

**Belonging, Community, and Preparedness:
Teacher Experiences of Working and Living in Northern Manitoba**

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Author's Note

The author did not receive funding for this publication.

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Abstract

Recruitment and retention of teachers remain persistent challenges for school divisions in northern Manitoba. This qualitative study examines the experiences of teachers new to working and living in northern Manitoba, with attention to recruitment, retention, preparedness, and sense of belonging. Findings highlight the central role of professional and social connections in shaping teachers' early experiences and influencing decisions to remain in the region. The study also advances a conceptual understanding of what it means for teachers to 'feel at home' in their profession, demonstrating that this experience has multiple, interconnected personal and professional dimensions. Recognizing these varied needs has important implications for recruitment, preparation, and retention strategies in northern and remote contexts.

Keywords: sense of belonging, northern Manitoba, teacher preparedness, teacher recruitment, teacher retention



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Teachers transitioning to new schools and communities frequently encounter challenges related to isolation, professional identity, workload, and integration into school culture (Anhorn, 2008; Hellsten et al., 2011; Kutsyuruba et al., 2014). These challenges are often intensified in remote and northern contexts, where limited resources, geographic isolation, and overlapping professional and personal roles can contribute to stress and early-career attrition (Bjorklund, 2023; Wotherspoon, 2008). In northern Canada, teacher retention remains a persistent concern (Greenslade, 2023; Kutsyuruba et al., 2014).

In Manitoba, northern school divisions continue to struggle to recruit and retain qualified teachers despite financial incentives and targeted recruitment initiatives (Greenslade, 2023; Manitoba Teachers' Society, 2021). While signing bonuses and salary incentives may support initial recruitment, they reportedly have a limited impact on long-term retention (Kitchenham & Chasteauneuf, 2010; Walker, 2024; White, 2019). Teachers who relocate to northern or remote communities may experience culture shock, limited access to professional development, and assignments outside their areas of specialization, which can further complicate their adjustment to their new roles (Hellsten et al., 2011).

Despite a somewhat growing body of research on teachers' experiences in northern Canada (Bowman, 2018; Danyluk & Sheppard, 2015a; Kitchenham & Chasteauneuf, 2010; Walker, 2024), there is less research on teachers' experiences in northern Manitoba specifically (Janzen, 2019), and to date, no research on larger northern centres such as Thompson. Thompson, located on Treaty 5 Territory, serves as an important regional hub for education, health care, and other services in northern Manitoba. Although it arguably offers more amenities than many surrounding communities, it continues to face substantial challenges related to teacher recruitment and retention (Greenslade, 2023).

This qualitative study explores the experiences of teachers new to working in Thompson, Manitoba, to better understand how to improve recruitment and retention strategies in Northern Manitoba. More specifically, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What challenges do teachers new to northern Manitoba experience?
2. How do teachers new to northern Manitoba experience belonging within their schools and the broader community?
3. In what ways are teachers prepared to live and work in northern contexts?
4. What factors influence teachers' decisions to remain or leave northern Manitoba?

By examining teachers' sense of belonging, preparedness, and perspectives on the challenges they face, this study makes an important contribution to the growing body of research on recruitment and retention in northern Canada. Understanding how new teachers navigate northern communities through a lens of belonging may inform recruitment practices, induction programs, and professional support systems to strengthen educational sustainability in northern Manitoba.

Literature Review

This literature review aims to present and critically discuss previous research that has laid the groundwork for this study. It is organized into three thematic sections aligned with the research topics. The first section highlights the experiences of teachers working in northern and isolated communities in Canada. As noted earlier, research on teachers' experiences in northern Manitoba is sparse. Therefore, the scope was extended beyond Manitoba's borders to other provinces, territories, and rural parts of Canada, from which relevant experiences can be drawn in similar contexts. Relevant research outside Canada was also examined. The second section explores a sense of belonging in teaching, which has been understudied until recently. The final section highlights teacher preparation for working in northern Canadian communities, focusing on Manitoba's education programs, given the limited available research.

Teaching in Northern Communities of Canada

Kitchenham and Chasteauneuf's (2010) longitudinal study in British Columbia, Alberta, the Yukon, and the Northwest Territories laid important groundwork by documenting and underscoring chronic staffing shortages in northern Canada. Although Manitoba was not included in their research, this work elaborates on pertinent issues teachers may face in the more northern and isolated regions of our country. Kitchenham and Chasteauneuf's research on northern Canada focuses on external issues that teachers may encounter, such as a lack of professional development and teaching outside one's area of expertise. However, more recent research has adopted a different approach in examining not only the challenges encountered by teachers working in northern or remote Canadian communities, but also the emotional aspects of relocating to a new community and the motivations for staying or leaving (Janzen & Cranston, 2015).

Janzen and Cranston (2015) assert that recent studies are insufficient in representing the complexities of teacher career choices. Their emphasis on community integration and the emotional and social needs of teachers helped inspire and lay the groundwork for this research. Janzen and Cranston also recognize that much of the existing literature and discourse on teaching in the North is positioned within metropolitan-centric views and can hold negative assumptions and misunderstandings about the North. This acknowledgment is important and, as an educator originally from northern Manitoba, is appreciated. The way in which teaching is framed in northern and rural locales is crucial, as 'deficit' views perpetuate inequities. White (2019) urges that teacher education should expand beyond the perspective of 'classroom-ready' to 'community-ready.' Looking towards the benefits of teaching in contexts different from our own is a helpful reframing.

Important insights emerge from rural literature, since northern and rural communities often face similar challenges in recruitment and retention (Hellsten et al., 2011; Saunders, 2022; Walker, 2024; White, 2019). However, the assumptions about what it means to reside in a rural Canadian environment differ greatly from those about living in Canada's North. Although certain parallels can be drawn from northern and rural literature—such as deficit narratives—it is important to recognize that these regions are distinct (Janzen, 2019). What it means to live North of the 53rd parallel differs greatly from living in a rural setting outside a large urban centre. While rural literature offers useful parallels, it ultimately reveals a gap: the North remains underexamined as a distinct context, particularly in relation to teachers' lived experiences and sense of belonging.

Sense of Belonging in Teaching

Belonging has been conceptualized as a fundamental human need that supports psychological well-being, identity development, and motivation (Allen, 2020; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1968). In school contexts, research has traditionally focused on students' belonging (Falkenberg & Heringer, 2024; Filstad et al., 2019); however, emerging studies indicate that teachers' sense of belonging is equally significant (Allen et al., 2025; Bjorklund, 2023; Özdögrü, 2022; Wator et al., 2025) and often predicts a student's sense of belonging (Allen, 2020). Recent research (Allen et al., 2025; Bjorklund, 2023) also reports that collegial relationships and leadership practices shape a teacher's sense of belonging, findings that *this* research further reinforces.

Allen et al. (2025) propose that there are interrelated factors which promote a teacher's sense of belonging. To further explore this, a conceptualization of what it means to 'feel at home' was developed from this study (Figure 1), which examines the multiple needs of teachers in a northern context. While analyzing the interview data, it became evident that teachers' needs span many levels that must be addressed for them to feel at ease in their work. Teaching in a northern environment adds a unique layer to this, which has not been explored in previous studies.

Teacher Preparation for the North

Teacher education programs are responsible for preparing teachers to work in diverse geographic settings, yet many education programs in Canada remain urban-centric (Janzen, 2019; White & Reid, 2008). It therefore seemed worthwhile, in this study, to examine current field experience options for teacher candidates living in southern Manitoba. Accordingly, the 2025-2026 practicum handbooks for the University of Manitoba, University of Winnipeg, and Brandon University were reviewed. The University of Manitoba handbook is the only one that clearly offers northern practicum options with financial support, though this support is not guaranteed. Unsurprisingly, northern communities struggle with recruitment and retention when university students are not guaranteed diversity in their practica (Kutsyuruba et al., 2014). Facilitating and encouraging northern practicum options would improve teacher candidates' understanding of the North, expose future teachers to other career options, and help retain quality teachers in northern communities (Brandon, 2015; Janzen, 2019).

Choosing a teaching position in northern Manitoba means living in an area home to a large Indigenous population, including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples (Janzen, 2019). Recognizing the North as an area of Canada with unique cultural and historical elements is important. Teacher candidates need to understand the region's diversity and would benefit from specific, meaningful preparation for this distinct northern culture (Danyluk & Sheppard, 2015b). Janzen (2019) asserts that teacher candidates having access to and proper preparedness for northern practicums is a starting point for addressing the inequities of student learning in the North. However, she acknowledges that simply offering northern practica options is insufficient. Teacher candidates need to be culturally prepared. Danyluk and Sheppard (2015b) argue that Indigenous-centred education programs can effectively prepare teacher candidates to work and live in northern and rural communities in Canada with larger Indigenous populations. Their research on Laurentian University's education program demonstrates the importance of teacher candidates building relationships with rural and Indigenous communities throughout their program. Programs such as Teach for Canada have sought to address staffing shortages through accelerated training models, yet critics argue that such approaches risk reinforcing colonial and deficit-based narratives

(Canadian Teachers Federation, 2015). The literature is clear that adequate preparation for teaching in rural and northern communities is essential, and that reshaping how teacher candidates are prepared may be imperative.

Methods

This section outlines the methodological approach guiding the study. It begins with an overview of the theoretical and conceptual framework, including the study's grounding in belonging and the emergent concept of 'feeling at home in teaching'. The research design is then described, followed by details on participant recruitment and characteristics. The remaining sub-sections describe data collection procedures and the processes used for data analysis and management. Finally, ethical considerations are addressed.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study explores the experiences and preparedness of teachers new to working in Thompson, Manitoba, with the aim of informing recruitment and retention strategies in northern communities. It addresses four research questions: (1) What challenges do teachers new to northern Manitoba experience? (2) How do teachers new to northern Manitoba experience belonging within their schools and the broader community? (2) In what ways are teachers prepared to live and work in northern contexts? and (4) What factors influence teachers' decisions to remain or leave northern Manitoba?

Theory of Belonging and 'Feeling at Home in Teaching'

Belonging has been defined and operationalized differently across studies (Allen et al., 2021). Despite needing more consistency and conceptual clarity in defining belonging, there are commonalities across perspectives and studies. One commonality across studies is that an individual's sense of belonging is often tied to their perception of a chosen group or place (Allen, 2020; Allen et al., 2025; Bjorklund, 2023; Mahar et al., 2014). Beyond social belonging, a connection to *place* and culture is also essential to recognize (Allen et al., 2025; Janzen & Cranston, 2015). For this study, the exploration of belonging focuses on one's relationship to community: the workplace community (Bjorklund, 2023) and the broader community—to place (Janzen & Cranston, 2015). Teachers' relationships within their school community and the broader community of Thompson, Manitoba, were explored.

Although research is beginning to burgeon regarding belonging for teachers (Allen et al., 2025; Özdögrü, 2022; Wator et al., 2025), more could still be known (Bjorklund, 2023; Pesonen et al., 2021; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011), especially while examining certain regions of Canada that struggle with retention. Highlighting a teacher's *sense of belonging* has yielded unique results in the northern context of this study. What started as an exploration of a teacher's sense of belonging in Thompson evolved into a broader exploration of not only what it means to belong but to 'feel at home' in the teaching profession.

Research Design

This qualitative study was guided by a constructivist paradigm, emphasizing participants' subjective meanings and socially situated experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This approach was well-suited to exploring teaching experiences within a small northern community characterized by distinct social, cultural, and historical contexts.

Participants and Recruitment

An invitation to participate in this study was sent to school principals at the six elementary schools and one high school in Thompson, who then distributed it to their teachers. Interested teachers contacted me directly. Four teachers met the inclusion criteria: they were new to teaching in Thompson, Manitoba, though not necessarily new to the profession.

The group of participants included three elementary teachers (middle years) and one high school teacher, representing a range of experience levels and backgrounds. Two participants were in their first year of teaching, while the other two had prior teaching experience in Canada or internationally. The group included two male and two female participants.

Given the study's origins as graduate research, a small sample size was intentionally maintained to allow for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences. Participant characteristics are summarized in Table 1:

Table 1

Background Information of Participants.

Participant	Years of Experience Teaching	Grades Taught in Thompson
Participant A	First year	Middle Years
Participant B	First year	Senior Years
Participant C	Fourth year	Middle Years
Participant D	Seventeenth year	Middle Years

Data Collection

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams between May and June 2025. An interview guide with open-ended questions was used to explore participants' experiences of belonging, preparedness, recruitment, and retention. Interviews lasted approximately 50–60 minutes, were audio- and video-recorded with consent, and were transcribed verbatim. Participants were provided with the opportunity to review their transcripts for member checking, and they were invited to clarify or amend their responses.

Data Analysis and Data Management

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis informed by In Vivo coding (Chase & Martin, 2021), which emphasizes participants' own language. Transcripts were reviewed iteratively to identify recurring patterns related to preparedness, belonging, recruitment, and retention. Although belonging and preparedness were not initial focal themes, they emerged as central during analysis and were informed by existing literature (Allen et al., 2025; Bjorklund, 2023).

Recordings were stored on the UM network drive during this study. The interview data were kept confidential using pseudonyms (participants A, B, C, D), and the schools were not named individually. A code list connecting the actual names to the pseudonyms, along with the Microsoft Teams interview recordings, was kept securely on the UM network drive. Names and identifying information about individuals or schools were removed from the transcript as an additional step to safeguard confidentiality. Recordings were conducted via Microsoft Teams, stored on the UM network drive, and deleted at the end of August 2025 after transcription.

Ethical Considerations

All participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and the right to withdraw before data aggregation. Pseudonyms were used, and identifying information was removed from transcripts. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Manitoba Research Ethics Board, and institutional permission was secured from the participating school division.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents an integrated analysis of findings in relation to the existing literature, organized around five interconnected themes: recruitment, sense of belonging, preparedness, challenges, and retention. These themes align with the study’s guiding questions, addressing the challenges teachers face in northern Manitoba, how they develop a sense of belonging within their schools and communities, how they are prepared for northern contexts, and the factors that influence their decisions to remain or leave. Although discussed separately, these dimensions were experienced as overlapping and mutually reinforcing in participants’ accounts. Collectively, they reveal that teacher retention in northern contexts is not driven by a single factor but by an evolving process through which teachers come to ‘feel at home’ in their professional and community lives.

Recruitment to Thompson

Across all four interviews, recruitment was relational. It was not primarily job postings or financial advertisements that persuaded these teachers—it was people. This aligns with broader research on northern recruitment, which implies that decisions to teach in northern communities are often influenced by social and emotional considerations rather than financial ones alone (Janzen & Cranston, 2015; Kitchenham & Chasteauneuf, 2010). In this study, teachers were more willing to relocate when they could imagine connection and support waiting for them.

For Participant B, siblings already living in Thompson spoke positively about life in northern Manitoba and encouraged her to join them. Her earlier experience substituting in the community during the summer months also strengthened her comfort with returning. She reflected that she was “blessed with connections” and that these relationships helped root her decision. Participant C, a newcomer to Canada, also had family living in Thompson, which eased his relocation and reduced some of the uncertainty associated with moving to a new country and region.

Participant D’s pathway was different but equally relational. After struggling to secure stable employment in Toronto, where positions were often part-time or substitute-based, he accepted a position in Nunavut before eventually moving to Thompson. He learned about opportunities in Thompson through a friend already working there. A simple conversation—“they were looking for teachers”—led him to contact the superintendent directly. This informal connection became the bridge to formal employment.

Participant A did not initially have family in Thompson, but she described being deeply influenced by conversations with professors and others who encouraged her to view teaching in the North as an opportunity for growth. That encouragement reframed the move as a possibility rather than a risk. She also acknowledged that finding a position in her specialty area closer to home would have been difficult, which made her more open to stepping outside her comfort zone.

As confirmed through previous literature (Kitchenham & Chasteauneuf, 2010; Walker, 2024; White, 2019), financial incentives did play an initial role, particularly the \$4,000 moving

allowance, which was described as ‘attractive’ by Participant D. Participant D acknowledged that financial compensation helped offset the sacrifices involved in moving north—distance from family, climate, and fewer amenities. However, these incentives were not described as decisive in and of themselves. Rather, they functioned as practical support layered onto an already relational decision. The financial bonus made the move feasible, but it did not make it meaningful. This aligns with White’s (2019) assertion that financial incentives are not enough to attract teachers to certain locations.

An important pattern emerges when recruitment is considered alongside belonging and retention. For three participants, prior relationships with people in Thompson eased their early adjustment and likely contributed to their initial sense of belonging. Even before arriving, they had a connection—someone who spoke positively about the community or personally encouraged them. Recruitment shaped teachers’ initial sense of belonging.

Sense of Belonging

How did the participants of this study experience a sense of belonging within their schools and the broader community? As identified in the literature, belonging is a fundamental human need (Allen, 2020; Maslow, 1968) that significantly influences well-being, mental health, and decision-making (Allen, 2020; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The experiences shared by participants in this study strongly reinforce the importance of belonging, particularly within the immediate school environment, as teachers navigated both professional and personal transitions in a northern context.

All participants emphasized that collegial relationships were foundational to their sense of belonging within their schools. One teacher explained, “I work in a good environment with seven other teachers in my department. I feel a sense of community in my department.” Another similarly noted, “I get along really, really well with my department, and we hang out and have made friends with teachers from other schools.” Across interviews, supportive colleagues and administrators were described not as incidental benefits, but as essential to feeling settled and accepted.

The importance of administrative support also emerged clearly. One participant reflected, “The support didn’t just stop after being hired,” explaining that administrators checked in regularly throughout the year. Another shared, “No one will turn you down or not welcome you.” These comments illustrate how belonging was not confined to informal peer relationships but was reinforced structurally through leadership practices. This finding aligns with Allen’s (2020) assertion that the quality of a teacher’s relationship with their principal significantly shapes their sense of belonging. In one case, a participant’s decision to accept a position in Thompson was influenced by a positive and welcoming interview experience: “Just from doing the interview, I think maybe that sold me... speaking to the principal and the previous vice-principal... made me feel like, ‘Wow, I want to work with these people.’” This early interaction in building relational trust demonstrates how the seeds of belonging can begin to form even before formal employment starts.

While literature on northern education often emphasizes the importance of a “relationship to place” and broader community integration (Janzen & Cranston, 2015), participants in this study primarily located their sense of belonging within their school communities. As participants acclimated to life in Thompson, the immediate professional environment appeared to act as a crucial anchor. Conversations about belonging consistently centred on relationships with colleagues and administrators, rather than on external community connections.

At the same time, some participants described belonging as an active process. One teacher explained that stepping outside her “comfort zone” by attending teacher events, socializing with colleagues, and participating in recreational sports was essential: “It’s gonna be what you make it... If you don’t kind of push yourself outside of your comfort zone, it’s going to be lonely.” Although she acknowledged feelings of homesickness, she ultimately concluded, “It ended up working out a lot... I’m OK.” This reflects Johnston and Dewhurst’s (2021) framing of belonging as an “act of doing” and aligns with Danyluk and Sheppard’s (2015a) findings that intentional engagement can accelerate integration in northern contexts. Belonging was not entirely passive; it required participation, vulnerability, and effort.

For one participant transitioning to Canada, belonging was initially complicated by cultural shock and distance from family. However, the openness of students and staff played a critical role in easing that transition. He recalled a student interacting with him on his first day, “as if he knew me for a long time,” and repeatedly emphasized the supportive nature of the school board office staff, describing them as treating him “like you are totally... familiar with them.” These experiences highlight the interpersonal dimension of belonging identified by Allen (2020): feeling recognized, welcomed, and accepted within relational spaces.

For teachers new to Thompson, belonging was primarily cultivated within the school community. While all teachers experienced belonging differently within their school and broader community, strong collegial and administrative relationships seemed to buffer against other stressors associated with relocation, cultural adjustment, and geographic isolation (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). Broader community integration improved belonging for some participants, though it was not a priority for all.

In northern Manitoba, where recruitment and retention remain ongoing challenges, fostering relationally rich school environments may be one of the most impactful ways to support new teachers. Belonging, as demonstrated in this study, is not incidental—it is foundational.

Preparedness

Teacher preparedness emerged as a complex, layered theme, revealing significant gaps between formal teacher education and the lived realities of teaching in Thompson, Manitoba. Most participants reported feeling culturally underprepared to work in a northern context. These findings align with research indicating that Canadian teacher education programs remain largely urban-centric (Janzen, 2019; White & Reid, 2008), often leaving candidates insufficiently prepared for the cultural, environmental, and social dynamics of northern communities.

Three participants, regardless of background, stated that they did not feel culturally prepared to teach in Thompson. One participant reflected, “My university integrated Indigenous perspectives, but it doesn’t quite prepare you for what’s in person.” Although Indigenous content had been included in coursework, it did not fully equip her for the lived reality of working in a community where Indigenous traditions were embedded in daily life. She contrasted this with her prior experience in a predominantly white community, where land acknowledgments felt more symbolic than integrated. This reflects Janzen’s (2019) concern that including Indigenous content in teacher education may not be sufficient if it does not meaningfully prepare teachers for the relational and contextual realities of northern Indigenous communities.

Another participant similarly noted, “I didn’t feel prepared through university, more so, just through, you know, people talking and the news.” Her perceptions of the North had been

shaped in part by media portrayals, contributing to apprehension and uncertainty. She acknowledged that during her degree, she would have felt “very, very scared” at the idea of completing a practicum in the North—if one had been offered—due to distance isolation, and lack of connection. Although both Canadian-trained participants indicated they were generally pedagogically prepared, their concerns centred more on cultural unfamiliarity and the social-emotional adjustment required when relocating.

Preparedness also intersected strongly with prior experience. One participant, who had previously taught in Nunavut, described his initial move to northern Canada as “kind of shocking,” particularly adjusting to extended periods of darkness. He had not anticipated how environmental factors, such as prolonged winter nights, would affect both his own well-being and student learning. However, by the time he relocated to Thompson, he felt relatively adaptable, stating, “I’ve experienced a lot of different situations... I’ve learned to adapt and change.” For this participant, prior northern experience functioned as a preparatory bridge, reducing the intensity of adjustment and limiting the support he required during his transition.

In contrast, the participant who was newest to Canada faced a multi-layered transition. His adjustment involved not only adapting to a northern and Indigenous context but also learning the mechanics of Canadian pedagogy. He proposed that beginning as a substitute teacher or educational assistant might have eased his transition: “If you work as a sub or an educational assistant, then you will learn a lot from the teacher. If you work as a permanent teacher directly, you have to learn a lot. You have to face a lot of challenges.” His experience illustrates how preparedness cannot be understood as a single dimension. For internationally trained teachers, professional, cultural, and personal transitions occur simultaneously, intensifying the complexity of the first-year experience.

The findings reveal a gap between theoretical preparation and practical readiness for teaching in the north. While universities may provide foundational pedagogical training and incorporate Indigenous perspectives, participants’ experiences suggest that authentic exposure to northern contexts remains limited. The absence of northern practicums—often restricted due to logistical challenges—contributed to uncertainty and apprehension. Without direct experience, candidates may rely on media narratives or second-hand accounts, which can distort perceptions and heighten anxiety.

Challenges

Participants described a range of personal and professional challenges during their first year in Thompson, reflecting differences in background, experience, and prior exposure to northern contexts. Several participants identified climate as an initial difficulty, particularly the length and severity of winter. Participant C, a newcomer to Canada, explained, “First of all, it’s very cold... the second one is cultural difference.” Participant B similarly noted that “winter as a whole was long.”

After adapting to environmental conditions, participants described challenges related to professional identity, pedagogical adjustment, and personal well-being. Participant A emphasized that her primary concerns were connected to her status as a beginning teacher rather than to northern living. She reflected, “I was worried about what my colleagues thought of my teaching,” noting that these concerns were unwarranted and diminished over time.

For Participant C, who was new to both teaching in Canada and the local community, professional and cultural challenges were closely intertwined. He described learning classroom management and pedagogical practices within an unfamiliar educational system, stating, “I didn’t have any kind of experience of the Canadian education system.” He also observed that other internationally trained teachers faced similar difficulties and emphasized the importance of mentorship from experienced colleagues. These professional challenges were compounded by geographic distance from family, contributing to feelings of isolation: “I miss my family a lot... It’s kind of a feeling of isolation.” As Canada continues to welcome an influx of internationally trained teachers, we must find a way to support them so they thrive, not just survive.

In contrast, Participant D, who had several years of teaching experience and prior experience teaching in Nunavut, reported fewer instructional challenges. Instead, his concerns centred on community and lifestyle factors, including limited transportation options, access to culturally familiar food, and the cost and distance associated with travel. He explained, “If I want to get out of Thompson, it’s not as easy as it might seem... you’ll need a heavy wallet.”

Participants’ challenges reflected shifting needs across career stages and personal circumstances. For less experienced teachers and those new to Canada, challenges are centred on pedagogical adaptation, classroom management, and cultural adjustment. For more experienced teachers, concerns were more closely tied to lifestyle, mobility, and community integration. As teachers gain professional confidence and cultural familiarity, the nature of their challenges evolves, with broader community and quality-of-life factors becoming increasingly salient.

Retention

Teacher retention in Thompson cannot be understood as a uniform or static outcome. Rather, it emerged in this study as a dynamic process shaped by teachers’ backgrounds, prior experiences, cultural familiarity, and evolving personal goals. While all four participants expressed intentions to remain teaching in the North for the upcoming school year, their long-term trajectories revealed more complex considerations, including family proximity, professional aspirations, and lifestyle preferences.

In the short term, the findings paint an encouraging picture. Each participant described generally positive experiences living and working in Thompson and planned to continue teaching in northern Manitoba. This immediate retention appears closely linked to the strong sense of belonging cultivated within their schools. Supportive colleagues, welcoming administrators, and inclusive school cultures helped teachers feel settled and capable in their roles.

However, long-term retention was shaped by broader life considerations. Two participants expressed intentions to eventually move closer to family. Participant A anticipates returning to Winnipeg to pursue a master’s degree and reconnect with friends and relatives. Participant D envisions returning to his home country to be closer to his mother, though he emphasized that if he were to remain in Canada, he would stay in Thompson. Participant B expressed curiosity about exploring larger communities with additional amenities. These reflections suggest that retention is influenced not only by professional satisfaction but also by life stage, relational ties, and long-term identity formation.

The advice participants offered to the school division further illuminates the conditions that support retention. Participant D explained, “If you hire somebody and put them here, you should not assume they are OK because not everybody will come forward and say, I need help.” He

stressed the importance of proactive support and attention to teacher mental health, noting the risk of burnout if needs go unnoticed. A couple of participants also recommended creating newcomer-specific gatherings specifically for newcomers to Thompson. Participant C explained: “When you meet the new people who are also new to the place, then you feel like you are not alone. You can share your feelings that they may also feel.” The participants acknowledged many opportunities for teacher socialization through events organized by the local teachers’ union; however, they remarked that they felt overwhelmed by meeting only ‘veteran’ teachers at these gatherings.

The significance of mentorship also emerged. A participant who had not previously taught in Canada noted that structured opportunities to work alongside experienced teachers would ease the adjustment, particularly in areas such as classroom management. Although the division had recently introduced a mentorship initiative, not all participants were aware of it or eligible to participate. This gap suggests that access, communication, and criteria for support programs may influence their effectiveness. Tailored mentorship that accounts for varied entry backgrounds may strengthen both confidence and long-term commitment.

Participants also highlighted the importance of community integration. Recommendations such as offering guided tours of the town, increasing school division visibility at out-of-province career fairs, and encouraging extracurricular involvement underscore the relational nature of retention. Teachers who built connections beyond their classrooms described feeling more rooted and less isolated. Two participants advised new teachers to “put yourself out there,” emphasizing that engagement in sports, music, or community events deepened their attachment to the North.

Teacher retention cannot be understood as a one-size-fits-all issue. Instead, participants’ experiences were shaped by interconnected needs influenced by prior experiences and cultural familiarity. Teachers who completed their education in Canada did not need to adjust to a new pedagogical system; their challenges were more often related to classroom management, emotional well-being, and long-term career considerations. In contrast, participants who immigrated to Canada navigated a broader range of challenges, including adapting to an unfamiliar educational system, learning new cultural norms, and developing classroom management practices, all while managing the practical realities of settling into a new community.

These layered experiences highlight the need for supports that are both flexible and responsive. Approaches to retention that acknowledge the varied ways teachers come to feel at home in their profession are more likely to address their needs and encourage long-term commitment.

‘Feeling at Home in Teaching’

The conceptual model presented in Figure 1 below emerged directly from the themes and experiences shared by participants throughout the interviews. While the above findings were organized into the broad discussion themes of recruitment, preparedness, belonging, challenges, and retention, the five overlapping areas in the model below represent the underlying conditions that participants described as shaping whether they came to feel “at home” in teaching in northern Manitoba. These conditions included basic external needs, cultural and contextual adaptation, pedagogical confidence, sense of belonging, and professional growth. Rather than being experienced independently, participants described these areas as interconnected and continually influencing one another throughout their personal and professional adjustment to northern life and teaching. This overlapping structure of the model reflects the fluid, relational, and evolving nature of these experiences.

Figure 1*'Feeling at Home in Teaching'*

1. **Basic External Needs:** Housing, transportation, winter clothes
2. **Cultural & Contextual Adaptation:** Understanding northern and Indigenous contexts, adjusting to local norms.
3. **Pedagogical Confidence:** Curriculum familiarity, classroom management, student engagement
4. **Sense of Belonging:** Supportive colleagues, inclusive school culture, community connection
5. **Professional Growth:** Mentorship, leadership opportunities, advanced education

The above figure illustrates an interconnected model of what it means for teachers to feel at home in their profession. Rather than representing teacher needs as a linear or hierarchical progression, this model reflects the overlapping and relational nature of the experiences shared by participants in this study. At the centre of the figure is the concept of 'feeling at home in teaching,' surrounded by five interrelated areas of need: basic external needs, cultural and contextual adaptation, pedagogical confidence, sense of belonging, and professional growth. Together, these areas reflect the conditions that supported teachers as they navigated their personal and professional lives in northern Manitoba. This model could perhaps be applied to other teaching contexts.

The circular and overlapping nature of the figure emphasizes that these areas do not operate in isolation. Rather, they continually interact, reinforcing one another in ways that help a teacher feel settled, supported, and committed to the profession over time. For example, when basic external needs such as stable housing or reliable transportation are unmet, teachers may find it

more difficult to fully engage in their professional roles or invest in relationships within the school community. Similarly, pedagogical confidence is often strengthened through a sense of belonging, as supportive colleagues and administrators provide guidance, reassurance, and opportunities for collaboration. Feeling accepted within a school culture can, in turn, encourage teachers to take professional risks, seek mentorship, and pursue leadership opportunities that support ongoing professional growth.

Cultural and contextual adaptation intersects with all other areas of the model. As teachers develop a deeper understanding of northern and Indigenous contexts, they often feel more confident in their teaching practices and more connected to their communities. This understanding supports stronger relationships with students and colleagues, reinforcing a sense of belonging and purpose. Professional growth is also shaped by these interactions, as teachers who feel culturally grounded and professionally supported are more likely to envision a future for themselves within their school division. The figure illustrates that ‘feeling at home in teaching’ is not achieved by any single factor but by the ongoing interaction of personal, cultural, and professional supports that collectively sustain teacher well-being, engagement, and retention.

Implications

The findings of this study offer several implications for educational institutions, school divisions, and future research concerned with teacher recruitment and retention in northern contexts. Viewing participants’ experiences through a lens of belonging highlighted the relational and contextual factors that shaped how teachers adapted to living and working in northern Manitoba. The following sub-sections outline practical considerations for supporting teachers in northern communities and identify areas where further research may deepen understandings of belonging, preparedness, and retention in the North.

Implications for Practice

Teacher recruitment and retention in northern Manitoba are shaped by many interconnected factors. Rather than viewing recruitment and retention as isolated challenges, institutions may benefit from considering how teachers come to feel at home in their profession.

Across participants’ experiences, a strong sense of belonging within the school emerged as central to short-term retention. School leaders play a critical role in fostering inclusive and supportive environments where new teachers feel welcomed and valued. Structured opportunities for collegial connection, accessible mentorship, and intentional onboarding processes that extend beyond the classroom may help reduce isolation and strengthen professional confidence.

Recruitment efforts may also benefit from emphasizing relational approaches. Word-of-mouth encouragement and personal connections were influential in participants’ decisions to move North. Recruitment strategies that include authentic storytelling, visible representation at career fairs, and opportunities for prospective teachers to connect directly with northern teachers may resonate more deeply than formal job postings alone.

Universities likewise have an important role in shaping preparedness. While participants often felt pedagogically prepared, many described gaps in cultural and contextual readiness. Expanding access to northern practicums, embedding Indigenous perspectives more meaningfully throughout teacher education programs, and explicitly preparing candidates for the environmental and social realities of northern communities may reduce culture shock and strengthen resilience.

Professional organizations, including the Manitoba Teachers' Society, can further support retention by increasing visibility in northern regions and offering professional learning opportunities that reflect the specific realities of teaching in the North. Context-responsive supports may help ensure that northern teachers feel represented and professionally sustained.

Implications for Future Research

This study highlights several areas for further inquiry. First, the role of collegial relationships warrants deeper exploration, particularly in northern and remote settings where professional and social networks often overlap. Understanding how belonging develops within school communities may offer important insights into retention beyond northern and remote teaching areas.

Second, the layered experiences of internationally educated teachers in northern contexts deserve focused attention. As Canadian school systems become increasingly diverse, research should examine how institutions can better support teachers navigating multiple transitions simultaneously.

Finally, the conceptual model of 'feeling at home in teaching' introduced in this study may provide a useful framework for future research. Investigating how teachers' needs evolve over time—and how institutions can respond to these shifts—may contribute to more sustainable recruitment and retention strategies in northern and remote communities.

Conclusion

This study contributes to research on teacher experiences in northern contexts by centring belonging as a key lens for understanding how teachers navigate recruitment, preparedness, challenges, and retention. While prior research has examined teaching in northern Canadian settings (Bowman, 2018; Janzen & Cranston, 2015; Kitchenham & Chasteauneuf, 2010; Walker, 2024), belonging has not been consistently foregrounded in this way. Focusing on northern Manitoba, the findings show how school-based belonging shapes teachers' adjustment, sense-making, and decisions to remain in the North. The concept of 'feeling at home in teaching' extends existing discussions by framing belonging as dynamic and evolving across personal, cultural, and professional dimensions, offering a more integrated understanding of teacher retention in northern communities.

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