



Educators' Experiences Awarding High School Credit for an Indigenous Youth Program in Alberta

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Author Biographies

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Tyler Cole (MA), is a PhD candidate in the School of Public Health at the University of Alberta. His research is grounded in community-based participatory approaches and program evaluation. He works closely with the Indigenous Youth Mentorship Program where he is interested in how leadership opportunities can contribute to educational attainment and mino-pimâtisiwin.

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Abstract

Educational attainment is a vital determinant of health, yet inequities persist for Indigenous students in Canada. The Indigenous Youth Mentorship Program (IYMP) is a community-based, after-school health promotion program that supports leadership, mentorship, physical activity, belonging, and wholistic wellbeing among Indigenous youth. In Alberta, high school youth mentors participating in IYMP have sought formal recognition of their learning through course credit; however, little is known about how educators navigate credit-awarding processes for health-focused, community-based programs. This study involved semi-structured interviews with five Alberta-based educators and program leaders with experience awarding credit for IYMP participation. Interview transcripts were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. Four themes were developed: (1) essential partnerships across schools and communities; (2) the need to educate educators on credit processes; (3) fostering student engagement and autonomy; and (4) policy challenges and opportunities. Findings indicate that credit awarding is a relational and locally mediated practice shaped by educator authority, institutional structures, and policy interpretation, with important implications for recognizing experiential learning central to physical and health education. Strengthening these pathways may support more equitable recognition of Indigenous youth leadership and community-based learning within school systems.

Keywords: educational attainment; qualitative research; credit awarding

Résumé

Le niveau de scolarité constitue un déterminant de la santé, mais des inégalités persistent chez les élèves autochtones au Canada. Le Programme de mentorat des jeunes autochtones (IYMP) est un programme communautaire de promotion de la santé offert après l'école qui soutient le leadership, le mentorat, l'activité physique, le sentiment d'appartenance et le bien-être holistique des jeunes autochtones. En Alberta, les mentors des jeunes du secondaire participant au IYMP ont demandé la reconnaissance officielle de leurs apprentissages par le biais de crédits scolaires. Cependant, on sait peu de choses sur la façon dont le personnel scolaire gère les processus d'attribution de crédits pour des programmes communautaires axés sur la santé. Cette étude a impliqué des entrevues semi-structurées auprès de cinq personnes éducatrices et responsables de programme basées en Alberta ayant de l'expérience dans l'attribution de crédits pour la participation à l'IYMP. Les verbatim des entrevues ont été analysés à l'aide d'une analyse thématique inductive. Quatre thèmes ont émergé: 1) l'importance de partenariats solides entre les écoles et les communautés; 2) la nécessité de mieux informer le personnel scolaire sur les processus d'attribution de crédits; 3) la promotion de l'engagement et de l'autonomie des élèves; 4) les défis et les possibilités liés aux politiques éducatives. Les résultats indiquent que l'attribution de crédits est une pratique relationnelle et est fortement influencée par les contextes locaux. Elle est façonnée par l'autorité du personnel scolaire, les structures institutionnelles et l'interprétation des politiques. Ces constats ont des implications importantes pour la reconnaissance des apprentissages expérientiels, qui occupent une place centrale en éducation physique et à la santé. Le renforcement de ces mécanismes pourrait favoriser une reconnaissance plus équitable du leadership des jeunes autochtones et des apprentissages réalisés dans des contextes communautaires au sein des systèmes scolaires.

Mots-clés: niveau de scolarité; attribution de crédits scolaires; recherche qualitative

Introduction and Literature Review

Educational Attainment and Indigenous Youth

Educational attainment, defined as the highest level of education an individual has completed, is connected to many aspects of wholistic health, such as positive life satisfaction, healthy eating habits, and overall quality of life (National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2017; Shankar et al., 2013). For Indigenous youth in Canada, inequities in educational attainment persist, often the result of structural barriers rooted in colonization and the enduring Eurocentric foundations of the education system (Layton, 2023; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Indigenous students are less likely to complete high school compared to their non-Indigenous peers, a disparity that contributes to downstream inequities across multiple dimensions of health and quality of life (Kim, 2019; Layton, 2023; National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2017). Supporting Indigenous youths' educational pathways, therefore, remains a critical priority within school health and health promotion efforts.

One approach to supporting educational attainment is through learning experiences that extend beyond traditional classroom instruction while still contributing meaningfully toward graduation requirements. After-school and community-based programs that emphasize leadership, mentorship, physical activity, and relationship-building offer important opportunities for youth engagement, particularly when they align with students' interests, cultural identities, and lived experiences (Melro et al., 2025; Tiernan et al., 2025). However, despite their educational value, such programs often exist outside formal curricular structures, raising questions about whether and how the learning that occurs within them can be formally recognized through high school course credit.

Research Setting: The Indigenous Youth Mentorship Program (IYMP)

The Indigenous Youth Mentorship Program (IYMP) is one such program with strong potential to support both health and educational outcomes. IYMP is a community-based after-school health promotion program delivered in more than 50 communities across Canada, including Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, and Quebec (Lopresti et al., 2020). The program engages Indigenous high school youth mentors to lead culturally relevant physical activity, healthy-eating, and relationship-building activities for their younger, elementary-aged peers. Guided by Indigenous worldviews of wholistic wellbeing, IYMP emphasizes mentorship, leadership development, and community connection while fostering a sense of belonging among participants. Previous research has demonstrated that participation in IYMP supports positive physical, emotional, and social health outcomes for Indigenous youth, as well as the development of transferable skills such as communication, responsibility, and leadership (Eskicioglu et al., 2014; Ferguson et al., 2021; Tiernan et al., 2025).

In recent years, high school youth mentors participating in IYMP have expressed interest in earning high school credit for their involvement in the program. In Alberta, multiple pathways exist through which credits may be awarded for learning that occurs outside traditional classroom settings, including locally developed courses, mentorship and leadership credits, health and wellness credits, and other flexible options (Alberta Education, 2021). While these pathways suggest considerable policy flexibility, how they are interpreted and enacted in practice varies across school contexts. As a result, uncertainty remains around how educators navigate the process of awarding credit for participation in health promotion programs such as IYMP.

Authority and System Structure in Credit Awarding

High school credit-awarding is not merely an administrative process; it functions as a primary mechanism through which learning is recognized, legitimized and rendered visible within educational systems (Domina et al., 2017; Tiernan et al., 2025). Credits signal that particular forms of knowledge, skill development, and learning experiences are institutionally valued, while other forms (often experiential, relational, or community-based) remain unofficial or peripheral (Domina et al., 2017). This distinction is especially relevant for health and physical activity education and school health contexts, where learning frequently occurs through mentorship, leadership, physical activity, and relationship-building rather than through traditional classroom instruction. Community-based after-school programs, such as IYMP, occupy a pedagogical “in-between” space: they foster demonstrable learning outcomes aligned with educational goals, yet they sit outside formal curriculum structures unless educators actively translate these experiences into recognized credit-earning pathways. Therefore, understanding how educators navigate this translation process is central to understanding how school authorities determine what learning counts, whose knowledge is recognized, and how educational systems can more equitably acknowledge diverse forms of learning.

While provincial education policy in Alberta outlines multiple potential pathways for credit awarding, authority over how these pathways are operationalized rests largely at the local level (Alberta Education, 2021). In practice, certificated teachers and school administrators play a central gatekeeping role, as they are responsible for interpreting policy, aligning learning outcomes with curricular requirements, assessing student work, and entering credits into official student information systems. Consequently, the feasibility of awarding credit for participation in programs such as IYMP depends less on the existence of policy pathways and more on how educators navigate institutional structures within their specific schools and jurisdictions. This localized authority introduces variability across school contexts, as divisions and schools differ in willingness to recognize experiential learning or adopt outcome-based approaches. Educators, therefore, act as intermediaries between policy and implementation, translating relational, mentorship-based learning into forms that are legible within curricular frameworks. Understanding this authority structure provides essential context for examining educators' experiences with credit awarding and underscores why educators' perspectives are central to this inquiry.

Study Aim

The aim of this study was to explore educators' experiences with awarding high school course credit to youth mentors involved with IYMP in Alberta. Specifically, this research sought to examine strategies educators have used in practice, the challenges and opportunities they have encountered, and the factors that shape whether community-based health promotion programs are formally recognized within school systems. The guiding research question was: What successes, failures, challenges, and opportunities have individuals in Alberta encountered in the IYMP credit award process?

Methods

Ethical Considerations

Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the University of Alberta Human Research Ethics Board (Pro00124180). All participants provided informed consent prior to participation and were assured of confidentiality and the voluntary nature of their involvement.

Identifying information was removed from transcripts, and participants are referred to using pseudonyms.

Study Approach

This study employed qualitative description as its guiding method to explore educators' experiences with awarding high school course credit for participation in a community-based health promotion program (Mayan, 2023; Sullivan-Bolyai et al., 2005). Qualitative description was selected to generate a detailed, practice-oriented account of how credit-awarding processes are understood and enacted by educators within real-world school contexts (Sullivan-Bolyai et al., 2005). This approach is particularly well-suited to research questions focused on “how” and “why” processes unfold in applied educational settings, where the goal is to capture participants' perspectives using language and concepts that are meaningful to practitioners.

The research was informed by a constructivist and interpretivist orientation, grounded in a relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology. Educators' accounts of credit awarding were understood as situated within the school, policy, and program contexts in which these decisions occur. From this perspective, knowledge was generated through participants' reflections on their experiences and the research team's interpretive engagement with those accounts, rather than treated as objective findings independent of context. This positioning aligned with qualitative description by supporting a practice-oriented account of how credit-awarding processes are enacted in real-world school contexts, while also allowing attention to how local decisions are shaped by educator authority, institutional roles, policy interpretation, and assumptions about what forms of learning count within school systems (Mayan, 2023; Sullivan-Bolyai et al., 2005).

This study was situated within the context of the Indigenous Youth Mentorship Program (IYMP) in Alberta and focused specifically on educators with direct experiences navigating credit-awarding processes for youth mentors involved in the program.

Reflexivity

The research team engaged reflexively throughout the study, acknowledging how professional roles, institutional proximity, and prior involvement with IYMP shaped the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Several members of the research team had established relationships with IYMP communities and leadership, which facilitated access to knowledgeable participants with system-level insight into credit-awarding practices. At the same time, this proximity required ongoing attention to how assumptions about the value of community-based learning and credit recognition could influence interpretation.

Reflective discussions were used to surface tensions between documenting existing institutional constraints and advocating for more equitable recognition of experiential and relational learning (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The research team remained attentive to the fact that the findings reflect educator perspectives within provincial education systems, rather than student, family or Indigenous governance perspectives. Reflexivity was therefore treated as an analytical resource, supporting careful interpretation of how institutional norms and professional roles shape credit-awarding decisions.

Participants and Recruitment

Participants were recruited using purposeful and snowball sampling to identify individuals with practical experience and system-level involvement in the high school credit-awarding process in Alberta (Morse et al., 2002; Sandelowski, 1995). Purposeful sampling was used to recruit

educators known to have direct responsibility for, or oversight of, credit-awarding decisions related to IYMP. Individuals were selected for their depth of experience rather than to represent all educator perspectives (Sandelowski, 1995). Snowball sampling was subsequently used to identify additional participants with complementary roles or insights into the credit-awarding process. Recruitment continued until informational sufficiency was reached, defined as the point at which additional interviews yielded little new insights into credit-awarding strategies, challenges, or decision-making processes (Sandelowski, 1995).

Five participants took part in the study. Participants included an IYMP program leader, a school division curriculum manager, an Ever Active School staff member, a student wellness consultant, and an Indigenous student program coordinator. Four participants were certificated Alberta teachers, though not all were actively teaching at the time of the study. Several participants worked across multiple schools or jurisdictions, providing perspectives that extended beyond a single school context.

The sample size was appropriate for the focused and practice-oriented aim of the study (Mayan, 2023; Morse et al., 2002; Sandelowski, 1995). Participants were not recruited to represent all educator perspectives in Alberta; rather, they were selected because they held direct or system-level knowledge of credit-awarding processes relevant to IYMP and similar health promotion programming. Informational sufficiency was assessed through the specificity and depth of participants' accounts, the recurrence of key considerations across interviews, and the limited emergence of new procedural or policy-related insights in later interviews (Mayan, 2023; Sandelowski, 1995).

All participants were contacted by email, provided with study information letters and consent forms, and gave informed consent prior to participation.

Data Generation

Data were generated through one-on-one semi-structured interviews conducted virtually via Zoom or in person. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, with the variation in length primarily reflecting the depth of individual participant experiences. While the same questions were asked consistently across all sessions, some participants provided more extensive answers, leading to longer discussions. The semi-structured format allowed participants to describe experiences with credit-awarding processes in their own words while ensuring consistent coverage of key topics across interviews (Mayan, 2023). The full interview guide is included as Appendix A. In brief, the guide included general questions about participants' roles in the high school education system, their previous education-related positions, how they came to work with credit-awarding processes, the courses or activities they had awarded credit for, essential partnerships, and unsuccessful attempts to award credit. IYMP-specific questions asked whether participants had successfully awarded course credit to IYMP youth mentors, why this pathway had been pursued, what the process looked like, what problems or roadblocks were encountered, and what an ideal IYMP credit-awarding scenario would entail. The interview closed by inviting participants to share any additional reflections on the process of awarding credits to high school students. The interview guide was developed in consultation with an Alberta school division curriculum manager to ensure alignment with provincial terminology and educational processes.

Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim using Otter.ai (Otter.ai Inc., 2023). MK manually verified all transcripts to ensure accuracy and confidentiality. De-identified transcripts were then organized and coded using NVivo 14 (Lumivero, 2025).

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Analysis began with transcript familiarization, during which the lead author reviewed each transcript in full to gain an overall sense of the data. Initial coding was conducted by the lead author, who generated codes that captured patterns related to educator roles, decision-making processes, institutional constraints, and enabling conditions for credit awarding.

Preliminary themes were developed through an iterative process of grouping and refining codes. These themes were then discussed with other members of the research team during analytic discussions, where interpretations were reviewed, refined, and contextualized in relation to educational practice and policy (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This collaborative analytic process supported the development of coherent themes while ensuring that multiple perspectives informed interpretation. The analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns in how educators described navigating credit-awarding processes, rather than on quantifying responses or achieving representativeness.

Rigour

Several strategies were used to enhance methodological rigour (Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Morse et al., 2002). Credibility was supported through iterative team discussions and peer debriefing during the analytic process. An audit trail was maintained to document analytical decisions and theme development. Thick description was used to support transferability by providing detailed contextual information about participants, institutional structures, and educational settings. Reflexivity was integrated throughout data generation and analysis to enhance transparency and analytical integrity.

Results

Through the analysis process, four major themes were developed to reflect educators' experiences with the high school credit awarding process in Alberta. All interviews focused on the primary goal of credit-awarding strategies and on key considerations for health promotion programs, such as IYMP. These themes were: 1) essential partnerships; 2) educating educators; 3) student engagement and autonomy; and 4) policy challenges and opportunities. Across themes, educators described acting as intermediaries who translate community-based learning into forms that schools can recognize for credit. The themes are described below with quotes embedded throughout to support the findings.

Theme 1: Essential Partnerships

Participants consistently emphasized the need for a multitude of partnerships to successfully award high school course credit to students. This theme was especially prominent across interviews because participants described partnerships as foundational to nearly every stage of credit awarding. Shared responsibilities impacted every stage of the credit awarding process, including programming development, program delivery, student assessment and evaluation, credit submission with student information systems, and overall approval of credit pathways. These partnerships depended not only on formal roles but also on a shared motivation to support students' educational attainment and a willingness to collaborate across institutional and community contexts.

Participants identified a range of partners as essential to this process, including school authorities, principals and vice principals, administrative staff, certificated teachers, and IYMP program leaders. Community partners were also described as important contributors, particularly when program content extended beyond a teacher's primary area of training. For example, participants described working with external partners to provide food-handling certification or collaborating with Elders and community members to support cultural learning opportunities. Within the context of IYMP, program leaders were described as needing to be "keen to work with schools and get those opportunities" for students (Educator C). Regardless of the specific credit pathway pursued, partnerships were viewed as necessary in some capacity.

All participants identified Alberta-certificated teachers as essential partners in the credit-awarding process. Four participants were certificated teachers themselves, although most were not actively working in classroom teaching roles at the time of the study. These participants highlighted the value of being able to deliver programming, assess student learning, and award credits independently, as this autonomy reduced reliance on additional personnel. The participant who was not a certificated teacher emphasized the need to partner with teachers in order to provide programming and ensure credits could be formally awarded.

Participants also explained that while certificated teachers were responsible for student assessment and evaluation, they frequently collaborated with others who were better positioned to deliver specific learning experiences. Educator D referred to these collaborations as "mini partnerships," describing them as small but meaningful contributions that enhanced the learning environment. For example, a teacher might partner with a certified First Aid instructor to provide specialized training. Educator A similarly noted that "sometimes we have education assistants, who are actually doing some work in the classroom with people. And technically, they aren't teachers, but they're doing [the work]."

The importance of partnering with teachers was further emphasized in relation to assessment and evaluation decisions. Educator A illustrated this by walking through the learning outcomes for the Career and Technology Studies (CTS) Human and Social Services (HSS) 1050 Introduction to Mentorship course, explaining how curricular outcomes could be interpreted flexibly in practice. They noted:

We don't necessarily have to assess every piece of minutia on here... what we're trying to assess is the things that are... in bold... they say we have to teach all of these things, but we don't have to assess all of these things. That's for a teacher to determine what they'll assess.

This example highlights the importance of partnering with individuals who possess both curricular knowledge and the authority to make assessment decisions.

Participants also emphasized the necessity of working closely with school administrators, particularly principals and vice principals, to secure support for credit-awarding initiatives. Educator B shared that school administrators had "advised me to get creative to get these students credit so that they can graduate," which encouraged further exploration of IYMP as a credit-earning opportunity. Educator C similarly emphasized that "principals are key, because they usually oversee credit earning in their school," adding that "when principals are not on board, we can't, we just can't do it."

Establishing these partnerships was often described as easier in smaller school jurisdictions, where principals had greater autonomy. Participants noted that additional layers of bureaucracy at the school division level could create barriers. Educator C described an instance

where a leadership-based program that had previously been successful was later rejected under new district-level leadership. Reflecting on this experience, they explained:

Had we just gone to the principal and work[ed] directly with the principal, the principal was amendable to it and confident in the process... I think the principals are key, whether it's the vice principal or principal who oversees credit earning, they're so key in that relationship.

Beyond administrators, participants highlighted the essential role of school staff, such as administrative assistants. These staff members were described as critical to enrolling students in appropriate courses, ensuring credits appeared on transcripts, and coordinating timetables. When programming occurred during the school day, administrative assistants helped ensure participation aligned with students' other coursework. For after-school programming such as IYMP, administrators and administrative assistants supported logistical tasks, including permission forms, attendance tracking, and transportation arrangements. Additional "mini partnerships," such as with bus drivers, were sometimes required when programming occurred off school grounds.

Overall, participants agreed that building partnerships with individuals who are invested in expanding credit-earning opportunities was essential. Educator D reflected on being "very fortunate" to work with a senior leader who was "super keen on getting [a credit earning opportunity] up and rolling," noting that it is difficult to make credit-awarding processes successful "if you try to throw that to someone who has no understanding of credits or education." Similarly, Educator C emphasized the importance of working with individuals motivated to help students "make connections to like real-world learning and real-world-like activities." Participants described these partnerships as the "infrastructure" that made credit awarding feasible, particularly by distributing labour and enabling administrative approval.

Theme 2: Educating Educators

All participants emphasized the importance of ensuring educators are knowledgeable about credit-awarding processes. This knowledge included understanding which credits are available outside traditional courses, how other educators are implementing non-traditional credit pathways, and how existing approaches could be adapted to local school contexts. Several participants expressed surprise at the range of credits available once they became more involved in the credit-awarding process.

Educator E described uncertainty about whether leadership credits were available in their school and how to locate relevant information. Educator B explained that once they became more familiar with CTS credit options, ideas for connecting IYMP programming to credit pathways began to emerge. Educator C acknowledged that their familiarity with credit awarding exceeded that of many teachers due to their experience "build[ing] a patchwork course out of a number of like single credit CTS courses."

Despite this growing expertise, participants expressed reluctance to delegate evaluation responsibilities to educators who were less familiar with the specific credit pathways being used. Educator B explained that their approach to awarding credits was not structured in a way "that somebody else can also do the evaluating who is not as familiar with the curriculum as what I am." These perspectives illustrate the complexity of credit awarding, and the time required for educators to develop sufficient expertise.

At the same time, participants noted a fine balance between educating educators and overwhelming them with information. Educator C described an unsuccessful attempt to distribute a detailed how-to guide containing example credits, assignments, and rubrics. The lack of uptake

suggested that educators may have been overwhelmed by the volume of information. Other participants reinforced this concern, pointing to heavy teacher workloads and limited time to explore credit-awarding pathways. Participants also noted that limited communication between schools contributed to duplicated efforts, as educators were often unaware of how similar programs were being implemented elsewhere. This duplication was viewed as potentially limiting the range of credit pathways pursued and, in turn, reducing opportunities for students. These accounts suggest that policy flexibility becomes actionable only when educators have time, curricular knowledge and administrative support to implement it.

Theme 3: Student Engagement and Autonomy

Participants unanimously emphasized the importance of prioritizing student engagement and autonomy in credit-awarding efforts. Students were described as being motivated by the opportunity to earn credits toward graduation, to explore personal interests, or both. Credit earning was viewed as a particularly effective motivator for students nearing graduation requirements. Community involvement was seen as a key strategy for enhancing student engagement. Participants described how building connections among peers and with community members fostered participation. Educator D noted that prioritizing “relationship building” led to “a lot of growth within the students,” particularly in social skill development. Community-driven programming was also described as effective when it aligned with student interests. Educator C shared an example of a traditional foods camp developed in response to community needs and student interest in employment-related skills:

...they did a traditional foods focused camp... plucking ducks and preparing wild game... picking berries... cooking Bannock... and then they also got like a food handling certificate... that kind of came from the community... and the youth were like looking for opportunities for employment.

Participants emphasized that aligning community needs with student interests created learning opportunities that benefited both students and their communities. They highlighted the importance of offering coursework that reflected student interests and supported future goals, noting that “it’s cool when youth can choose” (Educator C) and that fostering autonomy was “a really great opportunity to help [students] graduate so they can pursue their further goals down the line” (Educator D).

When discussing ideal credit-awarding pathways for IYMP, participants emphasized flexibility and student choice. Leadership and mentorship skills were described as assessable through diverse activities, including arts-based programming (e.g., dancing, crafting, beading) and sport-based programming (e.g., coaching). These opportunities could “fall under the umbrella of IYMP” (Educator C) while offering students multiple pathways to earn credit. Participants also expressed strong interest in land-based learning, describing it as more engaging than “just sitting in the classroom doing their regular work” (Educator E). Educators D and E elaborated on the value of outdoor and cultural learning experiences, noting their potential to support leadership development, engagement, and enjoyment.

Low attendance was identified as a persistent barrier to credit earning. Participants attributed attendance challenges to family responsibilities and disengagement from traditional schooling. To address attendance barriers, participants emphasized “sneaky learning” (Educator D), where learning outcomes were embedded into enjoyable activities so students did not feel like they were “doing work.” This approach positioned credit earning as a recognition of meaningful participation rather than an added classroom-like burden. Educator B described students’ reactions

to this approach, noting that they “can’t believe that they get to just come and have fun and earn credits... they don’t even see it as an extra class.”

However, participants cautioned that engagement diminished when credit pathways were imposed without student choice. When students were “voluntold” (Educator C) to participate, autonomy was undermined and engagement suffered. Participants emphasized that without centring student interests, even well-designed credit pathways were unlikely to succeed. As Educator E reflected, educators want to avoid situations where they “put a lot of work into something and the kids just... don’t see the importance.”

Theme 4: Policy Challenges and Opportunities

Participants described policy at both provincial and school-authority levels as creating challenges and opportunities for awarding credit through health promotion programs such as IYMP. As Educator C summarized, “the challenge and success... just comes down to like how districts function.”

A key policy challenge involved variability across school authorities, particularly regarding adherence to time-based credit models. Some jurisdictions followed a 25-hour-per-credit model, while others allowed for outcome-based assessment. Participants viewed outcome-based approaches as better aligned with the “characteristics-based” and “behavioural” skills developed through IYMP (Educator B). Strict adherence to time-based models was described as a significant barrier, particularly for short-term or intensive programming. Educator C explained that requiring 25 instructional hours made it “nearly impossible” to offer credit-earning camps unless they occurred over extended periods.

Additional policy barriers related to who was permitted to evaluate student learning. Participants described situations where certificated teachers delivering programming were not authorized to evaluate students or access information systems, necessitating partnerships with school-based staff. In one case, an educator sought substitute teacher status to comply with school authority requirements. Participants noted that while such policies were not universal, educators should anticipate encountering unexpected barriers.

Participants also highlighted the importance of understanding students’ existing credits and timetable requirements. Students could not earn duplicate credits for leadership courses already completed, and scheduling constraints sometimes limited opportunities to integrate IYMP-related credits. This required creative problem-solving to ensure credit pathways did not interfere with core coursework.

Curriculum alignment was identified as a guiding requirement under Alberta’s Education Act. Participants referenced curriculum “books” or “booklets” that detailed course titles, prerequisites, and learning outcomes. Educator E described their approach as returning to course summaries once program plans were established and “try[ing] to attach credit to that.” These resources were viewed as essential tools for identifying credit pathways aligned with IYMP programming.

Finally, participants viewed policy as a potential opportunity for system-level change. They suggested that formal agreements between IYMP leadership and school authorities could streamline credit awarding and reduce teacher workload by automatically enrolling students in agreed-upon credits. Participants believed that such approaches could simplify processes while maintaining accountability for attendance and learning outcomes. Despite these possibilities, participants echoed Educator C’s sentiment that credit-awarding pathways “still feel very muddy in Alberta,” underscoring the ongoing complexity educators must navigate. Participants

emphasized that this variability means access to credit can depend on local interpretation and educator capacity, rather than on student engagement alone.

Discussion

This study explored educator experiences awarding high school course credits for participation in a community-based health promotion program, highlighting credit awarding as a relational, interpretive, and value-laden process rather than a purely technical or administrative task. These dynamics were most visible in Themes 1 (Essential Partnerships), 2 (Educating Educators), and 4 (Policy Challenges and Opportunities), which together shaped the feasibility of credit awarding. The findings demonstrate that while policy pathways for non-traditional credit exist in Alberta, their enactment depends on educator authority, institutional structures, and relational conditions within schools. Together, these themes illuminate how credit awarding operates as a key site where pedagogical values, institutional power, and equity converge.

Credit Awarding as Pedagogical Recognition

A central contribution of this study is the interpretation of high school credit awarding as a potential mechanism of pedagogical recognition (Domina et al., 2017). As reflected across Themes 1 (Essential Partnerships) and 3 (Student Engagement and Autonomy), educators repeatedly described needing to translate mentorship, leadership, and community-based participation into curricular forms that could be assessed and recorded as credit. Participants consistently described credit not simply as a requirement for graduation, but as a form of institutional validation that signals what learning is considered legitimate within school systems. Community-based programs such as IYMP foster leadership, mentorship, and relational competencies that align closely with educational goals in physical and health education; however, these forms of learning are not automatically recognized unless educators actively translate them into curricular terms.

This finding extends existing school health and youth development literature by illustrating how the recognition of learning is shaped less by where learning occurs and more by whether it can be rendered legible within formal assessment structures (Domina et al., 2017; Hall et al., 2021). In this sense, credit awarding can function as a practical boundary between learning that is formally recognized by schools and learning that remains unofficial or peripheral. For Indigenous youth, whose learning is often grounded in relational, community-based, and culturally specific contexts, this boundary has significant implications for educational equity (Domina et al., 2017). Recognizing learning through credit pathways, therefore, may be understood as more than an administrative decision; it can also reflect a pedagogical stance about which forms of learning are made visible and valued within school systems.

Educator Authority, Gatekeeping, and Institutional Power

Findings also underscore the central role of educator authority in mediating access to credit for community-based learning. Certificated teachers and administrators were positioned in gatekeeping roles who interpret policy, determine alignment with curricular outcomes, and authorize credit entry into institutional systems. Theme 1 (Essential Partnerships) illustrated this most clearly: certificated teachers held responsibility for assessment, and principals' support often determined whether credit pathways could proceed. Theme 4 (Policy Challenges and Opportunities) further showed how district policies shape who can evaluate student learning and

enter credits into official systems. While this authority enabled credit awarding to occur, it simultaneously concentrated decision-making power within a small number of roles, making access to credit contingent on individual educator capacity, confidence, and institutional support.

This dual role of educators as both enablers and gatekeepers complicates narratives of policy flexibility as inherently equitable (Alberta Education, 2021; Hall et al., 2021). Participants described significant variability in how policies were interpreted across schools and divisions, suggesting that flexibility without structural support may reproduce inequities rather than resolve them. When educators lacked time, knowledge, or administrative backing, policy flexibility was effectively inaccessible. These findings suggest that institutional power is expressed not only through formal policy but also through the everyday interpretive labour educators perform when deciding whether non-traditional learning can be recognized for credit.

Partnerships as Educational Infrastructure

Across themes, partnerships emerged as the foundational mechanism enabling credit awarding. Participants emphasized that credit awarding depended on networks of relationships involving teachers, administrators, support staff, program leaders, and community partners. In Theme 1 (Essential Partnerships), participants described partnerships among administrators, administrative assistants, community partners, and program leaders—highlighting that credit awarding depended on distributed labour as much as on formal policy pathways. This suggests that improving recognition of experiential learning requires strengthening relational and administrative supports, not solely expanding credit-earning options on paper. These partnerships functioned as educational infrastructure, supporting educator learning, distributing labour, and enabling policy navigation.

This finding aligns with and extends prior research on comprehensive school health and collaborative educational practice by illustrating how partnerships specifically facilitate the recognition of experiential learning (Neely et al., 2020; Paulsen, 2008; Sobierajski et al., 2022; Walsh et al., 2022). Rather than serving as peripheral supports, partnerships were central to translating community-based programming into institutional forms recognized by schools. Where partnerships were strong, educators were better positioned to navigate policy constraints and support student engagement. Where partnerships were weak, even motivated educators faced barriers to recognizing learning through credit.

Student Engagement, Autonomy, and Relational Learning

Participants consistently emphasized the importance of student engagement and autonomy in designing and implementing credit pathways. Credit awarding was most effective when learning opportunities aligned with students' interests and allowed for multiple modes of demonstrating learning, including cultural, artistic, and physically active forms. Theme 3 (Student Engagement and Autonomy) showed that student choice, community-driven programming, and “sneaky learning” were key mechanisms for engagement, while “voluntold” participation undermined autonomy and sustained participation. These findings reinforce the importance of relational and student-centred pedagogies in physical and health education, where engagement is closely tied to relevance and agency (Hall et al., 2021; Sobierajski et al., 2022; Tiernan et al., 2025).

At the same time, participants cautioned against purely instrumental approaches that framed credit as the primary motivator for participation. When students perceived credit pathways as imposed or disconnected from meaningful learning, engagement diminished. This tension highlights the importance of designing credit recognition practices that preserve student autonomy

while acknowledging the structural realities of graduation requirements. For Indigenous youth in particular, respecting autonomy and relational engagement aligns with broader commitments to culturally responsive and wholistic educational approaches (Tiernan et al., 2025).

Policy Flexibility and Its Limits

While participants identified policy as a potential lever for expanding credit recognition, findings reveal important limitations of policy flexibility in practice. The persistence of time-based credit models in some jurisdictions constrained the recognition of outcome-based learning, even where policy allowed for alternative approaches. Theme 4 (Policy Challenges and Opportunities) documented how district-level variability—particularly time-based expectations (e.g., 25-hours-per-credit) and restrictions on who can evaluate—constrained credit awarding even when pathways existed (Alberta Education, 2021). This variability suggests that policy reform alone is insufficient to ensure equitable recognition of community-based learning.

Participants' discussions of potential system-level agreements between school authorities and IYMP leadership point to opportunities for reducing individual educator burden and increasing consistency across contexts. Such arrangements could shift credit awarding from an individualized, ad hoc process to a more sustainable and equitable practice (Paulsen, 2008; Walsh et al., 2022). However, participants also emphasized that policy solutions must be accompanied by professional learning, administrative support, and relational trust to be effective.

Implications For Physical and Health Education

Taken together, these findings have important implications for physical and health education and school health practice. They challenge narrow conceptions of curriculum and assessment that privilege classroom-based instruction and time-based metrics over relational and experiential learning. Participants' examples of land-based learning, cultural programming, mentorship, and leadership development (Theme 3: Student Engagement and Autonomy) illustrate learning outcomes central to physical and health education that may not be captured by time-based models (Theme 4: Policy Challenges and Opportunities). Recognizing mentorship, leadership, and community engagement as legitimate learning outcomes aligns with the pedagogical foundations of physical and health education and supports more inclusive approaches to educational success.

By foregrounding educator experiences, this study contributes empirical insight into how recognition practices shape educational pathways for Indigenous youth. It suggests that credit awarding is not a neutral process, but a practice with pedagogical and policy implications for equity, engagement, and wellbeing.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the findings reflect the perspectives of educators and program leaders involved in credit-awarding processes and do not directly represent the experiences of Indigenous youth mentors, families, Elders, or broader community partners. As a result, the analysis is strongest in relation to educator decision-making, institutional processes, and policy interpretation, rather than youth or family experiences of credit recognition. Although participants frequently discussed student engagement and autonomy, these findings reflect educator perspectives on student experiences rather than accounts from youth themselves. Second, this study focused specifically on Alberta, where credit-awarding structures, school authority policies, and educator roles may differ from other provincial contexts. The findings should therefore be interpreted as contextually situated within Alberta's education system, rather than as

representative of credit-awarding processes across all IYMP jurisdictions. These limitations point to the importance of future research that centres Indigenous youth, family, and community perspectives and examines how credit recognition operates across other provinces where IYMP is delivered.

Contributions and Future Directions

This study contributes to the literature by empirically examining credit awarding as a site of pedagogical recognition within a school health context. While grounded in IYMP, the findings extend to other community-based, experiential, and culturally grounded programs seeking formal recognition within school systems. Because the study focused on educator perspectives, future work should extend these findings by examining student and family experiences of credit recognition and by exploring Indigenous governance perspectives on what learning should “count.”

Conclusions

This study examined how educators in Alberta have navigated the process of awarding high school credit for youth mentors involved in IYMP. Although Alberta offers multiple possible pathways for recognizing learning outside traditional classroom settings, participants described the process as uneven, locally interpreted, and highly dependent on relationships among teachers, administrators, program leaders, and school authorities. In practice, credit awarding required more than identifying a suitable course or policy option; it required educators who understood the credit system, administrators who were willing to support flexible approaches, and partnerships that helped translate community-based learning into forms schools could formally recognize.

These findings are important for IYMP and for other community-based health promotion programs that support youth leadership, mentorship, physical activity, cultural learning, and belonging. When these forms of learning are recognized through credit, students may receive formal acknowledgement for work they are already doing in their schools and communities. At the same time, the findings show that access to credit can depend on local educator knowledge, school authority interpretation, and administrative capacity. Future work should explore how credit-awarding processes operate in other provinces where IYMP is delivered, including Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, and Quebec, and should centre the perspectives of Indigenous youth, families, Elders, and community partners. Strengthening these pathways will require clear policy guidance, practical supports for educators, and sustained relationships that honour community-based learning as meaningful educational achievement.

Data availability statement

Data are available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

Funding acquisition: KS; study conceptualization and design: MK, KT, KS, GM, LS, BT (equal); data generation: MK; data analysis and interpretation: MK (lead), KT, KS, LS, BT, TC; draft manuscript preparation: KT (co-lead), TC (co-lead), MK, GM, LS, BT. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of this manuscript.

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Appendix A

Key Informant Interviews

One-on-One Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Thank you for taking part in this interview today. Have you received a copy of the information letter for this study?

[INTERVIEWER INTRODUCES THEMSELVES AND WALKS THROUGH THE INFORMATION LETTER WITH PARTICIPANT, EMPHASIZING IMPORTANT POINTS]

Today I hope we can talk about your experiences with the high school credit awarding process.

What we learn from you will be used to help develop an evidence-based approach to standardizing the credit awarding process for all IYMP youth mentors across Canada. I will be audio recording this session so that I can listen to it later. This interview will also be typed out but I will ensure no words or phrases that could be used to identify you will be included in reports to support the findings. Personal information such as your name and community name will be kept confidential and will not be shared with anyone. We will use codes to replace personal and community names in any written reports and publications, or conference presentations. Quoted words and phrases that do not identify you may be used to support the findings.

Please help yourself to refreshments. Before we begin, I would like you to know the following:

- You do not have to answer anything you don't want to.
- There are no right or wrong answers.
- What you share with me in this room will remain confidential.

Before we begin, do you have any questions? Comments? Concerns? If anything is not clear, please let me know. I will not proceed until you are familiar with and comfortable with the process.

Are you comfortable with beginning the interview? Are you okay if I turn on the recorder?

Key Prompts/Questions:

General Questions:

1. What is your role in the high school education system? (are you a principal, teacher, administrator, etc)
 - a. How long have you been in this role?
 - b. Have you previously held different positions in the education system?
 - c. How many years have you worked in the education system?
 - d. Why and how did you come to work surrounding the credit awarding process?

2. Ask if not already answered: What courses/activities have you awarded credit for? How did you determine/create those courses?
3. Have you found that any essential partnerships are needed to successfully award credits? (encourage them to elaborate)
4. Have you had any unsuccessful attempts to award credit to students? (encourage them to elaborate)

IYMP-Specific Questions:

5. Have you had success awarding IYMP youth mentors with course credit for their IYMP-related work?
 - a. Why did you decide to pursue this?
 - b. Can you walk me through what this process was like for you?
 - c. What problems/roadblocks (if any) did you encounter during this process?
6. If you could implement IYMP course credit in your ideal scenario, what would that look like?
 - a. How would you go about awarding credit?
 - b. What would the course itself entail?

Wrap Up:

1. Is there anything else about the process of awarding credits to high school students that you would like to share?

Thank you again for participating in this key informant interview. The information and personal experiences you have shared today will be incredibly useful in advancing this research and supporting IYMP. I will now have the audiotapes typed out. I will then analyze them and use the information in reports and presentations about the credit awarding processes available to peer-led community-based participatory projects, specifically focusing on IYMP. Do you have any questions about this process before we end our time together?