

Grounding Teacher Leadership in the Politics of the Canadian Provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta

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Abstract

This article presents the findings of the second stage of the *International Study of Teacher Leadership*. The primary research question is *How do teacher leaders understand and enact influence in the political and social dimensions of their societies?* It describes the results of a scoping review of the contexts for teacher leaders in the Canadian provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta. The results of the scoping review are framed by the *collective memory* of residents of the provinces to highlight critical political, economic, cultural, and historical milestones. Seven key concepts emerged from an analysis of the milestones; they are described using the terms: context triggers, expect surprises, power fluctuates, uncertainty persists, events shape values, leading is political, and questions abound. The seven concepts suggest guiding questions for the oral histories that will be part of the next stage of the international study.

Keywords: Teacher leadership, politics of teacher leadership, western Canada, teacher leadership context, collective memory, scoping review

Introduction

Teacher leadership is an important focus of research and publication in Canada. A recent edited book (Smith & Schnellert, 2025) profiled several research reports about teacher leadership. The chapters focused on teacher leadership within Canadian K-12 classrooms and schools, within and beyond K-12 school systems, and in post-secondary teacher education programs. They represented a wide range of epistemological perspectives, reflecting the complexity of the construct of teacher leadership and ongoing ambiguity about its definition. The edited book also demonstrated the relevance of teacher leadership to learning communities (Watson & Sokugawa, 2025), women in education (Tucker et al., 2025), and inclusive curricula (Mahmud & Saleheen, 2025).

Learning to Lead

Other Canadian researchers have noted the increased capacity of school personnel to respond to demands for educational change when formal leaders collaborated with teacher leaders to gather information, co-construct knowledge, and share decision-making. For example, Hill and Sietz (2023) described shared leadership in culturally responsive assessment and reporting practices in an Indigenous school community. Brown and Friesen (2023) reported that multi-level collaboration among teacher leaders, assistant principals, and principals improved student learning outcomes throughout a large urban school district. Osmond-Johnson (2019) shared how teacher leadership in Saskatchewan was facilitated by inviting volunteer teachers to participate in a workshop series designed to develop their identities as learning leaders. Riveros et al. (2013) identified that teacher leaders who participated in a province-wide teacher-

leadership development program gained a broader knowledge of leadership and policy by working in multiple schools and school systems.

Operationalizing Teacher Leadership

Canadian researchers recognized suggestions in the literature (Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004) that teacher leadership is not clearly defined. They also noted the range of terms used to describe teacher leadership, such as distributed leadership and parallel leadership (Crowther, 2011; Nguyen et al., 2020). However, Canadian researchers have used variations of the definitions provided by Katzenmeyer and Moller (2016). For example, Friesen and Brown (2022) described teacher leaders as “classroom teachers who hold classroom teaching responsibility while also assuming a leadership role in improving and strengthening the instructional practices of other teachers in the school through mentoring individual teachers and leading the professional learning community” (p. 255).

Learners in Canadian schools represent diverse religions, languages, cultures, races, gender orientations, and developmental stages, leading to calls to engage teacher leaders who can question dominant cultures and promote equity and successful learning for all students (Cherkowski, 2010). Educators also must develop the leadership skills associated with navigating cultural dissonance, collaborating with settlement agencies, negotiating openness to cross-gender communication, and confronting negative views of newcomers (Okoko, 2019).

Politics of Teacher Leadership

Changes to the skills and knowledge required of teacher leaders are particularly evident in Alberta. Webber (2023a) described the power struggles between the provincial government and the teachers' union over curricular decision-making and mandated student assessment. Debates about school choice, educational funding, and preferred pedagogical approaches dominate educational discourse. A recent study reported teacher perceptions of the intensification of their work due to the increasing complexity of student learning needs, worsening working relations with parents, district-level directives, and provincial policy changes (Stelmach et al., 2024).

The political dimension of teacher leadership has emerged as one of the more daunting components of leading in classrooms and school communities. The *International Study of Teacher Leadership* (www.mru.ca/istl) addressed the question “How is teacher leadership conceptualized and enacted, and what are the implications for educational stakeholders?” The research team (Webber & Andrews, 2023) found that teacher leaders are largely unprepared to ameliorate the inequalities and instabilities resulting from historical social trauma, such as residential schools for Indigenous children (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015) and recent demands on Alberta schools due to unprecedented population growth at a rate “never seen in a developed country since the 1950s” (Serebrin, 2024, para. 3).

This report describes the next step in the *International Study of Teacher Leadership*. It is an exploration of the political, social, and historical dimensions of teacher leadership.

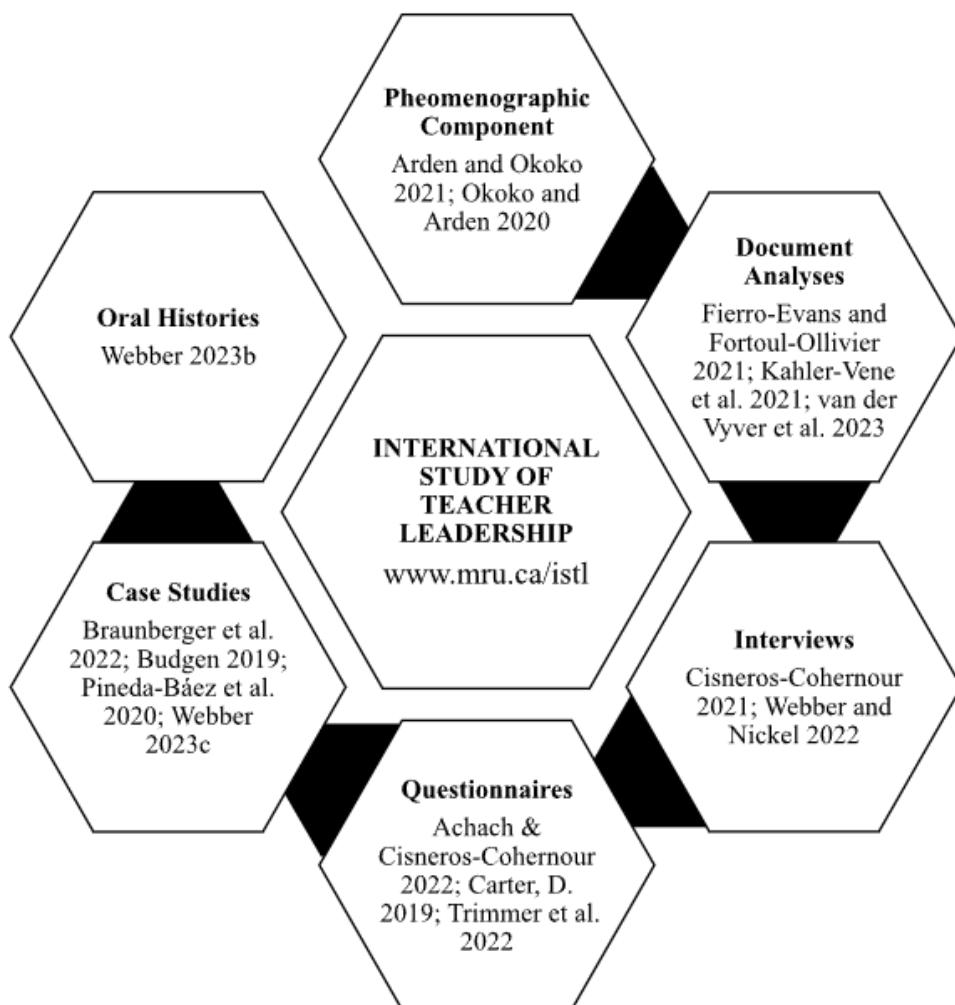
The International Study of Teacher Leadership

The first stage of the *International Study of Teacher Leadership* (ISTL I) was a study conducted in 12 countries with the purpose of contributing to the wider understanding of teacher leadership and of how professional development and university programs might contribute to

teacher leadership knowledge and skill development (www.mru.ca/istl). Its primary research question was *How is teacher leadership conceptualized and enacted and what are the implications for educational stakeholders?*

The ISTL I began with a phenomenographic component in which research team members analyzed the knowledge and assumptions about teacher leadership they each brought to the study. Figure 1 depicts subsequent stages of the study that included (1) analyses of government, university, and professional documents relating to teacher leadership, (2) interviews with teacher leaders in early, mid, and late career stages, identified by research team members and nominated by colleagues, supervisors, and students, (3) questionnaires administered to samples of teachers and principals, (4) case studies of schools reputed to be successful examples of teacher leadership, and (5) oral histories of classroom-based teacher leaders whose professional practices resonated throughout their school districts, nationally, and even internationally.

Figure 1
International Study of Teacher Leadership Research Design



One of the ISTL I team's key observations was the importance of context, particularly the influence of sociocultural and political factors. Others were the unprecedented pace of change fueled by technological innovations, a global pandemic, refugees fleeing political and economic strife, and groups seeking corrections of historical injustices. Teachers who emerged as influencers invariably encountered some degree of professional turbulence. They had to attend to their professional safety and occasionally to their personal safety. Webber and Andrews (2023) cautioned, "The enactment of teacher leadership can be a fragile and politicized process" (p. 344).

Thus, the ISTL team proceeded with Stage II, designed to facilitate deeper understandings of the role of classroom-based teacher leaders in increasingly politicized and rapidly changing contexts. The ISTL II primary research question is: *How do teacher leaders understand and enact influence in the political and social dimensions of their societies?* The ISTL II has two major components. The first involves a review of the political, economic, cultural, and historical contexts of each research team member's setting. Researcher team members are using, for example, systematic review and/or scoping review methodologies. During the second component, the ISTL research team members in different cultural contexts will address the primary research question by selecting from a variety of qualitative research methodologies: (1) cross-cultural narrative inquiry, (2) oral history, (3) definitional ceremony, and (4) social network analysis.

The following report, situated in the Canadian provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta, relates to the first component of the ISTL II, with a particular focus on the political, economic, cultural, and historical factors that are major influences on teacher leaders.

Methodology

The research team was informed by how Zawacki-Richter et al. (2020) described the process of conducting systematic reviews. For example, the ISTL team collectively drew upon ISTL I findings to develop ISTL II research questions and the study design. However, several factors led the researchers to move beyond the highly structured systematic review design process. For instance, the intercultural settings for the research, the range of descriptions of teacher leadership, the relevance of context, and the broad interpretations of what is meant by teacher leadership during *politicized and rapid social change*, precluded a tightly structured working hypothesis. Instead, the team sought to identify understandings, patterns, and factors that support and limit teacher leadership.

The researchers felt that following a systematic review process could be valuable but potentially restrictive. Thus, they drew upon components of a scoping review, described by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) as an attempt to map key concepts within a research area and to identify main information sources. Arksey and O'Malley (2005) suggested that researchers "may not wish to place strict limitations on search terms, identification of relevant studies, or study selection at the outset. The process is not linear but iterative, requiring researchers to engage with each stage in a reflexive way..." (p. 22). The description of a scoping review was enriched by this definition:

Scoping reviews are a type of evidence synthesis that aims to systematically identify and map the breadth of evidence available on a particular topic, field, concept, or issue, often irrespective of source (i.e., primary research, reviews, non-empirical evidence) within or

across particular contexts. Scoping reviews can clarify key concepts/definitions in the literature and identify key characteristics or factors related to a concept, including those related to methodological research. (Munn et al., 2022, p. 950)

Topics included in the scoping review were selected following multiple searches of academic databases, museum archives, provincial and Canadian government documents, encyclopedias, newspaper archives, educational magazines, teacher union documents, and educational websites. Search terms included teacher leadership, shared leadership, school culture, educational change, economic drivers, immigration patterns, educational context, teacher professionalism, politics of education, Indigenous education, collective memory, and systematic review.

Themes were identified through repeated readings of information sources using the following criteria: (1) pertinence to educational systems in Alberta and Saskatchewan, (2) frequency of appearance in information sources, (3) magnitude of influence on education, (4) relevance to educational leadership, (5) cultural linkages to Canada's three founding nations: English, French, and First Nations, (6) accommodation of changing cultural dynamics, (7) implications for teacher leaders.

Western Canada Context

The relationship between educational leadership and context is widely discussed in the literature (Day, 2005; Moos et al., 2008; Willower, 1987). Some debate centers on how context may be understood to be person-, school-, and community-centered (Elonga Mboyo, 2021) or as a set of constraints (Evers & Lakomski, 2022).

Krikorian (2021) argued that historical events affect the evolution of educational contexts. Although their argument was offered in relation to American higher education, the following abbreviated history of Alberta and Saskatchewan is offered in conjunction with a parallel argument; that is, the historical, political, and economic precursors to current K-12 education systems in the Canadian prairie provinces provide foundational knowledge for formal and informal leaders in the 21st century. It is argued here that the absence of teacher leaders' understanding of the *collective memory* (Isurin, 2017) situated in the context of their professional practice may serve as the antecedent to weak or failed leadership. Educational leaders benefit from understanding the "social environment in which such memories are constructed, their dynamic nature, and their tendency to be constantly reconstructed" (Isurin, 2017, p. 9).

It is important to state that there are multiple definitions of collective memory, but there is a common notion that it refers to images of the past shared by a specific social group and interpreted consciously and subconsciously by individuals as they connect to the people around them (Wójcicka, 2019).

The following section is an overview of the western Canadian context for the research. It is a necessarily incomplete snapshot of contextual factors that influence teacher leadership in Saskatchewan and Alberta. A guiding assumption is that conditions for teacher leaders are difficult to understand without knowing contextual details. This assumption was influenced by a systems thinking view of leadership and context (Gurr et al., 2020). Another assumption is that "knowing the historical and social context of one's own cultural location is crucial to appreciating the multiple perspectives of events in the past and the multiple ways they survive in evidence and can be interpreted today" (Peers & Podruchny, 2010, p. 9). This paper also draws

upon the work of Hallinger (2018) to consider the political, economic, cultural, and community dimensions of Alberta and Saskatchewan that impact current manifestations of teacher leadership.

A Very Brief History

Thousands of years before Saskatchewan and Alberta became known as Canadian provinces, the region was populated by Indigenous people who traveled and lived in approximately the northern third of North America. Brown (2017) posited that they were the ancestors of the current Cree population in western Canada. Contact with Europeans was documented in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, beginning with settlements established by French and English fur traders and colonists in eastern Canada. The demand by Europeans for North American beaver furs used in the hat-making industry propelled the fur trade westward.

Innis (1970) argued that the fur trade launched a European and Indigenous economic network extending from the Labrador coast to the Alaskan border. He described the establishment of the Hudson's Bay Company and the Northwest Company as central to the increased European presence in North America. In 1670, King Charles II of England granted the Hudson's Bay Company fur trading rights to a large area called Rupert's Land, broadly considered to be "along the coasts and confines of Hudson Bay and connecting waterways" (Brown, 2017, p. 32), a region that now contains present-day Saskatchewan and Alberta. The Hudson's Bay Company continued as a trading company and a major corporate entity with large department stores across Canada. *The Bay*, as it came to be known, operated uninterrupted from 1670 until it closed on June 1, 2025 (Desai, 2025).

This brief historical overview cannot highlight all events that contributed to Alberta's and Saskatchewan's cultural, economic, and educational makeup. However, one of the longest-lasting influences on the provinces occurred on September 13, 1759, far from the Canadian prairies in a field outside of Quebec City. The Battle on the Plains of Abraham was a brief conflict that resulted in the deaths of both the English General Wolfe and the French General Montcalm. It marked the loss of French control of New France, although French settlers retained the French language, culture, and religious practices that exist in present-day francophone culture in Quebec and, to a lesser extent, throughout Canada (MacLeod, 2008). It led to the enshrinement in the British North America Act of provincial control of education and the preservation of Catholic and public schools (Webber, 2023a). As a result, Saskatchewan and Alberta have publicly funded Catholic and public-school systems, plus French language instruction in both. The Battle on the Plains of Abraham also shapes modern-day discourse about school curriculum in Quebec and other provinces. "One can argue that 1759 does not belong primarily to a past that we might wish to study and understand, but, rather to a present and a future that we might wish to shape and control" (Letourneau, 2012, p. 279).

Another important event in the evolution of western Canada was the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) in 1885. It had been promised to encourage British Columbia to join Confederation and to assuage worries of American expansionism. It required negotiations that established treaties between First Nations and the Government of Canada. The treaties continue to exist, but the fulfillment of the promises to First Nations contained in them is contested to the present (Lavalle, 2023; Tasker, 2025).

Other events of the mid-1880s continue to be prominent in the history of Alberta and Saskatchewan, particularly the North-West Resistance and the Cree uprisings of 1884 and 1885. The Metis Resistance, led by Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont, was motivated by the refusal of

the Canadian government to recognize Metis ownership of their farmlands. The protest resulted in a military engagement with the North-West Mounted Police that ended with the capture, trial, and hanging of Louis Riel. Eight leaders of the Cree uprisings were also hanged, while several others were given prison sentences (Beal et al., 2016).

Completion of the CPR facilitated the arrival of immigrant settlers who were given homesteads on lands previously inhabited by Indigenous peoples. Waves of immigrants helped develop farming, mining, and resource extraction in Alberta and Saskatchewan, industries that remain central to their economies. Like the motivations of more recent immigrants, the settlers who came to Canada in the 19th and 20th centuries sought economic opportunities and refuge from political conflict and oppression. Their cultural diversity contributed to the current and sometimes contested reputation of Canada as a nation that embraces multiculturalism (Gagnon, 2022).

Teacher leaders in Alberta and Saskatchewan operate within the tightly intertwined influences of language, religion, royal proclamations, colonization, loss of Indigenous homelands, and intermittent waves of culturally diverse immigrants. These influences, and others, contribute to a concurrently deeply integrated yet often divisive cultural consciousness that is difficult for educational outsiders to comprehend and navigate.

Geography, Climate, and Work

Alberta and Saskatchewan, along with Manitoba, are known as Canada's prairie provinces. The southern regions of the provinces are described as *The Dry Belt*, where the climate is dry in summers and harsh in winters (Marchildon et al., 2009). The area experiences intermittent severe droughts, with particularly catastrophic droughts in the 1920s and 1930s that contributed to what Jones (2018) described as a disruption to social cohesion and depopulation.

The severe drought in southern Saskatchewan and Alberta that lasted through the 1930s is a central component of the collective memory of the citizens of those provinces. "Those years of devastation are called the *Dirty Thirties* and 70 years later they still loom over prairie culture....It is a cultural yardstick against which all else is measured" (Dyck, 2005). It coincided with a world economic depression called the *Great Depression*, which began in 1929.

The Great Depression affected all of Canada, but the impact on the prairie provinces was devastating. The era was characterized by low prices on commodities like wheat, plus international economic warfare in the form of high tariffs and surplus dumping. Thousands of farmers and business owners unable to pay taxes abandoned their properties. The combination of drought and economic depression contributed to the 1930s being remembered as one of the bleakest eras in Canadian history. "The images of the Depression include bread lines and the dust clouds sweeping over drought-stricken Saskatchewan" (Horn, 1984, p. 3).

Unemployment during the Great Depression was nationwide. The federal government of Prime Minister R.B. Bennett helped by establishing relief camps throughout the west where unemployed workers were provided "room and board, plus 20 cents per day [to] build highways and airstrips" (Canadian Press, 1995). In June 1935, approximately 1,000 relief-camp men left Vancouver intending to ride freight trains to Ottawa to protest their living conditions and unemployment. Called the *On-to-Ottawa Trek*, the protesters swelled to 1,500 men by the time they reached Regina, the capital city of Saskatchewan, on July 1, Canada's Dominion Day. There, members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and Regina City Police attempted to arrest the protesters. The result was a "pitched battle between the police and trekkers and citizens ... The toll from the riot was two dead...hundreds injured, and thousands of dollars damage to

the city" (Waiser, 2015, p. 409). The Regina Riot, as the incident was named, is a landmark event in the history of western Canada:

It produced psychological as well as physical deprivations whose full effects are impossible to assess. Who can know, for example, what price in personal health the children of the Depression have paid or are paying? But the effects were real, and so were the lessons that people drew. A generation learned that the independence and security they gained from work were largely illusory. Most must have realized that their incomes were at the mercy of forces beyond their control. They also knew that loss of work and income meant loss of status and even self-respect, losses to be guarded against at almost any cost. (Horn, 1984, p. 20)

The combined influences of geography, climate, and work mean that teacher leadership in the prairie provinces is shaped by underlying and often unconscious historical anxieties about social and economic stability.

Economy

While the fur trade was the driver behind the early exploration of western Canada by Europeans, and the completion of the CPR was the facilitator of massive international migration to the region, agriculture has been a mainstay of its economy since the latter part of the 19th century (Danysk, 2014). The early 20th century was marked by the transition from an Indigenous society of "hunting, fur trading, and self-sufficient farming to one of a European society geared toward commercial agriculture for an international market" (Danysk, 2014, p. 10). It was also when the dominance of wheat as a primary commodity produced in western Canada was noted (Wheat and the Canadian prairie provinces, 1928). A recent celebration of wheat production stated, "Thanks to breeding innovations and good fortune, Canadian wheat has set the global standard for high-quality milling wheat for about 120 years" (Arnason, 2024, para 2). The advance of mechanization in the form of steam engines, twine binders, and harvester combines increased wheat production (Thomas, 2011).

Concurrent with the establishment of European-style farming, large herds of cattle were brought to the prairies from the United States, and a ranching industry began to thrive (Jameson, 2011). Fort Macleod, Alberta, became the centre of the early cattle-based economy, which expanded into the Cypress Hills and throughout the Dry Belt (Breen, 2009).

Farming and ranching in the 21st century are still major contributors to the economies of Alberta and Saskatchewan. Wheat is a major crop, alongside specialty crops that are well established in the region. Farmers now grow "dry field pea, lentil, mustard seed, canary seed, dry field bean, triticale, buckwheat, sunflower and chickpea" (Carlyle, 2004, p. 138). In 2024, agricultural exports from Saskatchewan surpassed \$18.5 billion, and accounted "for 41 per cent of total provincial exports in 2024" (Saskatchewan, 2024a, para. 4).

As of 2023, the cattle industry in Alberta was based on 1.77 million animals in the beef supply chain used to distribute meat around the world (Brewin, 2024). In 2020, Alberta reported more agricultural revenue than any other province, \$22.2 billion, which "accounted for over 25.5 per cent of Canada's \$87 billion in total farm revenues" (Government of Canada, 2025b, para. 1).

Other economic factors in Saskatchewan include mining, forestry, and biotechnology (Saskatchewan Canada, 2020). Alberta has similar economic drivers, but the oil and natural gas

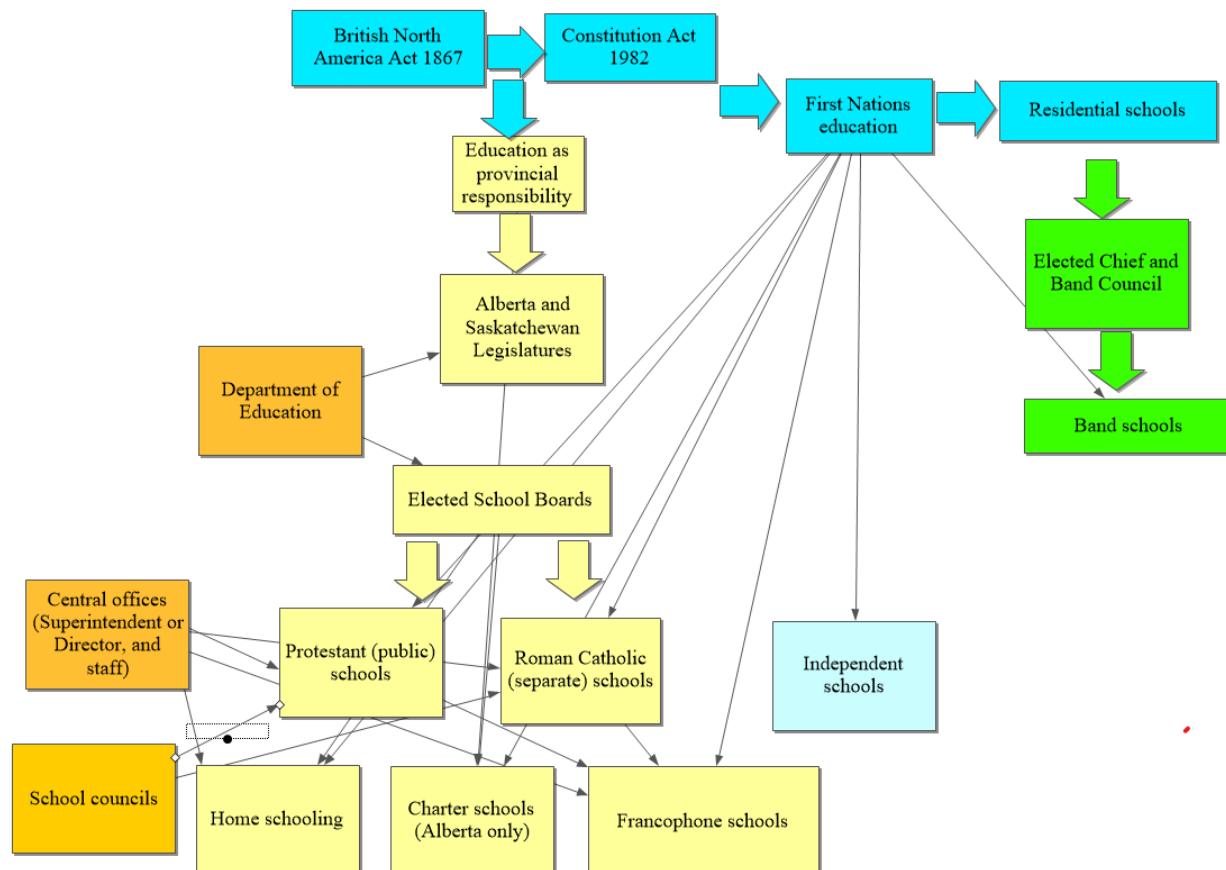
sectors contribute to Canada being the “fourth-largest global producer of crude oil and the fifth-largest producer of natural gas” (Government of Canada, 2025d, para. 1). Canadian oil reserves are surpassed globally only by Saudi Arabia and Venezuela, with “Canada’s oil sands the fourth largest proven oil reserve in the world” (Government of Canada, 2025c, para. 1). In 2022, revenue from the oil and gas sector contributed \$269.9 billion to the Canadian economy (Statistics Canada, 2023).

Successful teacher leadership in Saskatchewan and Alberta is enhanced by understanding that 21st-century educational policies and practices are derived from communal experiences of unpredictable fluctuations in economic returns from agricultural products and natural resource commodities.

Education

Figure 2 depicts the complex governance framework for education in Saskatchewan and Alberta. It demonstrates the sharing of powers between the federal and provincial governments, and with First Nations Chiefs and Councils. The parallel structure of the Roman Catholic and Protestant school systems is shown alongside the administrative offices that support them. Figure 2 also shows the relationships among the school systems and schools of choice, i.e., independent, charter, francophone, and homeschooling.

Figure 2
Educational Governance in Saskatchewan and Alberta



According to McVean (2021), the Canadian residential school system was designed to assimilate Indigenous children into the larger culture. Most were residential boarding schools with a smaller number of day schools. Various Christian churches operated the schools. Their indefensible history of child abuse is well known; the memory of the trauma inflicted on children still shapes dialogue about curriculum and teacher education. Residential schools were intended to provide practical education to support farming and the trades. Many teachers lacked official teaching qualifications or experience working with children. Even fewer were knowledgeable about Indigenous cultures. Children were separated from their families, missing opportunities to learn about their Indigenous cultures. Figure 3 is a photograph of students at a residential school in Ile-a-la-Crosse in northern Saskatchewan. Figure 4 shows St. Cyprian's Indian Residential School on the Peigan Reserve in Alberta.

Figure 3

“Girls at residential school, Ile-a-la-Crosse, northern Saskatchewan.” [ca. 1913-1914]. (CU1171736)



Figure 4

"St. Cyprian's Indian Residential School, Peigan reserve, Alberta." 1928. (CU1142215)



Early prairie schools for settlers' children are remembered as *one-room schools* (See Figure 5) where a few children in different grades studied together. Students arrived with little knowledge of what to expect and limited knowledge of English.

Figure 5

"Teacher and students at Craigmyle school, Alberta, Katherine McAuliffe." 1934. (CU1123246)



During the 20th century and into the 21st century, numerous small schools, sometimes with their own school boards, consolidated into larger school districts. This was often resisted by local farm families who did not want their children traveling long distances in winter weather to attend bigger schools (Boddington, 2010; Carr-Stewart, 2003). Small schools that continued to

operate incorporated multigrade classes, online courses, and occasional bus trips to larger schools. Teachers and principals experienced work intensification and high stress (Jutras et al., 2020).

Urban schools changed from being populated by students of primarily European descent to include learners from Asia and the Pacific region, Africa and the Middle East, and South and Central America (Okoko, 2019). The trend toward greater student diversity has grown in recent years, with Alberta's population reaching 5 million (Fletcher, 2025) and Saskatchewan's population rising to 1.2 million (Saskatchewan, 2024b).

The first decades of the 20th century saw increased applications to teacher education Normal Schools, so much so that admission became more difficult. However, the outbreak of World War II led to a teacher shortage and the lowering of admission standards. In the late 1940s, teacher qualifications were increased, as were teacher salaries (Lemisko et al., 2021). Later, pre-service education for Saskatchewan teachers was centered at the University of Saskatchewan and the University of Regina (Starr, 1977). These universities collaborated to deliver the Northern Teacher Education Program and the Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program (Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, 2025). Alberta also evolved from teacher education provided at Normal Schools to numerous post-secondary institutions offering the Bachelor of Education, with the larger universities being the University of Alberta, the University of Calgary, and Mount Royal University (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2025). All teachers in Alberta and Saskatchewan are required to complete four years of university education at a recognized post-secondary institution (Government of Alberta, 2025; Saskatchewan Professional Teachers Regulatory Board, 2025).

Teacher leaders may be challenged by school community members, and, in fact, many teachers are unaware of the complex and sometimes counterintuitive educational governance structures that exist in Saskatchewan and Alberta. Their work is supported but also restricted by educational policies embedded in the Canadian constitution, policies contested by some demographic groups as discriminatory and culturally insensitive.

Politics

A major event in Canadian history was the formation of the Dominion of Canada in 1867, when the British Parliament passed the British North America Act. The new Dominion included Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Quebec, and Ontario. This was followed by the creation of 6 additional provinces and three territories (Waite, 2019). The Canadian government purchased Rupert's Land from the Hudson's Bay Company in 1870. Alberta and Saskatchewan joined Confederation as provinces in 1905 (House of Commons, 1905).

In 1982, the Constitution Act was approved by the British Parliament, which gave Canada sovereignty from the United Kingdom. The Constitution Act included the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, although the inclusion of a Notwithstanding Clause allows the federal and provincial governments power to override legislation for up to five years (McIntosh & Azzi, 2020).

When Alberta and Saskatchewan joined Confederation in 1905, they gained provincial control of education. Both provinces guaranteed Catholics and Protestants the right to operate distinct school systems. The Canadian government retained responsibility for the education of First Nations children, subsequently delegated to the elected Chief and Council of First Nations communities (Webber, 2023a). Disparities among Catholic, Protestant (public), and First Nations

schools, plus the desire of other cultural groups to control their children's schooling, led to provincial funding of private schools and, in Alberta, the establishment of charter schools.

Two memorable aspects of prairie culture originated in Alberta and Saskatchewan. The first was the right gained by Saskatchewan women in 1916 to vote in provincial elections, an initiative led by Violet McNaughton (Carter, 2020). Women's enfranchisement in Alberta was due to the activism of *The Famous Five*—Henrietta Edwards, Nellie McClung, Louise McKinney, and Irene Parlby—who also appealed the definition of "persons" in provincial and federal legislation to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London and won, thereby reversing the exclusion of women from the Canadian Senate (Carter, S., 2020).

A second cultural milestone was the introduction of publicly funded universal healthcare (Government of Canada, 2025a). The Co-operative Commonwealth Federation party, led by Premier Tommy Douglas, introduced a comprehensive health insurance program in Saskatchewan in 1947. The federal government of Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson followed with the Medicare Care Act in 1966 (Museum of Toronto, 2025).

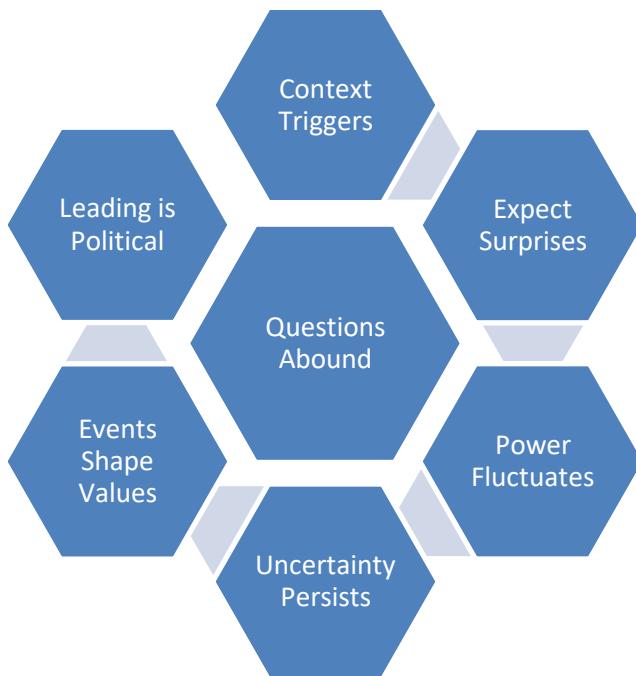
Educational leadership in Alberta and Saskatchewan is unique to each province and reflects the struggles of recent generations to share or regain control of community decision-making. The influence of current formal and informal educational leaders does not occur in isolation. It is fused with the continued influence of historically significant individuals and events. Teacher leaders who are unfamiliar with provincial cultural milestones may encounter challenges to their efforts to improve teaching and learning.

Mapping the Context

A guiding assumption for this study, shared earlier, is that "knowing the historical and social context of one's own cultural location is crucial to appreciating the multiple perspectives of events in the past and the multiple ways they survive in evidence and can be interpreted today" (Peers & Podruchny, 2010, p. 9). In addition, "Scoping reviews can clarify key concepts in the literature and identify key components of a concept" (Munn et al., 2022, p. 920).

Figure 6 is a response to the primary research question for the ISTL II: *How do teacher leaders understand and enact influence in the political and social dimensions of their societies?* For example, the term *Context Triggers* refers to how the actions of teacher leaders are influenced by contextual factors such as immigration and economic drivers. Further, *Expect Surprises* ties to unanticipated outcomes of historical decisions such as the introduction of European-style farming and ranching practices. The notion that *Power Fluctuates* connects to the ebb and flow of decision-making powers of groups such as the Metis, francophone communities, and homeschoilers. Recent concern about American expansionism is but one of the many current and past examples of how teacher leaders in the prairie provinces are influenced by the concept *Uncertainty Persists*. The term *Events Shape Values* highlights the intergenerational influence of, for example, immigration patterns and dramatic climatic events on the beliefs of Saskatchewan and Alberta residents. The importance of understanding that *Leadership is Political* emerged from the scoping review. That is, social trauma, intersectionality, and ambiguity lead to contested educational decision-making and political actions. The key concepts in Figure 6 lead to several guiding questions for the second component of the ISTL II. These concepts, which continue to forge teacher leaders in the prairie provinces, are explained in more detail below.

Figure 6
Key Concepts



Context Triggers

The research literature typically describes teacher leaders as active participants in teamwork with school community members (Harpham, 2023). They assist with developing school-wide visions, engage in professional dialogue, and lead work teams (Webber & Andrews, 2023). Clearly, teacher leaders act, but the scoping review also indicated that their actions are often triggered by contextual factors that may at first appear unrelated but collectively significantly impact school curricula and structures.

For example, the migration of Europeans to eastern, central, and western Canada was instigated by the money made by acquiring beaver pelts and shipping them to Europe. The push westward was less the result of curious explorers and more the consequence of large numbers of beavers found in Rupert's Land. Similarly, the capacity of the Canadian prairies to produce rich cereal crops and grass, plus the transportation offered by the CPR, facilitated the migration of Europeans who wanted to farm. It was the climatic and geographic context of the land that triggered the influx of farmers, whose families needed schools and designed them based upon Eurocentric knowledge and values (Benn-John, 2018).

More recently, the *oil patch* (Oklahoma Historical Society, n.d.) became the modern version of the fur trade and free farmland. The oil and gas industry transformed Alberta and Saskatchewan into major contributors to the Canadian economy. The robust business sector on the prairies led to Alberta leading “the country in population growth during the first quarter of 2025, gaining more new residents than the rest of Canada combined” (Brennan, 2025).

Beavers, productive farmland, and the petroleum industry in Alberta and Saskatchewan, each in its turn, caused schools to be flooded with students who arrived from around the globe. The current era of high immigration is not the first time that schools cannot be built quickly

enough, and when graduates of teacher education programs are quickly hired. Responses in previous decades and centuries included deeply flawed residential schools for Indigenous children (Barnes & Josefowitz, 2019), but also world-class schools and universities. Teacher leaders of the 21st century can draw upon past successes for inspiration but also learn from previous tragic outcomes.

Expect Surprises

Current educators and policymakers in the prairie provinces need only to look at the past to see how unexpected events caused societal disruption. Indigenous community members could not have anticipated how the decision of a faraway English King Charles II to grant the Hudson Bay Company fur trading rights to Rupert's Land would lead to centuries of social upheaval for their families and descendants. Teachers and principals in residential schools might be aghast if they could have known the multigenerational harm caused by their interactions with First Nations children; at least their descendants decry the separation of Indigenous children from their families and the terrible abuse some of the children suffered in residential schools. Barnes and Josefowitz (2019) noted the need for modern-day educational leaders to address the continuing impact of residential schools on Indigenous learners due to inadequate curriculum, racism, and disrupted cognitive development.

The introduction of European-style farming and ranching practices, accompanied by legal title to plots of land and the construction of farm buildings, changed the face of the prairies. Introduction of mechanization to farming fundamentally transformed how crops were planted and harvested, the types of plants that could be cultivated, and even the size of farms. In turn, the evolution of the family farm to larger industrial-size operations depopulated small rural schools and caused children to be bussed to larger communities for their K-12 schooling (Jones, 2018). Their studies of leadership in small rural schools led Hicks and Wallin (2013) to question “whether the value systems of any rural community (and the administrator of the school) align with those promoted by the centralized provincial educational system.”

Who could have forecast how the granting in the British North America Act of 1867 of educational governance to provinces and territories would impact the schools of the 21st century? Would anyone on the Plains of Abraham on September 13, 1759, have foreseen the direct link between the events of that day to the enshrinement of Catholic and public schools in 21st century Saskatchewan and Alberta (see Farney & Banack, 2023)? Teachers in the two provinces now are grappling with artificial intelligence that is “becoming a defining force in education, reshaping ... classrooms and influencing teaching practices in ways that were unimaginable a few years ago” (MacRae, 2025, para. 2). Which teacher leaders can predict the future of artificial intelligence in the education profession? It may make the impact of the CPR and farm machinery look minuscule in comparison.

Power Fluctuates

Schooling in Saskatchewan and Alberta is the result of powers won and lost by demographic groups in early Canada. Some gained power by negotiating for it to be included in the British North America Act (McIntosh et al., 2010). Others lost power on the Plains of Abraham in 1759 (Letourneau, 2012). Louis Riel, himself a teacher, was an influential leader in the Metis community of Batoche but lost his bid for land ownership during the North-West Resistance and then lost his life due to the power of the federal government (Beal et al., 2016).

More recently, the Parents' Bill of Rights in Saskatchewan "requires parental consent before a child under the age of 16 can use a different gender-related name or pronoun at school" (Talati, 2025), leading to widespread debate about the value of the contentious bill. In Alberta, more school choice is offered than in any other province; parents can send their children to Catholic and public schools, charter schools, and independent schools, or they can homeschool them (Zwaagstra, 2023). School choice has been contested unsuccessfully by some members of the public and by teachers' unions. For example, Webber (2023a) noted how the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) has for many years publicly opposed independent and charter schools. Thus, teacher leaders who are members of the ATA who seek innovative practices sometimes encounter resistance from their peers (Webber & Su, 2024).

Uncertainty Persists

The formation of Canada as a country in 1867 and the promise of a national railroad to British Columbians are but two examples of Canadian resistance to American expansionism. Recently, Canadians have resisted the current American president's regular references to Canada as the 51st state and his imposition of tariffs on Canadian industries (Stevis-Gridneff, 2025). School curricula in Alberta and Saskatchewan, especially Social Studies, strive to counter American influence by celebrating Canadian history and culture, including Indigenous and francophone perspectives.

The current generation of teachers in the prairie provinces may be less aware than their predecessors of the residual memory of the Dirty Thirties, the Regina Riot, WWI and WWII, and pre-universal health care. However, those events and others like the North-West Resistance remain in the collective consciousness that influences school curricula, government funding of schools, and teacher education.

Recent uncertainty for informal and formal leaders in the prairie provinces is evident in reports of workload intensification, and community expectations that they contribute to community life while maintaining professional distance from community members (Newton & Wallin, 2013). In addition, the development of teacher and leadership quality standards (Alberta Education, 2023a, 2023b) emphasizes comprehensive expectations for career-long learning and skill development in complex, demanding areas such as fostering effective relationships, providing visionary leadership, modeling professional learning, applying foundational knowledge about Indigenous groups, and establishing inclusive learning environments. Clearly, the knowledge and skill development of teacher leaders covers a wide range of areas that demand passion and commitment (Riveros et al., 2013).

Events Shape Values

Alberta historically has been perceived as a conservative, entrepreneurial, free enterprise, cowboy individualistic culture (Van Herk, 2002), while Saskatchewan was known for its more collectivist, egalitarian culture (Wesley, 2011). Despite those political and cultural differences, the two provinces have become closer in recent decades because of their shared interests in the oil and gas industry, agriculture, natural resource extraction, and growing alienation from the federal government and central Canada.

Still, the principles and values that guide school communities in each province have distinct origins. Alberta's early settlers included influential Americans who established long standing values related to "frontier liberalism that, over time, has become the foundation of

Albertan conservatism" (Wesley, 2011, p. 55). They also planted the seeds of a populist culture and western alienation.

Alberta's official motto is *strong and free* while Saskatchewan's is *from many peoples, strength*. Wesley (2011) described two of the central features of Saskatchewan's political values as collectivism and dirigisme (trust in government directing the economy). Hill (2023) provided more current data suggesting that Saskatchewan's culture has changed to something *blended* with both conservative and progressive values.

Challenges to the longstanding perceptions of the culture of Alberta and Saskatchewan have emerged alongside the rapid increase in immigration to the two provinces. Okoko (2019) highlighted how formal and informal leaders are expected to deal with non-academic challenges for international newcomers, such as post-conflict trauma and inter-ethnic conflict. These expectations underscore the critical need for teacher leaders to access formal and informal professional development programming. Relevant leadership learning opportunities are offered by the Saskatchewan Educational Leadership Unit (University of Saskatchewan, 2025) and the Alberta Regional Consortia (2025).

Leadership is Political

Is it enough to *describe teacher leadership as the influence of classroom teachers in the interest of improving teaching and learning*? If it is, then the knowledge items listed in Table 1 highlight the complex and politicized dimensions of exercising influence in school communities in Alberta and Saskatchewan. The skills in Table 1, based upon the key concepts summarized above and in Figure 6, underscore the fragility of teacher leader effectiveness. The descriptors in Table 1 may sound generic, but teacher leaders would do well to consider and apply them in the western Canadian context.

Table 1
Contextual Artifacts Distilled from the Scoping Review

Teacher Leader Knowledge	Teacher Leader Skills
Historical milestones	Interpret events and associated emotions
Geography and climate	Connect the land to beliefs, values, and actions
Economic drivers	Identify motivations
Indigeneity	Seek mentors
Educational governance	Clarify organizational structures
Social trauma	Empathize without being impeded
Effects of loss	Understand impacts
Intersectionality	Interpret confounding influences
Ambiguity	Appreciate knowledge that has not yet emerged
Time and space continuum	Think through temporal and spatial boundaries
Power fluctuations	Know what can be changed and when
Change process	Watch and learn

Summary

There are areas of educational knowledge that ground all educators in the prairie provinces. In Saskatchewan, teachers are expected to demonstrate competencies in relation to professionalism, knowledge, instruction, and curriculum (Saskatchewan Professional Teachers Regulatory Board, n.d.). Teachers in Alberta must demonstrate parallel knowledge of effective relationships; successful planning, instruction, and assessment; inclusive learning environments, and foundational knowledge about First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples (Alberta Education, 2023b).

However, the scoping review identified an even broader body of knowledge relevant to the positive influence of teacher leaders. First, teacher leaders should understand the *cultural landscape* of their communities; in Saskatchewan and Alberta, that includes knowing about landmark events and key influencers, and the social repercussions of immigration and settlement. It is also important that teacher leaders know how components of the *physical landscape*, such as geography and climate, continue to shape school communities and the people who live in them. A critical factor in the capacity of teacher leaders is their ability to comprehend the current *complex governance systems* in the prairie provinces in relation to their French, English, and First Nations origins. Another essential knowledge area is *understanding uncertainty*, so teacher leaders can cope with power fluctuations, and the emotional responses associated with unanticipated organizational and community changes.

Just as important as the knowledge required of influential teacher leaders is the set of skills they must also possess. They must demonstrate the capacity to *interpret events*; *discern the motivations* of school community members; and *empathize* with newcomers and longtime residents alike who may have experienced trauma, but without becoming overwhelmed by the harm they observe. Teacher leaders should also *seek mentors* and hone their abilities to *analyze the intended and unintended outcomes* of educational policies that are difficult or impossible to modify, as well as of practices that strongly resist change.

Questions

The scoping review and the concepts that emerged from it suggest several foundational questions to guide the next stage of the ISTL II in Saskatchewan and Alberta. They include:

- Are teacher leaders *aware* of the unspoken and taken-for-granted assumptions that allow them to navigate prairie educational cultures?
- Can teacher leaders *interrogate* their insider knowledge?
- Can teacher leaders *perceive* the prairie culture that shapes their professional identities?
- Are teacher leaders *from away* fully accepted in Alberta and Saskatchewan school communities?

Next Steps

This scoping review provided a solid foundation for the oral histories next in the ISTL II research design. Table 1 provides guidance for the oral histories that will be conducted in Alberta and Saskatchewan in alignment with the *guerilla journalism* showcased by Terkel (1974) in his books and radio-based oral histories, and with the oral histories of early-career primary school leaders shared by Cowie (2011). Participants' stories will provide insight into the research

question: *How do teacher leaders understand and enact influence in the political and social dimensions of their societies?*

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