Towards epistemological plurality: Blackfoot knowledge, decolonisation, and intercultural competency in higher education

Abstract

The dominance of Global North epistemology in education has resulted in the marginalisation of Indigenous and Global South knowledge systems, reinforcing systemic inequities and epistemic injustice. This study explores the integration of indigenous first nation Blackfoot Values into teacher training and professional development in UK Higher Education as a means to challenge these hierarchies and develop intercultural competencies (ICC) among educators. Drawing on critical discourses of decolonisation, the study interrogates the erasure of Indigenous contributions to mainstream educational theories - most notably, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which was influenced by Blackfoot philosophy yet remains framed within a Eurocentric paradigm. Through thematic analysis of participant reflections, this research highlights how engaging with non-Western or Global South epistemologies fosters critical thinking, enhances cultural responsiveness, and cultivates reflective educational practices. Findings indicate that exposure to Indigenous frameworks encourages educators to reconsider pedagogical approaches, acknowledge diverse worldviews, and promote more inclusive learning environments. The study underscores the necessity of embedding Indigenous knowledge in higher education curricula, advocating for epistemological plurality to create critically engaged educators and learners.

Keywords: Decolonisation, Epistemological Plurality, Higher Education, Indigenous Knowledge, Intercultural Competency

Introduction

In educational discourse, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) has long been a foundational framework, positing a linear progression of human needs from basic physiological requirements to the pinnacle of self-actualisation. *Figure 1* illustrates the conventional Western representation of Maslow's model, in which the final level (self-actualisation) is commonly interpreted as the fulfilment of an

individual's potential, expressed through creativity, autonomy, problem-solving, and personal growth. This model has been extensively applied across various educational contexts to understand learner motivation and inform pedagogical strategies. However, numerous scholars have critiqued Maslow's theory for its limited cultural applicability and its assumption of a universal, hierarchical structure of human needs (Darder, 2012; Hofstede, 1984; Koltko-Rivera, 2006).

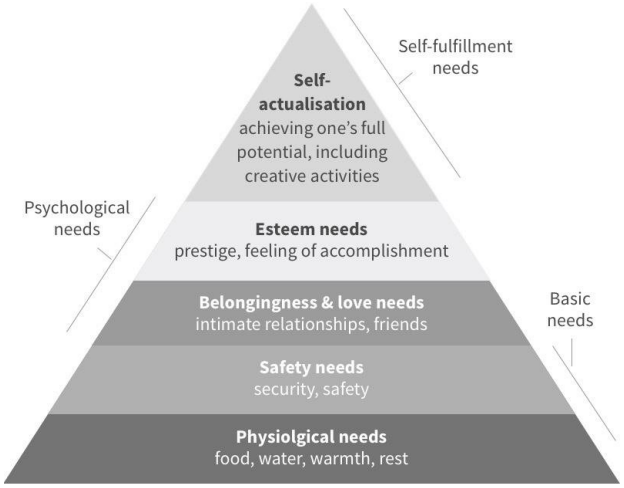

Figure 1: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943)

Importantly, Maslow's early encounters with the Blackfoot Nation during his 1938 visit to the Siksika Reserve in Alberta, Canada, profoundly shaped his thinking about human wellbeing. The Blackfoot are one of the Indigenous Peoples of the Northern Plains, whose worldview emphasises communal interdependence, reciprocity, and balance within the natural and social world. Historical accounts indicate that Maslow observed Blackfoot social structures, ceremonies, and pedagogical practices, which modelled a non-hierarchical and community-centred understanding of human flourishing (Bastien, 2004; The Esperanza Project, 2021). Yet these influences are rarely acknowledged in mainstream interpretations of his hierarchy. This omission reflects a wider pattern within Global North epistemology, in which Indigenous knowledge systems are marginalised or rendered invisible, leading to homogenised educational frameworks that may not resonate across culturally diverse or globalised contexts.

To contextualise this discussion, it is important to foreground the Blackfoot knowledge system itself. Blackfoot epistemology is grounded in principles of relationality, reciprocity, communal flourishing, and balance within the natural

and social world. Knowledge is not conceptualised as an individual possession but as something lived, practiced, and shared across generations. These values structure Blackfoot understandings of wellbeing, learning, and responsibility, providing a radically different worldview from Western psychological models. Introducing these epistemic foundations early highlights that the tensions explored in this article are not simply theoretical but reflect fundamentally different orientations toward human development and education (Smith, 2021).

The dominance of Global North epistemology in education perpetuates a monocultural paradigm that often disregards the rich diversity of knowledge systems inherent in Indigenous and Global South communities. For example, curricula commonly prioritise Western psychological theories, linear models of human development, and individualistic approaches to learning while overlooking relational, land-based, and community-oriented frameworks found in Indigenous pedagogies. Similarly, Global South philosophical traditions such as *Ubuntu* in sub-Saharan Africa or Andean conceptions of *buen vivir* are rarely represented in mainstream teacher education despite offering alternative understandings of wellbeing, identity, and social responsibility. This epistemic hegemony not only marginalises alternative ways of knowing but also reinforces systemic inequalities within educational structures. Theories of ICC highlight the need for educators to develop the ability to engage with diverse and globalised worldviews, fostering more equitable learning environments (Deardorff, 2020). However, these frameworks often remain rooted in Eurocentric perspectives on interculturality, failing to sufficiently incorporate non-Western ways of knowing. True ICC necessitates a critical engagement with epistemological pluralism - recognising and valuing Indigenous and Global South perspectives as foundational rather than supplementary to educational discourse (Andreotti et al., 2015; Andreotti, 2021).

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs occupies a central and enduring place within teacher education, psychology modules, and professional training programmes. It is commonly presented as a universal, culturally neutral framework for understanding learner motivation, and trainees are routinely expected to apply its linear progression - from physiological needs to self-actualisation - to classroom behaviour, wellbeing, and engagement. This widespread institutional

use amplifies the significance of the theory's misrepresentation of Indigenous knowledge. Maslow's reinterpretation of Blackfoot relational principles as an individualised, hierarchical journey from deficiency to personal triumph demonstrates how Western epistemologies often extract and reconfigure non-Western insights. Understanding how knowledge systems were transformed within Maslow's framing is therefore essential, as it illuminates the mechanisms through which Indigenous philosophies are subordinated within higher education. The hierarchy, often assumed to be universally applicable, illustrates the tensions between imposed Global North models and the realities of culturally specific understandings of human development. Many Indigenous knowledge systems, including those of the Blackfoot Nation, conceptualise wellbeing in relational rather than hierarchical terms (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991). Unlike Maslow's linear framework, which prioritises individual self-actualisation as the highest goal, Indigenous epistemologies often emphasise communal wellbeing, reciprocity, and interconnectedness (Battiste, 2013). The failure to acknowledge these perspectives reflects a broader epistemic injustice in higher education, where Global South knowledge systems are either erased or deemed inferior to their Global North counterparts (Santos, 2018). This dynamic is particularly evident in university curricula and teacher education programmes, where module content, assessment frameworks, and recommended readings overwhelmingly prioritise Western theories of learning, development, and pedagogy. As a result, trainee educators often encounter a narrow set of epistemic tools that position Global North frameworks as the default standard, leaving little room for Indigenous or Global South perspectives to meaningfully shape professional knowledge, practice, or classroom decision-making. The consequences of this epistemic dominance directly affect learners' everyday educational experience. For example, students whose cultural backgrounds emphasise communal responsibility, relational decision-making, or non-linear forms of reasoning often encounter curricula that do not reflect or value these orientations. This can lead to feelings of misrecognition, disengagement, or being "unheard," particularly when classroom expectations are shaped around Western individualism or hierarchical models of motivation. Epistemic injustice therefore manifests not only in abstract knowledge hierarchies but also in the micro-interactions of the classroom, how learners participate, how their knowledge is validated, and how

success is defined.

This epistemic hierarchy extends into higher education curricula, where Global North pedagogical models dominate while Indigenous and Global South perspectives are relegated to the margins. The Global North-Global South divide further exacerbates these disparities, with research and educational practices from the Global North often positioned as the universal standard. For instance, teacher education programmes across Europe, North America, and Australasia frequently rely on Western developmental theories such as Piaget, Vygotsky, and Maslow as the primary or sole frameworks for understanding learning, while pedagogical traditions from the Global South, such as African communal learning philosophies, Māori whanaungatanga practices, or Latin American popular education, are rarely included or treated as equally authoritative. This positioning undermines the legitimacy of knowledge systems from the Global South, perpetuating a cycle of epistemic injustice. Sepúlveda et al. (2021) emphasise the importance of recognising and integrating knowledge from the Global South to address educational inequalities and enrich global educational practices. They argue for the deconstruction of existing power hierarchies that privilege Northern epistemologies over Southern ones, advocating for a more equitable and reciprocal exchange of knowledge.

Integrating Blackfoot Values into teacher training programs represents a deliberate effort to challenge the dominance of Global North epistemological frameworks and promote intercultural competencies among educators (Deardoff, 2006). This approach aligns with the broader objectives of decolonising education by acknowledging, highlighting, and utilising Indigenous knowledge systems, thereby fostering a more inclusive and culturally responsive educational environment. Furthermore, such initiatives are critical for developing educators who are not only culturally competent but also critically conscious of the power dynamics embedded in knowledge production (Andreotti, 2021). This study also contributes directly to the field of ICC, drawing particularly on Deardorff's (2020) Process Model (*Figure 2*), which emphasises attitudes (respect, openness), internal outcomes (adaptability, empathy), and external outcomes (effective and appropriate behaviour).

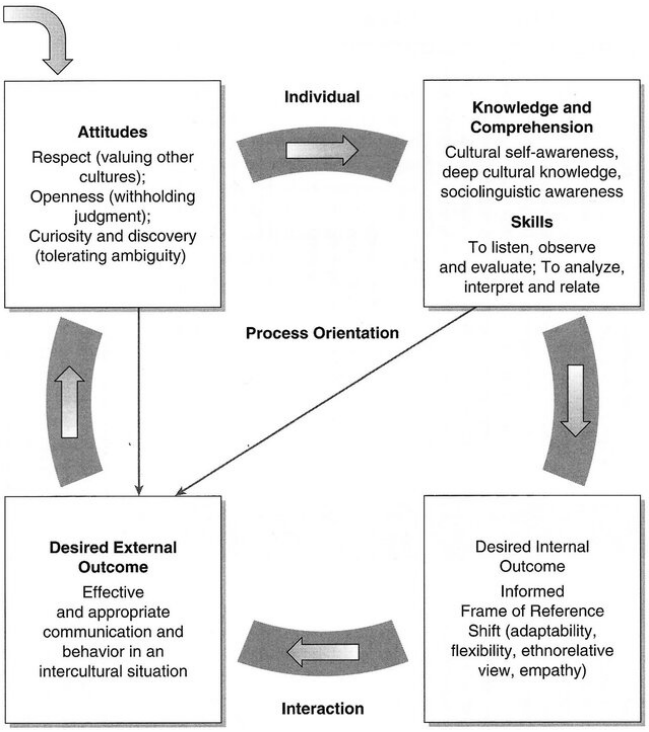

Figure 2. Deardorff's Process Model

The eleven Blackfoot Values are as followed:

- *Aatsimoyihkaan (Prayer)*
- *Kimmapiiypitsinni (Kindness/Compassion)*
- *Innakotsiiysinni (Respect for Others)*
- *Ihpipototsp (Purpose for Being There)*
- *Niitsitapiysinni (To be Blackfoot)*
- *Aksitoiyipaitapiiysiini (Being able to take on tasks independently)*
- *Isspommaanitapiiysinni (Being helpful to others)*
- *Ao'ahkannaistokawa (Everything comes in pairs)*
- *Ihkanaitapstsiwa (Everything that is given to a person to do what they want with)*
- *Kakyosin (Be aware of your environment, be observant)*
- *Pommotsiiysinni (To transfer something to others—knowledge)*

It can be argued that these Values map meaningfully onto this model: for instance, *Innakotsiiysinni* (respect for others) aligns with attitudinal components of ICC, while *Pommotsiiysinni* (transferring knowledge to others) resonates with external intercultural behaviours. Making these connections explicit demonstrates how Indigenous frameworks can operationalise ICC development

in ways that existing Western models do not fully address.

Unlike conventional diversity or awareness-raising training, which often focuses on representation, terminology, or compliance, this intervention introduces an epistemological framework that requires educators to rethink underlying assumptions about learning and human development. The use of Blackfoot Values is therefore not simply cultural inclusion but an engagement with alternative ways of knowing that reorient pedagogical thinking. This positions the study as an original contribution to higher education teaching and learning practice. ICC in education must therefore move beyond superficial gestures of inclusivity to engage with deep, structural shifts in how knowledge is valued and taught. The challenge for higher education institutions is not merely to include Indigenous and Global South perspectives but to fundamentally reconsider the epistemic foundations upon which their curricula are built. By critically examining the origins and applications of widely accepted theories like Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, educators can develop a more nuanced understanding of motivation that transcends cultural boundaries and addresses the diverse needs of all students. Through this process, higher education can become a space not only for the acquisition of knowledge but for the deconstruction of epistemic hierarchies and the cultivation of truly global citizens.

Literature review & theoretical framework

The call to decolonise education has gained significant traction, particularly in response to the Eurocentric dominance of curricula, pedagogical practices, and knowledge validation frameworks (Battiste, 2013; Smith, 2021). Decolonisation in education seeks to challenge and dismantle colonial structures that continue to marginalise non-Western epistemologies while promoting Indigenous ways of knowing as equally legitimate and valuable (Grande, 2015; Nakata, 2007).

Blackfoot knowledge systems, like those of other Indigenous communities, emphasise relationality, interconnectedness, and holistic learning, which stand in stark contrast to Global North models of education that often prioritise individual achievement and linear knowledge progression (Little Bear, 2000; Simpson, 2017). A further example demonstrates how the Blackfoot concept of *Kimmapiiypitsinni* (often translated as kindness, compassion, and relational

responsibility) positions wellbeing as emerging through reciprocal care rather than individual achievement. This stands in direct contrast to Western frameworks that prioritise personal accomplishment, competition, or self-actualisation as endpoints. By centring *Kimmapiiypitsinni*, educators are invited to reconceptualise classroom relationships as co-constructed and inherently interdependent, offering a practical philosophical alternative that extends far beyond the specific case examined in this study. The inclusion of Blackfoot Values in teacher training therefore represents a necessary shift towards acknowledging and integrating these perspectives into mainstream education, thereby fostering more culturally inclusive and responsive teaching practices (Donald, 2009).

Despite increasing efforts to decolonise education, Indigenous perspectives remain largely tokenised rather than meaningfully embedded into curricula and pedagogical approaches (Kovach, 2009). Research has demonstrated that decolonisation efforts in higher education are often superficial, framed within Global North methodologies that fail to capture the depth of Indigenous knowledge (Tuck & Yang, 2012). A critical examination of these shortcomings is necessary to prevent decolonisation from becoming a symbolic exercise rather than an actual transformation of knowledge systems and teacher training (Styres, 2017).

Challenging epistemology of the Global North

The dominance of Western epistemology in education has long positioned Eurocentric knowledge as the default standard, rendering Indigenous, African, and other non-Western perspectives as secondary or alternative (Smith, 2021). This is particularly evident in teacher training programs, where pedagogical theories such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Piaget's cognitive development stages (1971), and Vygotsky's social constructivism (1978) are treated as universal frameworks (*Figure 3)* without critical interrogation of their cultural origins or applicability across diverse contexts (Darder, 2012).

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is a prime example of how Indigenous knowledge has been appropriated and reframed within academic paradigms. Research has revealed that Maslow's time spent with the Blackfoot Nation significantly influenced his theory, yet his reinterpretation omitted the collectivist and

interdependent nature of Blackfoot teachings (Koltko-Rivera, 2006; The Esperanza Project, 2021). In contrast to Maslow's self-actualisation as an individual endpoint, the Blackfoot worldview sees self-actualisation as an inherent state tied to communal wellbeing and intergenerational knowledge-sharing (Brayboy & Mccarty, 2010).

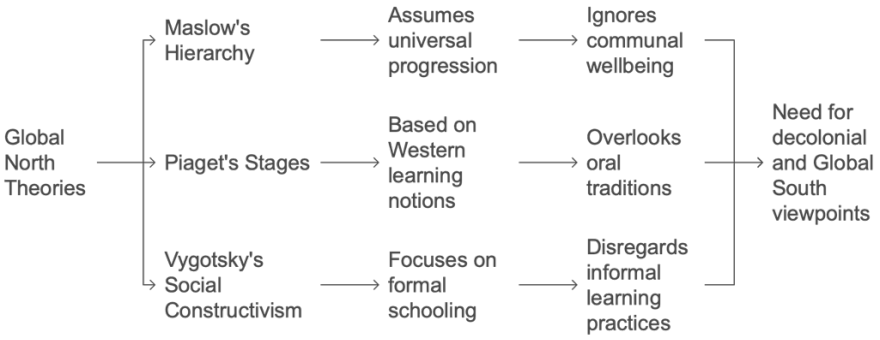

Figure 3. Framework for highlighting limitations of Global north theories (Dei & Cacciavillani, 2024)

Within teacher training, failing to interrogate these epistemic assumptions reinforces the Global North-Global South divide, privileging knowledge produced in Western institutions while devaluing local and Indigenous knowledges (Connell, 2007; Santos, 2018). To challenge this epistemic dominance, scholars advocate for "pluriversality," an approach that embraces multiple co-existing knowledge systems rather than reinforcing a single dominant worldview (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Embedding Blackfoot Values into teacher education thus serves as an act of epistemic resistance, ensuring that Indigenous ways of knowing are not merely added to existing curricula but fundamentally reshape pedagogical thinking.

Culturally responsive pedagogy

Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) emphasises the importance of integrating learners' cultural backgrounds into teaching methods to enhance learning outcomes and create more inclusive educational environments (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995). CRP is grounded in the recognition that learners' cultural identities shape their experiences of education and that teachers must be equipped to engage with diverse perspectives meaningfully (Paris & Alim, 2017). However, much of the literature on CRP remains rooted in multicultural

frameworks that often fail to address the power imbalances and historical erasures of Indigenous peoples within educational settings (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008).

The incorporation of Blackfoot knowledge systems into teacher training extends CRP by encouraging educators to move beyond surface-level cultural inclusion toward a deeper reorientation of pedagogical relationships, epistemic assumptions, and classroom practices. While CRP emphasises the importance of including learners' cultural backgrounds in teaching, integrating Blackfoot values pushes this further by requiring educators to engage with Indigenous worldviews through relational accountability, reciprocity, and community-centred ways of knowing. This shifts CRP from merely incorporating diverse cultural examples to transforming how knowledge, authority, and learning are conceptualised. Such engagement aligns with Donald's (2016) call for "ethical relationality," positioning teacher–learner relationships within broader interdependent networks of land, community, and shared responsibility.
Unlike Western approaches that prioritise standardisation and assessment-driven models of teaching, Blackfoot pedagogies emphasise experiential learning, storytelling, and intergenerational knowledge transmission, offering valuable insights into alternative forms of education (Cajete, 1994). Although experiential learning is also recognised within Western frameworks such as Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, Blackfoot experiential learning differs fundamentally in its ontological grounding: learning is not centred on individual cognitive processing cycles but embedded within relationships with land, ancestors, and community. In this sense, Blackfoot experiential practices expand rather than replicate Western experiential models, inviting educators to consider forms of learning that are relational, holistic, and spiritually connected.

Integrating Indigenous knowledge into teacher training also requires educators to critically examine their own positionality and the structural constraints of the education system. Many teachers, particularly those trained in Western institutions, struggle with incorporating Indigenous perspectives due to a lack of familiarity or institutional support. Therefore, professional development programs must be designed to not only introduce Indigenous knowledge systems but also

equip educators with the tools and confidence to apply them in practice (Louie et al., 2017).

Barriers to embedding indigenous knowledge

Despite growing recognition of the value of Indigenous knowledge, several systemic barriers hinder its meaningful inclusion in teacher education programs. One of the most persistent challenges is the resistance from institutions that continue to operate within Eurocentric paradigms, treating Indigenous knowledge as supplementary rather than foundational (Battiste, 2013). Studies indicate that faculty members often lack the training or willingness to engage with Indigenous epistemologies, resulting in a superficial or extractive approach to decolonisation (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2008; Marker, 2017; McGregor & Marker, 2018).

Another significant barrier is the structural limitations within curriculum design, which often prioritise standardised testing and competency-based assessment over holistic and relational learning approaches that Indigenous knowledge systems advocate for (McKinley & Smith, 2019). The pressure to align teacher training programs with political government mandates and accreditation standards further restricts the extent to which Indigenous perspectives can be meaningfully integrated (Kanu, 2011).

The tokenisation of Indigenous knowledge also remains a critical issue. Institutions may include Indigenous content in performative ways, such as land acknowledgments or isolated lesson plans, without challenging the underlying colonial structures that shape education (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Meaningful integration requires a shift in institutional priorities, fostering long-term engagement with Indigenous communities and ensuring that Indigenous scholars and knowledge keepers play a central role in shaping teacher education programs (Styres, 2017).

The literature underscores the urgent need to decolonise teacher education by embedding Indigenous knowledge systems in meaningful and transformative ways. The integration of Blackfoot values into teacher training represents a significant step towards challenging Western epistemic dominance and fostering culturally responsive pedagogy. However, this requires a critical interrogation of existing pedagogical frameworks, a commitment to structural change, and a

move beyond tokenistic approaches towards genuine epistemic plurality. By addressing these challenges, teacher education programs can better prepare future educators to engage with diverse worldviews and contribute to a more inclusive and equitable education system.

Methodology

Research design

This study adopts a qualitative case-study design (Yin, 2018) situated within a decolonial research paradigm. Case study methodology is well-suited to examining complex pedagogical interventions where context, meaning-making, and reflection are central. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, including familiarisation, initial coding, theme generation, review, definition, and final reporting. Codes were generated inductively from participants' reflections to avoid imposing Eurocentric categories on Indigenous-informed data. A decolonial research paradigm (Chilisa, 2020; Smith, 2021) underpins this study (*Figure 3*), recognising the necessity of challenging epistemic dominance in education (Battiste, 2013). By critically engaging with the historical erasure of Indigenous contributions to educational theory, specifically, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, this research encourages reflexivity and critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) among teachers. The methodology aligns with relational, community-centred approaches to research (Kovach, 2009), emphasising respect for Indigenous knowledge and its ethical engagement within education. It is important to recognise that the intervention was intentionally short - a two-hour workshop - which necessarily limits the depth of engagement with Blackfoot epistemology. The workshop was also intentionally aligned with Deardorff's Process Model of Intercultural Competence (2020), positioning Blackfoot Values as catalysts for developing intercultural attitudes, skills, and behaviours.

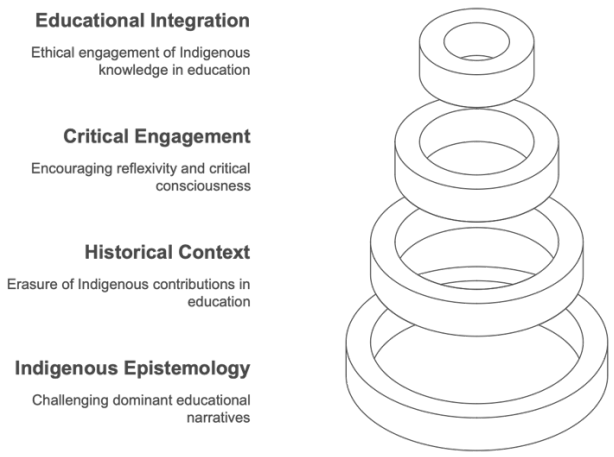

Figure 3. methodology and phases of the research approach (Chilisa, 2020; Smith 2021)

Context and participants

The study was conducted within an Initial Teacher Training (ITT) program at a UK higher education institution, between January 2023 to January 2024, where teachers were undertaking professional development in inclusive pedagogical strategies. Participants (n=27) were enrolled on university programme, preparing to teach in a variety of educational settings in the Further Education and Skills (FES) sector, including colleges, sixth forms, apprenticeship providers, adult and community settings or in vocational education.

Participants were diverse in subject specialisms (e.g., English, Maths, Special Educational Needs & Disabilities [SEND], vocational education) and prior educational experiences, reflecting a range of perspectives on pedagogy. Many had been socialised within Western educational paradigms, with little prior exposure to Indigenous knowledge systems or decolonial approaches to education. This context was significant, as it mirrored broader trends in the Global North, where teacher training often privileges Eurocentric frameworks while marginalising Indigenous contributions (Andreotti, 2011; Grande, 2015). Participants varied in age, prior educational background, and professional experience. Twenty-three identified as having no prior exposure to Indigenous or Global South knowledge systems; two reported limited awareness; and two described moderate familiarity through previous study or community engagement. Twenty-five participants identified as White British, one as Black British, and one preferred not to state. This diversity provides important context for understanding how Blackfoot epistemology was interpreted and the degree of

novelty it presented to learners.

Session structure and pedagogical approach

The research intervention took place over a two-hour workshop, designed as an interactive and reflective learning experience. The session aimed to:

1. Critically examine Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in relation to its Blackfoot origins.
2. Introduce Blackfoot values and explore their relevance to inclusive teaching.
3. Encourage reflexivity and application through independent work and group discussion.

This structure was deliberately dialogic (Freire, 1970), promoting engagement with decolonial perspectives beyond passive knowledge transmission. Teachers were positioned as active participants in challenging and rethinking educational assumptions (Mezirow, 1997; Paris & Alim, 2017).

Phase 1

The session began with a critical examination of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, a foundational concept in Western psychology and education, which has been widely accepted as a universal model for understanding motivation. However, participants were introduced to research highlighting that Maslow's work was influenced by his interactions with the Blackfoot Nation, whose conceptualisation of wellbeing was community-centred rather than hierarchical (The Esperanza Project, 2021). Teachers engaged in discussions about how the omission of these Indigenous origins reinforces Western epistemic dominance in educational psychology and contributes to deficit-based narratives in schools, particularly when applied to learners from marginalised backgrounds (Battiste, 2013). This phase prompted teachers to challenge the assumed universality of Eurocentric psychological models and consider alternative, relational understandings of learner wellbeing that emphasise interdependence rather than individual self-actualisation.

Phase 2

Following the discussion on Maslow, participants were introduced to eleven Blackfoot Values, which provide a holistic, relational framework for understanding learning and motivation. These values (Bastien, 2004; Chief, 2000; Vallee, Fat &

Fox, 2024) were analysed in relation to contemporary pedagogical practices, with teachers engaging in group discussions on their applicability to inclusive, trauma-informed, and decolonial approaches in education (Gay, 2010; Louie et al., 2017). A key focus of the discussion was how these values could reframe dominant narratives around learner success, shifting from an emphasis on individual achievement to community engagement and shared responsibility for knowledge.

Phase 3

Teachers were tasked with selecting one of the Blackfoot Values and preparing a three-slide presentation that addressed its personal significance, its relevance to education, and how it could be embedded into their own teaching practice. This activity aimed to move beyond theoretical discussion by requiring teachers to actively contextualise Indigenous knowledge within their subject areas and pedagogical approaches. Drawing on culturally responsive teaching frameworks (Paris & Alim, 2017), this phase encouraged deeper self-reflection and critical engagement with how decolonial perspectives could be meaningfully integrated into their classrooms. Teachers critically examined challenges in applying these values within institutional constraints, reflecting on how policy, curriculum design, and dominant educational discourses often marginalise Indigenous knowledge (Grande, 2015).

Phase 4

The final phase consisted of a group reflection session, where teachers shared insights from their presentations and engaged in dialogue about the broader implications of incorporating Blackfoot Values into their teaching. Discussions focused on epistemic shifts, as many reported a reconsideration of how they conceptualised learner needs, engagement, and success. The conversation also addressed systemic challenges, such as the difficulty of embedding decolonial perspectives within Eurocentric curricula and assessment frameworks (Andreotti, 2011). Teachers explored practical strategies for applying Blackfoot Values in ways that enhance learner belonging, social-emotional wellbeing, and inclusive pedagogy while navigating institutional limitations. This phase reinforced Freirean praxis (Freire, 1970), emphasising that decolonising education requires both critical reflection and tangible action in everyday teaching practice.

Data collection

Data was gathered through a combination of presentation recordings and group discussions during the workshop and structured reflections post-workshop. Each participant was required to submit a three-slide presentation that outlined their chosen Blackfoot Value, its personal significance, and its potential application in their teaching. These presentations served as a primary data source, offering insight into how participants conceptualised decolonial frameworks in education. Additionally, notes were taken on the post-presentation group discussions and reflective feedback was analysed to pick up on emerging themes and patterns in responses. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed to identify recurring ideas, tensions, and critical reflections, ensuring that the data captured both individual interpretations and collective dialogues on decolonial pedagogies.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were central to the study, particularly given its focus on Indigenous knowledge systems and the potential risks of misrepresentation or appropriation. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring that they understood the purpose and data collection methods. To respect the cultural integrity of Blackfoot knowledge, the research design was guided by Indigenous research methodologies that emphasise relational accountability, reciprocity, and ethical knowledge-sharing (Wilson, 2008). Participants were encouraged to engage with Blackfoot Values respectfully, recognising their significance beyond the scope of the study. The research also adhered to institutional ethical guidelines, ensuring that data was anonymised and securely stored to protect participant confidentiality. Throughout the study, care was taken to position Blackfoot knowledge as a source of pedagogical enrichment rather than an object of study, emphasising the importance of learning from Indigenous epistemologies rather than merely about them.

Analysis and discussion

The analysis of participant responses was conducted using thematic analysis, identifying key patterns in how teachers engaged with, interpreted, and reflected on Blackfoot Values within their practice. The emerging themes highlight shifts in perspective, challenges in initial engagement, deepened critical thinking, and

implications for pedagogical development. Thematic coding revealed four overarching categories: *Engagement with Indigenous Knowledge, Shifts in Perspective and Critical Reflection, Impact on Pedagogical Approaches, and Future Application of Knowledge.* These findings also reflect the development of key elements of intercultural competence, particularly openness, empathy, and perspective-taking, as articulated in Deardorff's framework (2020).

Engagement with indigenous knowledge

Initial engagement with indigenous knowledge and Blackfoot Values varied significantly among participants, ranging from enthusiasm to initial scepticism. Some immediately found the Values thought-provoking, particularly appreciating the communal and relational aspects that contrasted with dominant Western epistemologies. One participant noted that the concept of Ihkanaitapstsiwa (Everything that is given to a person to do what they want with) "*really got me thinking about the responsibility that comes with having the freedom to act,*" suggesting an early recognition of its broader implications beyond individual agency. Others reported that the values offered a refreshing alternative perspective on classroom culture and community-building, with one stating, "*It gave me a different perspective around classroom culture and how to create a sense of community within the classroom*."

However, for some, initial engagement was marked by confusion or scepticism, particularly where participants struggled to relate specific values to the classroom. One participant admitted, "*To be honest, my first thought when seeing the Blackfoot principles was, 'What on earth is this, and how can I relate it to my teaching?*'" This resistance is indicative of the broader challenge of introducing non-Western epistemologies into teacher education, where dominant paradigms often shape expectations and prior knowledge. Nevertheless, as engagement deepened, many participants found that the values were not only applicable but also valuable in rethinking classroom dynamics. This process of overcoming initial resistance aligns with Mezirow's (1997) theory of transformative learning, where exposure to unfamiliar concepts can lead to deep reflection and eventual perspective shifts.

Shifts in perspective and critical reflection

As participants moved beyond initial engagement, their reflections indicated a

shift towards deeper critical thinking. Many reported that exploring Blackfoot Values prompted them to re-evaluate their assumptions about education, cultural perspectives, and their own biases. One participant noted, "*I had previously considered myself to be knowledgeable about other cultures and religions, but I have since acknowledged that I'm not,*" highlighting the self-awareness that emerged from engaging with Indigenous epistemologies.

Some responses indicated that the process encouraged a more holistic view of education, particularly in relation to the social and emotional aspects of learning. The theme of Kimmapiiypitsinni (Kindness/Compassion) was particularly resonant, with one participant stating, "*The Blackfoot Values changed my thinking around barriers and values, as it allowed me to take a step back and look at the bigger picture and sort of be 'thankful' for the opportunity to be able to support a person who was struggling*." This aligns with research on culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010), which emphasises the importance of educators adopting a relational and empathetic approach to teaching.

Another striking reflection was how engagement with Blackfoot Values challenged rigid, process-driven thinking, particularly for participants with backgrounds in hierarchical or institutional structures. A participant from a policing background initially struggled to apply Ao'ahkannaistokawa (Everything comes in pairs) but eventually recognised its relevance to feedback mechanisms and resource sharing in professional learning environments. This echoes the work of Battiste (2013), who argues that Indigenous knowledge challenges Western frameworks that emphasise rigid, linear structures of learning and assessment. While many participants described the experience as perspective-shifting, it is important to note that this does not indicate a fully developed epistemological transformation. Rather, the workshop served as an initial catalyst for reflection, exposing participants to knowledge systems they had not previously encountered. The reported shifts should therefore be interpreted cautiously as early indicators of emerging intercultural competence rather than evidence of deep or sustained transformation.

Impact on pedagogical approaches

Beyond individual reflection, participants reported tangible changes in their approach to teaching and learning. Several emphasised that the Blackfoot

Values provided a novel lens through which to consider learner engagement and classroom management. One participant described how they now saw their role as more than just delivering knowledge: "*It's made me consider how I can encourage learners to take ownership of their learning and understand the impact their contributions have on the classroom environment*." This aligns with Freire's (1970) concept of education as a dialogical process, where learning is co-constructed rather than simply transmitted.

Another key theme was the value of Pommotsiiysinni (To transfer something to others- knowledge), which resonated deeply with participants who recognised their role in fostering a culture of shared learning. One participant noted, "*It reinforced the importance of differing perspectives and the value of learning from different cultures. It's a good reminder that I should challenge my own thoughts more and be open to alternative ways of thinking*." This draws on the work of Ladson-Billings (1995), who emphasises the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy in fostering inclusive and meaningful learning experiences.

Interestingly, some participants continued to link the Blackfoot Values to existing Western educational models, particularly Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Several commented on how Blackfoot Values complemented Maslow's ideas, particularly in relation to psychological safety and community-driven learning. One participant noted, "*It makes you stop and think what drives and motivates people to behave or react in certain ways, linking this again to Blackfoot values and Maslow*." This observation reflects research by Ermine (2007), who critiques Maslow's work for failing to acknowledge its Indigenous origins, arguing that the Blackfoot conceptualisation of well-being is more holistic and community-oriented than Maslow's individualistic framework.

Future application of knowledge

Many participants expressed a strong desire to integrate Blackfoot Values into their future teaching practice, seeing it as a powerful tool for fostering inclusive and reflective learning environments. One participant articulated, "*Going forward, I think this knowledge will influence how I approach decision-making, both professionally and personally. It's a reminder to consider the wider impact of my actions*." This aligns with Schön's (1983) theory of reflective practice, which suggests that educators who critically engage with new ideas are more likely to

refine their pedagogical approaches.

Others saw value in using Blackfoot Values as a strategy to encourage deeper thinking in learners. One participant highlighted that "*the technique of using an unknown, uncommon approach to getting learners to reflect on values and beliefs*" was particularly effective in removing bias and fostering open discussion and could see this being utilised in the classroom in their future sessions. This supports the findings of Tuck and Yang (2012), who argue that decolonial approaches in education should disrupt traditional knowledge hierarchies and encourage alternative ways of thinking.

Beyond the classroom, some noted how Blackfoot Values encouraged broader professional reflection. One individual working in healthcare linked their learning to psychological safety training, demonstrating how these values have implications beyond educational settings. This interdisciplinary application reinforces the broader relevance of Indigenous epistemologies in fostering more ethical, relational, and inclusive professional practices (Smith, 2021).

Several limitations however must be acknowledged. The reflective data was self-reported and collected immediately after the workshop, limiting insight into longer-term shifts in pedagogy. Additionally, participants' interpretations of Blackfoot Values were necessarily mediated through brief exposure and may not represent full cultural understanding. Finally, as the workshop was facilitated by a single educator, the relational dynamics may have shaped the nature of participants' responses. These limitations do not undermine the findings but indicate the need for cautious interpretation and sustained follow-up research.

Conclusions and recommendations

The integration of Blackfoot Values into teacher education has underscored a critical issue in contemporary educational discourse which is the persistent marginalisation of Indigenous and Global South epistemologies within Global North pedagogical frameworks. Participants' engagement with Indigenous concepts highlights the transformative potential of alternative knowledge systems in fostering deeper reflection, communal responsibility, and adaptability in teaching practices. This aligns with critical scholarship that critiques Western

epistemology for its dominance in shaping curricula and excluding Indigenous perspectives (Battiste, 2013). The erasure or neglect of such knowledge systems in mainstream education is not simply an oversight but a continuation of epistemic colonialism (Mignolo, 2011), where knowledge from the Global North is positioned as universal while Indigenous and non-Western epistemologies are seen as supplementary or even inferior.

This study suggests that incorporating Indigenous values into teacher training programs can contribute to decolonising educational curriculum by challenging dominant narratives and encouraging educators to engage with diverse worldviews. Participants reported an increased awareness of their own cultural biases and the limitations of a Eurocentric understanding of education, reflecting Freire's (1970) argument that education must move beyond a banking model of knowledge transmission to one that fosters critical consciousness. By engaging with the Blackfoot Values, participants recognised the importance of relationality in learning, a key principle in many Indigenous knowledge systems that is often absent in Western pedagogical approaches (Smith, 2021).

The findings also highlight the need to move beyond tokenistic inclusions of Indigenous knowledge. Many education systems continue to frame non-Western epistemologies as 'alternative' rather than integral to a holistic and just education (Andreotti, 2011). This approach fails to prepare students for a globalised world in which knowledge production must be pluralistic and reflective of diverse histories, cultures, and ways of knowing. The process of engaging with the Blackfoot Values in this study not only broadened participants' understanding of pedagogy but also facilitated critical reflection on how knowledge is constructed and validated within higher education. This reflection is essential in cultivating critically engaged citizens who can navigate complex sociocultural landscapes in both education and their wider careers (Santos, 2014).

Moving forward, it is imperative that education programs embed Indigenous and Global South epistemologies in meaningful and sustained ways, rather than as isolated exercises. This requires institutional commitment to diversifying curricula, supporting Indigenous scholars, and critically interrogating the Eurocentrism that shapes knowledge production. Reflective practice must also

be prioritised, not just as a pedagogical tool, but as a means of challenging entrenched power dynamics within education and beyond. Programs such as the Learning on Country initiative in Australia have demonstrated how the integration of Indigenous perspectives can lead to more inclusive and effective learning environments (Damus, 2021; Pete, 2016; Wilson et al., 2017). Expanding such initiatives globally, while ensuring they are led by Indigenous and local communities, is crucial in fostering an education system that truly values epistemic diversity.

This study's insights must be interpreted within the constraints of a brief, two-hour intervention. The preliminary nature of the activity means that long-term pedagogical impact cannot yet be established. A follow-up study tracking how participants integrate or discard Blackfoot Values over time would be essential for understanding sustained epistemic change. Future research might also explore how deeper engagement with Indigenous knowledge systems, led by Blackfoot knowledge keepers themselves, could strengthen or refine the outcomes identified here.

Ultimately, the initial results of this study reinforce the urgency of epistemic justice in education. Decolonising knowledge is not simply an academic endeavour; it is a necessary step towards social transformation. By centring Indigenous and Global South perspectives, education can move beyond reproducing dominant power structures and instead cultivate learners who are critically aware, globally engaged, and committed to justice in their own professional and personal lives.

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