



# UNCLE **TEACHINGS** AND AUNTIE **LAUGHTER**

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WITH PHOTOGRAPHY BY **DAVID STOBBE**  
AND **DALLIN SCHMIDT**





**EVERY MORNING,** Raylene Cardinal displays a different *nêhiyawêwin* word on the board in her classroom for her students to learn. Today, the word is *nîpin* — summer. It’s almost the end of the school year, and the children are preparing to celebrate National Indigenous Peoples Day with a cultural event at the school.

“I teach them how to say it [and] what the word means. It’s a new word every single day, just to build that awareness of the Cree language and who they are,” explains Cardinal.

Cardinal teaches a Grade 1 and 2 split class at the elementary school at Kikino Métis Settlement in Alberta, where she’s from. As a Métis teacher, she wants to give her students a sense of belonging and pride. She has brought in moose meat and bannock (which were promptly devoured) and regularly takes the children out on the land. She brings in plants such as muskeg (Labrador) tea, sage and wild strawberry and explains their uses. She weaves Indigenous knowledge throughout the curriculum — eager

to help her students feel connected to their Métis and Cree culture. Cardinal also leads a Cree choir at the school. At Christmastime, they learned to sing classic carols, Jingle Bells and Silent Night, in *nêhiyawêwin*.

Cardinal recalls that when she was going through the K-12 system in nearby Lac La Biche, she never saw Indigenous representation in the classroom, something that made it difficult for her to feel equipped to become a teacher herself. She worked as an educational assistant for a full decade before being recruited into the Aboriginal Teacher Education Program at the University of Alberta. The program describes itself as “the canoe beside the big ship” of the faculty of education; students earn a bachelor of education, but in a way that centres Indigenous worldviews. Cardinal graduated in 2014 determined to set a positive example for children in her community.




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Raylene Cardinal weaves Indigenous knowledge into the curriculum for her Grade 1 and 2 students in Kikino Métis Settlement, Alta.



“I find that if children know their educators know about their culture and their language, they’re more successful. You’re this role model standing in front of them,” she says.

Cardinal is part of a growing movement to decolonize Canadian classrooms — something that’s become particularly relevant in the wake of the devastating testimonies shared by residential school survivors during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Among the 94 calls to action included in the commission’s final report, many relate to education and youth and are aimed at both improving learning outcomes for Indigenous students and ensuring

that all students are taught about residential schools, treaties and Indigenous Peoples’ historical and contemporary contributions to Canada.

Demand for Indigenous teachers is at an all-time high as school boards look to address the calls to action. Indigenous teacher education programs like the one at the University of Alberta are key to bridging the gaps, yet amid a national teacher shortage, there are challenges with recruitment and retention. The Rideau Hall Foundation, a national non-profit organization with a broad mandate to “build a better Canada,” has an ambitious plan to support the training and hiring of more Indigenous teachers. Its goal is to dramatically increase the number of First Nations, Inuit and Métis teachers in Canada by 10,000 — a shift experts say would be transformative.

**CHRIS SCRIBE** is a longtime educator in Saskatoon. He was raised on the Prairies by his Nakoda grandmother, whom he lovingly refers to as a “Jedi master” for her mental strength, wisdom and resilience. She held onto her Nakoda culture in spite of her childhood years in residential school and was able to pass it on to Scribe and other family members.

“She wanted to make sure she raised somebody who was proud of who they were,” says Scribe, who is from Carry the Kettle Nakoda Nation in Saskatchewan and Norway House Cree Nation in northern Manitoba. “I was really blessed to be raised that way.”

Now a teacher himself, Scribe sees firsthand the transformational impact that being taught Indigenous knowledge has on First Nations, Inuit and Métis young people — especially those who haven’t had a chance to learn about their culture like he did.

“By standing in front of a classroom and sharing Indigenous ways of knowing, what we’re doing is allowing our students to walk on a path of decolonization. ... Our people are starving for that,” he says. “We’re feeding their souls and reconnecting them holistically to who they are. That’s what an Indigenous teacher, armed with all of that beautiful knowledge, can do for an Indigenous kid.”

For non-Indigenous students, the same knowledge can break down misconceptions they may have about Indigenous Peoples as a result of colonialism and change their ways of thinking about the lands they live on and their history. Unfortunately, Indigenous teachers who enter the public education system “are in a constant battle,” says Scribe.

“We are constantly fighting to make sure that Indigenous knowledge is put on the same level — eye to eye — with non-Indigenous knowledge, to say, ‘look, we can benefit from this; our systems can benefit from this.’”

Scribe says in his experience, one of the reasons why many Indigenous people haven’t flourished in post-secondary institutions is because those



systems usually aren't built for them to succeed unless they assimilate into the colonial norm. Eurocentric ideas of achievement often don't align with the more holistic nature of Indigenous worldviews, something that can result in people needing to leave a part of themselves at the door when entering post-secondary education. Adding to that, people in remote communities usually must relocate, which adds to the culture shock (and financial burden) of attending university.

Scribe graduated in 2005 from the University of Saskatchewan's Indian Teacher Education Program — one of the most successful and long-running programs of its kind. Scribe chalks his success up to the safe environment created for budding Indigenous educators to thrive within. The program hosts cohorts on-reserve so people can learn without leaving their communities. It also encourages its students to learn about and share their cultures.

"It was really one of the spaces where I felt safe and able to be who I was and succeed in a system that isn't always open to Indigenous people," Scribe says. "You know, we need

to create that space and create those changemakers, and teacher education programs that are Indigenous across this country, that's their goal ... to make sure our students go in there with a strong sense of who they are."

Earlier this year, the Rideau Hall Foundation announced its first invest-

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ments under an Indigenous teacher education initiative, with grants totaling some \$13.2 million to be shared with seven post-secondary institutions across Canada. The grants will help to create new Indigenous-led teacher education programs and expand existing ones. The work is guided by a national advisory council made up of experts in the Indigenous education field, including Yvette Arcand, director of the Indian Teacher

Education Program at the University of Saskatchewan, David Perley, former director of the Mi'kmaq-Wolastoqey Centre at the University of New Brunswick, and Roberta Jamieson, founder of Indspire.

Bill Mintram, director of Indigenous and northern relations for the Rideau Hall Foundation, says even though the organization was eager to act, it was important to build trust from a relationship-driven approach within communities and the education sector first.

"We can't just jump into a space, put a whole bunch of money out there and then expect that we've accomplished everything that we're intending to," says Mintram, a graduate of the Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program, a bachelor of education degree delivered by the Gabriel Dumont Institute in partnership with the University of Regina and the University of Saskatchewan. "If you do that, you're not going to get the outcomes you want, because it's not going to be relationship-driven in a way that leads to collective systems change; rather it will end up being transactional and short term."





Chris Scribe at Wanuskewin, Sask., a sacred site and gathering place for Northern Plains Indigenous Peoples for more than 6,400 years. LEFT: Scribe's wahpaha (headdress) features quillwork from his great-grandfather's wahpaha and feathers gifted to him by students in the Indian Teacher Education Program.

The importance of the advisory council, he says, “is that everybody’s coming together as equals. When they come together to talk about Indigenous teacher education, they’re all passionate about the future of their communities and willing to lend their advice and experience and direction on how things could go and how we can tackle different challenges.”

Andrea Brazeau is Inuk from Kangiqsualujjuaq, Nunavik, and was part of the advisory council until this past spring. She works at the Ulluriaq School in her home community. Kangiqsualujjuaq is small, and when Brazeau returned with her teaching degree from McGill University’s department of integrated studies in education in 2021, the community

celebrated her with a fire truck parade. She taught Grade 3 and Grade 4 and has since moved into a support worker role at the school after seeing a need for more social and emotional support for students. As an educator, she tries to pass along as many cultural teachings as she can to the children in her community — taking them out on the land as much as possible and speaking to them in Inuktitut. During culture classes, students will go out to hunt geese, or an Elder will teach them how to gut a seal.

“A lot of the students I worked with had low self-esteem. They were afraid to make mistakes in the classroom,” says Brazeau. “Once you bring those kids out on the land, it’s a completely different version of that person. They become their authentic selves. There’s less anxiety, less stress.”





Andrea Brazeau at the 12th Arctic Inspiration Prize celebration in May. Her community of Kangiqsualujjuaq, Nunavik (OPPOSITE).





Reflecting on her first years working in education, Brazeau says she sometimes feels like she had to sacrifice learning about her culture to obtain a colonial degree. She hopes future generations will have an opportunity to obtain credentials without being required to leave their home communities.

“One of the biggest things is changing our view on what education is, and that starts on a systemic level,” she says. “That system I went through, and succeeded in, is a very colonial system, and a lot of Inuit don’t make it through that system, understandably.”

Scribe agrees. “We can’t expect things to change in education if we keep doing things the same way we have always done,” he says.

In June 2023, the Rideau Hall Foundation hosted its first national summit for Indigenous teacher education in Calgary and included First Nations, Métis and Inuit participants from across Canada. Attendees were asked to envision what a future with 10,000 more Indigenous teachers would look like. Answers included “a Canada with a more holistic worldview” and “auntie laughter and uncle teachings.”

When the foundation was awarding its initial grants, it focused on four themes — language, land, leadership and love — stemming from what was learned at the summit. Mintram says the impact of the initial funding call has gone beyond what anyone initially

expected. The foundation has fielded dozens of calls from institutions that weren’t selected for this round of funding but are still moving ahead with versions of the projects they’ve conceptualized. That’s encouraging, says Mintram, since the goal of increasing the number of Indigenous teachers by 10,000 will be achieved only in collaboration with the edu-

During culture classes, students will go out to **hunt geese**, or an Elder will teach them how to **gut a seal**.

cational sector at large. “If a student has gone through their entire western education never seeing themselves represented in their classroom, the likelihood of them feeling like that’s a career that they could bring value to their community isn’t there,” he says. “Because the precedent hasn’t been set.”

Scribe sees his role as an educator as an ancestral responsibility. His moshum, Murdo Scribe, was a well-known Cree educator who published various works with the Manitoba Ministry of Education and made contributions to the province’s Indigenous

education branch. Before Scribe was offered the opportunity to attend the University of Saskatchewan program, he was adrift in his career, working as a tree planter and on oil rigs. When he began his teacher education, he found his purpose. He made a promise to his moshum in the spirit world that he would do everything he could to carry on his work, ensuring that education is a means “for people to love and understand who we are, for our people to find their identity, for our people to love and understand our culture and ways of living.”

Meanwhile, in Kikino Métis Settlement, the school year is winding down. Raylene Cardinal’s students are excited for their summer break. Report cards are done, and Cardinal is working on her pages for the school yearbook. She asked her students, “What do you want to be when you’re older?”

A few kids in her small class of 14 said they want to become teachers. “It looks fun,” some of them told their teacher. “I want to teach kids,” said one child enthusiastically. Cardinal smiles. “It’s awesome to hear them say that they have these dreams to become educators.” 🌱



This feature was produced in partnership with the Rideau Hall Foundation. To learn more about how Indigenous teacher education programs are creating positive change, visit [cangeo.ca/indigenousteachers](https://cangeo.ca/indigenousteachers)