

Indigenous Education: Land as Text

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Abstract

We are uniquely shaped by the ontology, axiology, methodology and epistemology to which we are exposed in life. The outdoor classroom provides many opportunities to use the land as text to observe surroundings informally, to learn experientially through various STEAM activities, and to create scenarios for project-based learning. In history, Residential Schools and the mistreatment of Indigenous students in the Western educational system created a stigma toward education for numerous Indigenous people. Teachers needs to invite Indigenous Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and Indigenous resources into the classroom in order to support the paradigm shift to an Indigenous curriculum.

How we view and understand our world is molded by our various personal experiences with people and our environmental surroundings. Every experience expands our epistemology, axiology, methodology, and ontology to develop a personal research paradigm that supports the Indigenous ways of being, doing, and knowing (Wilson, 2008). The Western paradigm rejects the Indigenous paradigm because it is not a quantitative or qualitative way to learn or think. Indigenous people believe that land contains the languages, stories, and histories of a people. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's *Calls to Action* speak to the moral and ethical obligations to strengthen relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (Kinzel, 2020). Understanding Indigenous perspective in education relies on knowing the connection to the land as text through traditional language and ceremony, Indigenous knowledge in curriculum, and the stigma Indigenous people have related to the Eurocentric model of education. Educators need to research traditional languages and ceremonies as connection to self, use Indigenous curriculum resources in the classroom, and understand the differences and similarities between Eurocentric and Indigenous models of education.

Connection to the Land as Text

When connections to land, ceremony, and languages are lost, then the connection to "all our relations" is lost, too. "All our relations" refers to the Indigenous belief that every object has a spirit and a connection to its surroundings. Our identity is uniquely shaped by values, beliefs, and attitudes to which we are subjected during our life. The Elders say that we are all related, not just to the people around us but to the plants, animals, air, water, and land. Indigenous people believe that land is a participant in the ceremonies and the songs as it offers melodies from the various flora and fauna that inhabit it. Land provides all inhabitants with a home (King, 2012). When Eurocentric worldviews are juxtaposed with Indigenous worldviews of "linear over cyclical progression, competition over collaboration, dualism over complexity, and product over process," they fail to accommodate the learning needs of Indigenous and many non-Indigenous students (Sanford et al., 2012, p. 20). The historical cultural genocide associated with Residential Schools promoted assimilation, marginalization of Indigenous people, and eradication of Indigenous knowledges, values, and ways of learning (Peterson et al., 2019). Thus, within Indigenous communities the loss of connection to the land, traditional language, and ceremonies has created disparity among Indigenous peoples.

To rekindle relationships with the land, individuals need to strengthen their understanding of Indigenous knowledge through personal experiences on the land, participating in Indigenous cultures through ceremonies, researching Indigenous languages, and reinforcing the connection

to all our relations. Indigenous educational experiences create an understanding of the history of Indigenous peoples, the importance of their cultural ceremonies, and how their language is action based as opposed to noun based (Jacob et al., 2018). In the Indigenous culture, the dynamics of the family may not be biologically related and are a significant supporter of a child's education. Schools need to recognize that alternative Indigenous family configuration is supportive of their culture and reinforces positive student engagement in classroom activities (McCalman et al., 2017). The English language is noun based, so when Indigenous words are translated they lose connection to the physical surroundings. To be a strong devoted community member, a person must encompass the dominant language of that community (Fishman, 1991). The Western educational system uses English language, literacy, and cultural practices that do not support the Indigenous knowledge systems. Including Indigenous knowledge systems in Eurocentric education will begin to reverse the eradication of Indigenous language and cultural practices (Paris, 2012). Many Indigenous students have had to dismiss their knowledge systems and adapt to the Western educational system that was deemed superior even though it did not support building a strong relationship with the land, Indigenous cultures, and language.

Indigenous Knowledge in Curriculum

Indigenous knowledges are not endorsed in the Manitoba curricula. A lack of confidence, resources, Elders, and knowledge keepers hinders teachers' confidence to address Indigenous subject matter in class. As well, teachers worry about "the right" to teach the material as non-Indigenous teachers, because they do not want to appropriate Indigenous knowledge systems. These conversations arise from research that Indigenous children are not represented in Eurocentric curricula and that teaching practices are carried out by teachers with little to no understanding of Indigenous cultures, epistemologies, and beliefs (Nardozi et al., 2014). Eurocentric curricula do not focus on Indigenous people's knowledges, the relationships with the land, and the land-based learning experiences available in the school communities (Jacob et al., 2018). It is difficult to describe informal land-based learning experiences, how Indigenous ceremonies are influenced by the Indigenous teachings, and how traditional Indigenous language is a verb/action-based language. There is no formalized plan to incorporate Indigenize education into the Manitoba curricula.

To support Indigenous knowledge in Manitoba curricula, school divisions need to support educators in delivering Indigenized education in the classroom. There is a movement toward recognizing the importance of land-based learning. Indigenous peoples' traditional education was through informal observation and experiential learning through storytelling, role playing, and project-based learning. Education was a natural process that occurred while doing everyday activities, and it was not framed within a closed classroom setting (Neegan, 2005). Many students benefit from a project-based, hands-on approach that can be developed in the classroom by using STEAM activities that focus on science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics. Inviting Elders and Knowledge Keepers into the classroom is an excellent way to bring Indigenous knowledge and storytelling into the Eurocentric school system. Organizing a variety of outdoor activities connected to Indigenous knowledge will support learning on the land and strengthen students' connection to the land. Taking a nature walk, picking a variety of plants, using an Indigenous plant guide to name and identify plants and their medicinal purpose, practising skills to start a fire, making bannock over a fire, and building a quinze are just a few activities that will help students to build a stronger connection to the land.

Eurocentric Model of Education

Schools have a long history of failing to support Indigenous children's learning and overall well-being, which has created stigma for Indigenous people related to the Eurocentric model of education (Peterson et al., 2019). The influence of Residential Schools has tainted the

Indigenous peoples' view of public education due to the horrific personal experiences and stories that have travelled through generations of Indigenous families. Indigenous knowledge is typically portrayed through role playing, legends that are metaphorically linked to natural occurrences, storytelling, traditional ceremonies (e.g., coming of age ceremony), personal experiences, and problem solving. These learning methodologies are not typical of Eurocentric perspectives, typified by using the written word and documentation with statistics and concrete findings. The Eurocentric educational model fails to support Indigenous learners, creating a stigma because it does not align with the Indigenous ways of knowing, teaching, and learning that took place across the generations through traditional language and seasonal activities.

The stigma related to education has been developed over generations of Indigenous students feeling like they do not belong in the Eurocentric school system. I use the *8th Fire: Aboriginal Peoples, Canada & the Way Forward* series with Wab Kinew (Walker et al., 2012) in my classroom because it does an excellent job of weaving the history and present time together to help students visualize urban Indigenous and rural Indigenous settings. This series showcases Indigenous people who are successful in many walks of life, from lawyers to a graphic cartoon artist. It creates understanding by depicting the typical Eurocentric ideology toward Indigenous people and portraying the answers to debunk the Eurocentric actors' opinions. Another activity I do is have Elders and Knowledge Keepers visit the classroom or we listen to their stories regarding Residential School experiences online. The Elders' memories help everyone in the classroom to empathize and understand how the generations of Indigenous people who attended Residential School may have felt.

In Canada, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada calls upon the federal government to address the 94 calls to action. For example, one request is to promote the "preservation, revitalization, and strengthening of Aboriginal languages and cultures" through an Aboriginal Languages Act in education (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, p. 2). Indigenous people need to be celebrated and empowered so that they can see their importance in our society. I have witnessed many students who do not know their own Indigenous history, but after they have been in my classroom, they have a better understanding of why certain people in their family may respond to certain situations or treat people a certain way. They have thanked me for educating them about their history which is not well documented and has been suppressed for generations. All students benefit from understanding the history of Indigenous people and how education has changed through the generations.

Conclusion

Addressing concerns related to Indigenous perspective in education relates to the connection to the land as text, Indigenous knowledge in curriculum, and the stigma that Indigenous people sense regarding the Eurocentric model of education. Indigenous children have a right to an education that includes their own knowledge systems and traditional teachings. Often, books and curriculum published about Indigenous peoples' way of being, doing, and knowing (Wilson, 2008, p. 70) have been written and illustrated, as well as formatted and marketed, from a non-Indigenous perspective (Peterson & Robinson, 2020, p. 3). Indigenous knowledge and history are becoming an important topic that is discussed within schools, and money is being allocated to purchase Indigenous knowledge resources that support the teachers to provide a more well-rounded education. The marginalization and suppression of Indigenous knowledge systems have gone hand in hand with the transformation and degradation of Indigenous cultures (Ka'opua, 2013). We all have an obligation to educate ourselves about Indigenous knowledge by attending Indigenous ceremonies, researching Indigenous knowledge systems, and creating experiential learning opportunities.

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About the Author

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