7 of 8: Decreased Planning Time as a Barrier to Reconciliation Education

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Abstract

This article considers the way neoliberal reductions in teacher planning time work to impede progress in reconciliatory education. Methodologically informed by phenomenology, the study described here was qualitative in nature and featured interviews with six Nova Scotia high school teachers who were teaching the social studies course *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*. This paper represents one consideration from the larger study. It focusses on the ways participants pointed to the restrictions on planning time in their workload as a direct impediment to actualizing reconciliatory work in education. Drawing together the literatures of time and neoliberalism in education, the authors argue that without time to engage with colleagues, to connect with students, and to just think about the process of course building, teachers—both in Nova Scotia and internationally—are being moved away from Giroux's (2025) idea of educators as transformatory intellectuals. Teachers need time and space to think and feel their way through the complex histories and contemporary contexts involved in reconciliation, and the data presented in this study suggest that Nova Scotia high school teachers currently have neither. To conclude, the authors call on governments, particularly those that profess a commitment to truth and reconciliation in and through education, to make truth and then reconciliation education more than a discursive shift by abating policies that reduce teacher planning time.

Keywords: reconciliation, reconciliation education, teaching time, neoliberalism

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The Time of Truth and Reconciliation

It has been 10 years since the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) released its calls to action and final report (TRC, 2015). In the ensuing decade, discursive shifts in the way Indigenous topics are discussed in both K-12 and postsecondary education have been plentiful, including the emergence of "truth and then reconciliation education" as a field of study (Howell & Ng-A-Fook, 2023, title). Yet, the literature of truth and then reconciliation education is often replete with descriptions of barriers to substantive change. Indeed, teachers' fears of trespass (Bascuñán et al., 2022), self-presumed lack of knowledge (Dion, 2009), and moves to innocence (or movements in thinking that assuage settler guilt; see Tuck & Yang, 2012) are all commonly referenced as things that need to be worked through in order to actualize meaningful reconciliatory education (Haige-Brown & Green, 2022). The current article contributes to the literature by identifying more of these barriers. Specifically, here we consider how, in Nova Scotia, neoliberal policy in education has reduced teacher planning time, and in doing so impeded the progress of teachers of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* toward creating models of reconciliatory education. We suggest that without the necessary time to think, learn, and reflect on Indigenous issues, efforts toward truth and reconciliation in public education are truncated.

Our discussion of teacher planning time and reconciliatory education emerges from interviews conducted by Susan and supervised by Adrian,[1] with public high school teachers in Nova Scotia. As with all Canadian provinces, Nova Scotia forms a unique curricular context within the landscape of Canadian education. Specifically, in 2015, the government of Nova Scotia signed an agreement with the Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia on treaty education, which made a commitment to "…teach Treaty Education in all classrooms, grades and schools across Nova Scotia, not just in the Mi'kmaq ones" (Treaty Education, n.d., p. 2). This commitment to treaty education was a major step forward for a province that had long ignored and misrepresented Indigenous people within its public curriculum (Peters, 2016). The exception to this systemic erasure was the high school history course *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*, which was originally introduced as *Mi'kmaw Studies 10* in the early 2000s, then rewritten as a grade 11 course in 2016. In its current curriculum document, *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* is described as,

> a course that . . . provides opportunities for learners to gain an understanding of how they [students] are connected to the history and culture of the First Peoples of the Maritimes… enable[ing] them to achieve a greater understanding of, and respect for, both Mi'kmaw society and Mi'kmaw contributions to Canadian society. (Nova Scotia Curriculum, 2016, p. 1)

The six teachers interviewed for this project were all teachers of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*; each of the participants commented on how important the course was and how they often lacked time to do the course the justice they felt it deserved.

In the paper that follows, we present the findings of the interviews in more depth, focusing on the ways that participants pointed to the restrictions on planning time in their workload as a direct impediment to actualizing reconciliatory work in education. To begin, in the next section, we describe the Nova Scotia curricular context in more detail, offering something of a cursory

[1] Susan is a settler-Canadian. Adrian has Indigenous and settler ancestry, and his maternal family are all members of the Qalipu Mi'kmaq First Nation.

literature review in the process. We also describe previous writings around the concept of time in education. Then, we outline the methodology underpinning the larger study. Finally, we turn to the interviews with participants, showing how all the teachers in the study pointed to the lack of time as being a major restriction on their progress toward reconciliatory action in education.

Nova Scotia Social Studies Curriculum, Neoliberalism, and Time

Before proceeding to discuss the methodological positioning of this study and the interviews in more detail, three areas of research deserve some attention: the Nova Scotia curricular context, neoliberalism, and time as manifest in education. This section will discuss each of the above.

First, to contextualize the current education climate in Nova Scotia, in 2018, the provincial government abolished English language school boards and removed principals and vice-principals from the teachers' union (Doucette, 2018). The previously publicly elected school boards were replaced with unelected regional centres for education, and the role of school administrators morphed from one of curriculum leadership and teacher support to that of educational management. A result of these changes is that it has become "easier for a government to impose top-down curricula and directives" (Gillis & Hurd, 2023, para. 9). Specifically, in the six years since Bill-72 (The Education Reform Act) became law, teachers have suffered the consequences of a system that has consistently underfunded and overtasked education support workers (including educational assistants and substitute teachers) and expected teachers to simply fill the gaps left when those workers leave the system (Gillis et al., 2019). A tipping point for high school teachers occurred in 2021, with the imposition of an extra course of study, from six teaching sections per year to seven. With a school day that contains four teaching blocks, this means teachers are in an active instructional role for a full day, at least two, and sometimes three, days per week. In the wake of those changes, teachers have reported increasing workloads, feelings of being overwhelmed and burnt out, and greater than expected numbers have left teaching through retirement and attrition (Agyapong et al., 2024; Cooke, 2024; Laroche, 2022).

The study under consideration in this article looked at a specific course within the Nova Scotia social studies curriculum. There have been a limited number of studies within that specific curriculum context (e.g., Rogers, 2011, 2018; Tinkham, 2013; Tompkins, 2002; Peters, 2016). Despite this dearth, however, it is widely and precisely acknowledged that over the last three decades, regardless of the political party that has formed provincial government, the direction of Nova Scotia educational policy has been toward neoliberalism (Campbell, 2024; Rogers, 2018; see also Frost, 2020). In Nova Scotia, the high school curriculum places a strong emphasis on students choosing courses that will enhance their perceived economic futures, which forms a neoliberal logic that devalues and draws learners away from social studies (Rogers, 2018). Indeed, as discussed by participants below, the social sciences are often and actively devalued relative to the hard sciences in Nova Scotia public schools.

In many ways, the influence of neoliberalism on Nova Scotia's education system mirrors its influence on education globally (Kumar, 2019). Neoliberalism can be described as the ramping up of capitalism, manifest in the removal of social safety nets in favour of an unbridled free market. In education globally, neoliberalism manifests as more teacher accountability measures, an erosion of the autonomy of teachers, more standardized tests with higher stakes, attempts to privatize public education, and a shift in curricular content toward those skills that are most economically rewarding (Giroux, 2013, 2025; Kumar, 2019). In Nova Scotia, many of the above are also true (Campbell, 2024; Rogers, 2018; see also Frost, 2020), and recent research in the province has also

pointed to massive increases in teacher burnout and emotional exhaustion (Agyapong et al., 2024; Ritchie et al., 2023). For us, the two are clearly linked: the conditions of teacher work have become untenable because of the influence of neoliberalism on education, and teachers are suffering as a result.

In this article, we suggest that one precise moment when teachers can feel the effects of neoliberalism is when their time for planning is replaced with more instructional time. As such, time deserves some discussion here as well. While time has not historically been a major focus of educational research, recent work has brought it into the fold of educational thinking. Specifically, Rose and Whitty (2010) argued that time could form something of a tyrannical control over the way learning occurred in the early childhood classroom. In response, Pacini-Ketchabaw (2012) pointed out ways of thinking with time rather than against it. More recently, Saul (2020) has suggested that divergent experiences of time, those that do not conform to the dominant expression of time in school, can be a manifestation of oppression. Adrian has contributed to this work on time as a dimension of education thinking, showing how the industrial expression of time in schooling works against meaningful learning in Indigenous education contexts (Downey, 2021) and through the expression of a lived curriculum more broadly (Downey & Whitty, 2019). As discussed in more detail below, the current research reinforces some of this previous literature, showing that the lack of teacher planning time, as a result of the previously referenced increase of teaching responsibilities from six to seven courses in Nova Scotia high schools, directly impedes progress toward reconciliation in and through education.

Drawing together the literatures of time and neoliberalism in education, we argue that without time to engage with colleagues, to connect with students, and to just think about the process of course building, teachers—both in Nova Scotia and internationally—are being moved away from Giroux's (2025) idea of educators as transformatory intellectuals. Instead, teachers are being tasked with more courses to manage every day, resulting in "the devaluation of critical, intellectual work on the part of teachers and students" (Giroux, 2025, p. 116) and reducing teaching to training. In more traditional Marxist terms, when teachers' planning time is reduced, they are further removed from the "means of production" of knowledge, being treated as trained technicians rather than sensitive and critical intellectual workers. Throughout this piece, we argue that such an erosion of the intellectual autonomy of teachers directly impedes meaningful work toward truth and reconciliation education.

Having now offered some characterization of the curriculum context in Nova Scotia through a discussion of the literatures to which we see this article contributing, we now move on to discuss the methodology of the study.

Methodology

The research reported on in this paper was undertaken as part of Susan's master's thesis (Legge, 2024), which was supervised by Adrian. The larger project worked from the central research question, "What is it like to teach *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*?". The purpose driving this research was to learn what teachers experienced when they taught the course as a way to learn about how reconciliation was being taken up in K-12 education in the province.

Toward the goal of learning what it is like to teach *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*; phenomenology was selected as a guiding methodological framework—specifically, the phenomenological research process described by Carl Moustakas (1994) in his book *Phenomenological Research Methods*. Phenomenology is the study of lived experiences; it is descriptive (about the experience),

reflective (on what has been described), and reflexive on the part of the researcher. The phenomenologist focusses on the experiences of participants in order "to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). This reflection, as expressed by the speaker to the researcher, forms the basis of an interpretation of that experience. From the specific experiences of the individual may come "general or universal meanings" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). It is through this lens of lived experience that insight may be gained into larger systemic processes.

This study reflected the lived experiences of six teachers of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* working in the public school system in Nova Scotia. Semi-structured interviews of between sixty and ninety minutes were conducted with each teacher. Interviews took place between April 1 and May 31 of 2024 and were often held in schools to accommodate the teachers' busy schedules. As part of the informed consent process, each participant was provided with questions for the interview intended to stimulate memories of teaching *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*. Participants were also encouraged to bring topics and personal experiences about teaching the course to share during the interview. During the interviews, Susan posed the following question to each participant: "Can you describe any constraints on how you teach the course?" In their responses to this question, a significant portion of the participants reflected first on increased teaching assignments and decreased preparation time as a constraint to their teaching. In addition, as the final portion of each interview, Susan provided an opportunity for each participant to reflect on topics they wished to discuss in greater detail. Again, participants returned to concerns about the lack of time available to learn from Mi'kmaw Elders and Knowledge Keepers, to create a relevant, anti-colonial curriculum for the course, and to support students as they grappled with the idea of reconciliation in their learning.

Ethics approval for the project was granted by both the University Research Ethics Board and the Regional Centre for Education's Research Department. Because of the tangential relation between the topic of study and the local Indigenous population (i.e., the Mi'kmaq), an exemption was also sought and received from Mi'kmaq Ethics Watch, a committee that reviews research pertaining to Mi'kmaw peoples, knowledges, arts, treaties, spiritualities, and cultures. As per the conditions of participation in the study, each of the six teachers was assigned a pseudonym to ensure the protection of their identity. This was felt to be necessary because participants shared information and experiences that sometimes showed colleagues and administrators in an unfavourable light, and they also spoke frankly about community experiences and political issues.

Generally, the participants' responses fell into two overarching categories that together formed an answer to the research question: the experience of teaching *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* felt constrained and contested (Legge, 2024). It felt contested in the sense that reconciliation is both important and politicized, and non-Indigenous teachers often grappled with their positionality in doing this work. It felt constrained by bureaucratic pressures emergent from the neoliberal education policy described above. In the current article, we focus on one dimension of the constraints teachers faced: time. Although other constraints, such as financial and material support, were mentioned frequently by participants, it was ultimately time that all the teachers asked for repeatedly.

Findings

Having thus discussed the methodology of the larger study and the relationship of the current article to that larger work, we now proceed to discuss the participants' comments about how time prevented progress toward reconciliatory education.

Seven of Eight

In the interviews, I (Susan) was curious to find out if time and money for curriculum development and teacher education connected to reconciliation education and treaty education were being provided in an identifiable way for these teachers. I was disappointed but not surprised by what they told me. The participants spoke about the education system they work in, providing less and less time for them to create curriculum as opposed to more. They spoke of their workload increasing yearly and of planning time being excised from the teaching day (see also Cook, 2024; D'Entremont, 2022, 2024; Kelloway et al., 2015; Lau, 2024; LaRoche, 2022; News-NSTU, 2021; Pacaol, 2021). According to the study participants, the breaking point was reached in September of 2021 when their workload was increased from six of eight teaching sections to seven of eight (see also Nova Scotia Parents, 2021; Frost, 2021). As I listened to the lived experiences of these teachers, a common concern emerged: they were not receiving either the time or the resources needed to plan, to learn, or to work together to create the curriculum called for by the TRC. The phrase I kept hearing that encapsulated this lack: "seven of eight".

As described above, "seven of eight" refers to the increase in the high school teachers' workload from teaching six courses per year to teaching seven. This amounts to a 12.5% increase in teaching time annually. It is another full class (usually between 25 and 30 students) to be planned, taught, evaluated, and reported on for teachers. Depending on whether the additional course is a duplicate of one already on the teacher's course assignment, it may also mean developing plans for an extra course of study. Three years into the change, a high school teacher in this system is teaching four out of four periods of the day (i.e., all day with only a lunch break) between two and three days a week. One participant expressed specific concerns about the effect of the increased workload, saying, "I think it's scary… doing seven of eight [courses]. If I were teaching five new courses a year… and I was trying to come up with this [Mi'kmaw Studies curriculum] on my own, I just feel like I wouldn't do it justice". Each participant in the study acknowledged that the curriculum document produced in 2016 by the Nova Scotia Department of Education provided a starting place for curriculum development but also pointed out that assignments and support material for teaching had to be sought out from external sources. A majority of teachers understand that creating classroom material is an expectation of the job. Nonetheless, being given the responsibility of teaching between twenty and thirty additional students over the school year and then being expected to create a curriculum from scratch is a significant increase in workload. During the 2022/23 school year, the second when this increased workload was in place, Agyapong et al. (2024) collected data from Nova Scotia teachers that revealed 77% of the respondents to the survey felt emotionally exhausted by their current working conditions. This statistic lends support to the experience of the study participants, one of whom told me as she reflected on her own increased course load, "I'm so tired, Susan, I'm just so tired… [I need] time, time."

The impact of this increased workload on the teachers I spoke to was profound and complicated. Five of the six teachers interviewed had worked in the Nova Scotia education system before the change, and they felt and saw the effects of having substantially less time to spend developing curriculum, working with students, and being involved with the life of the school. The sixth teacher, who was new to teaching, simply felt overwhelmed by the workload but had no experience of teaching before the addition of the seventh course, and thus did not refer directly to

the change to seven out of eight. Looking more specifically to developing education for reconciliation, the teachers were concerned that they were not working toward an anti-colonial pedagogy in their classrooms in large part because of the time constraints and mental fatigue created by their increased workload.

Time Constraints and Developing Anti-colonial Classrooms

All six teachers in the study felt *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* was a useful starting place to teach students about reconciliation and the role that Canadians must undertake in this process. One participant reflected on both the process of reconciliation, as she perceived it, and how the course provides a beginning step of understanding, and perhaps action, for students. She said,

> You can't have reconciliation without understanding, and you can't have understanding without the truth, right? So, I see the Mi'kmaw Studies course as being part of the truth-telling that has to happen. I see it as being a door to the conversation of reconciliation for a lot of young people… They are open and want to learn and understand and are primed and ready in a lot of ways… Reconciliation is the end that we hope for, but there's a lot that has to happen in between the truth-telling and the reconciliation, too. I think justice is like the missing word from this conversation; it's that you tell the truth, and then there has to be justice. And there has to be restitution. You can't have reconciliation without restitution… we talk a lot about how messy it all is… reconciliation is messy, and painful.

Reflecting on her words, creating a curriculum to help students understand what it means to live as treaty people is a complex undertaking, and *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* is a resource that can assist in that process. *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* was created by a joint committee of Mi'kmaw and settler educators and has been available to high school students in Nova Scotia for almost ten years in its current form. Although the present curriculum document is strong in terms of historical knowledge and cultural practices, there is much work to be done to update the course as we move toward models of anti-colonial education and reconciliation. As above and below, a major impediment to that work is the demand on the time of teachers who are tasked with ever-increasing numbers of courses and students.

The majority of teachers currently teaching *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* in Nova Scotia are not Mi'kmaq, and as a result, are faced with a huge learning curve of both content and pedagogical philosophies as they work to implement this course for students. Within this study, every participant expressed a desire for professional development specifically targeted at the *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* curriculum, anti-colonial education practices, and ways to teach about reconciliation. They were interested in time for teachers of the course to work together to share and create resources, and to read, think and learn about reconciliation education. In the words of the participants: "there's so much to learn". All the teachers I spoke to understood that curriculum development will necessarily extend beyond the teaching day, no matter what course is being taught. However, with two to three days of the teaching week without any preparation time to even arrange peer-to-peer consultation or make contacts outside the school environment, more of the workload is shifted to post-work hours. This is compounded by the addition of more students that each teacher is responsible for as a result of the increased course load.

The two participants who were new to teaching the course related that they spent inordinate amounts of time just locating resources. Although there is a course document available, unless a mentor teacher for *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* is on staff and willing to share their own course material, the expectation voiced by the teachers I spoke to was that they were responsible for creating their

own instructional materials. When asked about potential support at the board level for a teacher new to the course, one participant responded that she didn't even know who to contact.

Additionally, the teachers in this study, recognizing the limitations of their own knowledge and experience, expressed a desire for opportunities to be taught by Mi'kmaw Elders and Knowledge Keepers. Such a desire is reasonable given the ways that Indigenous people have often been misrepresented in settler-run education systems (Peters, 2016). Indeed, Newhouse and Quantick (2022) note that "the Indigeneity of the instructor is critical for courses that deal explicitly with Indigenous culture and Indigenous Knowledge" (p. 275) in the context of their university courses, and similar sentiments were held by some participants about the *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* course—that it would be best taught by a Mi'kmaw person. While recognizing this desire to learn directly from Mi'kmaw Elders and Knowledge Keepers comes from a good place, it must also be acknowledged that such a desire can put an undue burden on Indigenous people to educate non-Indigenous people. In reconciliatory work, settler folk, thus, have some obligation to educate themselves and their kin with publicly available resources and events before looking directly to Indigenous people for significant education pieces that require explanation, demonstration, or discussion from the community (Toulouse, 2016; see also Atho, 2019; Chapman & Whiteford, 2017; Ducharme, 2013). For the participants, however, there was no budget or time commitment available from the teacher's school administration or centres for education to support connecting with Elders or Knowledge Keepers, and so their learning was limited to secondary sources.

Only two of the six participants had their own connections in the Mi'kmaw community that they could contact with questions about the curriculum. The participant who was brand new to the Nova Scotia education system explained that a timetable where he taught all four periods of the day for three days of the week meant that there was literally no time in the school day for him to meet with mentor teachers or other support staff (including the Indigenous student support worker[2] based in the school). He said, "Often I'm busy throughout working hours, and then, like at 3:30, okay, I'm finally free, but the support staff are already gone." Many support staff positions in Nova Scotia high schools are either part-time or split between more than one school, and so not being able to meet with these staff members during their actual work hours meant that there was no way to meet at all. Mentor teachers are also in the same position with workday time challenges, and so scheduling professional development with other teachers did mean looking to the pre- or post-school day, which also presents challenges.

A related issue is the lack of support by the Nova Scotia Board of Education for learning experiences for students beyond the typical western classroom. Each of the participants who had taught *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* before 2020 recalled how resources, like field trips and guest speakers, did seem more available then but were noticeably absent now. In their words, "[Now] buses are not available; money is not available… there's no coverage [for classroom teachers] because of seven of eight [courses being taught by high school teachers]. It used to work, but not now…" One

[2] The job description of Indigenous student support workers in Nova Scotia is to work directly with Indigenous students in the school to "ensure improved achievement and a positive school experience" (Halifax Regional, 2024, Scope of Responsibilities section, para. 1) for Indigenous students. Assisting teachers to create relevant programming is not part of their job description. Nonetheless, the experience of the study participants was that the Indigenous support workers in their schools did take time from their already oversubscribed daily schedules to help *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* teachers with curriculum development and Indigenous pedagogies.

teacher recalled pre-pandemic times at her school: "[One year] I had seven, I think, guest speakers… We went to a powwow at Dalhousie, we went to Millbrook cultural centre, we took a bus to Debert and did the Debert walking trail… It was amazing." A second teacher spoke about feeling stymied by board policy and lack of administrative support at her school,

> To bring in guest speakers now, the board has made that almost impossible. I tried to have one last year… It has to be approved by the principal… and, when I tried last year, it was just like I'm [the principal] too busy, I don't have time for that right now, and it didn't happen.

A third teacher mused on what is missed as a result of these policies and the new time constraint:

> And you can talk about those things in a classroom, but it's not nearly as impactful… [Now], those things are expensive, hard to organize, hard to make work logistically… even something as simple as going to Millbrook to the cultural centre… Even something that should be pretty simple is difficult to arrange.

These teachers understood what was possible and yet found themselves increasingly frustrated with the continued neoliberal erosion in the system where they work of a basic teaching resource: time.

Effects of Neoliberalism on the Education System

The teachers I spoke to offer a window into an education system they see as less and less supportive of teachers. Twenty years after the publication of Giroux and Giroux's (2006) "Challenging Neoliberalism's New World Order: The Promise of Critical Pedagogy", it is clear that the authors' worries about an education system fallen victim to a neoliberal agenda, where students are simply a convenient product and teachers are the widget makers tasked with their creation, has come to pass in Nova Scotia. The stressor that continues to build for teachers is the ever-increasing speed of the assembly line on which these student "products" are expected to be "manufactured".

As alluded to above, participants discussed their experiences with lack of support for teacher professional development and course funding of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* as tied to the perception within their schools and centres for education that *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* is a social science course and, as a result, not worthy of any extra expenditures to support either new or experienced teachers to deepen their understanding of the course material and pedagogies. In their experience, the Nova Scotia education system is marginalizing its investment in both the course and its teachers because there is no perceived economic gain for students flowing from the credit. Ironically, the environmental science course called *Netukulimk 12,* currently being piloted in Nova Scotia public high schools, is an Indigenous knowledge course that is receiving large amounts of government funding and release time for teachers involved in the pilot (CBC News, 2024; Nova Scotia, 2024). Why are these funds available for one course and not another? One study participant opined that *Netukulimk 12* is a senior-level science course and Mi'kmaw Studies is a grade 11 social studies course, so "make the connection". An examination of the difference between who is expected by the system to be in a senior science class (*Netukulimk 12*) versus an open social studies class (*Mi'kmaw Studies 11*) points to a bias of resources being made available to a university stream science course rather than an open-level social studies class. As Rogers (2020) puts it, "Nova Scotia demonstrates the neoliberal education reform pattern perfectly: consult, reform, dismantle, and repeat" (p. 8). There's no easy solution for teachers when the government that controls

education funding appears to dismiss the value of the course (*Mi'kmaw Studies 11*) you are teaching.

All six participants referred to constraints on their time for curriculum development and student contact, and even their personal health and work-life balance, as a result of their current workload. One participant's reflection was particularly poignant, as he delineated the effects for both teachers and students of increased teaching time and decreased time to prepare for classes and interact with students:

> We need to know our kids in order to teach them. And yet we are not given the opportunity to know them. If this [*Mi'kmaw Studies 11*] is truly going to be a success, if the message of what happened to the Mi'kmaw people and the importance of the culture itself surviving is going to be taught, we need to know our kids. We need to be given the opportunity. And seven out of eight don't allow that. Not being able to do things with our kids outside of the classroom doesn't allow that because we don't have the time to do it. We don't have the time to improve our teaching methods, and we don't have the time to learn the things we need.

This experience is reflected in the literature, which comments on the trend toward educational systems directing resources primarily to skill-based education:

> Everywhere we look these days, there is evidence of education being understood as an economic good. Parents navigate 'education markets' in the hope of choosing 'the best' school for their children. Policymakers talk about the economic benefits of increasing young people's literacy and numeracy skills… public schools increasingly operate like private businesses. More than ever before, school principals are positioned as managers, accountable to the needs and wishes of 'clients' (parents and students). The content of school curricula is also being reimagined in line with changing economic demands... and a focus on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). (Savage, 2017, p. 143)

This dilemma of more students and less time is premised on a capitalist business model of neoliberal ideals that value most "efficiency and accountability through measurable performance standards and extensive standardized testing" (Scheutze et al., 2011, p. 79), demonstrating the change in school culture(s) from "a collectivist and public orientation to norms of individualism and… parental choice that is the result of neoliberal economism" (Scheutze et al., 2011, p. 79). While the education system in Nova Scotia today, like many across the world, was built on an industrial model of production, the neoliberal push in the last three decades has intensified the system, pushing it to its limits on the backs of a teacher population that is increasingly burnt out.

Without the time to work with colleagues, to connect with students, and to just think about the process of course building, the teachers in this study are being moved away from their status as intellectual workers who work with students to think about why things are not just "how to". The participants in the study recognized Giroux's (2025) concern that being tasked with more courses to manage every day is resulting in "the devaluation of critical, intellectual work on the part of teachers and students" (Giroux, 2025, p. 116) and that as a result "teaching is reduced to training" (Giroux, 2003, p. 2). These teachers were frustrated by a system that viewed time as a precious resource only when it pertained to direct instruction. With that in mind, the notion of rebuilding a curriculum to reflect the expectations of the TRC's calls to action 62 and 63, which deal with making age-appropriate curriculum around residential schools and supporting

Indigenous education more broadly, is being subsumed into an education machine focussed on students as products rather than critical thinkers.

The Dream of Time to Read and Think

This growing lack of time during the school day for high school teachers in Nova Scotia to think, create, and connect heightens a fear in the participants about presenting culturally specific subject matter and pedagogies that, coming from a non-Indigenous person, might appear appropriative or disingenuous as a result of ignorance or incomplete knowledge. The non-Indigenous participants talked about being so taxed by student needs and increasing amounts of administrative paperwork that they simply had no energy left for deeper dives into curriculum. For example, they expressed trepidation about teaching Mi'kmaw vocabulary as they worried about creating unintentional offence with mispronunciation or incorrect translation. One participant's reflection encapsulated the feelings of most, saying,

> I have qualms about being the person passing on this knowledge to people who again are essentially outsiders as I am... it is a bit of a dance because I am not [Indigenous], but I'm gonna share what I know and have come to understand with you because that's my job and that's what I've been hired to do. But I need you to know why I shouldn't be and why I am and why there's no alternative here at the moment.

This worry about making mistakes is addressed within the literature (Downey, 2018; Bascuñán et al., 2022; Carroll et al., 2020; Koops, 2018; Rice et al., 2022); the overall conclusion of the researchers is that mistakes are a part of learning and that fear of getting something wrong isn't a sufficient reason for not teaching it (Bascuñán et al., 2022). Further to that is an understanding that neither learners nor teachers are perfect and that the work toward anti-colonial education and reconciliation will be imperfect:

> Moving from anxiety and feelings of discomfort to action is necessary for educators in all settler colonial contexts […] Although we can never be 'perfect' as settlers, we can aim to be imperfect accomplices – always striving to work with and for Indigenous peoples on their lands. (Carroll et al., 2020, p. 17)

The literature does support that a greater good is accomplished for reconciliation education through educators who are willing to take the chance of making mistakes, and that this is preferable to being Dion's (2007) "perfect stranger," too nervous to even try. But this knowledge is presented in academic scholarship, and it is not readily available to classroom teachers whose available time is spent, according to the study participants, just fulfilling the demands of the day. This paralysis of teachers as "perfect strangers" without the time to even find these academic conversations, let alone engage in peer discussions around them or work through their own discomfort, is precisely illustrative of the problem under discussion. Teaching well cannot be rushed, least of all when the topic requires a high level of reflexivity.

It is worth noting, briefly, that in recent years, faculties of education in the province have begun offering pre-service teachers' courses in Indigenous education, with some including them as mandatory in their programs. Those courses offer an initial space for a deeper consideration of Indigenous topics, including but transcending the teaching of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*, but given their

relatively recent inclusion in B.Ed. programs,[3] many teachers in the province have not had coursework in Indigenous education as part of their primary teacher certification.

A related desire/dream expressed by the study participants was to have time to read widely, think deeply, and work together to learn about reconciliation and anticolonial education models. In the words of the participants: "I want some time to be able to sit down and collaborate with many different people about how to do this [teach *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*] and how to do it well" and "If they [centres for education] really care, we need time for more teachers to work together." Unfortunately, this dream was being set aside as a result of the ever-increasing workload demanded by neoliberal policy reforms, which left no time even to search out relevant materials. Classroom teachers are too often expected to create student materials "right now" and then catch up with the research literature when (and if) they can. Their curriculum becomes a surface pedagogy with little opportunity for deep reflection or sometimes even awareness of exactly what is being talked about in the wider academic community. The teachers I spoke to want more than this. They identify with Carolyn Roberts' description of what it means to be an accomplice to Indigenous people, to be

> someone who is always learning more, asking more questions, and always taking it upon themselves to do better in the spaces they are in. Knowing that in education, the narrative is always shifting and it will always be a learning journey, not a destination. (Roberts, n.d., para. 8)

This vision of education as a process of continual learning was a dream for the participants, one that had continually been stifled by the increasing demands of their jobs.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have highlighted the myriad ways in which public high school teachers in Nova Scotia point to time as being a limiting factor in preventing them from doing more meaningful reconciliatory work in education. While specific to the context of Nova Scotia curriculum, this finding is anticipated by earlier work on time in education (e.g., Rose & Whitty, 2010; Downey & Whitty, 2019). While some argue that time is something that can be worked-with (Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2012), there remains a tyranny about the way time is operationalized in schools for both students and teachers.

This tyranny is felt acutely as neoliberal education policy, the presence of which has been well-documented in the context of Nova Scotia (e.g., Campbell, 2024; Rogers, 2018), restricts teachers' time for reflection and planning in favour of classroom instruction time. In many ways, the change from six to seven out of eight identified by these teachers is a precise manifestation of what Giroux (2025) might call the erosion of the intellectual status of the teacher. Rather than being viewed as sensitive, thoughtful, and reflective intellectual workers, teachers are treated as cogs in a system, who are only useful to that system when they are actively engaged in the act of teaching. Their mere presence becomes more important than their actual work.

These conditions are untenable for teachers, as has been shown by the research pointing to the extensive emotional exhaustion teachers experience these days (Agyapong et al., 2024; Ritchie et al., 2023). Here, the intensification (but also routinization and bureaucratization) of teacher work

[3] As an example from the experience of the Authors, our university first offered a course on Indigenous education in 2015 as an elective. It was made mandatory for secondary education students in 2021-2022 and mandatory for elementary education students in 2024-2025. It is, of course, possible that our university is an exception in the region. Future research may be warranted in teacher education's role in reconciliation education in Nova Scotia.

manifests in the decrease of planning time, which not only results in teacher fatigue and burnout as suggested by previous research, directly impedes the work toward reconciliation being done in classrooms. Teachers need time and space to think and feel their way through the complex histories and contemporary contexts involved in reconciliation, and the data presented here suggest that teachers currently have neither.

To conclude our paper, then, we call on governments, particularly those that profess a commitment to truth and reconciliation in and through education, to make truth and (then) reconciliation education more than a discursive shift by abating policies that reduce teacher planning time. We recognize that our call may well go unheeded in the context of Nova Scotia, as a current shortage of teachers has spurred the progressive conservative government to propose drastic decreases in the requirements for teacher education in the province (Ayers, 2024; Henderson, 2024). Yet, even in the face of neoliberal policy, we remain heartened by teachers' commitments to reconciliation. The teachers interviewed for this study want to do more to actualize meaningful reconciliatory education with their students, and every day, they make incredible things happen, even as their working conditions deteriorate. In short, teachers want to do this and do it well, and it is *time* that government, administration, and society more broadly give them the time and space to do so.

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