FINDING OUR POWER TOGETHER

Promoting Resilience and Healthy Development in Indigenous Children and Youth Through Mindfulness-Based Practices

RESEARCH REPORT
MAY 2021

Written By:
Jordyn Vaisenberg

PROMOTING RESILIENCE AND HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT IN INDIGENOUS CHILDREN AND YOUTH THROUGH MINDFULNESS-BASED PRACTICES

Indigenous populations in Canada are diverse, with various cultures, beliefs and lifeways, and varied experiences of colonialism that have generational impacts (8). Many Indigenous people have experienced trauma, racism, and discrimination (21). These adverse experiences do not simply remain in the past, but rather accumulate generationally, impacting Indigenous experiences in the present (21).

Intergenerational trauma can be defined as traumatic shared experiences that may have accrued through generations (4). This is a collective issue, affecting Indigenous physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health and well-being (6). Intergenerational trauma can be attributed to mechanisms of cultural assimilation and colonization, which for Indigenous communities in Canada include the Indian Residential School System, 60s Scoop, forced relocation, and assimilation policies (21). Indigenous peoples have demonstrated their effort in countering the effects of assimilation through resilience. Resilience is defined as the ability to adapt to and manage the challenges of life, reducing the long-lasting effects of adversities caused by intergenerational trauma (2). Promoting resilience encourages a sense of belonging, self-mastery, cultural identity and continuity (9), and can be a crucial intervention supporting Indigenous youth to thrive amidst historical and contemporary oppressions.

Why is this important?

Mental health and wellness is a growing area of interest in Indigenous and non-Indigenous contexts, particularly as a result of COVID-19. Trends of mental health outcomes suggest a significantly higher rate of mental health challenges and unmet needs of mental health care among Indigenous peoples compared to white Americans (10). Intergenerational trauma has left Indigenous populations with vulnerabilities, and the threat of COVID-19 has only increased the risk of already existing physical, mental, and behavioural inequities (3). Therefore, it is crucial that accessible and culturally relevant sources of strength and resilience are available for these communities. Resources and interventions that support Indigenous mental, emotional, cultural and physical well-being must be promoted.

Intergenerational trauma is a collective issue, affecting the individual, their family, and community (6). Intergenerational trauma continues to impact the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health and well-being of Indigenous peoples (6). Colonial legislation, displacement, prohibition of cultural practices, the 60's scoop, and Indian Residential Schools (IRS), are a few examples of the historical trauma Indigenous populations in Canada have endured over generations (21).

In Canada, between the 1870s to the mid-1990s, 150, 000 First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children attended IRS (21). IRS refers to the schooling system that forced young children from their families and into schools focused on the assimilation of Indigenous Canadians into European colonial culture (8). Within these oppressive social, political, and economic environments, Indigenous peoples have faced traumatic experiences. For instance, attendees of the IRS faced physical, sexual, psychological, and spiritual abuse, and experienced long-lasting impacts, including emotional harm, educational attainment, loss of culture and language, and disconnect of family structures (21). Such experiences are purported to have manifested in intergenerational trauma among future generations.

Wesley-Esquimaux, an Indigenous scholar and anthropologist defines intergenerational trauma as *"the historical experiences of First Nation people(s), which disrupted the process of indigenous cultural identity formation, [that] continue to loudly resonate in the present, and ...the harm done in the past [that]continue[s] to manifest inter-generationally into the present.[...T]he psychological "affect" generated by centuries of cultural dislocation, forced assimilation and the Indian Residential Schools"* (20, p. 7). As depicted by Wesley-Esquimaux (2004), the adverse experiences accumulate over time, disrupting experiences in the present.

The Social Determinants of Health

"The inequity [in daily living conditions] is systematic, produced by social norms, policies and practices that tolerate or actually promote unfair distribution of and access to power, wealth and other necessary social resources" (5, p.10)

Intergenerational trauma is reinforced by its interconnectedness with the social determinants of health, which are factors that may impact the health of individuals (6). In particular, the socio-economic and physical environment in which one resides can result in higher susceptibility to illness and disease (6). Czyzewski (2011) suggests that the determinants of Indigenous health are visibly apparent and differ from mainstream Western populations.
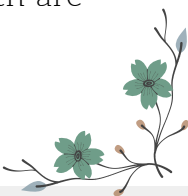
The history of inequalities have led to observable disparities at the individual and collective level, including the physical environments, health care, education, labour systems, employment and income, and food security. Czyzewski (2011) indicates that the memory and experience of childhood adversities of First Nations peoples have led to poor mental health outcomes, and altered coping strategies in adulthood. Furthermore, the trauma embodied in previous generations directly impacts the mental health of individuals today. These findings are replicated across multiple studies, indicating a positive correlation between the experience of intergenerational trauma in older Indigenous generations, and the physical and mental health implications of younger generations (6; 8; 21).

The Impact of Intergenerational Trauma on Subsequent Generations

The history of residential schooling resulted in negative health effects for former attendees and subsequent generations (21).

Mental Health Outcomes:
- Increased risk of distress and suicidal ideations/behaviours (8)
  - The on-reserve First Nations Regional Health Survey (2017) provided insight into youth suicide, suggesting that there was an increase in suicidal thoughts if at least one parent attended a residential school (21).
- Heightened use of harmful substances including alcohol and drugs (8)
- Depression (21)
- Addictive behaviours (21)
- Stress (21)

Health outcomes (21):
- Poorer general and self-rated health
- Increased rates of chronic and infectious diseases
  - HIV/AIDS, diabetes, obesity, tuberculosis (TB), Hepatitis C virus (HCV), sexually transmitted infections (STIs), chronic headaches, and heart problems

The social realities of Indigenous Canadians in the present day are rooted in historical experiences and the consequences of colonization. The reality is based on a loss of autonomy, political oppression, and bureaucratic control (11). However, Indigenous peoples have demonstrated their effort in countering the effects of assimilation through resilience. Resilience is intertwined with trauma, as it is defined as "the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances" (2, p. 426). Resilience is biologically predisposed, strengthened, and learned through environmental experiences (2).

Constructs of Resilience

There are various constructs expressed through culture and language, that determine resilience among Indigenous Inuit, Métis, Mi'kmaw, and Mohawk. The ability to regulate emotions, support adaptation through concepts of self, revision and understand collective history, revitalize language and culture, and renew individual and collective agency and autonomy, are constructs of Indigenous resilience (11).

Six Protective Factors of Resilience

According to Alvord & Grados (2005), there are six protective factors of resilience that should be considered based on the individual's culture and developmental stages.

- Proactive orientation (taking initiative in life, self-efficacy, self-esteem);
- Self-regulation (one's control over emotions, behaviour, attention);
- Connections and attachment;
- Proactive parenting (limits, boundaries, love, care, support);
- School achievement and involvement, IQ, and special talents;
- Community (supportive influences outside of the family, positive role models, and elders).

Resilience is invaluable in overcoming the adversities of historical trauma. In order to support younger Indigenous generations in facing the adverse challenges, early intervention of resilience promotion should be implemented. According to Hatala et al. (2017), promoting resilience encourages a sense of belonging, self-mastery, cultural identity, and continuity.

What is the Issue?

Indigenous communities face unmet mental health needs due to inconsistencies in therapeutic and clinical interventions (10). Currently, many resources and early intervention supports are delivered from institutional frameworks that reflect Western worldviews, which is inconsistent with Indigenous-specific cultural factors and epistemology (6; 12). These paradigms lack holistic views and can be harmful to Indigenous children's cultural identity and family connections (12). Therefore, early interventions that align with Indigenous worldviews and cultural differences is of utmost significance.

MINDFULNESS-BASED PRACTICES

Mindfulness-based interventions are especially impactful in supporting Indigenous populations, as the core components of mindfulness align with Indigenous practices, beliefs, and ways of life (12).

What is Mindfulness? (12)

- Mindfulness is a tool used to recognize, accept and respond to self-destructive thoughts and emotions.
- Allows one to be non-judgmentally aware and accepting of the present moment.
- Mindfulness shifts one's perspective by allowing them to observe thoughts, feelings, and sensations, and engage objectively in their internal experiences.

# The Benefits of Mindfulness-Based Practices

- Enhances self-management of attention, regulation based on control of thoughts and emotions, and social-emotional resiliency (11)
- Mindful attention reduces attentional, behavioural, and anxiety-based problems/symptoms (16)
- Improvements in working memory, attention, academic skills, social skills, and emotional regulation (14)
- Useful in strengthening connections and building relationships with others (12)
- A decrease in suicidal thoughts (12)

The Benefits of Mindfulness-Based Practices in the School Setting

Over the past decade, mindfulness has shifted its application in medicine to other fields, often in the realm of education.

- The integration of mindfulness training in K-12 education has demonstrated improvements in attentional and emotional self-regulation, promoted flexibility, increased teachers' sense of well-being and self-efficacy, as well as improvements in maintaining supportive relationships (14)
- Mindfulness has demonstrated its benefits in promoting better mental health and fostering resiliency among teachers and students, including a decrease in anxiety, stress, and fatigue (14)
- Improvements in children's academic performance, and spiritual, environmental, emotional, social, creative, and physical well-being (1)
- Students facing homelessness portrayed an increased likelihood of using mindfulness practices in various contexts, such as the school setting, interpersonal situations, and while experiencing difficult emotions (18).
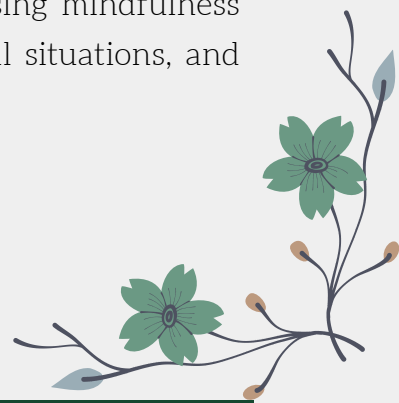
Mindfulness is a promising approach to support children and adolescents, however research regarding its feasibility among Indigenous populations remains limited. A primary aim in conducting this scoping review is to address this gap in the hopes of promoting the use of mindfulness-based interventions to foster resilience among Indigenous children and youth facing adversities.

Mindfulness-based practices have been proposed as appropriate methods for resilience promotion as it resonates with Indigenous spirituality.

Mindfulness emcompasses virtues of openness, acceptance, non-judgment, kindness, and compassion (12). The overarching goal of mindfulness is to extend these virtues to oneself and others, including family, community, and the world at large. Within Indigenous cultural practices, one is to be virtuous, righteous and balanced.

Mindfulness practices enhance interconnectedness, which is the state of being connected with another. The individual is asked to focus on an object (i.e. breath or sound), which often leads to deep silence and insight into the nature of reality and the individual's role in the world (12). The emphasis on the importance of silence and the ability to engage in deep listening aligns well with Indigenous practices.

Sacred ceremonies such as vision quests, sweat lodges, and drummings, are traditional Indigenous practices that allow individuals to attune to their highest intentions (12). During these experiences, the individual becomes aware of the present moment, allows them to connect with their surroundings, and honour the land, nature, ancestors and family lineage.

Mindfulness and the Connection to Land

Connections to land can be an important aspect of overall wellbeing for Indigenous young people (13). The relationship between the land, environment and community members is necessary to continue building and growing a healthy community (13). Promoting mindfulness practices in outdoor settings has also proven great benefits in enhancing one's connection to land and nature.
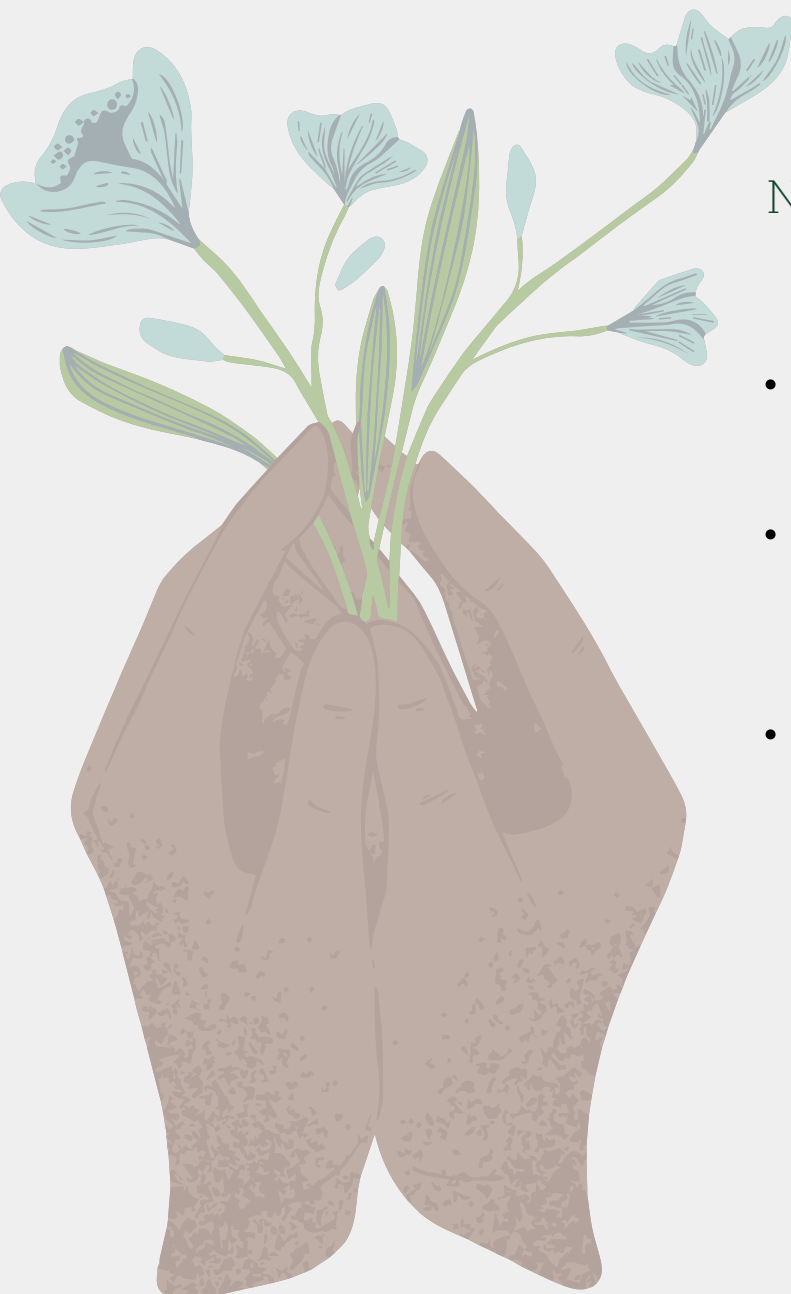
Nature-Based Mindfulness Practices in Outdoor Settings [7]

- Natural environments characterized as forests or wild nature are proven to have more positive outcomes than environments considered as gardens or parks
- Bodily involvement with the environment strengthens one's memory of experiences in nature and prolongs positive effects on an individual's psychological, physical, and social conditions
- Increased time in nature prevents health problems, including stress, depression, and anxiety; improves immune functioning; and interpersonal functioning

After review of the literature, it is evident that few studies have focused on mindfulness practices among Indigenous people, and even less so among Indigenous children. Much of the evidence on the use of mindfulness-based practices and/or therapeutic strategies focus on older Indigenous youth, leaving a gap in the literature of its effectiveness in younger children.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1 More research should be conducted within Indigenous communities to examine the cumulative effects of stressors and traumas, as well as the use of mindfulness-based practices across Indigenous communities, specifically in early childhood development. It is important that Indigenous traditional healing practices, knowledge, and cultural factors are taken into consideration for mental health practices and services.

2 Indigenous youth health perspectives should be incorporated to capture a community's holistic health perspective. This will ensure communities are being heard, needs are being met, and resources are being provided.

3 Early interventions that support children facing adverse experiences are highly recommended. Early interventions and the integration of mindfulness training in K-12 education have demonstrated improvements in attentional and emotional self-regulation, promoted flexibility, increased teachers' sense of well-being and self-efficacy, as well as improvements in maintaining supportive relationships (14).

4 Accessible interventions that align with Indigenous practices (traditional healing, knowledge, and cultural factors) should be made readily available. Specifically, engaging Indigenous youth in mindfulness practices to alleviate the long-term effects of intergenerational trauma on mental health.

5 Exploring different mindfulness-based interventions that cater to different populations (i.e. age groups, various adversities), and different forms of implementation (i.e. land and nature-based mindfulness, group intervention settings), is necessary to ensure community and relationship building.

Mindfulness can and should be used as a therapeutic tool to foster resilience, reduce the risks associated with childhood adversity, and promote Indigenous mental health. Mindfulness has demonstrated its positive effects among non-indigenous populations, and its promising contributions in Indigenous communities. This research demonstrates the importance of engaging Indigenous youth in mindfulness practices to alleviate the long-term effects of intergenerational trauma on mental health. As COVID-19 is drastically increasing mental health issues among Indigenous youth, accessible interventions that align with Indigenous practices should be made readily available.

Indigenous populations are facing long-lasting effects of historical and intergenerational trauma. Colonization-specific experiences, as well as the socioeconomic disadvantages and community conditions, should be taken into consideration.

Historical trauma affects many across generations, and a comprehensive understanding of the implications should be established. It may also be beneficial to identify the characteristics and conditions of the individuals and communities that are resilient to the effects of historical trauma to better understand the needs of those facing adversities.

Upon review of the literature, further research should be conducted to examine the cumulative effects of stressors and traumas, as well as the use of mindfulness-based practices across Indigenous communities, specifically in early childhood development. By doing so, early interventions, such as mindfulness practices, can be implemented to promote a child's resilience against life challenges.

Overall, this information is important for policymakers, clinicians, and all else involved in working with Indigenous communities as it demonstrates the importance of addressing the inequalities of resources, as well as health interventions that support and strengthen Indigenous families. These perspectives are invaluable in culturally sensitive, involved, and appropriate practices. As well as to provide person-centered and holistic care.

REFERENCES

1. Albrecht, J. N. (2018). Responsibility for nurturing a child's wellbeing: teachers teaching mindfulness with children. Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education, 47(5), 487-507. https://doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2018.1499012

2. Alvord, M. K., & Grados, J. J. (2005). Enhancing Resilience in Children: A Proactive Approach.Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 36(3), 238-245. http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/10.1037/0735-7028.36.3.238

3. Aulandez, K. M. W., Walls, M. L., Weiss, N. M., Sittner, K. J., Gillson, S. L., Tennessen, E. N., Maudrie, T. L., Leppi, A. M., Rothwell, E. J., Bolton-Steiner, A. R., & Gonzalez, M. B. (2021). Cultural sources of strength and resilience: A case study of holistic wellness boxes for COVID-19 response in indigenous communities. Frontiers in Sociology, 6, 612637-612637. https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2021.612637

4. Barker, B., Sedgemore, K., Tourangeau, M., & Lagimodiere, L. (08/01/2019). Intergenerational trauma: The relationship between residential schools and the child welfare system among young people who use drugs in vancouver, canada Elsevier. doi:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2019.01.022

5. Commission on the Social Determinants of Health. (2008). Closing the gap in a generation: Health equity through action on the social determinants of health. Final Report of the Commission on the Social Determinants of Health. Geneva, World Health Organization.

6. Czyzewski, Karina. (2011). Colonialism as a Broader Social Determinant of Health Colonialism as a Broader Social Determinant of Health. International Indigenous Policy Journal. 2. 10.18584/iipj.2011.2.1.5.

7. Djernis, D., Lerstrup, I., Poulsen, D., Stigsdotter, U., Dahlgaard, J., & O'Toole, M. (2019). A systematic review and meta-analysis of nature-based mindfulness: Effects of moving mindfulness training into an outdoor natural setting. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 16(17), 3202. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16173202

8. Hackett, C., Feeny, D., & Tompa, E. (2016). Canada's residential school system: Measuring the intergenerational impact of familial attendance on health and mental health outcomes. Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health (1979), 70(11), 1096-1105. https://doi.org/10.1136/jech-2016-207380

9. Hatala, A. R., Pearl, T., Bird-Naytowhow, K., Judge, A., Sjoblom, E., & Liebenberg, L. (2017). "I Have Strong Hopes for the Future": Time Orientations and Resilience Among Canadian Indigenous Youth. Qualitative Health Research, 27(9), 1330–1344. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732317712489

10. Hodge, D. R. (07/2009). Moving from colonization toward balance and harmony: A native american perspective on wellness National Association of Social Workers. doi:10.1093/sw/54.3.211.

11. Kirmayer, L. J., Dandeneau, S., Marshall, E., Phillips, M. K., & Williamson, K. J. (2011). Rethinking Resilience from Indigenous Perspectives. The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry, 56(2), 84–91. https://doi.org/10.1177/070674371105600203

12. Le, T. N., & Gobert, J. M. (2015). Translating and implementing a mindfulness-based youth suicide prevention intervention in a Native American community. Journal of Child and Family Studies, 24(1), 12-23.

13. Lines, L.-A., & Jardine, C. G. (2019). Connection to the land as a youth-identified social determinant of Indigenous Peoples' health. BMC Public Health, 19. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-018-6383-8

14. Meiklejohn, J., Phillips, C., Freedman, M. L., Griffin, M. L., Biegel, G., Roach, A., et al. (2012). Integrating mindfulness training into K-12 education: Fostering the resilience of teachers and students. Mindfulness,. doi:10.1007/s12671-012-0094-5.

15. Saghar Chahar Mahali, Shadi Beshai & Whitney L. Wolfe (2020) The associations of dispositional mindfulness, self-compassion, and reappraisal with symptoms of depression and anxiety among a sample of Indigenous students in Canada, Journal of American College Health, DOI: 10.1080/07448481.2020.1711764

16. Semple, R. J., Semple, R. J., Lee, J., Lee, J., Rosa, D., Rosa, D., Miller, L. F., & Miller, L. F. (2010). A randomized trial of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for children: Promoting mindful attention to enhance social-emotional resiliency in children. Journal of Child and Family Studies, 19(2), 218-229. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-009-9301-y

17. Underwood, Kathryn & Ineese-Nash, Nicole & Haché, Arlene. (2019). Colonialism in Early Education, Care, and Intervention: A Knowledge Synthesis. Journal of Childhood Studies. 21-35. 10.18357/jcs444201919209.

18. Viafora, D. P., Mathiesen, S. G., & Unsworth, S. J. (2015). Teaching mindfulness to middle school students and homeless youth in school classrooms. Journal of Child and Family Studies, 24(5), 1179-1191. http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/10.1007/s10826-014-9926-3

19. Warry, W. (1998).Unfinished dreams: Community healing and the reality of Aboriginal self-government. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

20. Wesley-Esquimaux, C. C.& Smolewski, M. (2004). Historic trauma and Aboriginal healing. Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation.

21. Wilk, P., Maltby, A., & Cooke, M. (2017). Residential schools and the effects on Indigenous health and well-being in Canada-a scoping review. Public Health Reviews, 38http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/10.1186/s40985-017-0055-6

22. Young, C., Hanson, C., Craig, J. C., Clapham, K., & Williamson, A. (2017). Psychosocial factors associated with the mental health of indigenous children living in high income countries: A systematic review. International Journal for Equity in Health, 16(1), 153-153. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-017-0652-5

Written By: Jordyn Vaisenberg, BA ECS, Ryerson University

Jordyn Vaisenberg is a recent graduate of the BA of Early Childhood Studies program and holds a double minor in French and psychology. She has completed a Mental Health certificate program with Wilfrid Laurier University to gain an awareness of the appropriate resources, referrals, and responses for children who may be struggling with mental health challenges. She has experience working with families and children in a variety of contexts and has learned the value of creating positive and inclusive environments to support individuals in reaching their full potential. As a positive and empathetic individual, her goal is to inspire, motivate and engage others in meaningful experiences.

Acknowledging Melissa MacIntyre for her contributions to this research report

Melissa MacIntyre is a Registered Early Childhood Educator and has completed her Early Childhood Studies degree at Ryerson University. Upon graduation, she is continuing her studies and pursuing Montessori teacher training.