

Decolonizing Education Through Outdoor Learning:  
The Learning Story of an Indigenous Kindergarten Teacher

Alexandria Middlemiss, B.A., B.Ed.

Department of Graduate and Undergraduate  
Studies in Education

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Education

Faculty of Education, Brock University  
St. Catharines, Ontario

© Alexandria R. Middlemiss 2018

## **Abstract**

This study examined the decolonizing pedagogy and practices of a First Nations kindergarten teacher. Indigenous communities across Canada and the world are currently affecting transformation in their schools by turning systems of colonial domination to education that is locally controlled, culturally relevant, and empowering. The study investigated the teacher's learning story, including her personal experiences with education throughout her life, as well as her current practice as an educator, through both an Indigenous and non-Indigenous lens. The author and the teacher acted as co-researchers in this collaborative project. The exploration of this pedagogy and practice through these two perspectives sought to gain insight into potential solutions for decolonizing education. This research is thus shared in the hope of bringing Indigenous-driven reconciliation into our classrooms by providing a decolonizing framework that can be imparted to fellow educators. The researchers observed that decolonizing pedagogy, in this instance, occurred through outdoor learning, culturally centred practices, as well as family and community connections. Such practices were determined to be deeply rooted in the teacher's personal identity and experiences, stemming from an Indigenous epistemology and ontology.

## Table of Contents

	<b>Page</b>
Abstract.....	ii
List of Figures.....	iv
Prologue.....	v
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION .....	1
Background and Rationale .....	1
Personal Rationale.....	6
Land-Based Pedagogies Within Indigenous Communities.....	8
Statement of the Research Problem .....	9
Theoretical Framework .....	11
Research Questions .....	12
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE .....	13
Methodological Approach to Literature Review .....	13
Culturally Responsive Education.....	14
Connection to Land.....	24
Community Engagement.....	28
Conclusions and Relevance to Study .....	30
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN.....	31
Selection of Site and Participants .....	33
Decolonizing Methodologies .....	39
Data Collection Tools and Analysis.....	40
Ethical Considerations .....	42
Scope and Limitations of the Study .....	44
CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF RESULTS .....	44
Education Journey as a Child—Memories of Learning.....	44
Education Journey as a Lifelong Learner .....	59
A Day in Kindergarten.....	71
Outdoor Education—Learning From the Land.....	72
Culturally Centered Practice .....	80
Family and Community Connections .....	85
CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND CONCLUSION .....	93
Summary .....	93
Findings and Discussion .....	94
Implications for Further Research.....	96
Conclusion .....	97
References .....	98
Appendix: Research Protocol Developed by Linda (2009).....	107

## List of Figures

<b>Figure</b>	<b>Page</b>
1. Curricular framework at mainstream schools.....	23
2. Curricular framework at MECCS.....	23
3. Locating Indigenous methodologies in qualitative research .....	35
4. Co-researchers' roles in the project.....	38

## Prologue

In the interest of respecting the privacy and confidentiality of research participants, all potential identifiers (names and locations alike) have been removed. Fictitious identifiers are used in their place to preserve the integrity of the research. All research was undertaken on a traditional territory and reserve located in southern Ontario. The results, as well as the ownership of this research, will be at the sole discretion of the participating community's Chief and Council.

Three copies of this paper will be submitted to the community's Research Ethics Committee, who will arrange for a copy to be stored at each of the following locations: the community's public library, the local Indigenous Knowledge Centre, and the Elected Council's administrative buildings.

The paper also contains written work from the co-researcher's unpublished thesis; again here, the author of the thesis will not be named. These works will be cited as personal communications.

*We gather our minds to greet and thank the enlightened Teachers  
who have come to help throughout the ages.*

*When we forget how to live in harmony, they remind us of the way  
we were instructed to live as people.*

*With one mind, we send greetings and thanks to these caring Teachers.*

*Now our minds are one.*

~ From the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

For Indigenous people in Canada, education—schooling in particular—has been a site of much pain and forced assimilation (Battiste, 2013; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRCC], 2015b). Such experiences encompass historical attempts at cultural genocide perpetuated through colonialism and residential schooling (Battiste, 2013) and ongoing injustices in Canadian Indigenous education through underfunding, discriminatory practices, and a Eurocentric curriculum (Chiefs Assembly on Education, 2012). Despite these unfavourable conditions, many Indigenous communities across Canada have reclaimed the education of their young people and are experiencing success. Indigenous communities across Canada and the world are currently effecting transformation in their schools from systems of colonial domination to education that is locally controlled, culturally relevant, and empowering (Battiste, 2013; Battiste & Barman, 1995; Fulford, 2011). This study examines the learning story and teaching practice of Linda,<sup>1</sup> an Indigenous educator who is part of this decolonizing movement in education.

### Background and Rationale

Thousands of years before European settlers arrived on Turtle Island (North America), Indigenous Nations had inhabited and lived in communities with long-standing guidelines and traditions, and educated young people in their ways of life (Battiste, 2013; Kirkness, 1999). Children learned through observation and imitation, and education was deeply embedded within the context of traditional life and spiritual–cultural identity (Battiste & Henderson, 2000). Historically and within many Indigenous cultures, children

---

<sup>1</sup> Again, all names and locations cited in the paper are pseudonyms used to maintain confidentiality.

learned through their authentic experiences, and experience was understood as being developed over time as a natural result of exploration (Bell & Brant, 2015). European settlers implemented cultural assimilation policies that aimed to eradicate traditional Indigenous ways of knowing and being. For nearly 150 years, the Indian Act has allowed the Canadian government to control Indigenous people by regulating status and dictating how Indigenous communities operate, which includes systems of education (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Kirkness, 1999).

For more than 100 years, the Canadian government along with the church forcibly removed Indigenous children from their homes and communities to attend residential schools (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Kirkness, 1999; TRCC, 2015b). Over 150,000 children attended these schools in which students' language and culture were banned in an effort to "kill the Indian in the child" (TRCC, 2015b, p. 132). Duncan Campbell Scott, who mandated attendance at Residential Schools in 1920, stated the goal of this type of schooling was "to get rid of the Indian problem. ... Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department, that is the whole object of this Bill" (1920, p. 55).

In addition to being removed from their home communities and placed in the totally foreign environment of a Eurocentric boarding school, residential school students were often purposefully malnourished, neglected, and abused emotionally, mentally, physically, and sexually (Kirkness, 1999; TRCC, 2015b). Over 4,000 children are estimated to have died at these schools; from those who survived, the stories are harrowing (Haig-Brown, 1988; TRCC, 2015b). Without reviewing this disturbing history

in detail, I acknowledge that

For Indigenous people, the past is a painful chronicle of broken treaties, stolen lands, Indian residential schools, and the Indian act. ... Yet this problematic history is not in the past: it sits with us in many places – government offices, boardrooms, negotiating tables, churches, hospitals, classrooms, and community halls. (Regan, 2010, p. 20)

It is this history that has contributed to a legacy of intergenerational trauma and broken trust, particularly with the education system, for Indigenous families and communities. The Assembly of First Nations states that “61% of First Nation young adults (20-24) have not completed high school, compared with 13% of non-Aboriginal people in Canada” (Chiefs Assembly on Education, 2012, p. 2). There are a multitude of interrelated issues that exist within First Nations education in Canada to cause this disparity. Chronic underfunding, food insecurity, lack of access to high school facilities in close proximity to home communities, lack of access to mental health services, culturally irrelevant standardized testing, and intergenerational trauma caused by residential schools are some of the most prominent barriers First Nations students face in their educational journeys (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Chiefs Assembly on Education, 2012; Hodson & Kitchen, 2015; Kirkness, 1999). Hodson and Kitchen (2015) point to lack of access to traditional knowledge as a main cause for what they call a “mass exodus” of Aboriginal students from high school.

Of course, this problem does not begin in high school. Indigenous educators at all grade levels are crucial to healing and repairing the colonial damage of residential schools (Atleo, 2009; Battiste, 2013; Battiste & Henderson, 2000). Atleo (2009)



describes a story-based research process “that recognizes respectful relations and more meaningful educational practices, [where] Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators, policymakers, and researchers can participate together” (p. 454). As illuminated by the work of Atleo, learning stories and practices of experienced Indigenous educators are invaluable, not only to their students but to their colleagues as well. This notion is also exemplified in St. Denis’s (2008) report for the *Reclaiming the Learning Spirit: Learning From Our Experience* roundtable in which more than 50 experts gathered to share successful learning strategies for Aboriginal learners; story, the sharing of experience, and acknowledgement of the past and present formed the basis of developing appropriate strategies to enhance Aboriginal education.

In 2010, Linda conducted a research study in partial fulfillment of her Master of Education degree. Her observation after teaching for 12 years was that students were not successful according to the Ontario curriculum standards and on tests like EQAO. Linda interviewed five Aboriginal teachers, focusing on their learning stories both as children and adults, and how they perceived teaching and learning in their own practice as educators in order to better understand how Aboriginal students learn. In her research proposal, Linda stated that

It is necessary to look at where we came from, to know where we are going. Prior to first contact with Europeans, families and communities were responsible for educating Aboriginal children. Recent studies (Barnes & Cole, 2006; Baydala et al., 2009; Chansonneuve, 2005; Peoples, 1996) emphasize that the reason our students are not successful in school can be traced back to the impact of the residential schools, lack of community responsibility; social issues emerging

because of residential schools and the lack of culturally relevant teaching (Kea et al., 2006; Kozelski, 2000). Therefore, before we can move forward, these issues have to be explored to identify how they formed the foundation of the current education system for Aboriginal children and what changes we have to make to empower our students. (Personal communication, April 5, 2017)

Linda is highly regarded as an excellent educator in the community where she works. Her unique teaching style focuses on outdoor experiential education and traditional Indigenous knowledge. These practices appear to set a solid foundation for her students to succeed in her kindergarten class.

In recent years, there has been a movement in mainstream education toward “forest schools,” a land-based experiential learning and outdoor education program approach (Bilton, 2010; Knight, 2013; Lowan, 2011). While I learned about the benefits of this type of pedagogy through a graduate-level course on outdoor learning in early childhood, I consistently perceived connections between Indigenous education and outdoor education. These connections began to truly come to life when I began working in Linda’s classroom and in the outdoor learning centre she has created. The purpose of this study was to make meaningful connections and enhance the researchers’ understandings of the possibilities for Indigenous education outside of the confines of Eurocentric norms of traditional schooling.

Honouring and learning from successful Indigenous educators has been significant in my own journey to decolonize my teaching practice. As Linda stated in the research proposal quoted above, changes must be made to empower Indigenous students (Personal communication, April 5, 2017). If I am to better understand how to teach

Indigenous students, I need to collaborate with and learn from Indigenous educators. Linda agreed to partner with me in undertaking this research project so that she not only could help me and others to become better educators to the benefit of First Nations students, but also continue to refine her practice as well. It is my goal that, through this research project, others may also reflect, learn, and grow as we work together toward reconciliation.

### **Personal Rationale**

Although my mother—as a black woman, single parent, and newcomer to Canada—raised me to be aware of social justice issues and stand against discrimination and racism, I did not recognize the stereotypes and whitewashed history presented throughout my education with regards to Indigenous people. As a child, I accepted what my school history textbooks and the media portrayed, leading me to view Indigenous people as historical entities, and not giving much thought to their ongoing presence and contributions to Canadian society. It was only in my first year of undergraduate studies that I learned of residential schools; I remember being horrified that this was not part of the mandated curriculum, and that I had lived 20 years not knowing of this significant injustice perpetrated by the Canadian government. I began to take an interest in Indigenous issues and reconciliation, taking courses on Aboriginal education, and considering the possibility of teaching on a reserve in northern Canada, where I knew there were many positions waiting to be filled.

When my husband and I completed our studies, we immediately took on first-year teaching positions in a small Anishinaabe community in northern Ontario. We were optimistic and well-meaning; however, I now recognize that some of our initial intentions

and attitudes point to a white-saviour mentality (Brown, 2013) that is not only unhelpful, but also harmful to First Nations communities. Over the next few months, these attitudes shifted as we became cognizant of their absurdity, humbled ourselves, and accepted that we were not only there to teach, but to learn. The next 2 years held some of the most enriching experiences of my life—Anishinaabe culture surrounded us, people welcomed us, and the small, 800-person community truly became our home. Increasingly, though, we became painfully aware of how ill-equipped we were to meet the learning needs of our students through a culturally sensitive and relevant pedagogy. I made a difficult decision to return to southern Ontario where we could teach on a casual supply basis at a southern Ontario reserve while continuing my education at Brock. Through the Master's program I have learned so much, and, unlike my undergraduate education, I have been able to tailor the program to allow me to research and learn, and write about Indigenous education, decolonizing pedagogy, and reconciliation.

The TRCC (2015b) defines *reconciliation* as “establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country” (p. 6). Unfortunately, non-Indigenous educators still find it easy to think we know what is best for Indigenous students, assuming we have the tools we need to solve problems and preventing us from acknowledging our responsibility to decolonize (Bell & Brant, 2015; Regan, 2010). It is with this truth in mind that I seek to decolonize my practice as an educator, and move forward with this research project “with vulnerability, humility, and a willingness to stay in the decolonizing struggle of [my] own discomfort” (Regan, 2010, p. 13).

As an educator of First Nations children, I have struggled in the development and delivery of culturally appropriate learning activities and materials for Indigenous

students. Despite literature that is available on cultural relevancy in teaching (Bell, 2013; Bell & Brant, 2015; Fulford, 2011), the Ontario curriculum and resources that have been available to me often do not align with an Indigenous view of education. In the past, I have been expected to use a great deal of biased and inappropriate teaching materials that romanticize and stereotype First Nations people through “Eurocentric assumptions,” “narratives of race and difference,” and “justification of the status quo” (Battiste, 2013, p. 107). I have, therefore, turned to Indigenous educators (either my colleagues, or resources developed by Indigenous educators) for guidance. Dominant Western ways of teaching and learning continue to be prominent in teacher education, materials, curriculum, and resources (Battiste, 2013; Bell & Brant, 2015). Although non-Indigenous teachers sometimes attempt to integrate Indigenous perspectives into the curriculum, we cannot teach what we do not know, and as Regan (2010) states, “the singular focus on the Other blinds us from seeing how settler history, myth, and identity have shaped and continue to shape our attitudes in highly problematic ways. It prevents us from acknowledging our own need to decolonize” (p. 11). Partnering with Linda in this research was a step forward in my personal journey toward reconciliation as well as a beneficial endeavour to decolonize my teaching practice, which will benefit students in the communities in which I work.

### **Land-Based Pedagogies Within Indigenous Communities**

Within a traditional Indigenous worldview, the land is central to education; engaging in land-based cultural activities is central to Indigenous students’ mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual development (Bell & Brant, 2015; Greenwood & de Leeuw, 2007; Rowan, 2017). Indigenous people, traditionally, see themselves as

responsible for the care and protection of the land that they themselves are a part of; the land also brings healing and wisdom (Snow, personal communication, December 4, 2017). When teachers and schools provide opportunities to secure students' connection to the land through traditional land-based activities including storytelling, traditional teachings, ceremonies, language, and survival skills, Indigenous students are better able to establish their identity, and value their culture (Bell, 2004; Bell & Brant, 2015). As Bell and Brant (2015) state,

The land communicates as a teacher and is a receptacle of knowledge and wisdom. When Aboriginal people seek wisdom, it is to Mother Earth that they return. With her they dream, have vision quests, and obtain the knowledge and wisdom they need. The knowledge and wisdom they glean from the land are not founded in logical thought framed within the Western rational scientific tradition. Rather, they are grounded in the land. (p. 16)

Linda understands and embodies these principles in her teaching practice. Through this project, I too have learned from the land as I spent time with Linda and her kindergarten students in nature. As a non-Indigenous person, I have much to learn about how to engage with the land alongside young learners. Non-Indigenous teachers, in order to teach through a culturally responsive pedagogy, must address the disconnect in our worldviews to those of our students, and provide opportunities for students to learn with and from the land.

### **Statement of the Research Problem**

It is clear that Eurocentric standards of practice in education have not been effective in the education of Indigenous children, as evidenced by the disparities in

educational access and achievement between First Nations and mainstream students (Hodson & Kitchen, 2015). Some research has explored Indigenous pedagogy in practice, which I will examine in my literature review. In my own experience, however, I have observed many non-Indigenous educators—myself included—using a tokenistic approach to including Indigenous content in their practice, rather than basing their practice wholly around Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and learning. Hodson and Kitchen (2015) state that current approaches for non-Indigenous educators include: “iconography on classroom walls, the annual afternoon Pow Wow, the Mid-Winter feast, or the occasional Elder’s visit”; however, “First Nations culture cannot be rendered down to key points and imparted by non-native teachers who are then responsible for cultural continuum” (p. 14). Regan (2010) makes a distinction between this type of token inclusion of Indigenous knowledge in Canadian education and true Decolonization, which involves a cultural paradigm shift that simply cannot be achieved through a tokenistic approach. Rather, teachers must adopt a culturally responsive pedagogy that is implemented in every aspect of their programming (Bell & Brant, 2015).

Overall, culturally responsive pedagogy can be defined as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (Gay, 2010, p. 31). For Aboriginal students, culturally responsive pedagogies are those that are: “experiential; spiritually oriented; communal; strength-based; rooted in culture; integrate Aboriginal with Western knowledge; and account for social, economic, and political realities” (Crooks et al., 2015, p. 217).

When I taught in northern Ontario, 100% of the students were Anishinaabe, while 90% of the teaching staff were non-Indigenous. At the reserve where I am currently a

casual supply teacher, 77% of teaching staff self-identified as Aboriginal as of 2014 (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, as cited in Mt Pleasant, 2014). In both situations, as is the case in schools both on and off-reserve across the country, non-Indigenous people are often responsible for the in-school education of Indigenous students. All non-Indigenous educators have the moral and ethical responsibility to respond to the TRCC's (2015a) calls to action, and make every effort to decolonize our practice. Personally, collaborating with and learning from successful Indigenous educators is a crucial step to the decolonization process, and this research addresses and responds to the need for those respectful learning relationships.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study examines the learning story and teaching practices of an Indigenous educator whose teaching style is culturally based; therefore, the research finds its basis within the framework of decolonizing education theory. Marie Battiste's (2013) book *Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit* examines the legacy of colonized education, outlines possibilities for the decolonization of education, and makes recommendations for reconciliation in education. Battiste (2013) defines decolonizing education theory in juxtaposition to colonialism:

Colonialism as a theory of relationships is embedded in power, voice, and legitimacy. ... This imperialistic system of knowledge that is considered the "mainstream" functions like a "keeper" current in a rapidly flowing river or ocean. ... Decolonization then is a process of unpacking the keeper current in education: its powerful Eurocentric assumptions of education, its narratives of race and difference in curriculum and pedagogy, its establishing culturalism or cultural racism as a justification for the status quo, and the advocacy for



indigenous knowledge as a legitimate education topic. It is the channel for generating a postcolonial education system in Canada and disrupting those normalized discourses and singularities and allowing diverse voices and perspectives and objectives into “mainstream” schooling. (p. 107)

Battiste (2013) calls for the decolonization of all areas of education, and the creation of a postcolonial system of education in which diverse perspectives and objectives are honoured within “mainstream” schooling. Battiste (2013) points to the successful efforts of Indigenous people in Canada to reclaim education as central to this transformative process. Linda is one such educator; thus, this project applied a critical decolonizing lens to analyze and reflect on Linda’s practice.

### **Research Questions**

Through this project Linda and I both aimed to uncover meaning by exploring the research questions as follows:

1. How does this teacher’s life, story, and identity shape her practice as an educator?
2. What are the possibilities, benefits/successes, and challenges to implementing land-based learning and Aboriginal pedagogy as practiced by this teacher?
3. How are culturally responsive, land-based pedagogies enacted within one kindergarten classroom?

## **CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

For this review, I consider both quantitative and qualitative research studies, document analyses, and personal narratives from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, researchers and practitioners. Initially, I reached out to my co-researcher Linda, an accomplished educator of 20 years, to identify the research and literature that has informed her practice, as her teaching will be the focus of my research. In addition to the texts she provided, I obtained literature from peer-reviewed research journals, published theses and dissertations, books, and reports using specific, targeted search terms and criteria to form the body of literature for my review.

### **Methodological Approach to Literature Review**

I used a variety of search portals including the Brock University library's Super Search, Academic Search Complete, Canadian Business and Current Affairs Database. Additionally, I reviewed specific journals (*Canadian Journal of Native Education*, *Canadian Journal of Native Studies*) and conducted a reverse citation search using core texts on Indigenous education on Google Scholar. I used the key terms "aboriginal", "Indigenous", "native", "First Nations", "outdoor", "land-based", "education", "kindergarten", and "early learning" in various combinations using "and" / "or" to account for similar terms. The reference lists of pertinent journal articles lead me to discover more relevant sources. I limited my review to literature from 2000 or later, and considered only examples from North America, with a strong preference for studies conducted in Canada.

Initially my goal was to identify at least 18 empirical studies that focused on elementary land-based education in Indigenous communities in Canada. After conducting

a thorough search using the methods above, I adjusted my criteria and explored self-studies as well as formal research, including children and youth from preschool to high school, and allowed for studies that focused on either Indigenous early childhood education or Indigenous outdoor education, with a preference for literature that discussed both. Identifying 12 core sources and several peripheral sources, I reviewed the body of research, looking for similar themes and patterns in methodology, findings, discussion, and recommendations. This literature review contains a discussion of three prevalent themes that emerged throughout my review of the literature: culturally responsive education, connection to the land, and community engagement. I explore each theme separately, maintaining the understanding that all three are interconnected (Battiste, 2008).

### **Culturally Responsive Education**

The overarching theme in the literature I reviewed was the notion of culturally responsive pedagogy. Gay (2002) defines culturally responsive pedagogy as “using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (p. 106). Within an Indigenous context, a culturally responsive pedagogue must first address the disparity between Western and Indigenous education, to ensure the educational process is informed by Indigenous philosophy, epistemology, and ontology. Traditionally, Indigenous education centres on the land and is determined by an individual’s own unique pace of development; this kind of education is delivered holistically with the view that all aspects of a person’s life—mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual—are intrinsically connected and developing together (Bell & Brant, 2015). Traditional knowledges are transferred in many ways

through parents, grandparents, Elders, story, and children's observation of cultural practices (Bell & Brant, 2015; Turner, Boelshcer Ignace, & Ignace, 2000)). Turner et al. (2000) note that "traditional knowledge among younger generations, in most indigenous groups, has inevitably diminished as assimilation and environmental change have escalated" (p. 1276). Western culture generally does not hold the same level of respect for the land and all life forms as Indigenous culture (Battiste, 2008; Bell & Brant, 2015; Turner et al., 2000). Thus, Western educational systems work to erode traditional knowledges by instilling an opposing worldview that does not align with Indigenous epistemology. Learning and seeking knowledge is seen as something that begins at conception and never ends for Indigenous people (Bell & Brant, 2015). A circle of Elders in Stiegelbauer's (1992) study define the traditional Indigenous learner according to the following characteristics:

1. The foundation for the "good life" or health and capacity for learning is modeled through the structure and behaviour at home during the early years.
2. As a child develops in age they can be asked to take on practical responsibilities relevant to their age. These responsibilities go beyond tasks to values, gathering experience, understanding it and expressing it in behaviour. This changes developmentally as a child ages. Learning is a life-long process but each stage has different qualities. Learning involves mind, body, and spirit simultaneously not separately.
3. Experience is the foundation for learning. Understanding experience is developed over time through dialogue. Experience is neither good nor bad but a natural result of exploration.

4. Children should be allowed to make choices to gather unique and individual experience within the framework of modeled values, discussion, and community good. Each individual has something unique to offer as a result of who they are and their accumulated experience.
5. Learning is a process that is accomplished through interaction with others; it is always a shared, cooperative venture.
6. The foundation for interaction with others is expressed through respect, feeling, a good heart, good intentions, kindness, sharing, and a knowledge of self.
7. Each individual is unique yet part of a whole community. The community and the individual have reciprocal responsibilities. In one sense the individual and the community and the world are the same entity, interdependent. What affects one, affects the others.
8. Learning begins with vision—of self, of goals, of the whole, of the direction a task is to go in. It is a process that goes through stages of “seeing” (vision), relating to what it is, figuring it out with heart and mind, and acting on findings in some way (behaviour).
9. The old and the young need each other: one to provide the understanding of experience from their own experiences, the other to frame that discussion in terms of current and changing needs. The child’s world may be different from that of the adult as it reflects a changing world.
10. Everyone has a responsibility to give back and to consider their actions in the light of their effect on generations to come. (p. 14)

For these Indigenous Elders, knowledge encompasses the growth that happens with

experience, understanding life, and meaning; the beginning of knowledge is a vision for who a child can become, what they can contribute to the community (Stiegelbauer, 1992). One Elder stated: “If you don’t start with vision, it is difficult to reclaim it. The dominant society starts in the knowledge part of the circle by focusing on the institutions of learning. Starting at vision enables you to see the whole picture” (Stiegelbauer, 1992, p. 8). Within Western educational institutions, teaching with an Indigenous cultural focus must be a purposeful act that involves unlearning and deconstructing Western knowledge systems, and starting with vision that stems from an Indigenous view of the world, of life, and of learning as outlined in the 10 points above.

Hodson and Kitchen (2015) state that the two greatest predictors of success for Indigenous students are access to traditional knowledge and teachers who employ a culturally responsive pedagogy. For Indigenous students, education must be designed from an Indigenous perspective and provide a relevant cultural context to be meaningful and effective (Battiste, 2008; Bell, 2013; Cooke-Dallin, Rosborough, & Underwood, 2000; Greenwood, de Leeuw, & Fraser, 2007). Unsuccessful attempts to provide a culturally responsive education are often delivered through an add-on approach (Hodson & Kitchen, 2015, p. 14). This approach at best would show a lack of understanding of the complexity of Indigenous knowledge; First Nations culture cannot be rendered down to key points and imparted by non-native teachers who are then responsible for cultural continuum (Hodson & Kitchen, 2015). The literature that I reviewed describes a culturally responsive education which permeates every aspect of schooling.

Cultural perspectives must be represented in the curriculum of educational programs offered to Indigenous students both on and off-reserve (Agbo, 2001; Fulford,

2011; Mashford-Pringle, 2012). Varying approaches are taken to ensuring curriculum is culturally relevant; for example, in Akwesasne, a board-developed, culturally based science curriculum is used in place of the mandated curriculum (Agbo, 2011) while in other communities, responsibility falls on the teachers to modify the curriculum to reflect Indigenous culture and perspectives (Fulford, 2011; Mashford-Pringle, 2012). In addition to culturally relevant curriculum content, practitioners must teach through a culturally responsive pedagogy that encompasses traditional ways of teaching that emphasizes learning by doing (Goulet, 2001). A culturally responsive pedagogy also includes culturally safe and appropriate assessment practices developed by and with community stakeholders as opposed to Eurocentric standardized testing with little cultural value (Fulford, 2011; Philpott, 2006).

Aligned with Indigenous beliefs, culturally responsive practitioners acknowledge each child as a valued individual with a unique talent or gift to offer; teacher–student interactions are centred on mutual respect, and teachers take a non-confrontational approach to classroom management, equalizing power relations and maintaining relationships characterized by warmth and care (Agbo, 2011; Goulet, 2001; Oskineegish, 2015). A teacher in Oskineegish’s (2015) study described how using a different communication style reflects care and respect to her students, for example:

When you see a kid running in the hallway, I wouldn’t say “Don’t be running in the hallways.” I won’t say that, I would say, ”When you run in the hallways, I’m afraid that you’ll get hurt, and I don’t like seeing kids get hurt.” (p. 17)

While teachers may feel uncomfortable letting go of a traditional authoritarian role, Oskineegish (2015) asserts it is “essential to carry the right kind of attitude that can help foster positive relationships and practices” (p. 18).

Ball and Pence (2006) highlight the importance of educational programs and services ensuring cultural safety by considering the particular values, goals, and practices of individual Indigenous communities and families. In much of the literature I reviewed, Indigenous epistemology and Indigenous education are discussed; the studies I reviewed considered over 60 distinct Indigenous groups across North America in total, and it is important to note that Indigenous ways of knowing and being are diverse across those groups and communities (Greenwood et al., 2007). Bomberry (2013) found that Haudenosaunee youth often felt uncomfortable as they were expected to know everything about “Natives” in mainstream school settings, as educators tend to generalize due to their own lack of knowledge. For educators, it is important not to “pan-Indigenize” but rather to develop practice based on the culture of the local community. For example, the Anishinaabe Bimaadiziwin Cultural Healing and Learning Program is conceptually designed and delivered through a holistic Anishinaabe medicine wheel framework (Bell, 2013), while Rowan’s work (2017) is informed by the Inuit notion of nunagat—water, ice, and land. While “Indigenous education” is referred to often throughout the literature, and throughout this paper, I acknowledge the unique set of knowledges specific to each Nation, which are interweaved with broader Indigenous knowledges that transcend those boundaries.

Throughout much of the literature lies the notion that education and childcare are vital in cultural revitalization or revival (Fulford, 2011; Greenwood, 2006; Philpott, 2006; Mashford-Pringle, 2012). Cultural revitalization takes place when an emphasis is placed on Indigenous culture, knowledge, and traditions (McWilliams, Maldonado-Mancebo, Szczepaniak, & Jones, 2011). The literature reveals the myriad ways in which this



cultural revival takes place within educational settings, with those most prominent being: Indigenous language learning and immersion (Ball & Lewis, 2014; Baydala et al., 2007; Bell, 2013; Fulford, 2011; Greenwood et al., 2007; Hare, 2012; Mashford-Pringle, 2012); spiritual practices including cleansing, healing, and thanksgiving (Agbo, 2001; Baydala et al., 2007; Bell, 2013; Fulford, 2011); ceremonial and artistic activities including traditional song, dance, dress, art, and crafts (Agbo, 2001; Fulford, 2011; Hare, 2012; McWilliams et al., 2011; Rowan, 2017); traditional story-telling (Agbo, 2001; Ball & Lewis, 2014; Baydala et al., 2007; Fulford, 2011; Hare, 2012; McWilliams et al., 2011); and land-based cultural activities (Agbo, 2001; Baydala et al., 2007; Goulet, 2001; Hare, 2012; McWilliams, 2011; Rowan, 2017; Takano, 2005).

The culturally responsive educational elements listed above do not occur in isolation; rather, they are holistically applied in various settings as they would be traditionally. An example of this from Hare's (2012) study involved children and families going

out on the land to learn and carry out traditional activities, such as hunting, fishing, plant gathering, storytelling and communal practices associated with traditional life. ... One parent described "I make up stories, like when we're walking in the woods"... elders regularly visit to tell children local stories and show them how to do traditional activities, such as preparing medicines, berries and fish, demonstrating how knowledge is passed on through the generations. (p. 402)

Partnering with Elders, parents, and community members to provide cultural teachings is essential (Bell, 2004). Students at 10 schools in case studies reviewed by Bell (2004) took part in a wide range of cultural activities, and schools were described as having culture

and heritage as “foremost in their minds” (p. 146). Cultural camps, school-wide participation in seasonal hunting, teachers who speak Indigenous languages either exclusively or use Indigenous languages alongside English, prominent displays of cultural imagery, and student-made cultural crafts such as dreamcatchers and drums, respectful relationships between teachers and students, nurturing of traditional spiritual beliefs, opening the school for cultural events such as pow-wows, and regular presence of Elders in the school were all highlighted as positive and successful practices in the 10 schools highlighted by Bell (2004). In the Gift Lake Settlement, students are able to take part in a program focused on restoring lost traditions, which is taught by cultural experts and overseen by elders (Bell, 2004). Students learn traditional skills like “cleaning and cooking fish, preparing fish for smoke house, cutting and making dried meat, making pemmican, and tanning a moose hide” (Bell, 2004, p. 164). The program appropriately teaches these skills through an Aboriginal learning process which involves carefully observing an expert perform the skill, attempting the skill when ready, and self-evaluating for success (Bell, 2004).

Cultural content in education is an important vehicle for cultural transmission and maintaining the cultural continuum, thus, parents, Elders, and community leaders place a high priority on education when it instills cultural knowledge in younger generations (Agbo, 2001; Bell, 2013; Greenwood, 2006; McWilliams et al., 2011; Rowan, 2017; Takano, 2005). The National Educational Association found “schools that infuse Native culture into the school climate via the curricula, staff expertise, and school activities see a corresponding increase in the participation and interest level of Native families” (as cited in McWilliams et al., 2011, pp. 35-36). At Mother Earth’s Children’s Charter School

(MECCS; Baydala et al., 2007), this “infusion” of Native culture discussed by the NEA is not considered sufficient, and an entirely new curriculum was created. Baydala et al.’s (2007) research highlights the collaboration of educators, parents, Elders and community members at MECCS; the school was established by a group of Indigenous parents and educators who noted the exclusion of Indigenous language and culture in conventional Euro-centric education and felt that there could be a more effective way to educate children through Indigenous education, by moving from infusing Aboriginal perspectives into the Western curriculum, to infusing the curriculum into a holistic Aboriginal educational program based on medicine wheel teachings.

Alberta’s Commission on Learning (2004) stated that Aboriginal perspectives should be “infused” or included within the mainstream curriculum; at MECCS, “the starting place for learning is the medicine wheel” and curriculum is seen as being “rooted in identity and experience, rather than something external to be funneled or infused into the daily life of the school” (as cited in Baydala et al, 2007, pp. 204-206). Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the way in which Western education “includes” Indigenous knowledge (in Figure 1), and the way in which a parallel curriculum at MECCS includes the Alberta curriculum into an Indigenous pedagogical approach based on the medicine wheel (Baydala et al, 2007, pp. 203-204). Through this shift, the goal is ultimately “to nurture, to support, guide and challenge each of our children to discover the gifts given to them by the Creator and [to create] a balance of their spiritual, intellectual, physical and emotional selves. Through this each child will achieve personal excellence and fulfillment” (MECCS Society Charter, as cited in Baydala et al., 2007, p. 203).

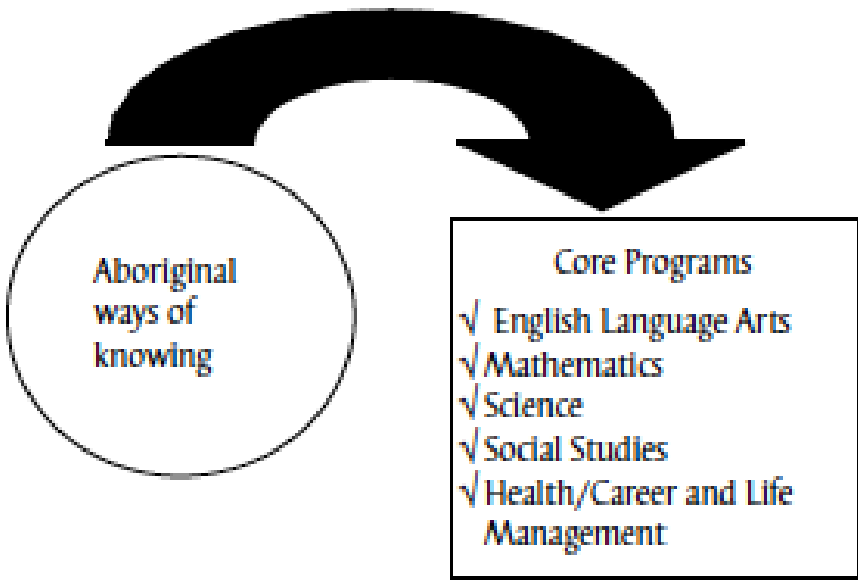


Figure 1. Curricular framework at mainstream schools.

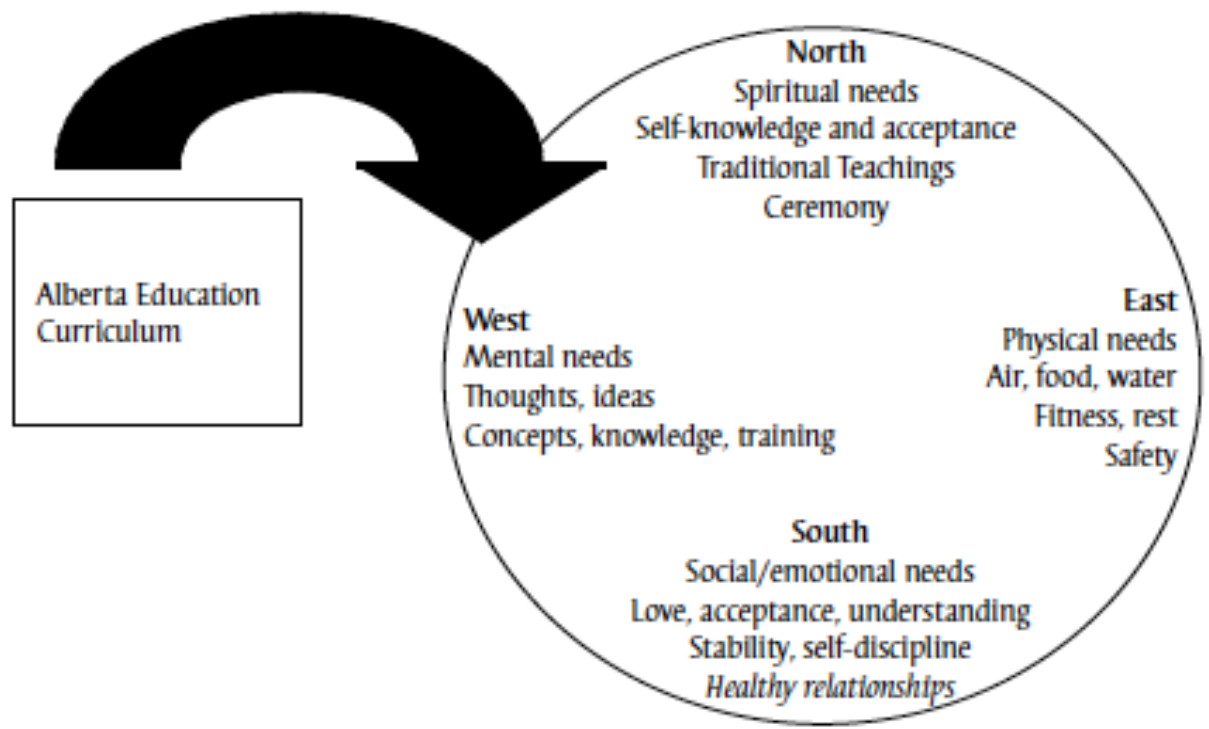


Figure 2. Curricular framework at MECCS..

### Connection to Land

Indigenous philosophy is grounded within the concept of interconnectedness with the earth upholds the land as “an extension of [Indigenous] thought and being because, in the words of a Pueblo Elder ... ‘It is this place that holds our memories and the bones of our people. ... This is the place that made us’” (Cajete, as cited in Greenwood & de Leeuw, 2007, p. 50). Underlying much of the research was a deep and meaningful connection to the land in the context of Indigenous tradition and culture. Some engaged with land-based learning as their primary focus (Lowan, 2009; Rowan, 2017; Takano, 2005), while others merely incorporated land-based learning within a broader spectrum of cultural education where cultural education was the primary focus (Baydala et al., 2007; Goulet, 2001; Fulford, 2011; Hare, 2012; McWilliams et al., 2011).

Because Indigenous knowledge is inherently entangled with land (Hare, 2012), connection to the land is valued by all stakeholders in Indigenous education. In a pilot study at MECCS, Baydala et al. (2007) noted that “All of the participants... spoke of Mother Earth and the spirit of the land and of their strong belief in the need to connect, respect and value the environment” (p. 212). Students at the school have access to over 30 acres of undeveloped land where “they spend time ‘seeing, interacting, touching and being with the energy of that land... [It is here that] they cut and dry meat, cook and pick berries. ... This is the place where the grass and the wind moves the spirit of the children’” (Bearhead, as cited in Baydala et al., 2007, p. 205).

The setting of the Anishinaabe Bimaadiziwin program is also situated rurally, with a bush around it and close access to the water, [which] was valued by the students at the school. ... A natural setting allowed the students and teachers to

engage in land-based activities and learning essential to Indigenous education.

These activities allowed students to develop a sense of who they were in relation to creation and to develop a sense of respect. (Bell, 2013, p. 47)

The Native Indian Centered Education program is located in an urban setting, but students still have access to an outdoor classroom and a Native healing garden, where children, parents, and caregivers all take part in planting, tending and harvesting the garden and build “strong connections to the earth” (McWilliams et al., 2011, p. 39). Students benefit from teacher flexibility to allow integration of cultural land-based activities in keeping with the seasonal cycles (e.g., berry-picking in fall, trapping and fishing in winter; Goulet, 2001; Swanson, 2003).

Children at two of the five schools in Hare’s (2012) study regularly went out on the land to take part in traditional camps, hunting, fishing, gathering plants, and taking part in other traditional activities. Goulet’s (2001) study highlights the work of a teacher named Roxanne, who took her students on cultural trips to traditional Dene hunting territory to set up camp in the bush. Roxanne describes the profound effect this had on her and her students:

It really hit me. On that trip we talked about the history, we talked about Dene, and I was really trying to instill the pride. We talked about many years ago, “This is traditional and where our ancestors used to come by” and “This is how children lived.” When it was time to leave] nobody wanted to go. ... The plane took off and they were all crying. I said, “Why are you crying?” “Because,” they said, “I can’t explain it to you. But I feel really sad. There’s something missing in our life. I mean this is the way we lived?” You know, just connecting back. So we did a lot

of journal writing when we got back in the classroom, just so they could tell me what they felt they were missing. (Goulet, 2001, p. 79)

This teacher goes on to describe the land as where the students are supposed to be, encouraging them to seek knowledge from parents and grandparents who can pass along those stories and land-based skills (Goulet, 2001).

In Baydala et al.'s (2007) research at MECCS, a primary teacher shares a similar view on children's learning from the land; a photo is shown of students outdoors with clip charts, and the teacher states:

There's so many pictures like this out on the land because to me this is the one thing that I love that's just so important. And I still believe ... that's when we're really going to see the difference in ... the kids—when we get on the land, because that's huge... that's central to all of it. (p. 213)

All of the teachers at MECCS involved in the pilot study referred to Mother Earth, the spirit of the land, and students' need to connect with, respect, and value the land (Baydala et al., 2007).

Rowan's (2017) dissertation focused on engaging with nunangat (land, water, ice, and snow) and Elders to develop culturally appropriate early childhood education programming for Inuit communities. Rowan's (2017) work suggests that Western ECE pedagogies are embedded with colonialism and must be challenged in their limited effectiveness with Inuit students. Ongoing engagement and relationship with the land allow children to negotiate their cultural identities, as they hear stories from Elders, learn traditional skills, and begin to see themselves as traditional people (Rowan, 2017). For example, a photo of a child participating in a nunangat-based program with willow

branched tied to her back prompted community members to share their own stories of walking many miles with giant stick mountains attached to their backs, affixed with ropes made of seal and caribou. ... It is in this story sharing that those local histories and contexts are made accessible and relationships with land can be remembered and recognized as deeply meaningful. (Rowan, 2017, p. 166)

Through Elder meetings, learning stories, and excursions on Inuit land, Rowan (2017) finds a basis for nunangat pedagogy that recognizes “that Inuit knowledge and learning comes from interactions with land, water and ice, from nunangat” (p. 76). After over 25 years of living and working on Inuit nunangat, Rowan (2017) posits that Inuit voices, experiences, and knowledge systems must form the basis for land-based early childhood education programs, as opposed to ECE programs largely based on Western ways of knowing and being. Elders are essential to a land-based education program, as they “hold the knowledge needed to engage skillfully and with comprehension when harvesting plants and animals, preparing and preserving food and skins, and making materials” (Rowan, 2017, p. 169); therefore, Rowan (2017) recommends the funding of Elder educator positions in all Inuit ECE facilities. Rowan (2017) also advises educators should continue working with Inuit Elders, hunters, community members, and pedagogues to design land-based ECE curriculum from an Inuit perspective.

When schools do not provide Indigenous students with such rich opportunities for land-based education, other measures are often taken. Takano (2005) found that Elders and community members in Igloolik were concerned that young people were losing connection with their land and culture. The Elders and community members took it upon themselves to begin a program called Paariaqtuqtut (“meeting on the trail”) with the goal



of connecting young people to land-based cultural skills and teachings (Takano, 2005). Lowan's (2009) research focused on the Giwaykiwin program, a land-based outdoor environmental education program for Aboriginal youth outside of the realm of traditional schooling. Lowan (2009) and Takano (2005) both found that young people in the program felt as though their participation helped them to reconnect with their land and culture.

### **Community Engagement**

For Indigenous children in schools and educational programs both on and off reserve, community connections and engagement figured prominently in the literature. Community engagement takes place within the context of the other two themes: culture and land-based learning. Oskineegish (2015) states successful teaching is only possible with “active engagement and partnership with local educators, parents, and community members; and a willingness to adapt and respond to the flow of the community” (p. 5). Learning from a community, Oskineegish (2015) states, is not a passive experience of watching from a distance but instead involves active participation in community events, which usually involve cultural and land-based components. One example of this is that community members appreciated teachers participation in events such as moose and goose-calling events which showed teachers' willingness to be visible in the community and take part in cultural activities (Oskineegish, 2015).

Elders are integral to many successful educational settings, sharing their rich cultural knowledge, teachings, and stories with students and teachers (Bell, 2004; Cooke-Dallin et al., 2000; Fulford, 2011; Greenwood & de Leeuw, 2007; Rowan, 2017; Takano, 2005). Elders are often fluent in Indigenous languages, and their knowledge is respected

in educational settings throughout the literature I reviewed; in Bell's (2004) study, a Department Head at Peguis Central School states "A lot of children here have lost the language, and that is why we bring elders in to explain different things such as the feather and the drum" (p. 215). Partnership with families in cultural, land-based, and academic activities connect the school and community in meaningful ways (Agbo, 2001; Baydala et al., 2007; Goulet, 2001; McWilliams et al., 2011; Rowan, 2014). In addition to the land-based and cultural activities mentioned in the previous two sections (fishing, hunting, setting up camps, etc.), community and family relationships are fostered through home visits (Fulford, 2011; Goulet, 2001), parent volunteers who run snack, extracurricular, and sports programs (Bell, 2004), and collaboration for community events and celebrations (Fulford, 2011; Rowan, 2014).

In Bell's (2004) study, a recent increase in parent engagement is highlighted at Princess Alexandra School, with one parent participant stating "When you walk in, everybody makes you feel welcome, and they're not judging you when you walk in the door" (p. 228). Bell (2014) notes that "both staff and parents celebrate the high degree of parental engagement," with one parent stating "we bring school to our house and we bring our home to the school. Half of the circle is at our home and the other half is at the school. That is how it is working, or has to be in order to work" (p. 229). A positive home-school-community connection is illustrated here in cultural terms, using the symbol of a circle which is central to First Nations epistemology (Bell, 2004). As community cultural values and Indigenous approaches to learning are emphasized, decolonization and healing takes place; thus, education plays a key role in achieving community wellness (Greenwood, 2006).

### **Conclusions and Relevance to Study**

The significance of culturally responsive pedagogy and cultural content in education were present in all 12 core sources I explored, and the importance of these themes cannot be overstated. Land-based learning and community connection, which occur within a cultural paradigm, are also key to a meaningful education for Indigenous students in Canada. After reviewing the literature, it is evident that a significant gap exists in research with Canadian Indigenous land-based early childhood education. As this will be the focus of my final research paper, my next step is to expand this literature review by allowing for examples outside of a North American context, where relevant connections may exist. Further, my review of the literature points to the need for researchers and educators to base their practice around the culture of the communities in which they work. As a non-Indigenous person working in a Haudenosaunee community, the ethical space in the centre of the two-row wampum belt (Bomberry, 2013) is the area in which my teaching and research lies.

While I was not surprised by the themes found in the literature I reviewed, I was taken aback by the striking similarities in story and experience, and the strength of these correlations among successful Indigenous education programs. As my co-researcher, Linda, is considered a highly successful Indigenous educator, our collective exploration of and reflection on her teaching practice will likely reflect the themes of culture, land and community.

### CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

In fall 2016, I began to work as a casual supply teacher at a First Nations reserve in southern Ontario. One of my first days on the job, I was assigned to a kindergarten classroom to supply for Linda. As I read over the day plans, it became evident that I would be spending the majority of the day outdoors with the kindergarten students. We would eat and have centre time inside, but we would read a story, do group math exercises, play, and go on a walk outside for the remainder of the day. As the students arrived, they greeted me and the Educational Assistant, and swiftly changed their shoes, checked their bags for homework, and changed their status from “in” to “out” on the attendance board without being prompted to do so. I was taken aback that they knew and followed the routines with little direction at a point so early in the year. Some students began handing me a variety of different fruits—melons, apples, oranges, grapes—out of their bag. I had read in Linda’s day plan that it was National Fruit Day and students would be making fruit salad with each child contributing a fruit if they could. As I took the fruit I said I would find a knife and cut it up for them before their lunch break. The Educational Assistant shook her head and informed me that the students themselves would cut the fruit: “We don’t do anything for them—they do everything themselves.” The students showed me for the remainder of the day how very true this statement was; I was amazed at the independence and creativity they showed while they were playing in the outdoor natural play space that Linda had developed for them. The concepts that I was engaging with in my studies at Brock really began to come to life as I continued to supply for Linda several times throughout the year.

One morning as I was walking into the school to supply for a different class, I noticed Linda backing a truck up to the outdoor play area with several stumps and

branches that she had brought from home for the students to play with. Students were outdoors, Linda explained, because that is how Indigenous children learn—from and with the land. It can be difficult to teach in her style (experiential outdoor learning) without access to any nearby forested areas. Therefore, she brought the forest to the students by bringing natural elements from home and letting students engage with them in their enclosed concrete play area outdoors. While the inside of Linda's classroom looks like a typical ECE learning space, the outdoor space differs in that there is a large paved courtyard and a grassy area, with recycled and natural materials Linda has brought in such as logs, lumber in varying sizes, milk crates, bales of straw, a sand pit, rocks of varying sizes, copper spools, baby trees, large and small plastic containers, riding toys, wagons, wheelbarrows, et cetera.

Students were engaged, independent, happy to be at school, and connecting with their culture while learning. Over the next few months I supplied regularly in Linda's class, and her program challenged long-held assumptions and reservations I had about early learning. Like many educators, I had previously thought of the outdoors as a place where children go to run around and release their energy for an hour or less per day out before returning to the classroom to participate in learning activities. The day plan in Linda's classroom reflected a culturally responsive emphasis on outdoor time that allowed students to learn with and from the land. Students had freedom to choose and direct their own learning by selecting activities both indoors and outdoors of interest to them; teacher direction was minimal and students showed a great deal of autonomy to self-direct in activities that I assumed would not be allowed for them, for example, using a knife to cut fruit or hanging upside down from a tree.

### **Selection of Site and Participants**

Initially I engaged the school community by reaching out to the Vice-Principal and Principal at the elementary school where I am a part-time casual supply teacher. I asked if they had any ideas for research that could benefit the school and community, and discussed my concerns as a non-Indigenous person hoping to conduct research within the community. I read through the Major Research Projects and Theses of some of the school staff including the Principal in order to situate my own research. After supply teaching for Linda several times, I discussed her pedagogy with the Principal of the school and with Linda herself; both were open to a collaborative research project exploring Linda's practice as an Indigenous educator. Linda and I will work collaboratively to describe and reflect on her decolonizing outdoor experiential classroom that she has created for the kindergarten students at her school.

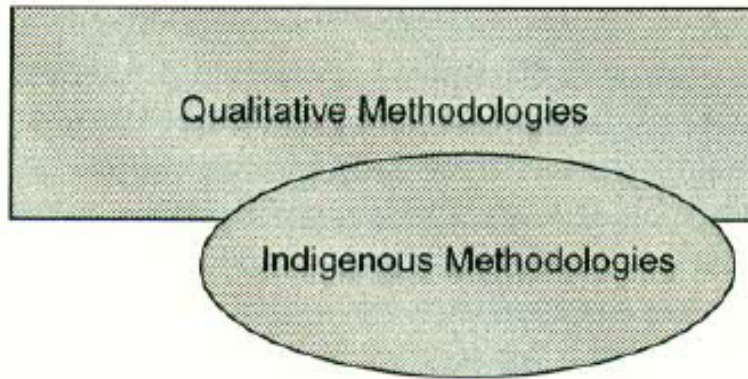
### **Decolonizing Research Methodologies**

As a non-Indigenous person conducting academic research on a Traditional Territory and Reserve, I struggled to conceptualize a research methodology that would be accepted academically but also, one that would not continue a longstanding culturally insensitive and exploitative pattern of Western research in Indigenous communities (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012; Styres, Zinga, Bennett, & Bomberry, 2010). Margaret Kovach's (2009) *Indigenous Methodologies* has been instrumental in guiding the development of the research methodology. Kovach (2009) defines Indigenous methodologies as "the theory and method of conducting research that flows from an Indigenous epistemology" (p.20). Kovach (2009) states that Indigenous knowledges have been marginalized in Western research practices, and that Canada's colonial history must not be forgotten in this process lest Colonialism be reproduced through research.

Importantly, cultural exoticism often relegates Indigenous ways of knowing to the periphery of academia, thus, Indigenous methodologies are seen as “less than” conventional Western methodologies (Kovach, 2009).

It is with this notion in mind that Linda and I made a deliberate choice to frame this research project very loosely as a qualitative, collaborative inquiry. In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) states “the intellectual project of decolonizing has to set out ways to proceed through a colonizing world. It needs a radical compassion that reaches out, that seeks collaboration, and that is open to possibilities that can only be imagined as other things fall into place” (p. xii). In laying out a decolonizing methodology for this project, there must be an openness to allowing the research methodology to develop as Linda and I spent more time together reflecting on her practice.

In *Indigenous Methodologies*, Kovach (2009) states that the use of “procedures that organize knowledge to Western terms” can limit research inquiries in an Indigenous context (p. 132). It would be both difficult and unhelpful, therefore, to frame this research within the strict paradigms of Western methodologies. Avoiding an individualistic approach of trying to “Indigenize” Western research methods (Kovach, 2009), there is no exact methodology term that I feel completely comfortable using to describe this research. In this project, a “backdrop of qualitative research” became “a bridge for traversing worldviews” as many of the data collection tools embodied qualitative characteristics, yet the research as a whole could not be placed within any one specific qualitative methodology (Kovach, 2009, p. 25). Kovach (2009) illustrates the tensions that exist when locating decolonizing Indigenous methodologies within Western qualitative approaches using the diagram shown in Figure 3.



*Figure 3.* Locating Indigenous methodologies in qualitative research.



Kovach (2009) states there is a “desire to give voice to Indigenous epistemologies within qualitative research, yet those who attempt [this] are destined to feel the squirm. The tension ... will persist until Indigenous research frameworks have methodological space within research dialogue, policy, and practice” (p. 31).

Within a holistic Indigenous paradigm, Linda and I collaborated to produce what could be described as a descriptive case study based on her life and practice; for the purposes of this study we will use the term “learning story.” Our research experience reflected what Kovach (2010) defines as the Conversational method—“a means of gathering knowledge based on oral story telling tradition congruent with an Indigenous paradigm. It involves a dialogic participation that holds a deep purpose of sharing story as a means to assist others. It is relational at its core” (p. 40). Battiste (2008) also states that Indigenous epistemology, or ways of knowing, is centered on relationality. Therefore, the research process embodied a relational tone, essentially documenting a growing mentor-type relationship between myself and Linda.

As Linda and I worked together, we applied our unique lenses to what we saw, heard, and experienced. Reflective conversation and the sharing of stories took place as this is what we both agreed would be the best way to fully understand the research questions posed. An approach that uses both Western and Indigenous lenses is referred to as two-eyed seeing (Hogue & Bartlett, 2014; Marsh, Cote-Meek, Toulouse, Najavits, & Young, 2015). Linda and I took part in a collaborative, two-eyed approach to research that privileged Indigenous ways of knowing and learning, while also reflecting upon Western approaches, which must be acknowledged in order to be decolonized.

A collaborative approach was taken for this study, with Linda and myself (Alexandria) co-operatively taking on different roles in the research. While the academic

writing was my responsibility, Linda's openness to share her education journey with me was the crux of this project. As she is currently working on her own thesis for her M.Ed., I was sensitive to ensure that this project did not burden her with any work over and above our time together in the classroom. Linda and I discussed what we feel comfortable with, what our roles would be, and we were both open to flexibility within those roles. Our responsibilities for the project were divided as laid out in Figure 4.

As the research process unfolded, our experiences mirrored those of Kovach (2010), who describes the implications of research that takes place within an Indigenous paradigm:

For the conversational method, the relational factor... was significant. In each case I had known or met participants prior to the research. With this method the researcher must have a certain amount of credibility and trustworthiness for people to participate in the research. With more trust there is the likelihood of deeper conversations, and consequently the potential for richer insights to the research question. The conversations were dialogic, relational, and reflective. As a result I found I had to be an active listener. As an active listener and participant in the research, the process felt less extractive and one-sided (even with the given that research can inevitably be an extractive process). Because I was a co-participant, my own self-knowledge deepened with each conversation. ... The conversation itself helped to deepen relationships... participants shared stories from their lives resulting in a highly contextualized, powerful source of knowledge. In receiving the gift of story, I was ever mindful of the responsibility inherent in research and the reciprocity it entails. (p. 46)



*Figure 4.* Co-researchers' roles in the project.

As co-researchers, Linda and I developed a relationship that continued to deepen through dialogue in a conversational research method. As we each shared stories within this context of mutual trust, knowledge was transmitted, assumptions were challenged, and decolonization took place, as I will describe in chapter 4.

### **Data Collection Tools and Analysis**

I spent 4 days in the kindergarten classroom (both outdoors and indoors) observing and the following data collection tools were used: notes that I made, notes that Linda made, and audio recordings of Linda and I during reflective conversations. At the end of each day, we discussed what we saw from each of our perspectives (the concept of two-eyed seeing is relevant here; Hatcher, Bartlett, Marshall, & Marshall, 2009).

These conversations were transcribed, and the text presented in accordance with Kovach's model of Indigenous methodologies. Kovach (2009) states that allowing stories to emerge completely gives participants a guiding role in how the research develops that is not possible with traditional interview formats and coding which can be limiting. Kovach (2010) explains that "The conversational method ... has the means to generate highly contextualized stories. In using a conversational method that is guided by an Indigenous paradigmic approach, I struggle in decontextualizing and fragmenting the data" (p. 47). Therefore, in presenting the results, every effort was made to present the conversation in its full context leading to longer than usual excerpts from collaborative conversation within this paper. This method of presenting story in its full context as data allows the story to remain intact and speak for itself (Kovach, 2010, p. 47). These reflective conversations took place using a previous research protocol developed exclusively developed by Linda to guide the reflection for both researchers. Because she has developed these guiding questions (see Appendix), this portion was a self-reflection

and self-study; I also reflected on my learning story noting any parallels and points of departure during these collaborative reflections.

Linda has offered to guide me through documents that she has created as well, including texts that she has authored to explain her pedagogy to administrators. We looked through these documents together and reflected on them. When the data was compiled, I aimed to present this body of data in a way that reflects the research questions posed, as well as allows myself and other educators to learn from them develop strategies that can help guide decolonization of education practices both present and future.

### **Ethical Considerations**

As a non-Indigenous educator and researcher, the importance of ensuring ethically sound research cannot be overstated. Historically, Indigenous people have been marginalized, taken advantage of, and harmed through Western research; recently has there been a significant shift toward “more research by and with Aboriginal peoples” and away from “research on or for Aboriginal peoples” in academia (Tecumseh Centre for Aboriginal Research and Education, 2017, p. 17). It is important to note that Aboriginal people conducted their own research within their nations prior to colonization: “These methods of investigation and problem solving involved everyone in the community and were specifically guided by Elders” (Marsh et al., 2015, p. 3). While I have ongoing difficulties with the notion of personally conducting research for fear that it will continue a pattern of marginalization and exploitation, Linda has been a great encouragement to me as she always points to the benefits of the research, which reach to the children and community that I work with. This project would also be beneficial to me in that it allows me to question and decolonize my own pedagogical practice, while learning from an experienced and successful Indigenous educator. In the two First Nations communities I

have worked in as an educator, between 20% and 95% of teachers have been non-Indigenous; it is vital that as non-Indigenous educators of Indigenous students, we collaborate with and learn from Indigenous educators, researchers, community members, and parents in order to ensure that we do not perpetuate colonial cycles of oppression for the students and communities we work with as visitors. It is within this ethical space that this project will take place. The treaty relationship of the Kashwenta, or two-row wampum (Bomberry, 2013; Muller, 2007) which signifies Western and Haudenosaunee people traveling along the same river with non-interference from both sides also informs and guides this research to ensure healthy and respectful research relationships.

The purpose of the research is to explore and reflect upon a teacher's practice, with the goal that through this reflection, I myself might become better equipped to be an educator, particularly for Indigenous students. Ethically, I cannot conduct such a project as a non-Indigenous researcher on my own. Linda, being invested into the decolonization and betterment of education for First Nations children, particularly those in the community in which we both work, has graciously agreed to undertake this research with me collaboratively. As we planned and discussed the research in Spring, I asked Linda what she would like to gain from the research. Linda mentioned validation of what she is doing, and personal reflection in order to become a better educator would be her takeaways from the project. In addition, Linda would like to have a video that encapsulates her practice, for her own personal and professional use. I have agreed to film and put together a video for her as a separate project, which will be completed in early 2018.

The Brock University Research Ethics office reviewed and exempted my research proposal from SREB review, because the research is collaborative and, therefore, does not involve participants in the traditional sense but instead involves two collaborating

researchers coming together to examine a phenomenon/practice. In a letter from the Research Ethics Manager, the conditions of this exemption are laid out as follows:

Brock SREB has determined that this project is outside of their review provided that:

- In keeping with Chapter 9 of the TCPS2 – Research Involving the First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples of Canada, the researcher engages the Six Nation’s Research Council for advice and if necessary, approval prior to conducting this research.
- The research is restricted to the reflections of the co-investigators, publicly available information and relevant literature in the field and does not include data or identifiable information from third parties who may be considered participants such as other teachers, parents, and/or students.

(Lori Walker, personal communication, June 8, 2017)

Ethical clearance has been given by the school principal where Linda teaches, who wrote a letter in support of the project after reviewing the research proposal. In accordance with the Chief and Council’s policy, no research can take place on the reserve without full approval from Chief and Council. The reserve’s ethics committee reviewed an application to conduct this research on the reserve, and recommended the research to the Chief and Council for approval. The Chief and Council reviewed and provided full approval of the research proposal on July 11, 2017. There were no recommendations made for changes to the research proposal.

### **Scope and Limitations of the Study**

This study takes place within an Indigenous educational context, exploring the practice of one teacher at a school in a First Nations reserve in Ontario, Canada.

Together, two teachers of Indigenous students will reflect on their practice, with a focus on Linda's decolonizing outdoor educational practices with kindergarten students. As a far less experienced and non-Indigenous teacher-researcher, I will take on a reflective learning role in the research. Linda's 20 years of experience as an educator, as well as her own educational experiences as a child, youth, and adult will be the focus of this study. Other teachers, administrators, student, family, and community perspectives will be explored as perceived by Linda, but direct responses or data from any of these other sources are outside of the scope of this study.

This study is limited to the perspectives and experiences of the two teacher-researchers taking part. Linda has exclusively taught kindergarten, which is a limitation to the scope of the study, but an advantage in terms of her depth of experience in that area. As a study focusing on the educational practice of one person, conclusions may not be able to be generally applied to educational practice in First Nations Schools, or other school boards and kindergarten classrooms across Canada and the world. The data collected is viewed through highly objective lenses of the researchers, and could be interpreted differently by others.



## CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

Over several weeks, the days that I have spent in Linda's kindergarten class were incredible, rich learning experiences. Interspersed throughout my observation days and our collaborative reflection discussions, I spent several days supply teaching for Linda which gave me the chance to put some of what I learned during our time together. The conversations we had brought out a beautiful and inspirational learning story and a detailed account of Linda's pedagogical practice from day to day which are informed by her experiences. Linda's practice is centered on cultural values, Indigenous ways of knowing, a deep connectedness to the land, and the importance of community and family.

### **Education Journey as a Child—Memories of Learning**

An Indigenous view of education encompasses the holistic process of learning from cradle to grave, as opposed to a Western view of education as K-12 schooling (Snow, personal communication, December 4, 2017). The first day of reflective conversations centred around Linda's learning experiences from childhood and onward. As Linda states, "It is necessary to look at where we came from, to know where we are going" (personal communication, 2017). Linda's education journey began with her parents; she explains that although she attended elementary school in her community, her teachers were all outsiders to the community, and her childhood memories of learning were centered around her family:

Alexandria: When you think back to your childhood, can you tell me your memories of how you learned?

Linda: Yes so that's what sparked my Master's because I remember learning from my parents, and I remember school, but I don't

remember anything those teachers taught me. I can remember one teacher taught me singing and music, and then I remember we had this other teacher and I just remember him but I don't remember anything he taught me, cause he used to smoke and he'd let the cigarette burn right down to his lip. And he has this big long ash, right, so .... but I loved school, I always loved school but I don't remember the teachers. But I remember everything I did with my parents, because we did lots with my parents, so they would take us out on the lake, and we'd go fishing and we'd go swimming, and we'd go in the boat and my dad would always cut wood, so he'd take us in the bus with him when he cut wood, and I remember him teaching my brothers how to set snares to catch rabbits, and so he would, my dad was the kind who would just—he never really told you what to do, he just brought you along with him, and we'd learn just by watching, not by him telling us.

Linda's recollections of learning in this way are in alignment with a body of research that suggests Indigenous children learn best by observation and imitation, rather than direct instruction (Battiste, 2008; Bell & Brant, 2015; Boulton-Lewis, Marton, Lewis, & Wilss, 2000). Linda joyfully recounts her time on the land and water with her father, and it is evident that she cherishes these memories of childhood learning:

Linda: I can remember going with him in the boat, and I used to always think, how does he know the way back? Because we would get on these lakes and they'd be going all over the place and then when

we'd come back, he brought us always back to the landing and I used to think, "I'm gonna watch him. I'm gonna watch and I'm gonna see how he gets us out there, and I'm gonna see how he goes to get back." But I could never remember because I'd get distracted by the water spiders or something and I never could remember how he got us back but I learned from him, a lot, mostly from my dad. A lot from my mother too, she was more, she liked fishing and all that too but, she was more all about her home, and healthy eating and cooking the food, and keeping the house clean, all that kind of stuff. So my memories of learning were from them, and the values they really ingrained in us, like don't disgrace your family, and you know, just by modelling like be a hard worker, and if you're going to do a job do it right. ... And my mother would make us do that; if we didn't do something right, we had to do it all over again so we knew: I have to do this right cause I'm gonna have to do it all over again. So those were my memories of learning were from my parents and I found the school was secondary, it wasn't really something that left any memories in my mind.

Alexandria: So how did that spark you wanting to do your master's?

Linda: Well I wanted to find out: how do we learn? Because we're in a system that's geared for non-Natives, and they always try and make us follow this system, and how is it appropriate for us? And

I'm thinking about myself, and I'm thinking, if I learned from fishing, or something that was more appropriate to what I was doing, what I was interested in, that my learning might have been even more than what we were learning in school. Like we were learning about Jacques Cartier, I remember that because we used to do maps all the time, and stuff like tracing. So I'm thinking about these guys here, and thinking okay.. it's part of your identity, your learning is part of who we are, and it has to fit because those teachers that used to come up to our community would leave too, they were all—they weren't living there. They would come in, they would go home at Christmas, they'd come back in January they'd go home at Easter, you know, and then go home for the summer. So you never really built up a relationship with them. They were transient. They were gone, and so they weren't that influential really, because they were never there, they were just there to teach you and then gone. So, you had your identity, and it was not tied to the school. You know, your identity was tied to your family—what you did, what you valued, those kinds of things. And so, I think the same thing with these guys here. But what I noticed was they don't really have that identity. Like we were isolated up north, so we were allowed to have an identity, where down here, because they're surrounded by such a big population of non-natives, who do you identify with? So, understand who you are, and also really

going back to your traditions and your culture, like to go back to that and to value that, because, I don't know why, but they don't value. ... Well it's just that whole idea that our knowledge was never valued, you know. Because they sent us to residential school right, to change us, to take the savage out of us, so how can we know anything? And I find that still continues.

The legacy of residential school in Canada is all too familiar for Indigenous people in Canada. On a visit to her home one day, Linda shared with me a letter that had been on file at Indian Affairs, and someone in her family had found through research. This letter had been sent around 100 years ago to a residential school by her great grandmother. Battiste (2008) states residential schools are a “systemic and human tragedy that has denied Aboriginal peoples their dignity” (p. 82). The incredible power of this letter is a legacy in Linda's family of resistance and refusing to allow dignity to be taken by the Canadian government. The letter reads:

In the matter of certain complaints against the administration of Reverend John Slater,<sup>2</sup> Principal in charge, \_\_\_\_\_ Indian Boarding School.

I, Marie George of the Village of \_\_\_\_\_ in district of \_\_\_\_\_, widow of Stephen George and a member of the \_\_\_\_\_ Indian Band do solemnly declare that I have one son Wendell George a pupil at said Boarding School now aged fourteen and who has been at this school nearly nine years. I am not satisfied with the English education my son is receiving at the school. He is in the Fourth

---

<sup>2</sup> Here again, all names and locations are pseudonyms and/or have been suppressed for confidentiality.

Reader and has the rudiments of spelling and arithmetic but he has not made proper progress for the time he has been at school and that most of his time is spent cutting and selling wood and other general work. I also complain that although I have faithfully supplied my said son four times with clothing and boots he does not receive them. For instance a pair of boots I bought my son after the holidays last summer but when I went to get him this Christmas he was wearing a pair of rubber running shoes. I wish to give my said son a good education but do not believe he will receive this at the above school and unless said Principal Slater is removed. I wish to withdraw my son from and send him to the public school at \_\_\_\_\_.

Linda read this letter to me and we discussed its implications:

Alexandria: It's like to me this letter showed me that in your family, way back from [the early 1900s], your family's been advocating for their education.

Linda: Right. Like recognizing that this isn't working.

Alexandria: What we're doing isn't working. Let's do it a different way. And we're going to take care of ourselves and take care of our family, and take care of our children, and you're not doing it right so I'm going to do it right and advocate until it gets done right.

Linda: Yeah. You're bringing clothes for the kids and they're giving it to somebody else and then you're not even getting an education. You're working for them. That was the thing. Half the day was spent working for them.

Alexandria: Yeah. So this is incredible that there's this agency in your family that goes back to your great-grandmother.

Linda: And that was the thing right? We value education. And obviously my grandparents valued education too.

Linda's narrative is so strikingly different from what I had heard from my non-Indigenous colleagues, speaking for Indigenous people with the assumption that education is not valued in First Nations communities. My conversations with Linda illustrate that the opposite is true: she and her family have always held education and learning as important. The advocacy of Linda's ancestor reflects Linda's own attitudes and actions in promoting quality education for her own family and for her students. When I think back to my own experience, I can see that advocacy from my family and learning from my family also figures prominently in my memories of how I learned.

My mother tells me that she recognized from an early age that I loved learning, and she tried her best to foster that from an early age. I remember having a lot of books always around our home, and my mother tells me that I read from a very early age, before I have clear memories. Because my mother was a single parent and separated from her family in Jamaica, schooling was difficult and I attended somewhere between six to eight schools by grade 8 (neither I nor my mother can remember exactly). My mom had me tested and identified as gifted, and, drawing on her experiences in schooling in Jamaica, believed strongly that I should be accelerated in order to receive the proper education. I can remember attending meetings with principals at different schools, noting my mother's frustration that they would not accelerate me two grades as I had tested at that level. For 2 years, I attended a private school even though my mother worked a minimum

wage job as a telemarketer, to show the public schools that I was capable of learning at that level. While I realize that acceleration may not have been the best thing for my development, particularly emotionally and socially, I believe my mother was doing everything she could to ensure that I got a good education.

Although Linda learned mostly from her parents at home, she does have some memories of her learning at school, which we discussed:

Alexandria: What about ... Okay. About the resources that you had. So, when you were in school, you already kind of said who influenced you the most as a child, but when you were in school, you already said you don't have that much memories—

Linda : Not of anything being taught.

Alexandria: Do you have any memories of anything in school? Positive or negative?

Linda : Like I said, I have memories of that woman teaching us music and she used the pitch pipe. One of those round ones. She'd blow it and we'd all have to say the note, sing the note, and then she taught us these songs. And at the time, I didn't know, but this ... what the heck was that song? Oh, Valiant. ... I remember the songs, 'cause I love singing, too. That was the other thing my dad did was ... we lived way up in the bush, but he ordered ... he had a membership to, I think it was called Columbia Records, and every month or so, he'd get a record.

And it was like of the musicals that they're having in New



York, like East Side, West Side, and Annie Get Your Gun.

Something I never heard of, nobody ever heard of, but my dad got these records and I loved music. My mother loved music and my dad would get these records. He was always one to try to better himself, so I think that's why he bought the records, but what I would do, is I would play those records and I'd write out every song from that record by hand, I'd write it all out and I kept on doing that and when I was listening to those songs, sometimes I didn't know what they were talking about, because they would say, on the sidewalks of New York and I never knew where New York was, I never knew what sidewalks were. We never had sidewalks, we just had dirt roads.

But hearing that vocabulary, I didn't know what they were until we left and I used to think it was odd that people would walk on a sidewalk. It seemed odd to me. But yeah, that was one way I learned from him getting those records, that I would sit there and write out all these songs and I had stack of ... We had scribblers and I had a stack like this filled with songs I wrote out all by hand, but I think what that did for me was to develop my vocabulary and my writing skills and spelling and everything, 'cause I spent hours doing that, hours and hours writing out all these songs and singing them and my brother played the guitar and so, I had all the songs written out and we would sing together and play the guitar.

That I remembered and I remember ... I love singing, so I remember that one teacher. Her name was Mrs. Dawson. She was very old, 'cause her hair was all white and she put ... blow that pitch pipe and then we'd all sing. The one song I remember singing was Valiant Hearts and I think it was a church song, but at the time we didn't know it. We just sang it. Her and the other teacher that I had was this guy, this old man. He was an old man, too. Well, we called him Pops Jeffries and he was the guy with the cigarette. I don't remember anything he taught me, but every Friday we had to recite a poem. We had to learn a poem and stand up on Friday and recite it.

I used to love to do that, so I'd learn a poem, recite it, but my brother, he was a year older than me, he didn't learn it, so he stood up and put the book down there, stood up and he was reading the poem. He got caught. But that's all I remember about school. I remember that and I remember... another girl in our school ... her parents had eight or nine kids and they made her work and everything, helping in the house. She was the oldest. And then they would punish her, sometimes they'd punish her and put her under the house. You know how a house has a crawl space? They'd put her under the house and then, she'd come to school and she would be so tired and she'd be ... put her arms on her desk and just fall asleep, and I remember that girl. We kept trying to help her all the

time, 'cause her parents were, whatever, and we would ... So she would run away from home and then, we would hide her. There were empty houses, we'd put her in an empty house and we'd bring her jam sandwiches, take care of her, so that's what I remember about school.

And then I just met a girl that I went to school with and she said to me, she goes, "All I remember about you is that you were very good at Latin." I said, "Was I?"

Alexandria: Latin?

Linda : Yeah, we took Latin.

Alexandria: Why?

Linda : We had Latin. I said, "I was?" She goes, "Yes, you were very good at Latin." I said, "Well, I liked Latin. I really liked it." I like the stories that were ... The Trojan horse and all that was part of the Latin and I liked those stories, but I don't remember being good at Latin.

Alexandria: That's so interesting. And so, was there any time at school where you learned anything that had to do with your culture at all?

Linda : Nothing. We didn't. Absolutely nothing, no.

Alexandria: No language?

Linda : No. No, there's nothing.

Alexandria: Songs?

Linda : Nothing. Not even saying “Let’s take everybody fishing” or something, or hunting. There was nothing.

Alexandria: So no outdoor stuff?

Linda : Nothing. No.

Alexandria: Wow.

Linda : Nothing. Nope.

Alexandria: That’s so wrong.

Linda : Yeah, 'cause these teachers came in, they were all from somewhere else. They knew nothing about us at all, so they just taught us what they knew.

Alexandria: Yeah. Sometimes. ... Well, I taught up north for a little while and I can see it in some classrooms that same thing... and even with me, just based on my lack of knowledge, that kind of continues.

Linda : Exactly.

As Linda told me this story I identified ways in which I could see evidences of her education journey weaved into her practice; although her memories of learning outdoors with her parents figured most prominently, she shared some memories of learning at school as well. I noted similarities and differences in our experience and reflected on how this impacts my teaching practice. For example, the songs and poems that she cherished as a child are some of Linda’s most prominent memories from school. Today, Linda reads poetry with her students daily, often incorporating cultural themes, for example, a poem about using beans, corn, and squash to make three sisters soup is featured around fall harvest time. I, too, remember enjoying specific songs; music was always my

favourite class. Like Linda, I often sing with my students and this is always well-received. I do, however, need to think more deeply about which songs I am choosing to sing and how those choices may have a colonizing effect by featuring mainly Western songs written from a non-Indigenous perspective. One goal of my future practice will be to seek out both popular and traditional music written and performed by Indigenous artists and incorporate those songs.

The young girl with a difficult home life who often fell asleep at school was a student who featured prominently in Linda's memories of school. Today, Linda is cognizant and compassionate to students' home lives, aware of the fact that intergenerational trauma from colonization impacts the students in her class. Risk factors including poverty, food insecurity, childcare, inadequate or unstable housing, unemployment, and mental and physical health challenges can be barriers to success for Indigenous students (Toulouse, 2013). Linda is aware of this, and also aware that "social support and belonging is also a primary issue that Indigenous students and their families face" (Toulouse, 2013, p. 14). Linda goes to great lengths to make school a safe place for children to be, regardless of any challenges they may be facing at home. Linda provides healthy snacks, extra warm clothing, all materials needed for any homework she sends, and a welcoming environment for all children and families in her classroom.

The privilege of my position inevitably prevents me from being able to ever understand the experience of being Indigenous. Every interaction I have with families must be seasoned with humility, honour, sincerity, and openness in light of my position as a visitor. Linda describes her teachers as people who were very transient and not part of the community. Reflecting on my past experiences, I know that arriving and leaving a

northern Ontario community within 2 years was not healthy for the community and for the students. In the future, working within an Indigenous community, it would be best to make sure that I am able to stay there and develop a relationship not only with the students in the school, but with families, elders and the greater community. High teacher turnover in Indigenous communities is known to cause strained relationships between teachers, students, parents and caregivers, and the community (Preston, 2016). In a small way, I can relate; the experience of moving schools many times, often halfway through the year, did not allow me to develop a sense of security and stability at any one school; this experience reinforces my belief that it is important to provide that safe and stable environment for students to thrive at school.

Sympathy and empathy for students and their families can invoke positive and productive behaviours, such as “empathetic behavior, such as sensitivity, patience, respect, tolerance, acceptance, understanding, flexibility, openness, and humility” (McAllister & Irvine, 2002, p. 439). There is also evidence that “White preservice teachers’ empathy provide[s] a ‘false sense of involvement’ that could be dangerous if they assume they know and understand their students although they may actually have a superficial understanding” (Rosenberg, as cited in McAllister & Irvine, 2002, p. 434). I have noticed, both in myself and non-Indigenous colleagues, that empathy and sympathy for Indigenous students has sometimes lead to an unproductive ‘White saviour’ mentality, often reinforced by popular media and literature (Brown, 2013) that distracts and derails from collaborating with Indigenous communities, families and educators providing a decolonized, culturally appropriate education for our Indigenous students. For example, when my husband and I announced to our family and friends that we would be leaving to

teach on a Northern reserve, we often received praise and accolades for how selfless we were being to sacrifice our time and talents, along with warnings based on news articles or ‘horror stories’ about First Nations Reserves. This type of narrative, although we have addressed it several times, continues when we share the nature of our careers with others. Teaching in an environment where families are still healing from the trauma of residential schools also lead to a greater than usual emotional investment in students as they worked through their personal issues, sometimes with little support due to lack of funding, staff, and resources, which led me to sometimes see myself as a burden-bearer of emotional trauma when students displayed certain behaviours in my classroom. As an educator, I must constantly be reflective as to whether my attitudes and actions, including sympathy and empathy are producing productive or unproductive behaviours in my teaching practice.

Lastly, Linda’s memories of the curriculum excluding any form of cultural content are consistent with the curriculum that was both in the past, and largely continues to be taught to accomplish the Canadian government’s goals of eliminating Indigenous culture and ways of life. The TRCC (2015b) has called for Canadian government to “make age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools, Treaties, and Aboriginal peoples’ historical and contemporary contributions to Canada a mandatory education requirement for Kindergarten to Grade Twelve students” (p. 7). However, by focusing on surface-level Indigenous historical knowledge, and framing it through a settler-biased lens, the Ontario curriculum continues to perpetuate “Eurocentric assumptions,” and a “justification of the status quo (Battiste, 2013, p. 107). Linda’s practice is, on the other hand, informed by her identity as an Indigenous person; as later chapters explore more in-

depth, Indigenous epistemology forms the basis of her teaching practices, and she uses the Ontario curriculum only as a guide.

Reflecting on my experience as a grade 3 teacher in a First Nations community, I noticed that the *Heritage and Identity* strand in this grade is the first mention of Indigenous people in the Ontario curriculum expectations (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). This strand, which focuses on how the First Nations interact with Europeans, ignores the fact that First Nations communities had been living in what is now called Ontario for thousands of years. This reinforces the dominant ideology that Indigenous people are only worthy of being discussed in terms of their relationship to dominant culture.

In my teaching practice, I must be cognizant of what voices are privileged in the classroom and in the curriculum, and make considerable efforts to integrate authentic, first-voice Indigenous content where I can, modeling my practice on those successful teachers who have created a program that honours Indigenous ways of knowing by moving away “from models of colonial domination and assimilation to those that are culturally, linguistically, and philosophically relevant and empowering” (Battiste & Barman, 1995, p. x).

### **Education Journey as a Lifelong Learner**

After Linda shared and reflected on her childhood memories of how she learned, she shared her journey through completing high school and her two university degrees before beginning her 20-year career as a kindergarten teacher. Linda describes her experience of attending high school away from home.

Linda: I think I’m not anything special and here I was able to compete



with all those other students who had lots more than I had and I graduated second out of all the grade 12s.

Alexandria: And away from home. Like in North Bay.

Linda : Away from home. On my own. I had to do it all myself. I bought a typewriter up there because I needed ... I bought a little portable typewriter. You know what was so interesting too back then? My sister was paying me. I lived with my sister. She was paying me to stay with her kids because she worked nights and I just thought, I didn't do nothing. And I forget how much she was paying me but I went down to this stationary store and I wanted to buy this typewriter. I forget how much it costs, like \$60 maybe, but I didn't have any money to buy it. But I said to the guy, I'll pay you like 15, it wasn't that much, maybe five a week. I'll pay you this much a week until I pay it off. And he gave it to me. Like how many ... when I think about it now, you pay in payments. And he gave me. Because I needed that typewriter to type up essays and stuff like that and he gave it to me. And I went down every week and paid him five bucks or whatever it is until I got it paid off and I paid it off.

Alexandria: You were very independent!

Linda : I had to be. I had nobody helping me. ... I didn't know what I was doing. I had to for myself because I was failing math and I remember the man. He was a young guy.... What did I end up? I ended up with a really high mark. Third term I got 99. The class

average was 64 and I ended up with 87. But my first term's not on here. I don't have any other report cards. I don't know what my mother did with them, but the first term I was failing. I went to him because I wanted so badly to know how to do this. I went to him and I said, "How do you do this math?" And I remember we did it in the library. We sat in the library and he showed me how to do it and I caught on. Then I was okay the rest of the time, but I didn't, at the time, I didn't know how to do it. I didn't have the background, probably, for that math that he showed me. Then I got 99. There were only three native kids in the whole school.

Linda's resilience, strength, and determination led her to not only complete high school, but to excel. I am amazed at the agency she took as a child in approaching her math teacher as one of the only Indigenous students in the school, and at her extraordinary level of achievement, graduating second in her class. As she points out, Linda did this all with very little support. Indigenous students, and particularly those from northern remote First Nations, face numerous barriers to high-school graduation. Education for children in First Nations communities is chronically underfunded; this leads to a lack of access to education at the high school level for thousands of students in First Nations communities (Drummond & Rosenbluth, 2013). In many cases that I have seen as a teacher in the north, children must leave their parents and the community they have grown up in to attend high school in cities like Thunder Bay, North Bay, or Sault Ste. Marie. Even once these students are successfully enrolled, lack of access to traditional knowledge at school, food insecurity, lack of family and community support, mental health and intergenerational trauma, and culturally irrelevant standardized testing

are all barriers to success leading to a 39% high-school completion rate for Aboriginal young adults, compared to 87% for non-Aboriginal young adults (Chiefs Assembly on Education, 2012; Hodson & Kitchen, 2015).

My own experience of attending high school was very different—I was expected to complete high school and go on to University. There was never any question as to whether I would complete high school. This underlying expectation guided me to take all academic courses and perform very well in school for the first 3 years of high school. In grade 12, I went through the usual teenage rebellious phase, however, when I slept in for school my mom was there to drag me to school every time. When I skipped class, she was notified and went around to all the places she thought I might be to bring me back to school; when I missed tests and assignments, my teachers called home and she made sure that I completed them. Even despite my lack of effort in my final year, I was still able to graduate as I felt teachers and my family pushing me forward toward success and supporting me. Indigenous students, on the other hand, often face low expectations from their teachers, and when they go through what for mainstream students is often seen as a normalized phase of rebellion, they are immediately written off and stereotyped according to mainstream conceptions of Indigenous students. Describing her experience in a mainstream school as a young person, Michelle Bomberry (2013) states:

my newfound acquaintances in the off-reserve school viewed me as “an Indian, the people who do not work.” Upon entering high school, I was exposed to the blatant racism and Otherness of being called an “apple” (meaning I was red or Native-looking on the outside, but my friends and choices were white in thought) by some Native students” (p. 251).

Michelle's experiences illustrate the common stereotypes faced by Indigenous students daily when they attend school.

Often, Indigenous students are separated from home as in Linda's case; even if they are home, their parents or caregivers may feel reluctant or intimidated when communicating with the school in order to support their children. Haig-Brown (1988) suggests that Indigenous parents' reluctance to engage with their children's schooling can be a form of resistance to the colonial occupation symbolized by the school itself. Reflecting on this, I have taken for granted a lot of privileges that I have been afforded in my education journey, and need to be aware that not everyone is afforded these privileges. Should I ever move into teaching higher grades, I need to monitor my expectations and ensure they are not guided by any false assumptions of my students' potential, and take in to account the social location and support structures that students may be lacking.

Interestingly, although Linda's high school teachers noticed her potential, they did not encourage her or prompt her to pursue higher education:

Linda: All the time I was in high school, especially that grade 12 class, none of the teachers ever, none of them ever said to me, "What are you going to do after grade 12? Where are you going," and all this kind of stuff. They never paid any attention to me, I felt, never.

Anyways, then my sister went to that same school after me. They said, "Oh, are you Linda's sister?" She said, "Yeah." "How's Linda doing?" At the time, I was working at Tim Hortons. I'd finished high school, went and worked at Tim Hortons. She said,

“Oh, she’s working at Tim Hortons.” They said, “She should go to college. She should go to university. She has so much potential and all.” I said to my sister, I said, “You know what, they never said one word to me when I was there. They never said anything. Never. No encouragement. Nothing.” Plus, my parents didn’t know anything about college, didn’t know anything about university. They had no clue what my next step should be. They figured, ”Hey, you’re done grade 12, good for you.” They had no clue.

No, there was nothing from those teachers at all. There was absolutely nothing. It was all like if you didn’t motivate yourself, nobody else did.

My experience was very different from Linda’s; throughout the years of my schooling, I remember that teachers consistently encouraged me. Educators seemed to take a special interest in me because I was 2 years younger than the other students. I was streamed into academic courses and expected to pursue postsecondary education. High school was full of opportunities for rich learning; I went on trips abroad, took part in the school musical, joined intramural sports, and came out of my shell socially. My music teacher, who I had a great relationship with, told me in my grade 12 year when I was starting to let my academics slide, that I had a great deal of potential and could be anything I wanted. I remember that he started listing off career options for me after reinforcing that he did not want to see me waste my potential: doctor, lawyer, teacher, et cetera. Although I now better understand that this type of streaming of students can be highly problematic, one of the main reasons I initially chose to become a teacher is

because I hope to inspire students like my teacher did at that time. In an analysis of 10 case studies involving Indigenous students, Bell (2004) found that high teacher expectations and encouragement are highly beneficial to their academic success. It is troubling to think that not all students are encouraged to fulfill their educational potential; consistent positive encouragement for her students is evident in Linda's practice, and I will aim to do the same throughout my teaching career as well.

Reflecting on my experience in school, I was always aware that my teachers had high expectations of me. These expectations were taken-for-granted, and it was a shock to my teachers and parents when I failed a math class in grade 12 due to low attendance. In a study involving teachers of Aboriginal students in grades 4-8, Whitley (2014) found that Indigenous students often have the opposite experience:

The most common response to hearing of an Aboriginal student who was academically successful was one of shock or surprise; a response that teachers felt was detrimental to the school experiences of Aboriginal students: "We have a student that just came to us, Aboriginal student, straight A student, and I say 'he's a straight A student,' everyone's like 'Really!' and you shouldn't be shocked by that!" (p. 170)

In my own experience, I have worked with some colleagues who have held dismally low expectations of their students; In addition to Intermediate level students being given primary-level work for the entire school year regardless of their capabilities, I have heard teachers refer to their students as "dumb" and "stupid" on numerous occasions. Linda is aware of the "racism and prejudice ... where Aboriginal students are viewed as less capable and lowered expectations of their success are held by their

teachers” (Whitley, 2014, pp. 156-157). We discussed this during one of our reflective conversations, and she described her intentional efforts to communicate to her high expectations to her students, rooted in her own education journey:

Alexandria: It seems like you have really high expectations of your own kids, and also the kids in your class. I find one of the problems that we face as teachers, in general, but especially teaching First Nations kids, I’ve found that a lot of teachers don’t have high expectations.

Linda : Isn’t that awful?

Alexandria: It’s terrible. It’s a form of racism.

Linda : It is. It’s so sad because it’s not anybody’s fault. It is what it is, but you think, “You know what, if I can do it, you guys can do it. I know you can.” Because I came from the same thing. You just see somebody giving you that positive message that you’re going to do it, you’re going to be successful. They’re so surprised that they are. I’ll say, “What? You’re not surprising me. I knew you could do it. Why not?” Just trying to put that in their brain all the time. ... Giving them always that. ... Saying positive things to them. Even for the parents, for them to hear that, that anything is possible. It doesn’t matter how long it takes you. I was, I don’t know, 40 ... I graduated in '67, so I was 47. Was I 47? I graduated in '97. 47, yeah. 47 when I got my teaching certificate. It’s what I always wanted. I got my dream job.

Linda shared with me her education journey and how it progressed after she

graduated from high-school:

Linda : I worked at Tim Hortons for a year. I was trying to think, “I don’t want to work at Tim Hortons for the rest of my life.” I went to hairdressing school for a year. I worked at Tim Hortons at night, went to hairdressing school in the daytime, and paid my way through hairdressing school. It was in [*city name removed*]. I got my hairdressing license. I am a licensed hairdresser. I worked in the salon and everything. Got married and then started having my children. I didn’t want to work. I wanted to take care of my kids. At some point in, I think when my second one was born, I thought I should get a job, because my husband was being laid off. I thought I should get a job.

I got a really good job with this lady working in her salon. I only had to work Friday mornings and Saturday mornings. It was perfect. She let me bring the kids to work with me. Anyways, I worked for her. Then when my youngest was in grade 8, I started working. I worked for [*a non-profit organization*] as a homemaker. I worked at a health food store, part-time too. I was doing both jobs.

I started going to university. I applied to go to university, and they said, “Okay, see if you can do one course. At least try one course, see if you can do it.” I took philosophy for my first course. I did fine. They said, “Yeah, you’re okay. You can take as many



credits as you want.” I still was raising my family. I’d take one credit, one a year or whatever it was. I can’t remember if it was one every fall, winter, spring. I can’t remember. I don’t think it was like that. It took me a long time. I took one at a time anyways. I needed 15 credits to get my BA. It took me 10 years to get my BA. Just doing it one at a time, one in the summer, just here and there, and at the same time working and taking care of the kids. In '96, I graduated, got my BA. In '97, I went to teacher’s college and got my B.Ed. ... It took me 10 years, but I did it. Got it done. That’s how it happened.

I always knew I could do it. I always knew. I had confidence that way. I thought, “I can do this.” I just didn’t know. ... You need somebody to help you, how you apply, or whatever. You need somebody to help you with that. My parents couldn’t help with any of that stuff, so I was kind of on my own. It worked out. I think it worked out the way it should have because my kids were just ... My oldest was just getting ready to go to university, too. When they saw me doing university courses, I think they thought, “If mum can do it, anybody can do it.” Because I would say, “Oh, I got to write an essay or got to do this.” They’d say, “Oh, Mum, just go do it.” I’d be doing my schoolwork. It helped because then I knew the process when my son went to university. I knew how to help him, what the application looked like and all that

kind of stuff. He went, and we both graduated actually at the same year. Him and I both graduated. He did it faster than I did it.

Alexandria: That's so special.

Linda : Yeah. It really helped. It helped.

Alexandria: That's a great story. That's awesome.

Linda: It just shows you can do whatever you want to do. It doesn't matter how long it takes you. The time goes by. I know people are saying, "How many credits do you have to get?" I'd say, "15." They'd say, "Oh my goodness, that's going to take forever." It does, but you know what ... I still kept going. ... As I was getting closer to the end, I did more credits because I could see the end. I did more credits. I'm the only one that graduated from university out of my family.

Linda's journey is demonstrative of Waterman and Sands's (2016) finding that Indigenous "pathways toward ... degree completion are not what is often described as 'traditional': students might attend several institutions, later in life, often as a parent, and they frequently privilege family and culture before academics" (p. 51).

Linda's story of going back to university reminded me of my mother's story, which I shared with her during our collaborative reflection:

Linda : It motivated my kids and inspired them that they can do whatever they want, because they think, "Well, Mum did it. Can't be that hard. It's got to be easy."

Alexandria: Yeah, you did it while you were with them.

Linda : Yes.

Alexandria: I can remember, too, when my mum and dad divorced and I was maybe 4. My mum hadn't finished her degree. She got pregnant and dropped out of university. She was taking fashion something, but she was taking it in university. She wanted to finish her degree and ... when I was 6 and my brother was 4, she went back to school. She used to take me to her classes with her. She didn't have a babysitter. Me and my brother would be sitting there. She'd be like, "You have to be quiet the whole lecture." We'd be sitting there in a university lecture with her. I think that's part of why, too, I left high school, did my own thing for a few years, and then decided to come back.

My mother also faced numerous barriers to completing her postsecondary education. Because we saw our mothers work so hard and prioritize education, Linda's children and I are similar in that we had a strong role model to look up to and inspire us. Through observing Linda in her classroom and around the school, it is evident that she takes on a similar role at the school, maintaining relationships and continuing to be invested in her past students', encouraging them, celebrating their success. The care and dedication Linda shows in her teaching sets a strong foundation for the students going through school, despite the barriers they may face in later years.

Linda's openness in sharing her learning journey from childhood to today allowed both of us to reflect on how historical events, family history, personal identity, and our learning experiences in and out of school shape who we are as educators and as people.

The first two sections of this chapter have outlined how this teacher's life, story, and identity shape her practice as an educator, providing a rich response to the first research question of this project. Through reflection both during and after my conversations with Linda, I have been able to identify parallels and points of departure in my own story, and identify ways in which I can decolonize my assumptions, philosophy of education, and pedagogy.

### **A Day in Kindergarten**

The following sections focus on Linda's practice as a kindergarten teacher; the following sections address the second research question: What are the possibilities, benefits/successes, and challenges of implementing outdoor experiential learning and Aboriginal pedagogy as practiced by this teacher. When I asked how she would describe herself as an educator, Linda focused on the purposefulness of the kindergarten program that she has created:

Like you said, I do set high expectations for myself. I always think about, "Linda, why are you doing this?" But I can't stop myself. When I create something for them or whenever I'm doing something, I always go way beyond what anybody would do. I think I can't really settle for less. This is how I do it. I think I'm very passionate and I'm a research person. I'm always looking to see am I doing the right thing, is this appropriate. Am I wasting my time on some things. I want to make sure I'm giving them the best of me. Okay, this is very best. When people challenge me, and they can, I always know why I'm doing this. I think that's why parents accept what I'm saying, how I say it, what I do, because I think I'm doing it for the right reasons. I'm not doing anything, I'm never punitive about what I'm

doing with them. It's all about teaching them to be better people and to show them that they're capable. Anything that they want. I think that's how I am as an educator. I'm always researching, always researching. I'm always finding the best practice for things.

During my time with Linda, I notice that everything she does with the students is purposeful; there is experience, theory, research, and value embedded in each activity of the day. Linda's awareness of the lack of culturally relevant curriculum leads her to not only integrating cultural content, but creating an entire program based upon Indigenous ways of knowing and learning. Linda's goal is to maintain this routine so that children feel safe within the gentle repetition of everyday activities. When I was supply teaching for Linda on a day where there was an alternate event, the 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old kindergarten students were cognizant of the changes. At the usual time for their power walk, they started getting ready to go outside; at their usual computer time, they went to get their headphones down without prompting. Students experience safety and familiarity with these routines, and Linda teaches with the ultimate goal of allowing them to become independent.

### **Outdoor Education—Learning From the Land**

At the reserve in southern Ontario where Linda teaches, children spend about 40 minutes outdoors per day, usually during recess. Linda has always done things differently and spent much of the day outdoors whenever possible. She estimates that, on average, half of the day is spent outdoors at least. The first time I met Linda, she was unloading a number of large logs and branches into the kindergarten outdoor space from a truck. The location of the school does not allow for access to a forested space, so Linda brings in a

variety of natural materials to enhance the learning environment they do have access to. These materials will also change seasonally, but during my time in the Kindergarten class I observed children playing with the following materials outdoors: rocks, wooden planks, logs, wood slices, a mud kitchen," various containers, branches and a tarp, ropes, wagons, wheelbarrows, riding toys, shovels, a sand pit (made with tires), milk crates, bales of straw, et cetera. Throughout my time with Linda's class the students consistently amazed me with their creativity in how they played with and manipulated these materials. Linda explained how she brings out students' creativity by allowing them to learn outdoors:

Well, when you're outside you can just do more, so much more, and you don't need anything. You don't need anything, anything in the classroom. You don't really need material things to learn. You have everything you need outside, and it's more creative because it's found objects. Whatever they find, what can they do with it?

And it's amazing to watch what they do with ... They could just find ... on the power walk, they found some sand. Like, just kind of in a little puddle thing. And they had this stick and just kind of started writing in the sand. You know, like nobody set them up. I didn't have to set anything up. I thought, oh look at that, they're writing in the sand. So, I was thinking, for me ... Okay they're writing in the sand, in this little puddle, so maybe we'll write in the sand in the sandbox back at school. It's teaching them to be creative and innovative. What do I have and what can I do with it? And I don't tell them what to do with it. I just give it to them.

I'm always trying to make a big mud hole. The water always used to run

in there. It doesn't do it anymore, but I was trying to create a mud area for them, so they could just go and dig in it. Do whatever they want in it. So it's just amazing to see what they come up with, and I don't have to come up with anything. I just take what they're doing and maybe expand on it.

And it's amazing. They're just creative. So, you're creating a mind that's very innovative and can look at something and think, oh, what can I do with this? And that's the kind of mind you want. You don't want somebody who's so limited.

In preparation for this project, I explored research that centred on the myriad benefits of outdoor education, particularly for Indigenous students; outdoor learning benefits children spiritually, physically, emotionally, and mentally (Battiste, 2013; Baydala et al., 2007; Goulet, 2001; Hare, 2012; Rowan, 2017). To be with Linda through a school day is to see these concepts come to life. To someone who is not spending the day with her class, however, it could seem as if they are just walking in a circle around the block; other educators and past administrators have often devalued Linda's style of teaching. Linda created a book to explain her style of teaching to administrators. This text details both the philosophical underpinnings and pedagogical practice of her kindergarten program, particularly, the power walk—a walk around the block of the school that students take every day with various stops along the way. The Power Walk text was created for in-school use, not academic publication; as such, sources are not all cited in APA format.

The sole purpose of the power walk is to recognize that the health and well-being of Indigenous children, their communities, and ultimately their Nations arise from

their connection with the land and from a strength of culture that grows from this connectivity. The land is the first classroom and allows our children to live the experiences of our ancestors—to smell the smoke, to feel the wind, to plan for the rain (Childhood Education). This helps awaken an ancient spirit that is content with the simplicity of being. The experiences on the land, establish the students' responsibility as *Ongwehonwe* people as the keepers of Mother Earth. And in order to realize their fiduciary duties, they must have a relationship with the earth. We are one with our environment and recognizing that without Mother Earth we cannot survive. Daily the students are outdoors, experiencing all that Mother Earth gives us and the knowledge gained from the land—the weather; the plants; the insects; the animals; the birds. Through these experiences—watching the animals; the plants; the weather; the insects—we learn; they pass on knowledge to us. Through these relationships we will develop self-confidence and self-esteem by realizing the interconnectivity of our people; our culture; and ways of life with the land.

Whereas outdoor education and “forest school” has recently gained more traction in Western educational discourse, Linda's philosophies reflect a movement led by Indigenous educators *back* toward traditional education for Indigenous students: “Historically, education was not what we see today. We... were and continue to be a highly educated people, having knowledge based in the philosophy of the natural environment” (Styres et al., 2010, p. 626). Although Linda's own schooling as a child was sorely lacking in cultural land-based content, she frequently shares the sentiment that the outdoors was where she learned with her family, and, therefore, where she continues



to teach. By teaching in this way, she is practicing a decolonizing pedagogy by reclaiming the education of these kindergarten students and integrating traditional knowledges, while also preparing them for success as they walk through life as First Nations people.

The Power Walk text is over 30 pages long, and details many of the specific learning activities that take place in the outdoors. Throughout the year, students in Linda's class will: plant a native flower garden, take a listening walk to observe nature, visit important landmarks within the community, interact with community members and community helpers, observe trees and develop vocabulary (buds, blossoms), count and record dandelions in a specific area, observe the growth of local berries using all five senses, observe and identify bugs, smell flowers, listen to oral storytelling, learn and recite poetry about seasons and weather, learn and sing songs about nature, count and skip-count using a variety of found objects, observe and document seasonal changes, compare how they dress throughout the seasons, make predictions about seasonal changes, compare and identify bark, leaves, nuts, pinecones and seeds from the trees, observe animals and birds, make connections to other animals (hibernation, migration), use natural materials to create art and make patterns, look for naturally occurring shapes and patterns, build structures (from snow, ice, etc.), take part in imaginative play, make temperature charts, compare snow-depth readings, estimate the amount of snow in an area, or the amount of water in a given amount of snow, identify tracks in the snow, read signs in the community, go on a number walk, read and identify flags, run cross-country, play in the sand (explore, investigate, design, build), balance on concrete curbs or other materials, and play sports and games. Linda includes photographs along with Ontario

Kindergarten Program expectations to illustrate how each of these activities fulfills Ministry guidelines. In this way, Linda “respectfully blend[s] Indigenous epistemology and pedagogy with Euro-Canadian epistemology and pedagogy” to create an innovative program that meets the needs of her students (Battiste, 2008). Linda shared the benefits of teaching and learning in the outdoors by describing how her students are able to make connections and grow in ways not possible within the four walls of a classroom:

So that’s the power of being outside. You’re experiencing everything first hand. You’re a weather person? You’re knowing where it’s at. You’re using all your senses when you’re out there. ... I show them the directions and I make the connection that the sun always rises in the east. Wherever you see that sun in the morning, you’ll know that’s the east. If you know that’s the east, you’ll know where the west is. You’ll know where the south and north are.

But I'll say to them, too, “It’s windy, you can see the flags moving.” ... But then to feel it, and say, “Turn until you feel that wind hitting your face. Now, which way is the wind coming from?” So teach them those kinds of things. I don’t need iPad to tell me which door the wind’s coming or if it’s raining or whatever. I’m out here. I know what happened out here. So, there’s so much to learn out there that, that’s your books out there. That’s everything, the animals, the birds. On our power walk... the one tree was no leaves left. There was a bird’s nest in it. So a lot of times my teachings are intentional, 'cause I want to teach them something. And I said, “Look at that bird nest.” You remember Stephanie? She said, “Yeah, but where are the eggs?” And I said, “Well, Stephanie, do you think birds lay eggs now?” I said, “Remember, where are the birds now?” And she didn’t really know, but the other kids knew. “Well, they’ve gone somewhere

warmer, because it's too cold for them here." I said, "Right!" So I said, "Do you think those birds would lay eggs now?" And they all said, "No." I said, "Why not?" They said, "It's too cold." But I said, "They do leave their nests here and they will come back to it and lay eggs. But when do they lay eggs?" So then teach them about the seasons, that they'll lay eggs in the spring.

And then some seagulls flew over just at that time. She said, "How come those birds haven't left here?" And I said, "Well, that's a great question!" I said, "Because those birds probably have more feathers." I said, "Those other birds don't have as many feathers. They can't put on a coat."

And we have a poem, that talks about robins being lightly dressed. So, we talk about those birds don't have enough feathers, so that's why they go south, and we've seen lots of sparrows. So look, sparrows must have enough feathers—they stay. So, this was happening on our power walk. I thought, she was asking such great questions... and I thought, I could never teach them this out of a book or even on YouTube or whatever. They're never going to forget this, 'cause we're on the power walk, doing that.

And then she asked me about, again, still on that same walk, Stephanie, we talked about, oh yeah, magnolia's still holding on to her leaves. Then she said, "What about those trees?" The coniferous plants. "Do they lose their needles?" I said, "No, they never do, 'cause they're different trees than these ones. They're coniferous. They have cones." She goes, "Okay, so the ones with pine cones don't lose their leaves?" I said, "No."

But I thought, wow, that girl's making all these connections in one day? Holy! It was amazing, but that's what happens out there. And you always have to

be listening to pick up on what they're saying. Not to just fluff it off but to stop and let's talk about this. Maybe somebody else will pick up on it, too. So that's what's amazing about out there.

As Linda shared with me how her students naturally inquire about the world around them, making connections that are only possible in the outdoors, I thought of my own limited experience with teaching in the outdoors. As a first-year teacher in a northern Ontario reserve, my grade three students spent nearly the entire day indoors except for one 15-minute recess in the morning. One beautiful, sunny day, I was teaching a science unit about soil in the environment; my students were inside, at their desks, labeling a picture and naming the different types of soil (loam, clay, etc.). It was overwhelmingly evident to me that my students were not engaged in this activity; I decided to take them outside the next day to explore the different types of soil, to see the various types of soil and explore how they vary in composition, colour, texture, capacity to hold water. The students were also able to find different living creatures that lived in the soil, and observe how plants grow in certain types of soil. I connected with a community member to arrange a class field trip to a community garden where potatoes were being harvested, and we tied in discussions about sustainable and healthy eating. Unfortunately, I was under a great deal of pressure for students to perform on their EQAO testing, and to cover the entire mandated curriculum, and we did not continue any significant portion of the learning program outdoors after that unit. Cherubini and Barrett (2013) state that

mainstream teachers generally perceive Aboriginal students from a deficit perspective given that the children generally do not achieve to standard. The result is not only a drop in student achievement, but an increase in the pressure

felt by teachers to cover the necessary standardized curriculum. (p. 163)

The deficit perspective from which I viewed my students prevented me from providing holistic, land-based learning that was relevant to them. In my conversations with Linda, it is clear that she views her students through an entirely different lens.

I also realized upon critical reflection that I may have partly been buying into a “naive and self-serving idea that anyone who digs their hands in the dirt has Indigenous knowledge” (Haig-Brown, 2008, p. 12). An elder could have been brought in to teach the students about the life cycle of a plant in relation to the medicine wheel, in order to ensure that the students saw themselves reflected in our learning. Bringing students outside for one or two lessons does not encompass culturally responsive land-based teaching. In my future practice, I will aim to prioritize daily time in the outdoors as Linda does. Because I did not grow up learning outside, and I do not have a strong cultural connection to the land myself, this must be an ongoing conscious choice to decolonize and reframe my educational philosophy to provide students with an education that is most beneficial for them.

### **Culturally Centered Practice**

Yattu Kanu (2011) calls for integration of Indigenous knowledge at five levels of classroom practice: student learning outcomes, curriculum content and learning resources, instructional methods and strategies, assessment methods and strategies, and a philosophical underpinning of curriculum. These objectives cannot be achieved through the widely-used additive approach taken by many teachers who integrate some (if any) Indigenous content. Linda’s practice is underpinned by Indigenous epistemology and cultural values, aligning with Battiste’s (2013) notion that traditional knowledges must

form the basis of educational programming for Indigenous children. Bell (2014) states “moving from linear models to the interconnectedness of the circle can guide the development of pedagogy and vision for the future” (p. 15). Linda views her learning program as holistic, and describes how she resists Western notions of compartmentalized knowledge in favour of teaching in a way that honours the interconnectedness of all things:

That’s always been my philosophy is I never could teach, okay, I’m going to teach you math. I teach everything all together, and so they’re getting math, science, everything when we’re outside, and you never know what it’s going to be because it always depends on what they want to talk about or what they’re interested in. You never know but you have to be ready to talk about anything with them. You never know where the learning will go with them, like when they’re out in the bush there and they’re finding stuff and they’re doing science, they’re doing math, they’re doing fantasy play, imaginary play.

All that kind of stuff is so rich, what they’re doing and they’re creating their own self-identity out there. They’re recognizing their strengths, what they can do, what they can’t do. All those things that make you a whole person.

They’re doing all those things out there. It’s seeing them do it and you know that it’s just so rich, you think wow.

Although Linda is not from the same Nation as her students, she shares her Indigenous identity with them. Her identity is what informs her teaching style; although she is aware that her pedagogy is not the same as others’, she has strong convictions that this is the right way for her to be teaching. She explained this to me, along with how she

helps the students to foster their cultural identity through education centered on learning from the land, and teaching cultural values:

When I came here and I saw these children and I thought, they don't really know who they are. They don't know that they're Haudenosaunee people. ... they don't really know this! And it came to me because this one guy came in and he was wearing a cowboy hat and he said, look at that Indian, you know, and I said well you're an Indian! But they never seemed to make that connection, and I'm thinking, I don't know why that is. Well, obviously, they're not talking about who they are, and they don't identify with it, and when I was taking them ... on the walk, I noticed they weren't observing anything, where I was raised observing... We were taught—and not really explicitly taught but just taught—by watching my dad do different things. And when I would take these guys on a power walk, they weren't really looking at things, they were just, like, walking by it. So, I would make it more explicit to actually stop and to show them something and try to make connections for them and hopefully that they'll take that back home and continue to do that or have somebody tell them oh yes, or something, you know help them to make those. So, try to teach them observation skills so that they can be more aware and in tune with their surroundings, because we're supposed to be on the land, taking, living off the land, so you gotta pay attention to it, you can't just be on it and not pay attention to it. So when I noticed that these guys have no observation skills ... that got me going on trying to help them develop those skills, help them identify who they were.

I knew who I was when I came here, I came to southern Ontario, I was 17,

so I knew who I was but I knew I didn't fit in either. I didn't fit in, I wasn't like anybody, I don't know how to be anybody else, this is who I am. I don't know how to be anybody else, you know I can't fit into the way you guys do things, because it doesn't feel right to try to, you know, and people notice that, but I don't know how to be anybody else but who I am so. So when you have a strong identity, I think it helps you to, you have to—because you're already a minority, and then you have to—you're always fighting against something, cause you're not fitting in. And it can be very uncomfortable, but at the same time, you have to do it, you don't have a choice. I have to be just me, and this is it, I'm sorry. So I think it's important for them...

It's trying to have these kids understand that who we are, that we were the first ones here. Our history and to be part of our contribution and I try to ingrain that. We were the first ones here, we discovered this, we did this. All those things that we did before anybody came. We didn't need anybody to help us. We knew how to fish, we knew how to hunt. We had our own homes. We were fine on our own... I try to ingrain that in the kids and just also, their responsibility as Haudenosaunee people that they have to take care of mother earth.

And I try to tell them that, too, and they're only little, but I tell them, "You were given a responsibility and you have to do it." Just like in trying to live the Haudenosaunee values. A hands-off policy, like the peace maker said. Just trying to keep saying it over and over and over again and that you've been given how you're to live and if you follow that, then you'll have a good life. You'll live the right way.



Linda models these values in her practice; on the power walk she brings a bag and students clean up the community, she treats her students with respect and expects respect in return, she works together with students to model cooperation and teamwork, and she is consistent in showing kindness in speaking. She teaches from her location, that is, from an Indigenous worldview that was imparted to her throughout her life as an Indigenous woman. This leads her to consciously adhere to more traditional models of education; as Battiste and Hednerson (2000) state, “Indigenous educators do not need to invent a new way of transmitting Indigenous knowledge and heritage. All they need to do is develop concepts that more faithfully reflect our traditional educational transmission process. Educators need to understand the traditional methods” (p. 95).

In a cross-cultural context, self-reflection is also essential as I work to decolonize my practice. Oskineegish (2015) states “Developing culturally relevant teaching practices in a First Nations community is not simply a matter of applying new techniques, it involves an ongoing personal reflection of how one’s own beliefs and attitudes of their students affect teaching” (p. 18). I must reflect upon my own bias and worldview, and how that may affect how I teach. For example, the culture that I was raised in led me to hold a worldview that humans are the most important beings on earth, while an Indigenous worldview holds all living things as sacred (Battiste, 2013). When I taught the unit on soil, one of the activities the third graders took part in was capturing earthworms from the soil to take into our classroom and keep as “pets”; I found this activity on a teacher blog that emphasized how wonderful it is to have earthworms as class pets. In doing this I was undermining the First Nations belief that all life is scared; I am sure that there were daily examples of my cultural bias negatively impacting my students when I

taught in northern Ontario. Collaborating with Linda on this project was an important step for me in self-reflexivity and decolonization, however, “At no point does self-reflection end; it is ongoing as teachers continually engage in a process of learning, teaching, and reflecting” (Oskineegish, 2015, p. 18). My responsibility is not to merely integrate cultural content at a surface level, but to consistently reflect, research, and accept cultural knowledge that the community is willing to impart to develop a culturally centered program and pedagogy.

### **Family and Community Connections**

In addition to cultural and land-based pedagogy, Linda’s practice is strengthened by an emphasis on connecting with the community and the families of her students. Linda ensures that her classroom is warm and welcoming for parents and caregivers, and encourages positive learning experiences at home, for example, by sending students with books to read at home each night, and inviting parents in for Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, and family nights. Linda shared a story with me that she presents on Father’s Day every year, along with a slideshow of photos from her childhood:

My memories of how I learned as a child was not from school or a teacher but from the time I spent with my family. The story I am going to share with you today illustrates how I learned when I was a child. I spent as much time as I could with my Dad. The learning that happened was from lived experiences, learning by example and learning from the land that provided our food and resources.

*I awake to the smell of toast and porridge and to the rolling sound of coffee perking on the woodstove. I jump out of bed, grab my clothes and hurry to the kitchen. Dad is sitting at the table, already half way through his breakfast. By*

*the door, the handle of the cast iron fry pan is sticking out of the old brown packsack, packed and ready to go. Standing by the warm woodstove, I quickly dress and I gulp down my porridge and toast, so that I am ready when I hear the sound of the motorcycle. Dad is sitting on it, with the packsack and the fishing rods and I climb on behind. Soon we are speeding (5–10 miles/hour) to [the] Lake. The sun is rising slowly behind the cluster of birch trees, standing stoically in their white gowns. The silver poplar leaves, shining with dew in the morning sun, wave gently as we zoom by. Hastily the mother partridge leads her chicks across the road, not appreciating the intrusion so early in the morning. This morning, we avoid the partridges, but in the fall, we'll come back to this same place to hunt the partridges.*

*Over the hill, I can see the mist rising off the water, as we slowly descend to the shore. While I am waiting for Dad to pull the canoe from the bush and load it, I quickly pick the sweet red raspberries and put them in a cup. The canoe is loaded with the packsack and fishing rods, and I jump in, with the cup of raspberries in one hand—Dad pushes us off and he jumps in. The welcoming call of the loon can be heard across the calm stillness, our paddles dipping into the cool, clear water. We paddle until we reach the home of the eagles—their nest straddling the branches at the top of the tall jack pine. This is where the fish are. I stick my hand into the minnow pail and pull out a big, fat one. Wiggling, he tries to get away but I put the hook through his head and his body, so that the fish will have to bite the whole hook. Dad's line is already in and I throw in mine and we wait. Sometimes you have to wait a long time for a bite but not today—the fish are*

*biting. It isn't long and we have enough fish. We head for the island with the big rock to have our shore lunch. While Dad unpacks the packsack, I collect kindling, birch bark and driftwood for the fire. Dad makes the fire and I fill the tea pail with water and he hangs it on a stick over the fire. I bring the fish from the canoe, take them off the stringer and hand them to Dad, grabbing the fish by the eyes, so I won't cut myself on the gills.*

*The first fish he cuts open has many eggs inside. We look in the stomach to see what the fish is eating. All we find in this one, is a minnow, probably my minnow. There behind the stomach is the air bag that helps the fish to float. Dad continues cleaning until all the fish are clean and ready to eat. I get the black frying pan from the packsack and then take the fish guts to the beach, where the animals will come to eat, once we leave. Dad opens a can of cream corn and sets it on a rock, in the fire, to heat. He has the fish filets in a pan of flour, while he waits for the grease to melt in the frying pan. While he cooks, I go swimming in the clear, black water. There I swim like a loon, dive like a duck and float, like my Mom. The smell of the fish cooking, wafts over the water and I'm finally enticed out. When we are all done eating, we clean up our campsite and head out to do more fishing.*

*On our way back to our fishing spot, Dad shows me where he camped with his parents in the springtime, when the whitefish were migrating into the rivers and streams to feed on the pickerel, pike and sucker eggs that were being dropped during the spawn. My grandparents, aunties and uncles, set nets and would go out at night to pull in the fish and the children would stay on the beach, taking care of the fire and playing around.*

*We pass the cliffs, where our ancestors drew pictures on the rocks. The pictures are away up high and I wonder how they were able to reach that place. Dad says that they have been there for a long time. Again I wonder what kind of paint did they use that stayed on the rocks for so long?*

*We pass through the shallow water, where the pike live. I look down and I can see the pike swimming through the reeds. We don't catch pike at this time of the year. The water's too warm and they are full of worms. We paddle to the piece of land jutting out—my dad says "the point"—and this is where we'll fish. Sitting in the canoe for many hours, Dad tells me stories of how his grandparents travelled all along this waterway to visit, hunt, trap and trade. The time goes by quickly. We stay on the water until dusk and then head to shore with our catch.*

*We are not alone on the lake. Dad points his paddle ahead. Crossing in front of us, is a moose swimming to the shore, keeping one eye on the canoe, with its two passengers, loaded with fish. As we leave the lake, we are surrounded by a quietness, until the sound of our motorcycle pierces the atmosphere.*

*The sun is gone now and the air is cool. I climb on to the back of the motorcycle and hang on to my Dad, knowing we will soon be home, cleaning and cooking the fish for the rest of the family.*

Linda's rich experiences in the outdoors with her father are mirrored in her time with her kindergarten students in nature—at the beginning of the year she models "noticing" the world around her, and her students quickly pick up on that, sharing their observations about the weather, animals, trees. The "wonder" she experienced as a child is transferred to her students as she encourages them to observe and wonder about their natural surroundings. For example, students wonder which tree will get their leaves back

in the Spring, make a prediction, and then observe throughout the season to learn from the earth. For Linda, sharing this story is a way of communicating to the parents how influential they are in their children's lives, and encouraging parents that the little things they do with their children leave lasting memories.

Linda also encourages family connection by sending home meaningful learning activities for weekly homework, for which she provides any supplies that might be needed:

It's homework that's something that the kids can do with their parents. I really can't say how much they spend with their parents. Going back to how I told you about my dad and everything, I want them to have a little bit of time that they're spending with their parents. Sending them the papers home as things, and it's just simple things, but things that they can do with their parents.

Just this past week, they had to do... How are they going to help out at Thanksgiving. Set the table, do dishes, whatever. One parent actually sent a picture, big picture, of her son and his dad stuffing the turkey. Just the backs of them. You could see the turkey. They were stuffing. You think, "She went that extra step to send me. ... We said he's going to do this, and here he is doing it." I thought, "Isn't that awesome?" I just thought that was great.

Linda, in many ways, helps to create positive home-school connections for her students and their families. It is important to note that because of the dubious history of residential schools, for Indigenous people, school is not a neutral site, but rather, a place that can evoke negative emotions, memories, and associations (Waterman & Sands, 2016).

Cherubini and Hodson (2008) state:

For Aboriginal peoples, school is not just a contested space; school is a hostile and alien space. Schools are places where the ghosts of residential schooling

hover in the recesses of consciousness. Schools are surrounded by barriers to understanding, knowing, and class that keep families—grandparents, aunties, uncles, mothers, and parents – outside the educational experience of their children. Schools are a space vigorously claimed by teachers, where teacher knowledge is privileged above all and parent knowledge is not understood to be important to the classroom experience. (p. 24)

In her practice, Linda is, year after year, breaking down these barriers and setting her students up for success by acknowledging and fostering the critical role of family and community in her students' lives.

When observing in Linda's classroom, I notice that she is very welcoming to parents and caregivers; some students are consistently late, and those parents are met with the same friendly greeting. Linda explains that she intentionally overlooks late arrivals or lack of school readiness because of her experiences; she understands and is sympathetic toward the causes:

I know the struggles, the way I was raised, we're in the same boat... as long as they're here I'm happy. It's a struggle just to get here. I want them to not feel left out —supporting home, you have no clue what's going on at home... they're working... I'm hoping that whatever I do in this room helps them be successful when they leave here, why make somebody feel bad.

The power walk allows the kindergarten students to connect with the community in meaningful ways daily:

What that walk did for us was connected us to the community in such a big way, 'cause we're always walking the same way, seeing all these people. We got to know like the dogs, and that lady brings her dogs out sometimes to see us. There

used to be a house on the corner and she was a hairdresser and she would put all strawberry plants, and I'd show the kids the plants and everything, and she'd come out and talk to the kids. Then that other lady, that's the teacher, and we'd always go behind the funeral home. Before we didn't go into the forest at first, but we just would walk behind the funeral home, just different thing, we'd walk. Along the way, you just kind of met up with community members all along the way and it was a great experience for the kids.

At the corner, used to be the stand is still there, a french fries stand, and then she would invite us for ice-cream at the end of the year. We would all come and go in there and have an ice-cream. It was real community building thing, but was also all the other things that they learned while just on that walk, that short little walk.

The community connections that students make as they walk are intrinsically tied with their cultural identity and connection to the land they live on. By placing a high value on community and family, Linda privileges an Indigenous worldview that recognizes the importance of learning from family and community. Students in kindergarten are learning about the world and different roles that people play in communities; what better way to learn this than being out in the community interacting with neighbors, business owners, community helpers, and elders, learning first hand from these cultural role models.

As a non-Indigenous teacher who has had relatively little connection to Indigenous communities, there is enormous value to facilitating this type of community engagement. In addition to students developing an increasingly strong concept of their identity in connection to the community, teachers' ability to create meaningful



programming for students are directly related to their willingness to engage the community (Oskineegish, 2015).

The more time I spend with Linda and the Kindergarten students, the more I realize how deep the work of decolonization must go in order to teach in a way that is culturally appropriate for my students. This begins with a posture of learning from the community in which I teach; “Non-Native teachers who arrive in a First Nations community willing to learn from within the community will be more able to develop lessons and instructional strategies that are culturally relevant and meaningful to the students they are teaching” (Oskineegish, 2015, p. 4). In my experience I have found community members overwhelmingly kind, caring and willing to help teachers. Sadly, non-Indigenous teachers often think we have superior knowledge on educational theory and methods, and do not reach out to the community and allow ourselves to learn.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND CONCLUSION**

This research was conceived with the goal of exploring an Indigenous teacher's learning story and practice in order to better understand decolonizing educational practice. A literature review conducted before the study explored successful educational practices with Indigenous students; themes that emerged were culturally responsive education, connection to the land, and community engagement. The methodology of this research was loosely defined as a qualitative learning story or descriptive case study. Indigenous methodologies are heavily focused on relationality and story; conventional Western methodologies were not able to encompass the totality of this research. I spent 4 days in the classroom and one day at the teacher's home, observing, learning, and sharing stories. Recognizing that we each have a unique lens, we came together to reflect on the learning story that unfolded.

### **Summary**

The teacher that I worked with is an exceptional educator, and through the research, it became clear that her life story impacts her current practice in myriad, multi-faceted ways. Reflecting on her stories as well on my experiences allowed me to question and decolonize my own practice, while learning from an experienced and successful educator. Often, the education of Indigenous students is enacted at school by members of the dominant culture, which can continue a legacy of colonization and cause a disconnect between identity and schooling. This research investigated a different approach that can be taken, one that ascribes value to the land, family, community and culture through a decolonizing pedagogy. Children in Linda's classroom gain autonomy, responsibility, a positive sense of self, a healthy connection to land and culture, and are set up for success

in their future educational endeavours. Interestingly, the themes that emerged as prominent in the review of relevant literature were the same as those that surfaced in the research we conducted into Linda's practice. In each of these areas, I also reflected on my experiences and noted a number of ways in which I can decolonize my lens and teaching practice.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The three main themes that surfaced in the research of a decolonizing teaching practice were land-based learning, culturally relevant curriculum and connection to family and community. The research also explored how teacher identity and experience inform these teaching practices. As was the case with both Linda and myself, each person who comes across this learning story will be at a different point in their journey and may read it differently depending on their own experience and lens; "A body of knowledge differs when it is viewed from different perspective" (Battiste & Henderson, 2000, p. 134). With Linda's learning story, the elements of decolonizing practice and teacher life story are inextricably linked. We reflected on ways in which identity and experiences shape philosophy and practice. For Linda, learning cultural and land-based ways of living from her parents was her most prominent memory of learning; as a child, she learned the interconnectedness of all things and this is evident in her holistic, decolonizing teaching practice.

The researchers found the results of this project to reflect the literature on decolonizing teaching practices presented in chapter 2. Through reviewing the literature, we found that a combination of culturally responsive education, focus on connection to the land, and community engagement formed the basis of decolonizing practice. The core

elements of Linda's teaching practices align with those themes as described in chapter 4. For the researchers and for educators, this leads us to draw conclusions that decolonizing education practice encompasses outdoor education, culturally centered practice, and strong family and community connections. As a non-Indigenous educator currently teaching in a First Nations context, I continue to grapple with non-appropriative ways of incorporating these practices. The concluding of this research project does not end my learning journey—listening to Linda share her experiences led me to re-evaluate some of my own, and grow in my knowledge of how to decolonize my practice.

While the research findings are laid out separately beginning with teacher life story, and continuing into three main elements of Linda's practice, it is important to note that these elements do not occur in isolation from each other. Acknowledging my Eurocentric educational experiences allowed me to see how I have compartmentalized knowledge in a way that is not beneficial to my students in the classroom. Through the lens of Indigenous epistemology, all things are interconnected; teaching from experience, from the land, from culture and from a community-based perspective all go hand-in hand. Teachers, particularly non-Indigenous teachers must begin a decolonizing journey that begins with a posture of learning so that we can begin to appreciate the interconnectedness of these elements.

This study has far-reaching implications not only for the researchers' educational practices, but for educators across Turtle Island, along with other stakeholders including administrators, policy-makers, curriculum specialists, and governments. Linda's learning story brings out the nuances and rich experience that is often ignored by educational stakeholders in favour of big data; for example, standardized test scores or graduation

rates. Through the lens of an Indigenous worldview, these types of stories are where true learning and growth begin; Bomberry's (2013) research focuses on learning stories of Six Nations people, framed within the Haudenosaunee symbol of the Great Tree of Peace. More research is needed through this storied approach. As discussed in chapter 1, a great deal of quantitative data shows Indigenous children are not as successful as mainstream students in school; research framed through Indigenous epistemology is often qualitative, storied, and holistic in nature. This type of research is needed in order to decolonize educational practices through story and critical reflection.

This study of Linda's practice is an example of how teachers can fulfill the mandated curriculum, while still upholding and privileging an Indigenous worldview, preparing their students to walk in two worlds (Bomberry, 2013). There is a growing movement toward outdoor learning, which can be amplified by these types of studies which show how educators can decolonize education through land-based practices.

### **Implications for Further Research**

This study explored the life story and pedagogy of one Indigenous teacher at a reserve in Ontario. Through the sharing of her ongoing learning story, in what could be described as a descriptive case study, we reflected on what it means to have a decolonized education practice. It would be interesting to explore these types of learning stories on a larger scale, with more participants who teach through a culturally responsive pedagogy in Indigenous communities. Reflection similar to what took place between Linda and I could take place in a small group setting, with more voices contributing to the discussion, a depth of understanding could be shared beyond what is possible with only two people. This study focused on the teacher; researchers and educators could invite parents, students, administrators, Elders, and community members to share their

learning stories and describe what they feel would be a successful decolonizing educational practice. This study did not involve the collection of data involving students in the classroom or in the outdoors; a research project that captures their learning through the use of technology (photos, audiovisual recording, activity monitors, etc.) could help educators to envision and implement land-based decolonizing practices. Finally, educators who work in Indigenous communities—particularly those who are non-Native—should take on a posture of reflective learning in research to decolonize their practice.

### **Conclusion**

I once asked a panel event how I could decolonize my practice as a non-Indigenous educator and the response I received was to find someone to sit under, to listen to, to honour, and to learn from. Over the course of this collaborative research project, Linda has become a mentor to me in ways I never imagined possible. As I complete this research project, I do so recognizing that the act of reflection and decolonization will never truly “conclude,” and so in a way this entire project is merely an introduction. Linda has continually encouraged me that providing students the opportunity to learn in ways that are culturally relevant, land-based and community-oriented is entirely possible and within reach. Through our time together she has not only modeled this, but we have deeply explored the foundations of her practice in order to truly understand not only the practice but also the learning story and philosophy behind it. It is my hope that educators in all contexts can gain a deeper understanding of decolonizing educational practice through the experiences Linda and I have shared in this project.

## References

- Agbo, S. (2001). Enhancing success in American Indian students: Participatory research at Akwesasne as part of the development of a culturally relevant curriculum. *Journal of American Indian Education, 40*(1), 31-56.
- Atleo, M. R. (2009). Understanding Aboriginal learning ideology through storywork with Elders. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research, 55*(4), 452-467.
- Ball, J., & Lewis, M. (2014). First Nations Elders' and parents' views on supporting their children's language development. *Canadian Journal of Speech-Language Pathology & Audiology, 38*(2), 224-237.
- Ball, J., & Pence, A. R. (2006). *Supporting Indigenous children's development: community-university partnerships*. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press.
- Battiste, M. (2008). Constitutional reconciliation of education for Aboriginal Peoples. *Directions: Research and Policy on Eliminating Racism, 5*(1), 81-84. Retrieved from [http://www.crrf-fcrr.ca/images/stories/pdf/directions/directionsVol5No1-Sys\\_Racism-AboriginalPeoples.pdf](http://www.crrf-fcrr.ca/images/stories/pdf/directions/directionsVol5No1-Sys_Racism-AboriginalPeoples.pdf)
- Battiste, M. (2013). *Decolonizing education: Nourishing the learning Spirit*. Saskatoon, SK: Purich.
- Battiste, M., & Barman, J. (Eds.). (1995). *First Nations education in Canada: The circle unfolds*. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press.
- Battiste, M., & Henderson, J. (2000). *Protecting Indigenous knowledge and heritage*. Saskatoon, SK: Purich.

- Baydala, L., Letourneau, N., Bach, H., Pearce, M., Kennedy, M., Rasmussen, C., & Charchun, J. (2007). Lessons learned through research with Mother Earth's Children's Charter School. *Pimatisiwin: A Journal of Aboriginal & Indigenous Community Health*, 5(2), 201-216.
- Bell, D. (2004). *Sharing our success: Ten case studies in Aboriginal schooling*. Kelowna, BC: Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education.
- Bell, N. (2013). Just do it: Anishinaabe culture-based education. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 36(1), 36.
- Bell, N., & Brant, T. (2015). *Culturally relevant Aboriginal education*. Toronto, ON: Pearson.
- Bilton, H. (2010). *Outdoor learning in the early years: Management and innovation*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Bomberry, M. (2013). Negotiating two worlds: Learning through the stories of Haudenosaunee youth and adults. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 36(2), 248-283.
- Boulton-Lewis, G. M., Marton, F., Lewis, D. C., & Wilss, L. A. (2000). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students' conceptions of formal learning and experiences of informal learning. *Higher Education*, 39(4), 469-488
- Brown, A. (2013). Waiting for Superwoman: White female teachers and the construction of the "Neoliberal Savior" in a New York City public school. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, 11(2), 123-164.
- Cherubini, L., & Barrett, J. (2013). Teaching and learning in remote northern Ontario schools: Aboriginal teacher perceptions. *Native Studies Review*, 22(1/2), 157-169.



- Cherubini, L., & Hodson, J. (2008). Ontario Ministry of Education policy and Aboriginal learners' epistemologies: A fundamental disconnect. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration & Policy*, 79, 1-33.
- Chiefs Assembly on Education. (2012). *A portrait of First Nations and education*. Retrieved from [http://www.afn.ca/uploads/files/events/fact\\_sheet-ccoe-3.pdf](http://www.afn.ca/uploads/files/events/fact_sheet-ccoe-3.pdf)
- Cooke-Dallin, B., Rosborough, T., & Underwood, L. (2000). The role of Elders and Elder teachings: A core aspect of child and youth care education in First Nations communities. *Issues affecting rural communities: Proceedings of the International Conference on Rural Communities & Identities in the Global Millennium*. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED455063.pdf>
- Crooks, C. V., Burleigh, D., Snowshoe, A., Lapp, A., Hughes, R., & Sisco, A. (2015). A case study of culturally relevant school-based programming for First Nations youth: Improved relationships, confidence and leadership, and school success. *Advances in School Mental Health Promotion*, 8(4), 216-230.
- Drummond, D. & Rosenbluth, E.K. (2013). *The debate on First Nations education funding: Mind the gap*. School of Policy Studies, Queen's University. Retrieved from <http://www.queensu.ca/sps/publications/workingpapers/49-Drummond-Rosenbluth.pdf>
- Fulford, G. T. (2011). *Sharing our success: More case studies in Aboriginal schooling: Band-operated schools: A companion report*. Kelowna, BC: Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education.
- Gay, G. (2002). Preparing for culturally responsive teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53, 106-116.

- Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Goulet, L. (2001). Two teachers of Aboriginal students: Effective practice in sociohistorical realities. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 25(1), 68-82.
- Greenwood, M. (2006). Children are a gift to us: Aboriginal-specific early childhood programs and services in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 29(1), 12-28.
- Greenwood, M., & de Leeuw, S. (2007). Teachings from the land: Indigenous people, our health, our land, and our children. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 30(1), 48-53.
- Greenwood M., de Leeuw, S., & Fraser, T. (2007). Aboriginal children and early childhood development and education in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 30(1), 5-18.
- Haig-Brown, C. (1988). *Resistance and renewal: Surviving the Indian residential school*. Vancouver, BC: Tillacum Library.
- Hare, J. (2012). "They tell a story and there's meaning behind that story": Indigenous knowledge and young Indigenous children's literacy learning. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 12(4), 389-414.
- Hatcher, A. M., Bartlett, C. M., Marshall, A., & Marshall, M. (2009). Two-eyed seeing in the classroom environment: Concepts, approaches, and challenges. *Canadian Journal of Science, Mathematics and Technology Education*, 9(3), 141-153.  
doi:10.1080/14926150903118342

- Hodson, J. A., & Kitchen, J. (2015). *A strategy for change*. Thunder Bay, ON: Northern Policy Institute.
- Hogue, M., & Bartlett, C. (2014, June 9). Two-eyed seeing: Creating a new liminal space in education. *Education Canada*. Retrieved from <https://www.edcan.ca/articles/two-eyed-seeing/>
- Kanu, Y. (2011). *Integrating aboriginal perspectives into the school curriculum: Purposes, possibilities, and challenges*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- Kirkness, V. J. (1999). Aboriginal education in Canada: A retrospective and a prospective. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 39(1), 14-30.
- Knight, S. (2013). *International perspectives on forest school: Natural spaces to play and learn*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kovach, M. (2009). *Indigenous methodologies: Characteristics, conversations and contexts*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- Kovach, M. (2010). Conversational method in Indigenous research. *First Peoples Child & Family Review*, 5(1), 40-48.
- Lowan, G. (2009). Exploring place from an Aboriginal perspective: Considerations for outdoor and environmental education. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 14(1), 42-58.
- Lowan, G. (2011). Ecological Metissage: Exploring the third space in outdoor and environmental education. *Pathways: The Ontario Journal of Outdoor Education*, 23(2), 10-15.

- Marsh, T., Cote-Meek, S., Toulouse, P., Najavits, L.M., & Young, N. L. (2015). The application of two-eyed seeing decolonizing methodology in qualitative and quantitative research for the treatment of intergenerational trauma and substance use disorders. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 14*(5), 1-13.
- Mashford-Pringle, A. (2012). Early learning for aboriginal children: Past, present and future and an exploration of the Aboriginal Head Start Urban and Northern Communities program in Ontario. *First Peoples Child & Family Review, 7*(1), 127-140.
- McAllister, G., & Irvine, J. (2002). The role of empathy in teaching culturally diverse students: A qualitative study of teachers' beliefs. *Journal of Teacher Education, 53*(5), 433-443.
- McWilliams, M., Maldonado-Mancebo, T., Szczepaniak, P., & Jones, J. (2011). Supporting Native Indian preschoolers and their families: Family-school-community partnerships. *Young Children, 66*(6), 34-41.
- Mt Pleasant, J. (2014, June 18). Teachers say schools on reserve like “residential schools all over again.” *Two Row Times*. Retrieved from <https://tworowtimes.com/news/local/like-residential-school/>
- Muller, K.V. (2007). The two “mystery” belts of Grand River: A biography of the Two Row Wampum and the Friendship Belt. *The American Indian Quarterly, 31*(1), 129-164.
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2013). *The Ontario curriculum: Social studies, grades 1 to 6, history and geography, grades 7 and 8*. Toronto, ON: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/elementary/sshg18curr2013.pdf>

- Oskineegish, M. (2015). Are you providing an education that is worth caring about? Advice to non-Native teachers in northern First Nations communities. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 38(3), 1-24.
- Philpott, D. (2006). Identifying the learning needs of Innu students: Creating a model of culturally appropriate assessment. *Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, 26(2), 361-381. Retrieved from <http://www3.brandonu.ca/cjns/26.2/07Philpott.pdf>
- Preston, J. P. (2016). Situating educational issues in Nunavut: Perceptions of school leaders and teachers. *Northern Review*, 42, 109-129. Retrieved from <http://journals.sfu.ca/nr/index.php/nr/article/view/571>
- Rowan, M. (2014). Co-constructing early childhood programs nourished by Inuit worldviews. *Inuit Studies*, 38(1-2), 73-94.
- Rowan, M. (2017). *Thinking with nunangat in proposing pedagogies for/with Inuit early childhood education* (Doctoral dissertation). University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, NB. Retrieved from <https://unbscholar.lib.unb.ca/islandora/object/unbscholar%3A8129>
- Scott, D. C. (1920). *Testimony to the Special Parliamentary Committee of the House of Commons*. National Archives of Canada, Record Group 10, vol 6810, file 470-2-3, vol 7, pp. 55 (L-3) and 63 (N-3).
- Smith, L. T. (2012). *Decolonizing methodologies: research and indigenous peoples*. London, UK: Zed Books.
- St. Denis, V. (2008). *Reclaiming the learning spirit: Learning from our experience*. Saskatoon, SK: Aboriginal Education Research Centre, University of Saskatchewan.

- Stiegelbauer, S. (1992, April). *The individual in the community; the community in the world: Native Elders talk about what young people need to know*. Paper presented at the meeting of the AERA, San Francisco, CA. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED349151.pdf>
- Styres, S., Zinga, D., Bennett, S., & Bomberry, M. (2010). Walking in two worlds: Engaging the space between Indigenous community and academia. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 33(3), 617-648.
- Swanson, S. (2003). Motivating learners in Northern communities. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 27(1), 61-73.
- Takano, T. (2005). Connections with the land: Land-skills courses in Igloodik, Nunavut. *Ethnography*, 6(4), 463-486.
- Toulouse, P. R. (2015). *Beyond shadows: First Nations, Métis and Inuit student success*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Teachers' Federation.
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015a). *Calls to action*. Winnipeg, MB: Author.
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015b). *Honouring the truth, reconciling for the future: Summary of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*. Winnipeg, MB: Author.
- Turner, N. J., Boelscher Ignace, M., & Ignace, R. (2000). Traditional ecological knowledge and wisdom of Aboriginal peoples in British Columbia. *Ecological Applications*, 10(5), 1275-1287.
- Waterman, S., & Sands, T. (2016). A pathway to college success: reverse transfer as a means to move forward among the Haudenosaunee. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 55(2), 51-73.

Whitley, J. (2014). Supporting educational success for Aboriginal students: Identifying key influences. *McGill Journal of Education*, 49(1), 155-181.

## Appendix

### Research Protocol Developed by Linda (2009)

**Project:** How do Canadian Aboriginal children learn?

**Time of Interview:**

**Date:**

**Place:**

**Interviewer:**

**Interviewee:**

**Position of Interviewee:**

**# of years in position:**

**Educational background:**

Since I've been teaching, we have worked very hard to ensure the success of our students. We follow the Ontario curriculum; we assess; and we participate in the EQAO testing. However, we don't appear to be gaining any ground. Our school has not moved up in the testing. I thought about my learning and what I remember about how I learned. Most of my learning happened when I was with my parents. So I was wondering about how you learned and what your memories are of how you learned. I would like to ask you and other Aboriginal teachers questions about how you learned when you were a child and also how the students in your classroom learn? I will record this interview and I will also be taking brief notes. The interview will take approximately 45 minutes. Once all the interviews have been completed, I will transcribe the information and analyze it for any reoccurring themes. In the written report all participants will remain anonymous and will be identified by a pseudonym. The results of the interview will be published in my Master's project, with all of the participant's identities remaining confidential. I will share with you a copy of my interpretation of the findings.

I have some questions and along with the taping, I will also write notes.

#### **Aboriginal Children's Learning**

1. When you think back to your earliest childhood tell me your memories of how you learned?

-who did you learn from or who were you with?



- who were your role models?
- what do you remember learning about?
- what kinds of things were you doing?
- tell me about the resources (books, pencils, crayons) that you had
- what or who influenced you the most when you were a child

### **Best Practices**

2. Tell me about school, what are your memories?
  - of all of the memories you have as a student, what is one of your favorite ones, something that a teacher or school administrator said or did that boosted your motivation and self-dignity?
  - of all of the memories you have as a student, what is one of your worst ones, something that a teacher or school administrator said or did that lessened your motivation and self-dignity
  - As you reflect on both your positive and negative memories of school, what did you learn from both and do you use these memories to guide what you are doing with your students today?

3. How would you describe yourself as an educator?
  - What words would your students use to describe you?

### **Strategies**

4. What are the strengths/challenges of teaching today?
  - What do you see as the role of the Ontario curriculum?
5. Tell me about a lesson plan that you used that excited the students?
6. What are some strategies that you use to help students learn?
7. Is there anything else you would like to tell me, that I didn't ask?

Thank you for participating in this interview. Do you have any questions? This interview will be kept confidential. Once I transcribe the data and identify the reoccurring themes, I will share the information with you.

### **Interview Guide 2**

**Title of Study:** How do Canadian Aboriginal children learn?

**Principal Student investigator:** *[omitted for anonymity]*

**Faculty Supervisor:** *[omitted for anonymity]*

**Note to reader (REB):** This is a rough guideline of the questions that will be asked in the second interview. Until I have reviewed the data collected in the first interview, it will be difficult to develop questions based on speculation.

### **Purpose of Interview**

This is a study of how Aboriginal children learn. The purpose of this second interview is to delve deeper into the issues raised by yourself and the other participants in the first set of interviews.

### **Questions**

1. You said that the way you learned is the way you teach. Could you expand on that?
2. Reflecting on the activities you enjoyed as a child and the activities that your students enjoy today, how does the Ontario curriculum meet the needs of the students?
3. In the last interview you said that Aboriginal children learn best with experiential learning. What strategies could teachers use to build on this strength.