses their identities and contributes to lower graduation rates (Harper & Thompson, 2017; Stagg Peterson et al., 2018, Statistics Canada, 2023).

The construct of 'Indigenisation' has multiple applications and interpretations. As a process it generally describes collaborative efforts to engage with and understand Indigenous values, perspectives and knowledge, weaving these into our everyday practices to "transform spaces, places and hearts" (Wilson, 2018). As Canadian educators contemplate the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) Final Report (TRC, 2015) efforts are being made to work towards adopting what Ragoonaden calls "culturally responsive pedagogy" (2017). This aims to decolonise curricula by going beyond linear Eurocentric ways of knowing, to recognise the wealth that diversity of experience brings to education. One of the calls to action that resulted from TRC (2015) is to, "develop culturally appropriate early childhood education programmes" (p. 2). Recent research found that more than half of Canadian provinces have responded to the TRC by enacting specific K-12 policies designed to facilitate decolonisation and incorporate Indigenous content in school

classrooms (Webb & Pringle, 2022). Research highlights the benefits of creating inclusive learning environments that emphasise a holistic approach (Dufresne, 2021; Toulouse 2016). Holistic education, grounded in the spiritual and cultural identities of Indigenous students, integrates hands-on activities, storytelling and real-life experiences. This contrasts with the compartmentalised Eurocentric frameworks that dominate mainstream education systems (Toulouse, 2016). To foster educational success for Indigenous students, schools must be equipped with the necessary tools and resources to implement culturally relevant and inclusive practices. Without such support, the academic potential of Indigenous students remains constrained and the achievement gap persists (Dufresne, 2021; Malott, 2007).

By promoting a culture of empathy and inclusivity, the NA has the potential to transform school environments. This, however, requires a shift in school culture and substantial investment in training, staffing and resource allocation (Colley, 2009, Syrynk, 2012). While this case study is certainly only exploratory in nature, it raises important questions about the potential for the NA to be applied 'in-house', especially within rural and marginalised groups. This is specifically interesting when considering the Boxall Profile® – future research may consider its cultural sensitivity as a tool and how it may consider racial trauma. As schools like Blackfew continue to navigate the complex socioemotional needs of their students, the NA could offer a powerful tool for addressing both short and long-term challenges. This study provides a foundation for future studies and potential practical guidance to support the integration of the NA into Canadian educational practices, particularly in underserved and Indigenous communities.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Focus group questions

Professional growth day 1, September

1. How does the wider community better support this school, its students and teachers?
2. What is teaching in this school like?
3. What are the biggest challenges that students of this school face?
4. How do the early lives of students affect them in the classroom?
5. What do your students need from you as a teacher on a day to day basis?
6. How confident are you in managing difficult behaviour in your classroom?
7. How do you manage the needs of your students'?
8. What questions would you like to have been asked?

Professional growth day 2, October

1. How do you think the NA could benefit your school?
2. What might be the challenges to implementing the NA in your school?
3. What impact is this project having on your whole-school practices?
4. Was there anything we spoke about today that you want to learn more about?

Professional growth day 3, February

1. What impact is the NA having on you?
2. What impact is the NA having on your students, if any?
3. What does applying the NA look like in your day-to-day practice?
4. How do you find using the Boxall Profile®?

Professional growth day 4, May

1. What impact has the NA had on you?
2. What impact has the NA had on the school and students?

3. How might the wider community better support this school, its students and teachers?
4. What is the reality of the NA being an everyday practice in your school?
5. What are the barriers? What needs to happen?
6. What can you do to look after yourself so that you are in sound condition to carry this load for students?
7. What questions would you like to have been asked?

Appendix 2 – Focus group data

To help provide context, herein follows examples of responses from participants who engaged in focus groups. These are organised according to the identified subthemes.

1. How might the nurture approach be received as a whole-school approach?

Advocacy and support

“That’s the tricky balance of trying to help people understand the challenges at the school without burying the school at the same time. You know what I mean?”

[A previous principal was very...] “good at asking for money” [and achieved this through] “connections in the community.”

“[The school] had a different perception in the community. They were promoting lots of the really cool, exciting things going on.”

Routine

“For a lot of students, the school is the only place that they have... a consistent schedule... and they need that. And this is supposed to be their constant... It’s hard for us as adults but, like, kids that don’t have a regular bedtime, don’t brush their teeth, don’t have regular mealtimes... they already have such a whirlwind of a day, it’d be nice if, here, we could just have a steady – just steady, simple routine.”

“[One] thing that’s good about it is, then the student has somebody consistent for three years.”

“So maybe even if, you know, they don’t have that consistency at home with a parent figure or whatever, at least at school, then it’s like the teacher.”

“These are the kids that need us here consistently. They need the consistent EAs and teachers, they need it. We rely on it. When you’re not there, man does it affect them.”

2. How might the nurture approach impact the wellbeing of educators?

Teacher support

“There’s just no time built in the day where teachers can talk to each other, can collaborate.”

“We never talk. We don’t talk.”

“We want to find out from you, and we want you to find out from us, you know how we can work better as a team.”

“[We] were talking about NVCI training yesterday, and how that really is beneficial... that was five years ago... I think it would be beneficial... doing it frequently.”

“Learning about FASD, learning both ADHD, learning about attachment issues, learning about the brain.”

3) What benefits and challenges might the nurture approach present?

Freedom to focus on things other than academics

“Sometimes there was, like, pressure. ... I don’t have a ton of the best evidence for some of these kids come report card time, right, because I spent a lot of time doing this, and we did this, and then we started with that, and then it turned into this, and a little discussion here... but if that’s the approach, and then you’re kind of not scared to, like, take that freedom and that time to invest into that section of teaching, then it’s of benefit to me because sometimes I felt like I had to hide that I took some class time today and talked about this.”

“If a student could be able to regulate and show interest and ask questions, and you’re piquing

their sense of curiosity just a little if those other curriculum pieces go. But those are the important life skills that you want them to take to middle school and high school and being an adult. I wish that was part of our curriculum.”

“Before when it was just, like, no, we have to do this or I’m going to get in trouble, so if you’re not going to come with us, then fine, stay back there, but I have to push forward with this. And then... you see so many kids just kind of. ... Left behind.”

“And stop feeling guilty for not spending every minute of the day academically... It’s emotionally connecting and doing something fun and just building that piece of being silly, and, you know, we’re not learning right now, but who cares.”

[The NA approach helps you to]

“engage in fun activities with them”

“have breakfast with them.”

“slow down” and “do that again.”

Sense of belonging and recognition

“And this could be part of their day built in, and they work on some of these types of things, just like the soft exit is where we try to make some friendships and give them a chance to fulfil all of that and then calm down so that they’re ready to go outside and leave our building happy instead of leaving our building dysregulated.”

“I connected with it [nurture approach] because I’m Metis... Indigenous people always had strong family connections. And it just looked different because their life context was different, and I’m talking about pre-contact and then during contact and then when the country, being Canada, came into play. But because of that interruption of colonisation, all of those behind you, those important pieces... all of those things were what guided the family. ... Those things are the same things that are important to every family, so when we adopted the circle of courage into our school. ... A sense of belonging. We all want to belong. All of those things are important, but it’s especially important to this school because of who our students are. So I like what the nurture approach is, but to me, you could also call it the circle of courage.”

“In my own students too, like, we talk about so much negative. But, like, there’s so much potential in them... so many artists, so many actors, so many... there’s so much wonderful potential in them just waiting to be unlocked.”

“I’ve seen what can happen when our students are given the chance to succeed. ... This is just another way that we can give them the support that they need because they are capable. They have so much to give to this community. ... I’m excited to see where this goes.”

“Celebrating, never mind tolerating, celebrating every member. And you know, we can’t discredit the job we’re doing by role modeling that. That is a big learning for these kids.”

Guiding focus and uncovering strengths

“You know where you are starting from: it makes it less overwhelming. ... I’m just thinking, okay, he’s not safe for himself. He’s not safe for others. He’s not even engaging in any of the lessons. He’s not even respecting boundaries. ... You think, where do I start?... But this makes it more manageable.”

“Yeah, and I think that’s so valuable because it gives you that starting point where even if you were doing this and it was rushed and it was flawed, you still have a starting point.”

“Doing this might help to guide some of those selections that you make on the student profiles, but I think that this gives you more usable information that you can actually take action on.”

“If you do the whole class, and you start seeing some common through lines, then you can plan things and organise things in a certain way.”

“It would guide your classroom I think. If you had big behavior, you had challenging behaviors in our classroom, you know, you could say, overall, a lot of students or most students, many students in this classroom, struggle with this specific area.”

“You could even just, like, make charts and stuff where you’re, like, let’s track how many times we do this. It brings it to the kids’ focus and attention.”

“Success builds success, so you have that starting

point. You're seeing those little achievements building to that goal, and then, like, you start to feel like actually what I'm doing is having an impact, right."

"If you charted it somehow and put it in some kind of programme... it would also help identify the strengths of your classes, too."

"You can step back and generalise, this is still – even though it's very specific, you could still step back and say, you know, our students are, you know, whatever. Their strengths are this, and their challenges are this area, which we know, but sometimes it's good just to have – proof."

"Say the student... I'm looking, and, okay, her area of strength is this, her biggest gap from – you know, if you want to look at it that way for prioritising where she's got the biggest gap to be where she should be."

"You can talk to the whole group."

"It gives us common language."

"I felt like it made me a better teacher, and I felt like – you know? I felt heard and I felt like I could actually do something about it or help... and it helps your mental health too."

"Okay, this is what I can – I can pick these certain things, and that's what I'll work on." From the few that I did, like, one that I was able to prepare, it was interesting that there were, like, big leaps forward in some areas and small steps back and other ones, but I like that part of it and it kind of just reinforces that relationship safety, behaviour component, because I think, internally, I can be thinking, "We've got to get these academic levels higher and higher," but then it reminds that I can't do that. [unclear 00:04:51] and I think I've done a pretty good job of, like, trying [unclear 00:04:53] this, the social emotional component, but I'm always learning more. But, yeah, it definitely shows me that, like, that social emotional component for, like, progressing in different areas."

"I feel more confident with the nurture approach... I knew that I can sit in the morning at the table, sit and make toast and them gather around me and, you know, they come and say, "Can I have

another toast? Can I have Cheez Whiz?"... I had one little boy come in after the weekend and he was breaking down. I can hear in his voice, he goes, "I had something happened to me on the weekend, I felt like no one cared about me," and he started to cry, and I said, "Well, what happened?" and he told me that he was playing with his cousins and they threw a mattress on him and it almost broke his neck, he said. So, I gave him a hug and I said, "I care about you." He goes, like, "Then, it's just you." ... And, at the end of the day, I found a heart on my desk yesterday from that little one that said no one cared about him, and he said, "Ms. [unclear 00:08:34], you are the best."

Divisions

"We do not receive enough support, and that is because of the funding model that's being used."

[We need a] "different model of funding that takes into account the "needs" of the student population."

"While I know our division is trying to support us, I don't think unless you've worked here, you really get what our needs are. I think we're fairly unique compared to other schools."

"How do you get it across that all our needs are different, and have people understand? You know, you need some kind of data to support that, obviously, but that is not factored into the equation. ... We don't have a chance to get our needs across. We're not able to advocate in a way that is received."

"... divisions in the cities are light years ahead."

[cities have] "... much more resources."

"When it comes back down to action, nobody is willing to do that, and that's what our community needs to do. They need to make it fair for everybody and give everybody a fair chance."

"There are a lot of things and events and stuff that every school is responsible for, but a lot of the other elementary schools have double or triple the staff. So, we have to have that completed the same as them, but they have triple the staff."

[There is a lack of]

“... skilled, experienced guidance teachers.”

“... access to substitutes.”

“There’s some of us that really push through, and there’s some that are just not here, and the ones of us that push through. Then we get sick, right?”

“They [students] need the consistent EAs and teachers, they need it. It’s – we rely on it. When you’re not there, man does it affect them.”

Student-specific challenges

“So many of the barriers to kids having success are things that are happening outside of our building, which I don’t have a huge [control over].”

“I can’t change what goes on at home and, no matter how many things we put in place... if they’re still coming to school hungry, if they’re still coming to school traumatised, if they’re still coming to school with, you know, other things that are out of my control, then things are not going to get better.”

“They [Parents] don’t have the capabilities.”

“So many of our [indigenous] families are separated from their extended families here, because they’ve moved from communities to come here, so they’ve lost out on a huge social support system. A lot of, you know, things that would ground them, things that would help them, they’re missing here, so they’re at a disadvantage here. And, of course, they’re struggling. You know, everything is harder here.”

“They’re scared. They’re crying because they’re scared. They don’t know. They just feel like – they just don’t feel like they’re safe yet.”

[Students are]

“not getting their needs met”

“hungry or tired”

[Struggle with] “... expressing that need.”

“If they’re not being modelled things, if things are not being modelled for them at home.”

“They don’t know how to sit and talk to adults

when they’re eating at the table, or those little things. I think that is a big factor. Yeah, it’s not modelled. They’re not having those conversations before they come to school.”

“We have students coming in who don’t speak yet in kindergarten. I think about 95% of the kindergartens this year have some kind of speech issue. And then, it just grows. It just rolls on through.”

“There’s kids that we have on our class list, we haven’t seen them.”

“Every year, there’s kids that missed, like, months of school.”

“With Reading Recovery, it goes with absentees... if a kid is absent a few times, you’re gone off the list, new kid comes on. And so that other person’s off the list”.

“Because sometimes it’s that there’s work somewhere else, or somebody’s sick in the family so they went somewhere, or there’s a funeral somewhere so they’re gone for a couple of weeks. They may end up moving to the place that they went, or maybe they’ll come back in a month or so. ... Because there is a lot of back and forth, too, where kids are here, then they’ve moved somewhere for half a year... and then they come back.”

“Because it’s not additive. ... It’s not like oh, they have three problems, so that equals three. It’s like, no, they have this problem, times this problem, times this problem, and it comes out to 27.”

Teacher challenges

“There’s some behavior that takes me away from, you know, providing for the whole class, so that’s a big challenge. Yeah, trying to, you know, deal, you know, with certain students, and then not having that time for the other students.”

“It’s difficult because I feel like I’m going to cry, not because I can’t handle it, but because I feel like I’m not meeting their needs, you know, the kids?”

“My biggest struggle, my biggest challenge, is not feeling guilty for the kids who are regulated, who

are there to learn, who could do this all day long, and they're getting denied opportunity, in my eyes."

"As a teacher, we want – we're trying to actually teach, but before we do, we have to do... everything else."

"We have to caregive."

"I feel like a parent."

"It's really important and it's a benefit that we have the kids in our room for two, three years sometimes because we do get to know them."

"Some of the ones, if they had a new teacher every year, I can't imagine how rough [it is] to reestablish those connections and that trust. Every year, they wouldn't really be starting much learning until like December."

"I'm fun. I'm loving. Like, kids always loved me. They always came to me. You know, they trusted me... but here, it's – they're not. Maybe because

I'm new. Who knows?... I just feel like I'm having a hard time, you know, making that connection, and having them trust me and come to me. ... I find that so difficult – not making that connection."

"I actually am loving this right now. I feel like we don't do this enough. I'm going to cry. I feel like we don't have a chance to express this. This week, I had a student disclose – and I had told our admin, and then I went back to work. And there's nothing there – like I'm still dealing with that. Can't sleep. And this student has been looked after, but look at me, and I've been a mess all week. And there's nothing like – okay, so I just found out a bunch of terrible things about one of my kids, students, and nobody's checked in with me. Nobody. I haven't told anybody because I feel like I shouldn't, and there's nothing. I am hurting. I don't even know how that student is right now."

"I don't think people are letting that out... I haven't felt like I've been able to."

