


# Teaching about Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and 2SLGBTQIA+ People: Implications for Canadian Educators

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## Article abstract

The 2019 National Inquiry on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls called on educators at all levels to raise awareness about the phenomenon of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQIA+ people (MMIWG2S) and its root causes as connected to centuries of colonial violence and ongoing systemic discrimination. This article responds to that call by showcasing the experiences of eight teachers already teaching about MMIWG2S, the recommendations of 11 adolescent Indigenous girl activists, and the guidance provided in the *Their Voices Will Guide Us* teaching and learning guide, published alongside the National Inquiry's final report. We draw upon the combined perspectives to encourage teachers in Canada to address the issue of MMIWG2S with their students, moving past representations of colonial violence as historical to examining how it affects the lives and deaths of far too many Indigenous people in Canada today.



# Teaching about Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ People: Implications for Canadian Educators

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## Abstract

The 2019 National Inquiry on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls called on educators at all levels to raise awareness about the phenomenon of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people (MMIWG2S) and its root causes as connected to centuries of colonial violence and ongoing systemic discrimination. This article responds to that call by showcasing the experiences of eight teachers already teaching about MMIWG2S, the recommendations of 11 adolescent Indigenous girl activists, and the guidance provided in the *Their Voices Will Guide Us* teaching and learning guide, published alongside the National Inquiry's final report. We draw upon the combined perspectives to encourage teachers in Canada to address the issue of MMIWG2S with their students, moving past representations of colonial violence as historical to examining how it affects the lives and deaths of far too many Indigenous people in Canada today.

*Key words:* Canada, colonial violence, decolonizing education, gender-based violence, Indigenous knowledge, MMIWG2S, pedagogy

## Résumé

L'enquête nationale de 2019 sur les femmes et filles autochtones disparues et assassinées (FFADA) avait lancé un appel aux éducateur[-trice]s de tous les niveaux en vue de sensibiliser le public au phénomène des femmes, filles, et personnes 2ELGBTQQIA+ autochtones disparues et assassinées et à ses causes profondes liées à des siècles de violence coloniale et à une discrimination systémique persistante. Cet article répond à cet appel en présentant les expériences de huit personnes qui enseignent déjà sur les FFADA, les recommandations de 11 adolescentes autochtones militantes et les conseils fournis dans le guide d'enseignement et d'apprentissage *Leurs voix nous guideront* publié parallèlement au rapport final de l'enquête nationale. Nous nous appuyons sur ces perspectives combinées pour encourager les enseignant[e]s du Canada à aborder la question des FFADA avec leurs élèves, en allant au-delà des représentations historiques de la violence coloniale afin d'examiner comment celle-ci affecte la vie et la mort de trop d'Autochtones au Canada aujourd'hui.

*Mots clés* : Canada, décoloniser l'éducation, femmes, filles et personnes 2SLGBTQQIA+ autochtones disparues et assassinées, pédagogie, savoir autochtone, violence basée sur le genre, violence coloniale

## Introduction

We call upon all elementary, secondary, and post-secondary institutions and education authorities to educate and provide awareness to the public about missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people, and about the issues and root causes of violence they experience. All curriculum development and programming should be done in partnership with Indigenous Peoples, especially Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people. Such education and awareness must include historical and current truths about the genocide against Indigenous Peoples through state laws, policies, and colonial practices. It should include, but not be limited to, teaching Indigenous history, law, and practices from Indigenous perspectives and the use of *Their Voices Will Guide Us* with children and youth. (National Inquiry on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019, p. 79)

The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls' 2019 report found that Indigenous women and girls are 12 times more likely to go missing or be murdered than other women in Canada. The National Inquiry built on decades of activism from Indigenous women's organizations (Jacobs, 2018; Native Women's Association of Canada [NWAC], 2010b) and declared that the extreme violence experienced by First Nations Métis and Inuit women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people constituted acts of genocide

empowered by colonial structures, evidenced notably by the Indian Act, the Sixties Scoop, residential schools, and breaches of human and Inuit, Métis and First Nations rights, leading directly to the current increased rates of violence, death, and suicide in Indigenous populations. (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019, p. 2)

The report concludes with Calls for Justice, including the Call for Educators quoted above, noting the imperative for all education authorities to educate the public about why this violence is occurring. It calls for this to be done in partnership with Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people, and to draw from the *Their Voices Will Guide Us* student and youth engagement guide (Bearhead, 2020) produced by the National Inquiry. Following the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)'s report on residential schools in Canada, education about residential schools expanded substantially to hold a central position in many provincial curricula (Miles, 2021; Wallace-Casey, 2022). The National Inquiry's report has not garnered the same attention in education. We seek to shift that by magnifying the experiences of Canadian teachers who have taught about MMIWG2S, the recommendations of an Indigenous girls group, and guidance from *Their Voices Will Guide Us* that responds to the voices of teachers and students calling for change.

This article describes the experiences of eight Grade 8–12 teachers who have taught about MMIWG2S [Table 1] and 11 Indigenous adolescent girls ages 11–17 affiliated with the Young Indigenous Women's Utopia (YIWU). Based in Treaty 6 Territory, Traditional Homeland of the Métis People, YIWU is an Indigenous-led community group empowering girls to challenge colonial and gender-based violence by drawing on traditional Indigenous knowledge; its members come from numerous First Nations communities (Wuttunee et al., 2019). Data was collected via a larger study on teaching about gender-based violence (GBV), entitled *Time to Teach About Gender-Based Violence in Canada* (Vanner, 2023). For this article, data specifically addressing teaching about MMIWG2S was re-analyzed by a team of Indigenous and settler scholars, asking: How can teachers enhance the critical consciousness of Canadian young people about MMIWG2S? Findings establish Making Change as a unifying goal. To do this, participants recommended Expanding the Curriculum, Centring Indigenous Voices and Lived Experiences, and Creating a Safe Space for All Voices. Findings presented here combine participants' suggestions with corresponding guidance from *Their Voices Will Guide Us* and other resources by Indigenous-led organizations to ensure that analysis aligns with the National Inquiry's recommendations.

**Table 1**  
*Participant Information*

| Pseudonym  | Province | Ethnicity <sup>1</sup>   | Sex    | Subject                           |
|--|----------|--------------------------|--------|-----------------------------------|
| <b>Interviews that focused on teaching about MMIWG2S</b> |          |                          |        |                                   |
| Lee  | ON       | White                    | Female | English, History, Gender Studies  |
| Marie  | SK       | Métis                    | Female | All subjects (Gr. 8)              |
| Heather  | ON       | White                    | Female | History, Civics, Politics         |
| Marnie   | ON       | Muslim                   | Female | All subjects (Gr. 8)              |
| Sam  | QC       | European & North African | Female | English, History, Drama           |
| <b>Interviews that mentioned teaching about MMIWG2S</b>  |          |                          |        |                                   |
| Kelly  | ON       | White                    | Female | English, History, Social Sciences |
| Erin   | ON       | White                    | Female | Art, English                      |
| Lawrence   | BC       | White                    | Male   | History, Social Sciences, English |

## Context

Violence toward Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people comes from multiple sources, ranging from intimate partners and family members suffering from inter-generational trauma to acquaintances, strangers, and serial killers (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019). It is enabled by long-standing stereotypes of Indigenous women as sexualized and disposable (Riel-Johns, 2016) and by police apathy and aggression (Jacobs, 2018). The National Inquiry classifies this violence as genocide because of its linkages to centuries of colonial policies that targeted Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people, culminating in their dehumanization and dramatically higher exposure to violence (García-Del Moral, 2018). Clark (2016) situates gender as inextricably connected to race, culture, and multiple other frames: “Indigenous communities prior to colonization had multiple categories of gender, holistic understandings and approaches to health, and many had strong matrilineal traditions and complex systems of governance, systems of treaty, and peacemaking processes” (p. 49). Indigenous

<sup>1</sup> Ethnicity and sex as self-identified by the participant.

communities in Canada are incredibly diverse yet face a shared history of colonization (Wuttunee et al., 2019) that has attacked intersectional ways of being, including targeting the roles of women and the sacredness of Two Spirit people (Clark, 2016). Examples include the 1867 *Indian Act*, which privileges patrilineal descent (Harper, 2016), the enforcement of Christian gender ideologies within residential schools (Wuttunee et al., 2019), and the forced sterilization of Indigenous women (Stote, 2012). These genocidal practices targeted Indigenous women because their ability to produce and nurture future generations threatens the colonial project (de Finney, 2015; Lavell-Harvard & Brant, 2016; Smith, 2005). The relative gender equality of many Indigenous communities also threatened European society's patriarchal structure (Harper, 2016); Indigenous women's demonization therefore helped maintain White men's control over White women (Riel-Johns, 2016; Smith, 2003). Recent colonial practices that directly perpetuate MMIWG2S include the RCMP's ineffectiveness in addressing the issue (García-Del Moral, 2018), media coverage depicting missing Indigenous women as less "newsworthy" than other women (Gilchrist, 2010), and legal proceedings that dehumanize victims (Jacobs, 2018).

Clark (2016) calls for violence to be understood within a complex web of social forces, emphasizing the resistance and resilience of Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people so that their stories are not only of victimhood. De Finney (2017) discourages framing Indigenous girls' resilience within individualistic Westernized frameworks, advocating instead for understanding resilience within the rebuilding of traditional Indigenous kinship networks that leverage sovereign Indigenous political and economic responses. Tuck (2009) also rejects "damage-centred research," documenting people's pain, depicting them as disenfranchised, and reinforcing the colonial status quo by focusing on their suffering while ignoring their agency. She calls for "desire-centred research," which centres on "the hope, the visions, the wisdom of lived lives and communities. Desire is involved with the not yet and, at times, the not anymore" (2009, p. 417). While it is still possible to describe violence, poverty, and loss within desire-centred research, it positions members of the community as the ones who should determine and deliver the solutions for the problems they experience. Here, we try to apply desire-centred research by focusing on the desires of Indigenous girls as expressed by the Young Indigenous Women's Utopia participants and the pedagogical recommendations from *Their Voices Will Guide Us* and other Indigenous-created tools for teaching about MMIWG2S (e.g., Moosehide Campaign, 2023; NWAC, 2010a).

## Decolonizing Education

Our analysis is cautiously informed by Battiste's (2013) concept of decolonizing education. We do so while recognizing Tuck and Yang (2012)'s critique of references to decolonization that ignore its full implications in relation to the restoration of Indigenous sovereignty, land, and governance. We sit with this critique as our recommendations speak to school systems that are still actively colonizing. Kempf et al. (2022) describe the complexity of identifying and trying to undo the effects of settler colonialism on education in the context of ongoing colonialism, comparing it to "trying to dry off while you are still in the shower with the water running" (p. xviii). While recognizing this tension, we see decolonizing education as the only appropriate frame to centre perspectives of Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQIA+ people and highlight the colonizing action that is staying silent about MMIWG2S and maintaining the status quo.

Battiste writes, "No educational system is perfect, yet few have been as destructive to human potential as Canada's, with its obsession with paternalism and assimilation and racialized discourses" (2013, p. 65). She describes decolonization of education as the process of naming and challenging the

powerful Eurocentric assumptions of education, its narratives of race and difference in curriculum and pedagogy, its establishing culturalism or cultural racism as a justification for the status quo, and [leveraging] the advocacy for Indigenous knowledge as a legitimate education topic. (p. 107)

Battiste argues that the exclusivity of Eurocentric knowledge has to be completely transformed to incorporate Indigenous knowledge, values, and pedagogies. This involves, in part, teaching about the history, legacy, and continuation of colonial violence. School systems have to disrupt settler innocence narratives by showing Canada as "a settler colonial state where Indigenous peoples continue to face systemic discrimination" (Siemens & Neufeld, 2022, p. 378). The recent proliferation of teaching about residential schools rarely does this. Instead, it mostly adopts a historical perspective that ignores remaining colonial structures (Miles, 2021) and focuses on "the Government" as the agent of cultural genocide, without recognizing the culpability of Canadian citizens in enabling the government to take such devastating actions (Wallace-Casey, 2022). Brant (2022), noting the uptake of Indigenous literature following the TRC, cautions that Indigenous



stories cannot be easily dropped into the curriculum. She writes they must be preceded by a process of unlearning and relearning “the truths of Indigenous-settler relations” (p. 226), accompanied by deep reflection on teacher and student positionality in relation to reconciliation, and followed by ethical responses and tangible actions.

Grande (2008) describes a vision in which “indigenous and nonindigenous scholars encounter one another, working to remember, redefine and reverse the devastation of the original colonialist ‘encounter’” (p. 3). This approach theorizes against the terrain of Western knowledge, and engages teachers, students, schools, and communities in pedagogical choices that contribute to an overarching purpose of social justice and Indigenous sovereignty. Brant (2022) and Zinga and Styres (2019) note the importance of educators’ critical self-reflection on their positionality and implication in the issues they are teaching about before they can support their students to do the same. Colonial events should be studied within a continuum so that students can understand the colonial project’s evolution and pervasiveness (Tupper & Mitchell, 2022). Tuck and Yang’s (2012) critique of settler educators who falsely claim to be decolonizing education classifies this practice as a settler move to innocence, defined as “strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege” (p. 10). They describe this pedagogy as making settlers feel better without acknowledging their complicity in the colonial project; while they do not discourage critical pedagogy addressing settler colonialism, they ask settlers to examine whether doing so allows them to feel less responsible for the colonial state from which they benefit.

## Team

Recognizing this work as relational, our team members identify our positionalities and connections to the research.

**Catherine:** I identify as a White settler woman of British ancestry. I led research on educational experiences with GBV issue(s), including but not limited to MMIWG2S. I am privileged to work with this team of Indigenous and settler scholars to analyze the data specific to teaching about MMIWG2S. I do so from my academic position at the University of Windsor on the Traditional Territory of the Three Fires Confederacy of First Nations, including the Ojibwa, the Odawa, and the Potawatamie people.

**Jill:** I joined this research while studying sociology and working with the University of Windsor's Belonging, Inclusion, Diversity and Equity team. I grew up on the Traditional Territory of the Three Fires Confederacy of First Nations, including the Ojibwa, the Odawa, and the Potawatamie people. My positionality is informed by my intersecting identities as a Métis woman from a working-class family that also has a French settler history. I come to this research somewhat from a place of privilege as a cisgender, able-bodied woman with various social supports. I am a musician, artist, and freelance writer.

**Meegwun:** I am a Pottawatomi/Lenape woman, my clan is Turtle and my nation "Three Fires Confederacy." I am a second-generation Residential School Survivor. I completed my BA in International Relations with a Philosophy minor at the University of Windsor. I come from a long line of resilient people, although they have faced many hardships such as abuse, poverty, and colonialism. I am the second generation to attend post-secondary education and the first in my father's family.

**Kendall:** I joined this project in the final year of my undergraduate degree. I come from a position of significant socio-economic privilege as a White, heterosexual, educated woman who was raised and currently lives on the Traditional Territory of the Three Fires Confederacy of First Nations, including the Ojibwa, the Odawa, and the Potawatamie people.

**Angelina:** I am a nēhiyaw iskwēw, Plains Cree woman from Sweetgrass First Nation in Treaty 6 Territory. I am an associate professor at First Nations University of Canada. My lived experience with domestic violence draws me to this research. As a teacher, I often encounter stories from my students about their experiences with domestic violence. I now know that my life path was intended to help others in their own journeys.

**Claudia:** I identify as a White settler of British ancestry. My background with this project comes from engagement with arts-based methodologies with rural Black youth in South Africa and Indigenous youth in Canada. In 2014, Relebohile Moletsane and I embarked upon a project showing how these methodologies could be central to "girl-led from the ground up policy making." Working with Indigenous girls in contexts of colonial violence surrounding MMIWG2S in Canada and sexual violence in South Africa has educated me about colonialism and the need for methodologies and pedagogies for deep engagement.

## Methodology

Data collection on teaching about GBV began in 2019 with virtual individual teacher interviews using a narrative approach (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016). Participants were recruited through social media, snowball sampling, and targeted recruitment. After background questions, interviews began with, “Tell me about a time when you taught about [GBV] in your class.” Teacher participants selected a GBV issue to focus on. Five spoke mainly to their experiences teaching about MMIWG2S; three selected another issue but mentioned also teaching about MMIWG2S. Participants could review their transcripts, make corrections, and/or do another interview. Catherine partnered with Jennifer Altenberg, Young Indigenous Women’s Utopia’s community leader, to design the in-person two-day student workshop.<sup>2</sup> Following an opening ceremony by Elder Marjorie Beaucage, Indigenous community leaders guided the girls through discussions of GBV terminology. The girls wrote letters and created a stunning art piece with notes to GBV survivors, signed with their handprints, that they gifted to Catherine. Data collection began with carousel papers, where participants moved around responding to prompts including “How have you learned about GBV in/out of school?” and “What do you think your teachers should know when teaching about GBV?” (Vanner et al., 2022). Four participants reviewed the carousel papers with Catherine, creating an audio-recorded focus group. Finally, all YIWU participants created cellphilms—short videos recorded using tablets (MacEntee et al., 2016)—responding to the prompt, “What do you want your teachers to know when teaching about GBV?”

Our team began analysis by reading the data and screening the cellphilms; each member then read aloud quotes that most impacted them. We followed Charmaz’s (2014) protocol involving initial and focused coding, memoing, and moving between data sources. Catherine, Jill, Meegwun, and Kendall analyzed the data, then presented their emergent theory to Angelina and Claudia for feedback. We hope that bringing the recommendations of the YIWU Indigenous girls and *Their Voices Will Guide Us* together with the teaching experiences of mostly settler teachers will enable more settler teachers to respond to the National Inquiry’s Calls for Educators in their classrooms.

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<sup>2</sup> YIWU was invited to collaborate on a workshop after the PI had worked with them on a related research project.

## Results

Making Change was the goal that participants thought should drive education about MMIWG2S, which could only be accomplished by Expanding the Curriculum, Centring Indigenous Identity and Lived Experiences, and Creating a Safe Space for All Voices. The following brings these themes into conversation with the *Their Voices Will Guide Us* student and youth engagement guide written by Charlene Bearhead (2020) and an Education Advisory Circle. The guide helps

educators at all levels to introduce the value of Indigenous women's and girls' lives into the classroom and into the minds and hearts of young people. It will prepare educators to use a decolonizing pedagogy and a trauma-informed approach in their teaching. (p. iii)

It is structured with over-arching advice and specific guidance for different grade levels. After coding, we reviewed the themes next to *Their Voices Will Guide Us* to identify how its recommendations responded to the challenges voiced by the participants.

### Making Change

The teachers interviewed indicated it was important to address difficult elements of Canadian history and society so that students gain a more complete understanding of their country and take an active role in making change. Heather described how her belief in her students' ability to effect change keeps her motivated:

students say to me, "Miss, how do you do this? How do you teach this every day, it's so depressing. How do you stand it?" I say because...if you learn about it now and it upsets you and you're motivated to do something, then you can do it...

Heather identifies a trajectory as first learning about MMIWG2S, being affected by it, becoming motivated, and, finally, taking action. Lee echoed this idea, focusing on developing students' sense of agency to enable them to move through devastation, often guiding students through a social action, such as writing a letter to a politician, writing a rant, creating a blog post, or starting a petition.

Marie, a Michif teacher with mostly Indigenous students, also sought change through pedagogy, but described change more personally, helping students understand the root causes of the trauma many experienced in their communities: “If we don’t talk about it, nothing will change. These young people need to understand why their families are in the situations they are. It’s not their fault. It’s very purposeful colonial structures that have been oppressing them.” The change asked for by YIWU participants was even more personal: they wanted to live without feeling threatened. In the cellphilm “Fear No More,” the girls called on teachers to identify strategies to protect themselves, to teach boys that women are sacred, and to find safe places in their communities. These requests show that they face an omnipresent threat because of their identity, that they identify teachers as capable of instigating change, and that it cannot come fast enough. *Their Voices Will Guide Us* also frames hope and change as driving education about MMIWG2S:

We will be defined in the future by the actions we take – or fail to take – today to eliminate violence against Indigenous women and girls and support them as they reclaim power and place in Canada. *Their Voices Will Guide Us* offers an opportunity to create a safe, respectful learning environment for confronting hard truths and generating new knowledge through dialogue and art to change the future with and through our students. (Bearhead, 2020, p. 1)

The guide recommends activities that can be undertaken and positions learning as a potentially transformational act. Similarly, NWAC’s Community Resource Guide underscores the urgency of all Canadians taking action and identifies educators as best placed to reach specific audiences with appropriate messages. They address the concern that the issue may be too sensitive to learn about: “While the issue of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls is a disheartening one, it is not too sombre and scary for students. The fact that our Aboriginal sisters are disappearing and that their families do not have access to justice cannot be ignored” (NWAC, 2010a, p. 46).

## Expanding the Curriculum

YIWU participants identified that MMIWG2S remained largely ignored in schools and that they learned about issues affecting Indigenous communities historically, but not in the present. One participant reflected, “it’s kind of sad [that] we don’t really learn about

anything that happens in [Indigenous communities], all we learn about is...the history of us.” Another reflected that, when difficult subjects were addressed, it felt tokenistic: “We wear orange for residential school day but they don’t give you the real meaning of it.” *Their Voices Will Guide Us* expresses the importance of teaching about *why* MMIWG2S is happening, including identifying systemic causes linked to historical and ongoing colonial violence and discrimination enacted by Canadian governments and the public. Recognition of how socio-economic factors contribute to the vulnerability of Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQIA+ people should explicitly invite analysis of how these conditions were created by colonial attacks on Indigenous societies (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2010). Centuries of genocidal policies and discriminatory practices—some ongoing—created situations in which Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQIA+ people often have no choice but to live in environments that heighten their vulnerability to violence (Lavell-Harvard & Brant, 2016).

Teachers expressed frustration that MMIWG2S was often excluded from curriculum and learning materials. Sam said, “I’m the one who finds my own articles and my own material for these kids so that they have a glimpse of what is going on...that’s not covered in our textbooks.” They also described challenges finding time to teach about this traumatic issue properly, given its sensitivity and students’ lack of prior knowledge. Heather said,

It’s one of those topics that I have found can end up taking a lot more time than I might have initially budgeted for...it’s extremely rare...for any of the students to have ever heard of that issue. I’m really starting from scratch.

*Their Voices Will Guide Us*, NWAC’s *Community Resources Guide*, and the Moosehide Campaign all fill the resource gap. For example, the Moosehide Campaign’s website has ready-made lesson plans, including on “Women and the Land” and “The Highway of Tears.”

MMIWG2S should be situated within a broader historical trajectory. Lee described organizing her Grade 10 History course thematically instead of chronologically:

The approach in that course really used to be the Canadians were heroes in the world...my approach now is...look at the places where our country does not have a good record and [ask] how do we practice reconciliation and how do the mistakes of the past impact and influence the way that our country is today.

It is important to also underscore the ways in which *ongoing* colonial practices lead to heightened vulnerability of Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ peoples. For example, the proportion of Indigenous children placed into child welfare today is larger than during the Sixties Scoop (Sinclair, 2016). *Their Voices Will Guide Us* invites examination of colonization by leading students to think critically and draw their own conclusions. One activity suggested is, “Examine the difference between formal search and rescue efforts depending on whether the woman or girl missing is Indigenous or non-Indigenous. Consider what needs to change around search and rescue policies, efforts, and processes” (Bearhead, 2020, p. 23).

### Centring Indigenous Identity and Lived Experiences

Many participants emphasized the need to address the teacher’s identity and to find ways to bring in Indigenous voices when the teacher is not Indigenous. YIWU participants called for more Indigenous teachers to provide spiritual and intellectual guidance. As a Michif teacher, Marie used her identity to bolster those of her mostly Indigenous students:

A lot of my beliefs align with Indigenous worldview on how we build relationships and part of that is I teach ceremony in my classroom. For the past five years, every day I open [with] a circle and I give the kids an opportunity to learn about what that looks like...I’ve built them up in their identity as Indigenous people and acknowledged that a lot of things in our lives are unjust.

Settler teachers recognized the importance of having Indigenous people “tell the story.” Similarly, *Their Voices Will Guide Us* advises, “Whenever possible, bring authentic voices into your classroom who are part of the local Indigenous communities” (Bearhead, 2020, p. 10). Beyond guest speakers, participants described using videos, documentaries, interviews, and other Indigenous-created materials, such as those on the Moosehide Campaign website. *Their Voices Will Guide Us* provides a comprehensive list of such resources; for example, the documentary series *Taken* (Meeches, 2016–2020) and the novel *The Missing* (Florence, 2016).

Settler teacher participants invited critical reflection on their positionality. Heather asked students to reflect on why there are so few Indigenous teachers and to identify bar-



riers that Indigenous people face in getting into the teaching profession, connecting forms of systemic discrimination to MMIWG2S. YIWU participants found the homogeneity among teachers problematic; one reflected: “Hopefully now we will get some Indigenous teachers...we only have two teachers in our school who aren’t Caucasian.” NWAC’s *Community Resource Guide* advises that teachers consider how the issue of MMIWG2S has affected them and why they connect to it. The Moosehide Campaign’s *Curriculum Guide* (n.d.) further advises that teachers present themselves as learners alongside their students.

Recognizing their limitations, settler teachers identified the importance of connecting Indigenous students to culturally appropriate support systems. Lee, who teaches Grade 11 Gender Studies online, described connecting Indigenous students to a guidance counsellor, learning support teacher, or a representative of a local Indigenous community who the student feels connected to. The Moosehide Campaign *Curriculum Guide* (n.d.) recommends connecting to health outreach workers from local Indigenous service delivery organizations. The teacher’s responsibility for making Indigenous supports accessible to students is emphasized in *Their Voices Will Guide Us*: “speak with health supports such as school counsellors, Resolution Health Support Workers, mental health services staff, or other support staff and services that you have access to through your school, making them aware of the learning that will be happening” (Bearhead, 2020, p. 10). When asked about her perspective on settler teachers teaching about MMIWG2S, Marie (the study’s only Indigenous teacher participant), stated,

[Someone] who is engaging in the process and doing things in a proper way and having the courage to ask kind of those hard questions, that is absolutely needed. It doesn’t mean you become an expert or all-knowing or that you’re not going to continue to engage with Indigenous women or Indigenous elders or Indigenous people who have these stories. But I think if you can hear that with humility, then [you make possible] Indigenization.

Her reflections indicate a pathway for settler teachers that relies on combining critical self-reflection with genuine desire to learn from Indigenous people.

## Creating a Safe Space for All Voices

All participants were conscious that the subject could be (re)traumatizing for students and suggested ways classrooms could be safer. *Their Voices Will Guide Us* defines a trauma-



informed approach as “supporting healing in a way that aims to do no further harm and to ensure that families and survivors are not re-traumatized” (Bearhead, 2020, p. 15). Lee recounted how an Indigenous student in her Grade 11 Gender Studies course told her that learning about MMIWG2S made her feel disempowered and victimized. Consequently, Lee now emphasizes the power and influence of Indigenous women’s advocacy alongside the devastating statistics that characterize the ongoing situation of MMIWG2S in Canada. *Their Voices Will Guide Us* encourages extensive recognition of Indigenous empowerment, with prompts including: “Explore the concepts of resistance, resilience, and resurgence of cultural roles, values, teachings, and practices, including Indigenous laws, governance, and self-determining practices,” (Bearhead, 2020, p. 27) and “What does the empowerment of Indigenous women and girls look like? Explore examples” (Bearhead, 2020, p. 27). While teachers recognized risks of (re)traumatization, some were conscious that many students have become *desensitized* to violence and may not grasp the gravity of the situation. Marnie explained that she made empathy a cross-curricular theme for her whole year, so when she approached MMIWG2S she did so by connecting back to the empathy theme that her Grade 8 students were by then very familiar with.

YIWU and teacher participants pointed to the value of student voice to enable students to drive the learning process and indicate what they were comfortable with. Sam gave her students the option to engage in discussion or write a reflection: “Some people can’t fully participate or don’t feel comfortable in discussion groups.... There will always be an opportunity for a written reflection piece that would stay private.” Teachers mostly abandoned assessments that focus on right answers for this complex subject matter. Heather said, “It ends up being much more discussion based...I don’t recall ever giving any test or assignments on it. It’s more like saying, watch this little bit and then we’re going to talk about it.” Some teachers do connect assignments to the topic, but they usually have an element of student choice; for example, designing and implementing an advocacy initiative or including MMIWG2S among topics they may explore in a research essay or heritage fair project. The activities recommended within *Their Voices Will Guide Us* emphasize student learning, critical thinking, and creative expression, many of which use art-based approaches and/or community connections. Examples for Grades 9–12 include:

Host an evening or event at which students share their work, educating and engaging their families and communities in creating positive change....

Presentations to local police, justice, corrections, health care, family services, and other local service providers who might benefit from hearing the genuine voices of children of all cultures.... Have each student “rewrite” a news article about a missing or murdered Indigenous woman or girls from a culturally safe viewpoint. (Bearhead, 2020, p. 31)

These activities’ orientation is on individual and community learning and reflection, rather than assessment and achievement with quantifiable grades.

### **Stereotypes on Indigenous Students**

YIWU participants’ cellfilms showed that Indigenous students continue to face racist and colonial violence, discrimination, and exclusion at school. Two of the five cellfilms responding to the prompt “What do you want your teachers to know when teaching about GBV?” focused on discrimination Indigenous students face at school. In “Stereotypes on Indigenous Students,” a student read the sign, “Teachers should not expect us to fail, they need to have higher expectations on us students.” Another, entitled “Class Excludes Indigenous Students,” shows two Indigenous students ignored by their teacher and told to drop the class. At the end, a student reads, “Based on true events.” Effective teaching about MMIWG2S is impossible when racism and colonialism is reproduced by teachers in school. YIWU participants call on teachers to examine their biases and communication with Indigenous students, particularly before attempting to address sensitive and potentially (re)traumatizing subjects. *Their Voices Will Guide Us* states that, while all perspectives and voices are valued, “abuse, oppression, sexism, and racism have no place in our classrooms” (Bearhead, 2020, p. 10). Recognizing that racism and sexism can manifest in subconscious bias, the guide advises “adopting a shared set of principles and guidelines at the beginning of the year that may be revisited during important and personal discussions” (Bearhead, 2020, p. 10).

### **Discussion**

The literature about decolonizing education positions changing curriculum and pedagogy as essential for social progress (e.g., Battiste, 2013; Donald, 2009). The status quo results in Indigenous women and girls being treated as ““ungrievable bodies’...bodies without

hope and without capacity, victim bodies, disenfranchised bodies. Such conceptualizations place the burden for healing on Indigenous girls while facilitating a state agenda of economic and political control” (de Finney, 2014, p. 10). Clark (2016) recommends a process of “witnessing,” in which those who receive an Indigenous girl’s story of violence engage “in an intimate act of decolonizing” (p. 57) that recognizes a resilient truth-teller, validates her story, and reflects upon the witness’s role in supporting and entering into relationship with the truth-teller. The victimization of Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people must be understood as caused by historical and ongoing colonialism, while their resilience must be framed within “a broader social-political context that accounts for transgenerational kinship networks, in relationship with ancestors, lands, and all our relations” (de Finney, 2017, p. 19). Learning about MMIWG2S is an act of witnessing to be accompanied by reflection on the roles of the teacher and the student in relation to the violence and the responsibilities that accompany this knowledge.

Teaching about MMIWG2S in mainstream curricula redistributes the onus for healing and reparation and positions teachers as responsible for change. Our results indicate that “making change” has different meanings for settler teachers of primarily settler students and for Indigenous teachers of primarily Indigenous students. The former reflects the conviction that all Canadians are responsible for addressing systemic violence affecting Indigenous peoples (Laboucan-Massimo & Big Canoe, 2015; National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019), and that teachers are responsible for encouraging students to undertake this commitment. For the latter, Marie indicates it is about supporting Indigenous students to understand the colonial context that has led to the struggles faced in many Indigenous communities. YIWU participants call for teaching that helps them feel safe by showing them how to protect themselves and teaching boys to value women and girls, echoing Lavell-Harvard and Brant (2016)’s observations that Indigenous girls need to be educated about the “very real dangers that exist” (p. 6), while being supported to achieve their goals. They further write that Indigenous boys need education that teaches them “to honour and respect girls and women, and to walk with them as we collectively advocate for the elimination of racialized and sexualized violence” (p. 6).

Our findings speak most directly to settler teachers of settler students out of concern that the majority of Canadians remain ignorant of the ongoing travesty of violence affecting Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people (Jacobs, 2018). They respond to Battiste’s (2013) call for integrating Indigenous knowledge firmly into

the mainstream curricula, displacing the centrality of Eurocentric knowledge, and teaching about the legacy of colonial violence. Recognizing critiques of education that teaches about historical traumas but ignores ongoing systemic discrimination (Miles, 2021; Siemens & Neufeld, 2022), teaching about MMIWG2S must position it as part of the continuum and continuation of the colonial project (Tupper & Mitchell, 2022). Doing so requires connecting students unthreatened by colonial violence and those most threatened by violence. Connecting these groups subverts the implicit message students often receive that Indigenous peoples and settlers live in separate realities and the suggestion that Indigenous sovereignty, governance, and ways of knowing cannot be understood by settler Canadians and are therefore irrelevant to them (Donald, 2009). Positioning students and teachers as witnesses of MMIWG2S means assuming “a role that’s not to take up the voice or story of that which we have witnessed, nor to change the story, but to ensure the truths of the acts can be comprehended, honored and validated” (Clark, 2016, p. 56). The act of teaching about MMIWG2S is a starting point to understanding how teachers and students can honour and validate these lost lives and treat them as if they truly mattered.

Teachers demonstrate the entry point into these conversations is critical reflection on their personal identity and responsibility for the actions of their government (Regan, 2010) before prompting students to reflect on their relationship to the issue. “It cannot be assumed that students will connect the process of historical thinking with their own identities and responsibilities as settler Canadians” (Miles, 2019, p. 489). Regan (2010) asserts that, to understand why colonial mindsets persist, we must examine how “colonial violence is woven into the fabric of Canadian history in an unbroken thread from past to present” (p. 6), and restore dominant-culture narratives to incorporate Indigenous counter-narratives. Strategies for reconciliation must build upon the solutions proposed by Indigenous people. The teachers in our study describe pedagogy as resistance to the colonial status quo by shifting conventional discourse about Canada that focuses on cultural awareness solutions (Gebhard, 2017) and that separates historical (or contemporary) wrongs as distinct from foundational understandings of Canada as a nation (Miles, 2021). In our view, they embody Grande’s description of critical pedagogy:

The imperative before us as citizens is to engage a process of unthinking our colonial roots and rethinking democracy. For teachers and students, this means that we must be willing to act as agents of transgression, posing critical questions and engaging dangerous discourse. (2008, p. 22)

Settler teachers must attend to the ways contemporary settler communities are complicit in perpetuating MMIWG2S, otherwise they constitute a settler move to innocence (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Yet, as Brant (2022) observes, the process of guiding students through unlearning and relearning about colonization is highly complex. It involves engaging in “politically and emotionally charged dialogue that challenges preconceived notions and understandings of histories and contemporary realities; that confronts the intersectionalities of oppression, as well as the dominant systems of privilege that sustain and are sustained by the oppression of others” (p. 235). Teacher participants show they are working against the constraints of the education system in terms of the available time and materials in heavily loaded curricula, particularly in required courses (Vanner, 2022), reflecting the turmoil of trying to address the impacts of colonization while still working in its midst (Kempf et al., 2022).

## Conclusion

Participants demonstrated commitment to learning about stories of colonial violence that emphasize the resilience and resistance of Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people. The change imperative is made explicit by the YIWU participants, who call upon teachers to create a world in which they “will fear no more.” YIWU participants showed that Indigenous girls continue to face violence and discrimination, including from teachers while at school. This study reveals the intentionality of some teachers to challenge violence and discrimination toward Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people through education, teaching about MMIWG2S through critical self-reflection that recognizes their own fallibility and responsibility. We bring teacher and student narratives together with Bearhead’s (2020) *Their Voices Will Guide Us* to accentuate its value for all teachers. During our project, Angelina brought *Their Voices Will Guide Us* into teaching she did with Indigenous teacher education students. She opened the class with a smudging ceremony, a prayer, and a talk by their resident Elder, understanding that the spiritual would guide their class. They had a sharing circle where students related stories and experiences within a safe space and went through resources from *Their Voices Will Guide Us* that supported using story as pedagogy. Students selected stories that they could see themselves using in their own teaching practice, spurring future educators to connect to the resources as pedagogical tools.

We close with words from Marie, the only Indigenous (Michif) teacher participant in our study, who insists that settler teachers should engage in decolonizing their pedagogy:

I would absolutely expect [settler teachers] to teach about missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls...if we don't expect non-Indigenous teachers to teach these things, then we're supporting the problematic to why colonial violence happens and why our girls go missing and murdered. And why our bodies and our lives are not valued.... I would absolutely expect non-Indigenous educators to acknowledge their privilege, to learn about colonial history, to not have White guilt about it, to work through that because it's not about you. It's about how can we give an explanation so young people can feel that their lives are empowered and they can be proud that they are Indigenous youth.

Marie suggests that the silence of settler educators makes them complicit in violence. She calls upon teachers to move beyond discomfort and inform students of their responsibility in challenging the genocidal situation. Tuck and Yang's (2012) caution against settler moves to innocence speaks not only to the teachers we hope will learn from this article but also to its authors, half of whom identify as settlers. We proceed with discomfort out of the conviction that education has an important role to play in raising that awareness about MMIWG2S that is, as yet, unrealized. We recognize that teaching or research about this subject does not absolve us of guilt, but that neither does silence. Currently, MMIWG2S continues unabated, yet remains largely unaddressed in K–12 education. We hope this article will shed light on the urgency and opportunity for educators to meaningfully teach about MMIWG2S, as called for by the National Inquiry.

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