

Miskasowin askîhk: Coming to Know Oneself on the Land

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Abstract

miskâsowin askîhk is a nêhiyawêwin word that translates roughly “as finding oneself on the land.” Throughout this paper, I aim to tell a story about the journey I have taken on the land, with the language. The paper also addresses a process of coming to find myself throughout these experiences and relationships with land and language. Through my stories on the land, I have learned that I belong to the land and that the land teaches me. The article also shares what I have learned from Elders, Knowledge Keepers and literature. Namely, learning language on the land, with the land's resources, is an effective way to revitalize language and reclaim Indigenous identity in a balanced way. I finish this paper with the description of a project that I would like to research further. The project involves hand making beaded leather mitts while learning to speak nêhiyawêwin. This project is connected to asōnamēkēwin, a word in nêhiyawêwin that means that it is our responsibility to pass on knowledge that we learn. This is another important nêhiyawêwin phrase that guides me on this journey. It is my responsibility and I pass this responsibility onto anybody that I teach, to teach what they learn.

Keywords: land-based learning, Cree language learning, language revitalization, best practices



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Figure 1

Matilda isiyihkāsow nicāpan



Note. A copy of a family photo of my cāpan (great grandmother), ca. 1978.

To lose your language is to lose the soul of your culture, and when the language is gone you are forever disconnected from the wisdom of ancestors; the loss of language inevitably results in losing the gods you pray to, the land you live on, and your own government and sovereignty. (Lilikala Kameyelehiwa, 2004, as cited by Aguilera & LeCompte, 2007, p.11)

I have chosen the above quotation because it speaks to me as a nêhiyaw (a Cree person), as an educator, and as a mother. For me, it rings true when Lilikala Kameyelehiwa says that when one loses their language, they lose the soul to their culture. Indigenous Elders say that language is in the ceremonies and that if we do not know the language, we cannot properly and fully understand ceremony. I think about all the meanings within each word in nêhiyawêwin (Cree language) and those meanings connect us to our way of thinking, our culture. If we lose the meanings in all these words, we ultimately lose our culture. At times, I feel disconnected from my ancestors. Both nikâwi (my mom) and my father's families. This may be because I am also part Scottish. And it may be because I also grew up away from both my families. Lilikala Kameyelehiwa's words seem particularly true when I spend time with my cousins who do not fully nêhiyawêk (speak Cree) but are more proficient in the language than me. Because they were raised in a location where the majority of people speak nêhiyawêwin, in Pinehouse Lake, northern Saskatchewan, they have been able to hear the language more often than I have. As a result, they are able to understand conversations in nêhiyawêwin (Cree language) and are confident in responding in nêhiyawêwin. Not being fully proficient in nêhiyawêwin makes me feel disconnected because I question where

I belong and who I am. I sometimes feel that I do not know if I know my family enough. I am also preoccupied with questions such as Do they know me enough? If my ancestors and living family are not from here, then where do I belong? and Where am I connected?

Yet, I have hope. As I learn my language, I feel empowered, closer to my family and more connected to the land of my ancestors. To me, feeling empowered is reflected because the language was forcibly removed from Indigenous people through multiple colonization efforts (residential schools, pass and permit system, and government policies), and yet, the language still exists today. Despite efforts made by European settler governments, *nêhiyawêwin* is still spoken today. People are still trying to reclaim what was taken from them. While I feel this disconnection, I also feel inspired, grateful, and connected to them in a way that I cannot explain. *ê-nêhiyawêcik* (they speak Cree) in front of me and they assume I know what they are saying. Sometimes I do and sometimes I do not, but I am a part of these conversations and I love being able to hear *nêhiyawêwin* and being connected with my family at this level. To me it is spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and physically inspiring and healing. As I write this paper, I am privileging *nêhiyawêwin* and I will provide English translations when appropriate. Through Indigenous methodologies (see Absolon, 2011), I have learned that it is important to start your research paper and all things really, by situating yourself. Wherever you are, you introduce yourself so people know where you come from and who you are related to. It helps to set the tone and lets people know your relations, where you come from, and the perspective from which you are located. I have already begun this paper by doing so and will continue in the next few sections.

Tammy Ratt *nitisiyihkâson. oskana kâ-asastâki, minahik waskahikan sâkahikan, êkwa Swift Current ohci niya. mâka mêkwac oskana kâ-asastêki niwikin. Niya nêhiyaw êkwa Scottish iskwêw. nikakwê-nêhiyawân apisis. nîso nitotansin, Darling isiyihkâsow pâyak nitânis êkwa kotak nitânis Coral isiyihkâsow. niwicêwâkan Boyd isiyihkâsow. nitatim sôkâw isiyihkâsow. Niya okiskinwahamâkêw êkwa okiskinwahamâkan. Bernice Lariviere isiyihkâsow nikâwi. Minahik waskahigan sâkahikan ohci wiya. tâpwê ê-miyo-nêhiyawêt. Bill Aitken isiyihkâsow nohtâwi. Swift Current, Saskatchewan ohci wiya.*

I am called Tammy Ratt. I am from Regina (Pile of Bones), Pinehouse Lake and Swift Current. I live in Regina (Pile of Bones). I am a Cree and Scottish woman. I try to speak Cree a little. I have two daughters. Darling and Coral are their names. The one who I walk with is Boyd. My dog is called Sugar. I am a student and a teacher. Bernice is my mom. She is from Pinehouse Lake. Truly she speaks good Cree. Bill is what my father is called. He is from Swift Current, Saskatchewan.

As a *nêhiyaw iskwêw* (Cree woman), it is important to me to incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing and being because I want *nitanisak* (my girls) and ancestors, as well as the people who read this, to know the importance of being Indigenous. I want them to know that I honor this about myself and I hope they honor it in them or around them as well. The approach I use in this paper is a self-reflective methodology. I will be sharing my personal perspectives on land, language, and how I teach through stories. I see all these elements as interconnected and are a necessary part of Indigenous ways of thinking, living and teaching. Sometimes I do not know how to explain how this all connects or why it makes sense. I just know that it does. It was suggested by a dear friend that “perhaps, the more [I] learn *nêhiyawêwin* (four-part being of this land language), the more [I am] connecting to all life of the land and in order to connect to the land, [I] need to embody the language and the land (L.Whiskeyjack, personal communication, May 25, 2022). I feel that this suggestion fits with what I am trying to explain throughout this paper.

I have been teaching for 15 years. I love being a teacher. I have not been passionate about many things, but I believe that I was born to be a teacher. The first 2 years of my career, I was given the opportunity to teach Introductory nêhiyawêwin and a syllabics course at First Nations University of Canada. I feel fortunate that I was able to start my career there and then went on to teach for the local school board. I have been a high school teacher since. I have always taught Native Studies, Cree and usually Art classes. Since 2020, I have also been teaching as a sessional instructor at the First Nations University of Canada in the teacher education program and I teach beginner Cree language classes. Along with my professional background I also have great passion for engaging and supporting Indigenous arts. I bead and make maskisina (moccasins) êkwa astisak (mitts). Since I can remember, sākāhk (the bush) is one of my places of getting grounded, unplugging from the technology and reconnecting to myself and all my living relations. Nistês (my brother) tells a story about me running into the sākāhk alone where he would chase me to bring me home, and he would say when he told that story that he was afraid but yet I would run in without a care. I know that he was not actually afraid, but cautious of the surroundings. I love when he shares this story because it reflects my connection to the land. This tells you a little bit about my where I have gained the personal and professional experiences that have brought me to this passion with the language, the land and art.

I teach in an urban school with the highest population of students who identify as Indigenous in Regina. I became a teacher to teach Indigenous students in an urban setting. This was a choice I made because I was a student who attended a high school in an urban setting with no Indigenous representation on the staff of the school I went to. I believe this is still one of the greatest flaws in this city's education system: a lack of Indigenous representation on teaching staff. I feel like I would have done better and felt better if I had been around people who looked like me and have some of the same experiences as me. This was a conscious choice as I see the need for Indigenous teachers in urban school settings to connect with the high population of Indigenous students. There are many teachers in urban areas who do not think they have access to the resources on the land, but I have searched and learned there are many resources to incorporate land-based education. I believe the best way to transfer knowledge onto the next generation is to be on, and connect to, the land as a living relative through learning nêhiyawêwin, engaging in Indigenous art-based practices, cultural activities, and ways of knowing.

Education should be fun and mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually fulfilling. This paper will explore my best practices of sharing knowledge and learning a second language on and with the land to support and prepare Indigenous students to connect and develop their cultural identities and skills. I will introduce how I have connected to the land and share the benefits, share my learnings on land-based learning and teaching, and discuss a project I have been preparing alongside the students that may be offered as a course in the future. This project fills me with pride and joy as I connect with my family's community, hear nêhiyawêwin and learn from and within the land.

askîhk nitipêyih̄tâkosin (I Belong to the Land)

Always walking a known terrain, leaving, always coming back to the known reality, walking with one clear intent—the will to remain rooted to familiar ground and the certainty of knowing one's place. (hooks, 2009, p. 2)

This paper begins with a photo of my cāpan (great grandmother). Matilda isiyihkâsow (is what she is called). I did not know her because she passed on to the spirit world before I was born,

but I feel a deep connection to her when I flesh hide, when I wear floral, and when I work and learn through the lands that she called home. I am connected to her when I speak and hear nêhiyawêwin. Through this experience of kinship connections, I know there is a need for all Indigenous students to connect their bodies, minds, and spirits to the land through learning to speak their Indigenous language so that they can connect and feel a belonging with their ancestors. The connection we gain improves the health and well-being of our identity.

It has been stated that more research needs to be done on the positive effects that language learning has on mental health, like some of the studies that have been done showing evidence of the positive effects that language learning has on the mental health of Indigenous people. Jenni et al. (2017) found the following three themes in the reflections of participants from a mentor/apprentice program: (a) cultural and spiritual health and healing, (b) health outcomes, and (c) negative impact on the well-being of Indigenous people. Everyone is made up of the physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional. It is hard to distinguish and separate the benefits of land-based learning and language on our emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical well-being; all of these elements are interconnected as reflected in the medicine wheel teachings. To keep the health and well-being of a person in balance, one must give equal attention to each domain of being since they impact one another. White (1996) stated that “the healing of ourselves, our families, our communities and our Nations must take into account everything around us, and within us [and] that we need to have interconnectedness in all things to achieve balance” (p. 121). The imbalance within the domains can help or hinder our general health. The physical is sustainable living, being self-sufficient and physically healthy. The mental is the knowledge gathered from the land and language. The spiritual is the connection to our people, our culture, and our environment. The emotional aspect is the strength of our identity. The land and language heal us.

As a nêhiyaw educator to Indigenous people who will become teachers, it is important to take any opportunity to learn from the land and to speak my language to inspire future teachers to do the same. To take advantage of the learning opportunities out there for us to learn. asōnamêkêwin is a word in nêhiyawêwin, it means it is our responsibility to pass on the knowledge that we learn (Weenie, 2020). I carry this responsibility with great care as our Elders and Knowledge Keepers will not live forever. Our future generations will need this knowledge for their health and well-being; we need to pass on this knowledge to ensure our stories and teachings will live on through generations. We need to learn and experience the kinship connection with the land through learning the language. Our language comes from the land. When we share the language we share our ancestral teachings of the land.

nitâcimowina askîhk (My Stories on the Land)

We’re all storytellers, really. That’s what we do. That is our power as human beings. Not to tell people how to think and feel and therefore know-but through our stories allow them to discover questions within themselves. (Wagamese, 2016)

I love to tell stories about my experiences on the land as I am always trying to find what connects me to the land and to my family. They remind me that I belong to the land. I tell these stories to remember all the teachings and experiences that contributed to shape me into the person I am today. These stories have taught me the importance of family, culture, language and community.

Sivak et al. (2019) completed 16 interviews in a Barnagarla community in Australia. The interviews were based on personal perspectives of participants on how language reclamation affects them socially and emotionally. Some of the key themes that were presented from the

participants reflect the same learnings from my stories, such as the “connection to spirituality and ancestors; connections to culture; connection to community; connection to family and kinship; connection to mind and emotions; and the impacts upon identity and cultural pride at an individual level” (Sivak et al., 2019, p. 1). As Thomas King (2003) wrote, “The truth about stories is, that’s all we are” (p. 2) I believe that when we tell our stories it makes it easier for people to connect with you because they actually start to know who you are as a person and an individual. I love to share stories as a way to acknowledge and ground my whole body, mind and spirit to the land and to make connections with other.

For as long as I can remember hearing the stories from nikâwiy (my mom) and family, they would talk about how I always wanted to be outside. Nikâwiy would say, “It would be -40 out and Tammy would be outside playing.” In the summers, I would go up north for a few weeks to Minâhik waskâhikan SK, which is where most of my family is from. I would spend most of the time at Spigama, the name of the place where my uncles’ cabins are. Everybody in the community calls it Spigama, which means “across the lake.” The thing about place names in nêhiyawêwin is that they were named after what people saw and what was done there. Spigama must have just become the proper name after some time. When I was there as a young child, there was only one cabin and an outdoor kitchen that my uncle made. I always thought it was cool because the older cousins had tents out there and they would have actual beds and buckets with makeshift toilet seats. It was their bedroom during the warm months. I usually stayed in the cabin with my uncle’s family, unless nikâwiy was there; then we got to stay in a tent that had an actual bed; my mom put a bucket in the tent with a card board seat for night time pees. I loved it. My uncle would come pick me up on the boat when my family came to town. I think it was because I always enjoyed being outside and eating wild meat. Porridge always reminds me about Spigama. Every morning it seemed there was a giant pot of porridge cooking in the outside kitchen stove. This is where I found my belonging of comfort and safety. nêhiyawêwin was all I heard in camp and I was able to say words in nêhiyawêwin to my cousins. “pîtâ the ball” I remember saying when we played in the water. I was so proud.

I lived in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, Canada from the age of 2 to 10 years old. For a long time, Yellowknife was home. Even after the move from Yellowknife to Regina, I always wondered when I would be moving back home. Even though I spent half of my life in Regina, it was getting to the point of whether I could still consider Yellowknife my home. The winters are long and cold in Yellowknife, but even in the winter there we would go on day camps with close friends and have a big bonfire. We would dress warm and spend the day and into the night visiting. I remember watching my boots smoke as I kicked back and warmed my feet by the fire. These were some of my most cherish memories. Life was good. Being on the land was perfect in any temperature; it was healing to be with our friends on the land visiting in the different temperatures and colours of the land.

Towards the end of my secondary Indigenous Education degree, I participated in a nêhiyawak language experience (Daniels, 2021; Daniels-Fiss, 2008). It was the second year Belinda Daniels from Sturgeon Lake organized this camp. This camp was originally a part of her master’s project. My experience at this language camp was probably one of the first times I was confronted to step outside my comfort zone as we prepared to perform a play in nêhiyawêwin. I met the most beautiful iskwêwak and their families. I had morning coffee on a deck overlooking the lake. We set up tents and tipis and slept there. There was were so many teachings I learned during the camp, such as the following: we are all connected, and if we live a good life, we will be

taken care of and loved. I learned that the best place is to be surrounded by loving people and that if you want to learn a language then to spend time with people who will help get you there. This is where my love for land-based learning as a method for language revitalization started. I have now been to this camp four times and have brought nitanisak (my daughters) along the past two years. Connection to community and culture matter.

A few years back, during a February break from the school where I teach, I was fortunate enough to be a part of a nêhiyawêwin immersion storytelling camp in La Ronge Saskatchewan. The people who hosted the camp are near and dear to my heart. There was no other way I would want to spend a February break than to be in cabins heated with wood fires. There was no electricity, so when it got to sun set, it was dark. We ate supper by candlelight, stayed up late and listened to all the Elders and hosts tell stories in nêhiyawêwin. During the day we worked in pairs to create our own stories. I also was able to check muskrat traps, cook muskrat tail, and stretch muskrat fur. I did some ice fishing and rode around on a ski doo. I was immersed in the language. I was inspired and filled with pride and joy that I come from this amazing culture and this perfect place. I have been to many nêhiyawêwin immersion camps but this one's primary focus was teaching language through stories. This one was my favorite and I will continue to try to attend this camp or more camps similar to this one. I felt that I was able to challenge myself when I could work on my own story during the day. I would have eventually liked to share my story but was not given that opportunity. When I am an Elder able to speak nêhiyawêwin fluently, it will be my turn.

I have used the land's resources and materials for the art that I create. All the art skills I learned I use to practice with my own students. As a class, we learned to stretch, scrape, and flesh a moose hide. What we need to learn next is to hunt the moose, which I am trying to convince people to help me to learn to do this. With the moose hide in its raw hide state, people can use it to make drums and rattles. When you pass the rawhide stage, you work the hide into its smoked stage, you will have soft leather. With this soft leather one can make anything: mitts, moccasins, bracelets, earrings, and much more. With the fur, one can use it as liner or trim for mitts or moccasins. Within our class, we experimented with fur. We washed and dyed the fur different colors and then did some moose hide tufting onto leather. Tufting is a form of appliqué; you pick up little bunches of fur and you sew it onto the leather, then trim it to create a design. I have attended a porcupine quill workshop and have done some experimenting myself with porcupines and porcupine quills. Many people harvest porcupine quills from roadkill and they often will leave tobacco to honor and give gratitude to the spirit of the animal.

My students and I have picked, washed, dyed, and created art with porcupine quills on different materials. I have learned from these experiences that the land does sustain us in all aspects of life, living and enjoyment, feeding us, warming us, and allowing us to be creative. I have also found that students love to be a part of these experiences. They love experimenting and learning along the way. The art supplies we create are made available to us from the land. The land and the language are connected; the names of things are usually a description of what they are and what they are used for. Most Indigenous arts, such as beading, working with hide, dance, songs (ceremony), sewing (clothing, blankets), are intertwined and express our identity and way of life as Indigenous people. These are the things that kept us alive. Being able to hunt and then use the whole animal is art in itself: from scraping to smoking, stretching into raw hide for tools or drums or carrying on to make smoked traditional hide for clothing and shelter, and also to make all tools for survival.

Our Indigenous languages, all Indigenous languages, are how we communicate to live, to create and to experience life together and with much deeper meaning. In nêhiyawêwin the words mean more, they are more specific to the activity, they are much more descriptive. Cikâstêpayihcikanikamik is a word in nêhiyawêwin that is used for movie theater. It means a building where movies are made. Cikâstê-shadow/payi-occur, happen/ ikan-indicating a thing happening/ wikamik is a word for building. Literally, the word means “the building where shadows are made.” This is how most nêhiyawêwin words are made in little pieces that describe what is happening. I would say art does the same thing it can describe feelings, memories, represent social issues and so much more. Language and art portray the same things;

[Language] is a tool used for recording and preserving thoughts, and is a form of communication, equally, art may be used as a tool for recording and preserving thoughts, and as a form for expressing or communicating those thoughts. Therefore, language and art may be interwoven, complementing one and another. (Sinclair & Pelletier, 2012, p. 11)

It makes sense that art would be a method used to teach language. In Taiwan, Pyng-Na Lee did research with a Paiwanese music teacher who uses primarily traditional music to teach Paiwanese language. The teacher, Ms. Wong, teaches in her home community and speaks her native language. She has learned ancient songs from tribal elders through oral tradition. She believes that the songs should be passed on to younger generations because it is important to culture (Lee, 2020).

kîkwây askiy nikiskinwahamâkon (What the Land Teaches Me)

All my experiences on the land with those who love learning and teaching the language have brought me pure joy. It is in these moments that I feel exactly where I need to be. These experiences on the land, I know I belong. It is where I connect with my ancestors that have passed and where I feel connected to all the good things about being Indigenous. A big part of why I want to teach on the land is because it is good for the mental health, identity development, cultural learning, and learning good life skills. I have come to find myself on the land—miskâsowin askîhk. I have learned to honor and love myself on the land and through learning my language. I know the students I teach will come to know and love themselves in the same way.

As I reflect on what the land teaches me, I remembered the story below told by nikâwiw ototêma (my mom's friend). I asked her to tell me a story about Pinehouse Lake, where my family is from. As I reflect on what the land teaches me, it brought me back to this story:

May 3, 2020

Pinehouse Lake Story

Kiyas mana ē-sīnowak ē-kī-mamawacik ē-kī-kowacocik onikikwaowa ekwa otema. ē-kī-macīcik, ē-kī-opāhicik, ēkwa ē-kī-paktohowācīk. Were were rich in traditional foods. ē-kī-asamtocik mwīkawīhak mōcinakītotiw. Ka-kī-kiyatcimot e-kī-wīcitocik ē-pinawasocik. Kīyā-pitsanos āpis kwapatīn. Nīhiyomaskīkiya nikī-mosakinkatiki. Mwīmstahi pohcswōn ohci tākōn. Ki-apic anohc nēhiyomaskīkiy mōsakinkatiw.

(In the old days’ people used to love to be together out on the land with family and friends. They used to go hunting to gather food, trapping, and fishing. We were so rich in traditional foods. People used to share the food, no one was ever hungry. All relatives of family used to share stories and used to cook together. We still see this

happening today. At the same time as gathering food, traditional medicine was also gathered. There was not much sickness, even diabetes. People were healthy, and still today some of our people practice traditional medicines.)

Scenery is beautiful everywhere we go, especially when we go canoeing. It was emotionally healing when out on the land there were no distractions, just a sense of peace being out on the land. Still today families like to go out on the land. Our land is still clean and peaceful. Even our water is still clean, our traditional medicines still good, and fish is still rich and healthy. Still rich in traditional foods we still eat and practice a traditional lifestyle.

Many of our children were taught respect, not to disrespect. The Elders taught us this. That is still seen in our young people today. Especially not to ever disrespect an Elder.

Still rich in traditional food, no one should ever go hungry.

Religion was strong among our Elders. They used to have lots of respect for the Bishop. When he landed and from off the plane people would stand up palm trees from the plane landing and to the church and they follow him to church. This was showing a warm welcome. Praying is still strong today

Our Elders are still strong today. One of our Elders had delivered 500 babies at the time there was no road out and no airport. She was the only one to deliver babies. They are all healthy babies. She did not have any training. Even she was a very strong woman. Some of her family still practice traditional medicine that she taught them.

Our community is still a great place to live. We live by a lake if you look out the window you see water. People are still close to each other. No one gets hungry, someone will always provide for them.

When a person was struggling with things in life, people would go and support them right away. Even if there was a loss of a family member people would go take food and gather with family members. Today this is still very strong practice. When a person gets sick people would gather to support and pray for them for healing. This was all taught to us from a long time ago, respecting one another not to disrespect anyone. We still see that today in our community a good life.

We still continue to use our land to survive like fishing, hunting, and gathering meat. I still practice this today. Living off the land is such a healing experience.

People used to go out on the land in the winter season and come back home when the ice melted. This is good practice to live off the land

Our community is a great community, prayer is still strong today, and we still eat traditionally today. (Phyllis Smith, personal communication, June 26, 2021)

The story teaches me and reminds me that, in some cases, wisdom sits in places and everything is connected. It teaches me about peace, comfort, patience, and love. Phyllis even talked about how the land is healing for us, emotionally, like a doctor or medication. She shares how the land has beautiful scenery and provides us with food and medicine. She talks about the movement of the people in the different seasons, which I think is in our blood. Many Indigenous people still move, they come and go, and do not stay in one place. I think this is just another reason why the

Western education system is tough for many Indigenous students. They travel when something comes up. They are not held back when something important happens in their lives. I love this about Indigenous people. It is important to value Indigenous ways of being. In the Saskatchewan Indigenous studies curriculum, one of the outcomes is to value Indigenous ways of being. This story teaches me that everything that we need and could want is provided to us from the land. Wahkotowin is a nêhiyawêwin word that describes our relationships to everything. It says that everything is connected to everything, the rocks and trees, and our relationship to all things. It is because of these connections that we need to respect and honor kikâwimaw askiy (our mother earth).

naspasihikêwin êkwa nêhiyawêwin (Art and Cree Language)

I have learned through experiences with the land, the language and art that it is important to incorporate them into your teachings to students. I am grateful I was gifted with the knowledge to teach them to other people. asōnamêkêwin - it is my responsibility now to pass this knowledge on. In this section I explain a program that I have not yet implemented fully. I have been using the arts as a pedagogical method but I have never conducted research about it. I have done bits and pieces of this project as an art project with very minimal language learning through the years and would like to explore it further through research one day. I would love to teach students in nêhiyawêwin how to make beaded hide astisak (mitts) in a nêhiyawêwin immersion style. The students will follow directions while practicing in speaking nêhiyawêwin. They will learn sewing and beading terms, how to say the supplies and colors. They should be able to tell us what they are doing in nêhiyawêwin as they do it. At the end of this project, I would like the students to be able to tell a story using their mitts. This is important because I know that using traditional Indigenous education is lacking in the Western education system, and reclaiming our traditions is what I believe will help give us back more of our identity.

Sometimes I do not know how to explain how this all connects or why it makes sense. I just know it does. I talk to nitotêmak (my friends) and they help me understand why it makes sense and that I am not just seeing it this way because I want to see it this way. I have to ask “Am I crazy? Does this make sense?” Then, I go back to the stories; I go back to what the students tell me about their feelings, how they connected, and how they enjoyed learning through traditional Indigenous education. Sometimes there is misconceptions about land-based learning and doing traditional Indigenous art. People wonder if we are following the curriculum. The curriculum guides and supports the learning, but it is so much more than the curriculum. Land-based learning is mental, as well as, spiritual, emotional and physical. These school lessons addressed identity, worldview, positive mental self-view, and healing. I go back to what I felt as a young person and I hope to offer what I missed and so truly wished for. I would like to be able to focus all the things that I have learned on the land and teach nêhiyawêwin while we learn all the things on the land, but for now I am focused on the traditional Indigenous art of creating beaded astisak.

Indigenous land-based education is its own paradigm based on Indigenous worldviews and beliefs and the passing on of knowledge to one another and to the next generation It is also a form of understanding our place within, and our responsibility to, the wider universe If you understand—through our kinship structures or the way the language is structured—that parts of the land or animals are literally related to you, then you have a different kind of relationship with the land: you have something more like a familial relationship, where protection is

naturally a part of it. I think that's really important. (Alex Wilson, as quoted in Canadian Commission for UNESCO, 2021)

The purpose of the program I want to create is to promote positive self-identity through language, culture, and traditional Indigenous art. Having completed all my education in urban settings, I have come to realize there was a lack of opportunities for traditional Indigenous art and the lack of opportunities in urban settings continues today in most urban education settings. In an urban setting, you do not get to hear the language as you would if you were in your home community.

In Pinehouse Lake, Saskatchewan (Northern Indigenous community), where my family is from, *nêhiyawêwin* is the primary language. I have been told through the years from Elders, Knowledge Keeper, teachers, and through readings that language is what connects us to our ancestors, our culture, and our identity. In urban schools we are missing these aspects of our experience. Norris (2009) wrote that in bigger cities, “transmission and continuity are significantly reduced” in terms of Indigenous languages (p. 4). Indigenous people are the minority in urban settings and there is so much systemic racism in Western societies and institutions, including the schools. As Indigenous people, we have so much to be proud of; our language and culture are at the center of our identity. Within systems of oppression, we are trained to think we are less-than. We see and sometimes experience negative perceptions that non-Indigenous people have of us and it can take a toll on our four domains: mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional parts of ourselves.

Many Indigenous people are migrating into urban areas and send their children to public school systems that lack the Indigenous language and culture. Indigenous people, language, culture, and worldview are all under-represented in our education system. This creates barriers for the high population of First Nations, Metis and Inuit (FNMI) students. It is important to continue to incorporate Indigenous Language and work towards creating language and cultural programs that are beneficial for all students, regardless of their language speaking abilities. Because I have spent much of my leisure time outdoors and I take every opportunity to attend outdoor culture camps, I am so filled with joy when engaged in traditional Indigenous activities, connecting to and being on the land. I have asked students and parents what they would like to learn and how they would incorporate *nêhiyawêwin* in their lives and a common theme is the benefits that traditional Indigenous activities would bring to the identity of the student and their families. I do not think that I will create fluent *nêhiyawêwin* speakers in an urban setting, but I do hope to create lifelong learners and inspire the students to continue to learn their language.¹

Conclusion

I conclude with a letter to my future students, which summarizes my exploration of best practices for sharing knowledge and learning a second language on and with the land to support and prepare Indigenous students:

tânisi okiskinwahamâkanak (hello students)

Tammy Ratt *nitisiyihkâson*. I want to teach you to bead and sew mitts, while teaching you to speak some *nêhiyawêwin*. I hope you enjoy beading, sewing and *nêhiyawêwin* as much as I do. I know it is not for everybody, but I just know that it should in some way be a part of your lives. Some of you may or may not have parents, grandparents and possibly siblings who speak their Indigenous language. Some of you may even know words in your Indigenous language. I believe that learning traditional Indigenous art and your Indigenous language is good for our

Indigenous identity. I think it is good for mental health. I believe these things connect us to the land and this is a part of who we are as Indigenous people. So, I would like to take this journey with you, learn from you and about you. I hope as we carry forward you will share your thoughts with me. miyaskam askîhk is a word in nêhiyawêwin that means finding oneself on the land. I believe that we can find ourselves on the land and through this project. āsōnamēkēwin is a nêhiyawêwin word that means it is our responsibility to pass on the knowledge that we learn, therefore I want to teach you all this and hope you share the knowledge (language, beading, and sewing) that you learn through this project to the people in your lives now and that become a part of your lives in the future. I am so grateful that I get to be doing this with you all. I am thankful that you allow me to teach you and I want you to know that you teach me so much in the journey.

ninanâskomon (I am grateful) to be a part of this with you.

êkosi (that's it)

¹ See Appendix I for a glossary of terms

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Appendix I

Glossary

āsōnamēkēwin (our responsibility to pass on knowledge that we learn)

astisak (mitts)

câpan (great grandmother)

êkosi (that's it)

ê-nêhiyawêcik (they speak Cree)

iskwêw (woman)

isiyihkâsow (is what she is called)

kikâwimaw askiy (our mother earth).

kîwêtinôtâhk (in the north)

maskisin (moccasins)

miyo-pimatisiwin (living a good life)

naspasinahikêwin (art)

nêhiyaw (a Cree person)

nêhiyawêwin (Cree language)

nikawiy (my mom)

ninanâskomon (I am grateful) to be a part of this with you.

nistês (my brother)

nitâcimowina (my stories)

nitanisak (my daughters)

ototêma (her/his its friend)

sākāhk (the bush)