

**Partnership Research With  
Indigenous Communities:  
Fostering Community  
Engagement and  
Relational Accountability**



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**Abstract**

Drawing from principles of ethical research derived from our review of national and international policy documents, in this paper we reflect on our research experiences working in partnership with Indigenous educators in a project to support young Indigenous children’s oral and written language development through collaborative action research. Then, acting on lessons learned from this first partnership project, we describe our efforts to attend to these ethical research principles in a second partnership project to support Indigenous children’s writing and Indigenous language and cultural learning through teacher-initiated, culturally specific, play-based activities. We offer our reflections as a starting point for conversations that will inspire and call for the necessary ethical and relational responsibilities of doing partnership research with and for Indigenous communities.

*Keywords:* ethical research, research with Indigenous communities, partnership research, NOW Play

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Research involving Indigenous participants and carried out by non-Indigenous researchers has a troubling history. Indeed, Indigenous peoples have been the subjects of some of the most harmful and unethical research practices in the history of research in education and in other disciplines. Kovach (2021) explains that “ethical infringements in research impacting Indigenous communities are not hard to find” (p. 89). Kovach and others (e.g., Denzin et al., 2008; Smith, 2021) provide historical and contemporary examples of unethical research practices from research studies that have occurred on the lands referred to as Canada, the United States, New Zealand, and Australia.

As a bi-epistemic research team, we write this paper in agreement with Bull (2010) that it is well past time to consider ethics from an Indigenous perspective rather than from only a Western perspective. Our intentions are to engage in ethical research that moves away from the kind of work that Tuck (2009) defined as “damage-centered” (p. 409) towards an approach that honours the principles associated with doing research for and with Indigenous peoples (Smith, 2021). As one Indigenous and two non-Indigenous scholars, we offer this paper to document our collective journey through the murky waters of enacting ethical research with Indigenous peoples. We enter this work from different positionalities and levels of understanding related to the history of research involving Indigenous peoples. Our collaboration offers space for the two non-Indigenous researchers to be guided by the Indigenous researcher in reflections on research practices as we delve into policy documents and align with the protocols articulated by Indigenous scholars who write about Indigenous methodologies. The non-Indigenous researchers are grateful to the Indigenous researcher for sharing her knowledge, experiences, and perspectives that enabled them to learn about ways of thinking about, and of doing, research that better reflects Indigenous ethical perspectives on community engagement and relational accountability.

By way of building rapport with our readers and the communities where our research takes place, we begin by introducing ourselves and our research project. Such introductions are important given the context of our shared commitment to ethical research practices with Indigenous communities. Moreover, this practice of self-locating is particularly important within Indigenous research contexts, as Indigenous communities have been historically objectified and misrepresented through colonial or outsider research (Brant, 2017). Thus, we humbly open this paper as we journey through the lessons of ethical engagement and accountability to our research partners by locating ourselves as individual researchers with shared and varying research interests. Jennifer Brant belongs to the Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk Nation) with family ties to Six Nations of the Grand River Territory and Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory. As an Indigenous scholar, she positions herself as a lifelong learner and educator and humbly acknowledges the lessons of engaging with/in Indigenous community settings. Jennifer's scholarship focuses on Indigenous maternal pedagogies and methodologies as liberatory

praxis. Shelley Stagg Peterson was born in Treaty 4 territory and lived much of her life in Treaty 6 territory as the daughter and granddaughter of farmers of Dutch, Scottish, and Irish ancestry, and later as a teacher in rural communities. She is now working as a literacy professor, living on the ancestral land of the Anishnaabe, Haudenosaunee, Huron–Wendat, and the Mississaugas of the New Credit. Nicola Friedrich is a third-generation English-speaking settler who lives and works on unceded Algonquin Anishinabe territory. Nicola has focused her teaching and research on supporting children's learning in and out of the classroom. Over the course of her doctoral program, she was a member of two research projects involving families from immigrant, refugee, and Indigenous communities.

Shelley is the project director of the Northern Oral Language and Writing Through Play (NOW Play) partnership project. The overarching purposes of the first NOW Play project, which began in 2013, were:

1. To develop play-based practices and tools to support and assess the language and writing of children in northern rural communities in four provinces through engaging in collaborative action research with teachers and early childhood educators in kindergarten and Grade 1 classrooms; and
2. To support participating teachers' professional learning and development as educational leaders.

Although under development in 2019, the second NOW Play project began in 2020 as the project director co-developed the research project with educators and educational leaders in the northern Indigenous communities that had participated in the first project. The goals of the second project are similar to those of the first project, with a more specific focus on supporting Indigenous children's writing and Indigenous language and cultural learning through play-based activities. The second project was developed with lessons learned about ethical conduct of research with Indigenous communities. These lessons are gleaned from our intentional relationships with partnering communities and attend to the protocols expressed in the reviewed policy frameworks.

Throughout this paper, we document the journey from NOW Play 1 to NOW Play 2 and, informed by research guidelines intended to support ethical research with Indigenous peoples, identify important lessons we have learned. We describe our efforts to enact ethical research principles in both NOW Play projects. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, planned research activity had not begun at the time of writing this article. As a result, our assessment of the ethical nature of practices in this article is based on actual research activities carried out in the first project and the planning processes of the second project. Additionally, this work is informed by a gathering that took place in May 2022 to bring together all members of the research team and our community partners. The intention of this gathering was to collectively map out the future

visions of the project, assess community research desires, and foster relationships among partnering communities. The 2-day gathering included an Indigenous research panel to inform ethical conduct for partnership research with Indigenous communities.

We offer this working paper as a reflection on our research experiences and hope it will provide starting points for conversations about ethical and relational responsibilities of doing research with and for Indigenous communities. More than this, by humbly documenting the lessons gleaned from the NOW Play partnership project, we extend our work as an example of what it means to honour and listen to our community partners and work alongside them to co-create knowledge. We begin by discussing key principles from our review of 10 policy documents. We then outline examples to demonstrate our commitment to the core principles of ethical research we identified in our review: (a) just and equitable; (b) reciprocity and relational accountability; (c) alignment with Indigenous worldviews; and (d) self-determination. To offer a vision of partnership research that benefits Indigenous communities, we document the ways we take up the lessons shared by our community partners and co-researchers in the second NOW Play partnership.

### **Frameworks for Ethical Conduct of Research: Guidance from Indigenous Communities and Governments**

In an attempt to protect Indigenous peoples against ethical misconduct, Indigenous communities have been working with granting agencies and academic institutions to publish principles, guidelines, and protocols (Kovach, 2021) to counter objectionable research practices around governance, consent, ownership, and use of data involving Indigenous peoples. These documents are intended to offer guidance to grant reviewers, university researchers, and Indigenous communities on assessing ethical implications of research. However, some of these guidelines can be problematically interpreted because of the inherent disconnect between Indigenous and Western approaches to research and the lack of contextualization that ethical research requires. Kovach (2021) explains, for example, that although granting agencies require that researchers complete a *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS2) certificate (Panel on Research Ethics, 2018), one cannot assume that this means their research will be ethical. Moreover, Chapter 9 of the TCPS2 (“Research Involving the First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples of Canada”) appears to be a supplementary module and not required for the certificate.

In their review of 13 codes and guidelines from multiple countries, Tunón et al. (2016) identified six core ethical principles to guide research: respect, recognition of rights, responsibility as a scholar, mindfulness, participation, and mutual benefits. Herman (2014) found similar principles in his review of 25 documents on Indigenous research ethics, protocols, and guidelines from multiple countries. From the principles of integrity, protection,

and reciprocity, he suggested nine guides to action: open consultation, values, respect, consent, confidentiality, protection, partnership, review, and benefit sharing. Common to both reviews are the ethical principles of participation, benefit sharing, and respect.

We reviewed three international documents (two written by government agencies and one by Indigenous scholars) that serve as frameworks for the ethical conduct of research involving Indigenous peoples in three countries (Canada, Australia, and New Zealand), as well as seven documents written by Indigenous communities in Canada that provide guidelines for Indigenous communities and academic researchers. We selected these documents because many have been cited in previous community-based research studies, and many are written by Indigenous communities living in areas in which we live and work. In the following, we present our synthesis of how ethical research involving Indigenous individuals and communities is conceptualized across these documents. We have organized our discussion around four common principles of ethical research we identified in our review: just and equitable, reciprocity and relational accountability, alignment with Indigenous worldviews, and self-determination (see Table 1 for illustrative examples of each of the four principles). We then use these principles to assess a 14-year partnership project.

**Table 1**

*The Four Ethical Principles With Illustrative Examples from Selected Local, National, and International Policy Documents*

Ethical principle	Illustrative examples
Just and equitable	<p>“This policy acknowledges the important role of Indigenous communities in promoting collective rights, interests and responsibilities that also serve the welfare of individuals” (Panel on Research Ethics, 2018, p. 111).</p> <p>“Inform and get individual permissions from individuals who are to be involved in a research project” (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami [ITK], n.d., p. 22).</p> <p>“No coercion, constraint, or undue inducements shall be used to obtain consent” (Mi’kmaw Ethics Watch [MEW], n.d., Obligations and Protocols section, para. 5).</p> <p>“Researchers must respect privacy, protocols, and dignity of the individual and the collective rights of First Nations” (Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre [MFNERC], 2014, p. 6).</p> <p>“The well-being of research subjects including maintaining anonymity and confidentiality shall be the paramount concern” (Six Nations of the Grand River [SNGR], 2014, 4.1.g).</p>

**Table 1 (cont'd)**

*The Four Ethical Principles With Illustrative Examples from Selected Local, National, and International Policy Documents*

Ethical principle	Illustrative examples
Reciprocity and relational accountability	<p>“Research should be relevant to community needs and priorities. The research should benefit the participating community (e.g., training, local hiring, recognition of contributors, return of results), as well as extend the boundaries of knowledge” (Panel on Research Ethics, 2018, p. 124).</p> <p>“Appropriately attribute, acknowledge, and resource Indigenous contributions to research” (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies [AIATSIS], 2020, p. 19).</p> <p>“Dissemination of results will be focused on matters of relevance to Māori with information directed to an end use that shows clear benefits for Māori” (Hudson et al., 2010, p. 8).</p> <p>“Whenever possible, provide training to community members” (ITK, n.d., p. 23)</p> <p>“Aboriginal Knowledge should be accessed and used in ways that empowers First Nations communities” (Assembly of First Nations [AFN], 2009, p. 6).</p> <p>“Invit[ing] Mi’kmaw participation in the interpretation and/or review of any conclusions drawn from the research to ensure accuracy and sensitivity of interpretation” (MEW, n.d., Obligations and Protocols section, para. 11).</p> <p>“Seek out opportunities to provide training and skills development” (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, &amp; Nunavut Research Institute [ITK &amp; NRI], 2006, p. 8).</p>
Alignment with Indigenous worldviews	<p>“Researchers have an obligation to become informed about, and to respect, the relevant customs and codes of research practice that apply in the particular community or communities affected by their research” (Panel on Research Ethics, 2018, p. 118).</p> <p>“Researchers should not seek to qualify Aboriginal Knowledge or devalue its worth or the worth of its holders” (AFN, 2009, p. 6).</p> <p>“Engage with Indigenous perspectives, worldviews, and ways of operating” (AITSIS, 2020, p. 18).</p> <p>“Recognize spiritual integrity and Māori philosophy” (Hudson et al., 2010, p. 12).</p> <p>“Make serious efforts to incorporate traditional knowledge whenever relevant throughout the project” (ITK, n.d., p. 23).</p>

**Table 1 (cont'd)**

*The Four Ethical Principles With Illustrative Examples from Selected Local, National, and International Policy Documents*

Ethical principle	Illustrative examples
Alignment with Indigenous worldviews (cont'd)	<p>“Make serious efforts to incorporate traditional knowledge whenever relevant throughout the project” (ITK, n.d., p. 23).</p> <p>“Respect local cultures, customs, and authority” (ITK &amp; NRI, 2006, p. 8).</p> <p>“All research scholars shall assume the responsibility to learn the protocols and traditions of the local people ... and to be knowledgeable and sensitive to cultural practices and issues that ensure respect and accommodation to local norms” (MEW, n.d., Obligations and Protocols section, para. 4).</p> <p>“The research must respect the strengths, cultures, languages, and traditional norms of First Nations and involve them whenever possible” (MFNERC, 2014, p. 7).</p> <p>“Research shall be respectful of community life, norms, and customs” (SNGR, 2014, 4.1.e)</p>
Self-determination	<p>“Researchers should engage the community in identifying Elders or other recognized knowledge holders to participate in the design and execution of research, and the interpretation of findings in the context of cultural norms and traditional knowledge” (Panel on Research Ethics, 2018, p. 126).</p> <p>“Work together in full partnership with researchers and managers on research involving Aboriginal Knowledge” (AFN, 2009, p. 6).</p> <p>“Be able to demonstrate Indigenous leadership” (AITSIS, 2020, p. 18).</p> <p>“First Nations people, their communities, and representative bodies controls how information is collected, used, and disclosed” (First Nations Information Governance Centre [FNIGC], 2014, p. 5).</p> <p>“First Nations must have access to information and data about themselves and their communities” (FNIGC, 2014, p. 5).</p> <p>“Develop mechanisms for Māori to have a governance role in planning, developing, and executing research, and Māori control within the project” (Hudson et al., 2010, p. 8).</p> <p>“You and your community can help make research responsible and useful by negotiating a research relationship” (ITK, n.d., p. 23).</p> <p>“All research on the Mi’kmaq is to be approached as a negotiated partnership ... where participants shall be recognized and treated as equals in the research done instead of as ‘informants’ or ‘subjects’” (MEW, n.d., Obligations and Protocols section, para. 2).</p>

**Table 1 (cont'd)**

*The Four Ethical Principles With Illustrative Examples from Selected Local, National, and International Policy Documents*

Ethical principle	Illustrative examples
Self-determination (cont'd)	<p>“Researchers have to respect the sovereignty, jurisdiction, and rights of First Nations” (MFNERC, 2014, p. 6).</p> <p>“No research data is to be sold, transferred, or reused without prior approval of Research Ethics Committee” (SNGR, 2014, 4.1.i).</p>

### ***Just and Equitable***

Common across the documents is the idea that ethical research minimizes harm and highlights the benefits to individuals and communities. Benefits should be meaningful to Indigenous community members and should endure beyond the time frame of the formal research project. As in most research, before commencing data collection, researchers are required to obtain the free, prior, and informed consent of potential participants. In other words, researchers may not compel or tempt individuals into participating, nor may they hint at any ramifications to an individual if they choose not to participate. Researchers must inform individuals of their right to decline the invitation to participate and that they have the right to withdraw at any time. Individuals must agree to participate in the research prior to the commencement of data collection. For research with Indigenous peoples and communities, it is suggested that researchers provide written and oral descriptions of the research in an individual’s first language and in English (MEW, n.d.). This should also be done in a setting that reduces perceived power relations and is comfortable for potential participants. As an example, this might take place in a familiar community setting and alongside an Elder or community member to offer guidance and support. In publications stemming from the research, researchers must disclose how participants gave their permission to consent (ITK, n.d.).

Ethical research also addresses issues of privacy and confidentiality in relation to the dissemination of results. Researchers must respect the privacy and dignity of the individual and the collective rights of the community (MFNERC, 2014). It is recommended that all parties address these tensions early in the process (Panel on Research Ethics, 2018).

Finally, ethical research with/in Indigenous communities must demonstrate benefits to individuals and communities. We understand this as *relational accountability*, which we discuss below.



### ***Reciprocity (Relational Accountability)***

Reciprocity is at the heart of ethical research practices and is characterized by relational accountability. Reciprocity within research engagement means that the research has a direct benefit to the Indigenous community and participants. The focus of the research must be relevant to the needs and priorities of the community (Panel on Research Ethics, 2018) and the research process should enhance the capacity and skills of Indigenous community members (MFNERC, 2014). As an example, the documents suggest individuals could receive research training (ITK, 2002), and community members might be invited to participate in all levels of the research process—from the planning and design stage, to data collection such as interviewing, to analysis, reviewing findings, and documenting conclusions (MEW, n.d.; SNGR, 2014). Furthermore, results of the research should be culturally aligned with, and empower, the community (AFN, 2009). This is best achieved when academic partners acknowledge the community's contribution to the research (AITSIS, 2020), ensure the community has access to the results (AFN, 2009), and mobilize the results in the community (Hudson et al., 2010). Knowledge dissemination and mobilization should involve language translation, so it is most accessible to all community members and presented through various formats such as workshops and community presentations. Dissemination sites might also include local media, interactive multi-media and websites, as well as posters and newsletters (ITK & NRI, 2006). Moreover, research should always be gifted back to the community through culturally specific ways of disseminating knowledge. This might involve a community feast and research presentation but will likely vary from one community to the next. As Smith (2021) stated, "sharing is a responsibility of research. ... For Indigenous researchers, sharing is about demystifying knowledge and information and speaking in plain terms to the community" (p. 183). Thus, Indigenous research must be presented in a way that speaks to the hearts and minds of Indigenous communities.

### ***Aligning with Indigenous Worldviews***

Ethical research values Indigenous perspectives, worldviews, and protocols. This form of research is culturally relevant to the local community in that it respects the community's language, culture, and traditions. Researchers have the responsibility to learn the norms and customs of the community (ITK & NRI, 2006; SNGR, 2014) and become knowledgeable of and sensitive to their cultural practices and traditions (MEW, n.d.). This is best achieved when researchers reach out to Elders and Knowledge Holders early in the relationship (Panel on Research Ethics, 2018). Researchers should endeavour to incorporate Indigenous knowledges and methodologies in their research design when appropriate to do so. As part of this commitment, researchers must also honour and respect the integrity of Indigenous knowledges in their research design and avoid cultural appropriation. To align the research with Indigenous worldviews, Indigenous researchers should develop research partnerships and seek out research team members from the participating community. Therefore, aligning with Indigenous worldviews will involve different processes from community to community. Researchers must

continually strive to protect the integrity of Indigenous knowledge and not attempt to qualify or devalue its worth (AFN, 2009).

### ***Self Determination***

Within these documents, ethical research is conceptualized as a negotiated partnership in which Indigenous peoples and communities participate as equals (AIATSIS, 2020; Hudson et al., 2010; ITK & NRI, 2006; MEW, n.d.; Panel on Research Ethics, 2018). Such partnerships enable Indigenous communities to take a governance role in the planning, developing, and executing of the research (Hudson et al., 2010). This form of partnership is best achieved when academic and Indigenous partners establish a relationship prior to commencing a research project, negotiating and clearly articulating the terms and undertakings of both parties within a formal research agreement (AIATSIS, 2020; IKT, n.d.; Panel on Research Ethics, 2018).

The documents also highlight the fact that Indigenous communities collectively possess their information. Consequently, they have the right to manage and make decisions regarding who can access their information and how their information may be collected, used, and disclosed (FNIGC, 2014). Likewise, Indigenous communities have the right to access any information collected about their communities and about individuals within their community (FNIGC, 2014). It is the responsibility of the researcher to disseminate research findings in ways that are culturally relevant, accessible, and meet the needs and desires of the community (Smith, 2021). Indigenous partners retain ownership of and control over their knowledge and how it is interpreted (AFN, 2009). As such, they must have full access to any research or products of research that include their Indigenous knowledge (AFN, 2009) and in a format appropriate for the community (MFNERC, 2014).

### **The NOW Play Partnership Project: Reflections on Ethical Principles for Research with Indigenous Peoples**

The following reflections on lessons learned from the NOW Play project are guided by ethical principles for research with Indigenous peoples in the reviewed documents. We use these principles to organize our discussion and offer key insights gleaned from our work with/in partnering communities. To be clear, our reflections on ethical principles for research with Indigenous peoples are governed by the lessons offered by our Indigenous community partners. We are humbled by these lessons and committed to the deep listening, intentional relationship building, and development of friendships that have characterized our collective research journeys.

### ***Ensuring Research with Indigenous peoples Is Just and Equitable***

Integral to our shared interests as a bi-epistemic research team is the need to attend to principles that support our commitment to ethical engagement throughout our research

endeavour and we know this involves establishing relationships with the communities where we will enact our research. Similar to what has previously been reported in descriptions of partnership research involving Indigenous peoples and communities (e.g., Adams et al., 2014; Ball & Janyst, 2008; Castleden et al., 2010; Riddell et al., 2017), in our experience, developing relationships and taking responsibility for the well-being of participants and their communities are central. We believe the 7-year time span of each NOW Play partnership project provides the extended time needed to develop trusting relationships with participants and with key educational leaders who have a stake in the research outcomes.

Partnership research with Indigenous communities involves two forms of consent: one from the community in which the research will be conducted, and another from individuals who will be sharing information. In the first NOW Play project, prior to entering classrooms in Indigenous communities, we received written consent from the Education Directors and, in two First Nation communities, from the Education Councils of the communities. Once in the school, we asked interested adults (e.g., teachers, early childhood educators, cultural teachers) to sign individual consent forms. The forms were written in English only. Given that our second project focuses on Indigenous language learning, we have allocated sufficient funds in the budget for translators to ensure smooth communication in languages of all who are involved.

Classroom teachers sent home written consent forms (English) to parents asking for their consent to include their children in the research activities (i.e., video-recording their children's activities, taking images of their children's texts). To maintain confidentiality, we assigned pseudonyms to the communities, schools, teachers, and children.

In the second NOW Play project, we are making requests to the Education Council administration to be included on the agenda of the Council in order to request permission to carry out the research. Along with sending summaries of the research to Council members in advance of the Council meeting, we make formal presentations about the NOW Play project, answering Council members' questions, and discussing ways in which the project might align with the Council's and community's goals. In one First Nation community, we have met with the Education Council, submitted an ethics protocol to the regional research review committee, and following approval from this committee, have met with the Chief and Council of the community, gaining approval to begin research activities when pandemic restrictions are lifted. We identified benefits for participating teachers, early childhood educators, and parents, and for children. As examples, participating adults will benefit by taking up a leadership role within their community; by contributing to the development of teaching practices that integrate Indigenous language, culture, and knowledge; and by having opportunities to network across provincial, territorial, and international borders. Participating children will benefit by developing

a stronger cultural identity and deepening their learning of their community's Indigenous language, and by enhancing their literacy learning.

### ***Ensuring Relational Accountability (Reciprocity) in Research with Indigenous Peoples***

Based on our experience, we believe collaborative action research (CAR) is reciprocal in that participating teachers and early childhood educators (ECEs) benefit from the professional learning and relationships that come from working and learning with fellow educators and university researchers. In the first NOW Play project, research practitioners took the lead in implementing, assessing, and refining pedagogical practices and tools in their classrooms, contributed to articles published in professional journals (e.g., Peterson et al., 2018; Peterson et al., 2021), and presented with university researchers at local, regional, national, and international conferences and meetings. Moreover, participants, especially those who have been conducting CAR for 3 or more years, have been invited to take up leadership roles as mentor teachers in non-Indigenous communities, and as acting Education Director in one Indigenous community.

Because of the focus on individuals' needs and priorities, CAR positions practitioners *and* university researchers as knowledge-creators (Bradbury-Huang, 2010), each valuing the knowledge created in the action research process. In this way, we suggest CAR transforms notions of what counts as legitimate research (Peterson et al., 2016). For example, in the first NOW Play project, research practitioners uploaded to the project's data storage site only those videos and images that they wanted to include in the project. Additionally, they determined what data to include in the analysis and how findings would be reported.

We also understand information sharing as providing benefits to the community. In the first NOW Play project, participating teachers/ECEs, and community partners came together with university researchers to showcase the action research at the end of each school year. To communicate project activities, we emailed project updates to team members and research practitioners twice-yearly. Additionally, in September of each year, those parents who signed consent forms for their children's participation received summaries in English of research findings for projects in which their children had been involved in the previous school year.

Ethical research with Indigenous peoples aims to shift the balance of power away from the university and towards the community (Stiegman & Castleden, 2015). Egalitarian relationships, open exchanges of information, and shared decision-making that flows back and forth between participants and university researchers provide the foundation for respectful partnerships. Each contributor in research relationships brings unique perspectives, experience, and expertise. In Indigenous research, reciprocity takes a "circular form" that begins with an acknowledgment of a "kinship and coexistence with the world" (Kuokkanen, 2007, p. 38) and "a sense of

responsibility to look after others on an ongoing basis beyond the timeframe of the formal research project” (McGregor & Marker, 2018, p. 323). In the second NOW Play project, to invoke the principle of relational accountability, we will strive to engage in more of a two-way sharing of information; for example, asking to be on the agendas of Indigenous communities’ education council meetings at least once each year in order to invite input and to share what has been learned throughout the school year in the collaborative action research.

### ***Ensuring Research With Indigenous Peoples Aligns With Indigenous Worldviews***

Underlying both NOW Play partnership projects is a deep respect for participants’ worldviews, values, knowledge, experiences, and practices. We believe our collaborative action research (CAR) methodology is consistent with Indigenous epistemologies valuing not only “self-knowledge but also social and communal knowledge” (Cajete, 2017, p. 114). Recognizing experience as a legitimate way of knowing, CAR methods allow us to “trouble the connections between how knowledge is created, what knowledge is produced, and who is entitled to engage in these processes” (Brown & Strega, 2005, p. 7), ensuring that research practices and outcomes are reflective of local traditional ways and traditions (Absolon, 2011). We understand our participants’ action research projects as reflecting cultural practices connected to their northern landscapes and to their small rural schools. For example, in the first NOW Play project, teachers collaborated with the Indigenous language teacher in Poplar Lake First Nation, an Anishnaabe community in northwestern Ontario<sup>1</sup> to develop play-based language- and writing-supportive activities following from a blueberry picking experience in the bush adjacent to the school. In another northern Ontario Anishnaabe community, Cougar Creek First Nation, an Aboriginal Head Start teacher demonstrated, using an Indigenous doll, practices for caring for babies, such as carrying them in a *tikinagan* (cradleboard). To assist teachers and early childhood educators who took the role of research practitioners in collecting data in their pre-school, kindergarten, and Grade 1 classrooms, we provided them with smart phones set up on tripods. We visited each community every 6 to 8 weeks and together, we analyzed data, refined the pedagogical practices and materials based on the analysis, and set new goals when appropriate.

In both NOW Play projects, community members (i.e., teachers, ECEs, parents) participating in CAR are considered research practitioners. Drawing from their own cultural and professional experiences, they establish learning goals that in turn shape the collection and analysis of data within their action research initiative (i.e., trying a new teaching approach or tool). Their interactions with children in their classrooms and Aboriginal Head Start programs are largely informed by the findings of their action research projects. Consequently, we consult with the research practitioners before publishing research reports about the play interactions in their early childhood setting.

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<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms to protect the identities of participating children and teachers.

In the second NOW Play project, we plan to draw on Indigenous research methods, such as holding sharing circles when meeting with Elders and other community members and offerings of gifts of tobacco when meeting with research practitioners (Kovach, 2021). Valuing the uniqueness of each participating Indigenous community's language and culture, we will strive to be flexible in collaboratively developing community engagement, recruitment, and research practices that are appropriate for each community.

### ***Research With Indigenous Peoples Supports Indigenous Self-determination***

Through a collaborative process with participants from the previous project, including Indigenous educational leaders from northern Indigenous communities and staff from Indigenous educator certification programs, we co-developed the second research program. As a result, project goals are closely aligned with community partners' mandates of supporting Indigenous language revitalization through developing capacity in Indigenous communities, in terms of knowledge of Indigenous languages, culture, and worldviews, and the integration of this knowledge into professional practice and everyday interactions with children at home.

Indigenous community partners are central to the respectful recruitment of educators, families, and community members in Indigenous communities. Parents/caregivers, early childhood educators, educational assistants, and teachers, together with Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and other Indigenous community members, will take up research practitioner roles. They will participate in both knowledge creation, while engaged in collaborative action research activities, and in the dissemination and wider implementation of the resulting toolkit within the extended group of communities. These team members contribute valuable knowledge about their communities' Indigenous languages, culture, and worldviews, and about the families and children, and stories of community members. An Elder from one of the Indigenous partners will guide all partnership activities.

The second NOW Play partnership includes the following community partners:

- Three certification and professional learning programs for Indigenous early childhood educators (ECEs) working in daycares, Aboriginal Head Start programs, and kindergartens;
- Two service providers supporting teachers' professional learning and daily classroom work in northern, rural, and remote Indigenous communities;
- One northern First Nation Board of Education and two northern school divisions that have service agreements with First Nations education councils;
- One non-profit organization established to support Ojibwe language revitalization through creating and distributing high-quality Indigenous language materials;
- Two companies providing speech-language pathology services and language resources; and
- One provincial professional association supporting ECEs' professional learning.

The Project Director invited all partners and university applicants to participate in the development of the partnership project. At a face-to-face 2-day meeting, all partners and university co-applicants contributed to the development of the research design, governance model, our *Research Collaboration Agreement*, and a document detailing expected outcomes of the second NOW Play project. We also engaged in activities to introduce new partners and co-applicants, and to deepen relationships with existing partners and co-applicants. All partners and co-applicants made suggestions to improve the overall research design in order to optimize these benefits.

As stated in the *Research Collaboration Agreement*, we drew from Kirkness and Barnhardt's (1991) Rs of Indigenous research as inspiration for our collaboration. Kirkness and Barnhardt's seminal discussion of "the implications of the 'Four Rs' of respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility" (p. 6) as they apply to Indigenous peoples' experiences of higher education has been taken up by numerous Indigenous scholars in relation to ethical research engagement with Indigenous communities (Brant, 2017). Pidgeon (2019) adds a fifth R, reverence, and we attend to this by honouring Pidgeon's work that reminds us of the place of sacred knowledge. This integral part of doing research with Indigenous communities means that we acknowledge the spiritual elements that might come through in the research engagement as Elders and Traditional Knowledge Keepers guide research circles and recognize that these ceremonial or sacred components are not meant for us as researchers and do not "belong to the academy" (Pidgeon, 2019, p. 432). We honour and respect the reverence that manifests within our research study and understand its place in relation to respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility.

In accordance with the *Research Collaboration Agreement*, we co-created governance procedures and communication measures that are responsible and relevant to the goals and contexts of all members of the project. Governance of the second NOW Play project supports self-determination in that data will be co-created and shared in consultation with communities, and co-owned by partners and participating communities and schools. All will have access to data throughout the duration of the project. Permission from research practitioners, partners, and participating children's parents/caregivers will be needed to share the data outside the project team. Additionally, devoting time and resources to developing relationships will be central to all governance interactions. The unique processes and protocols of each participating community will be respected and followed.

Local participation in governance will be ensured through the mechanism of the Core Partnership Committee (CPC). The CPC will consist of an Indigenous Elder from an Indigenous community partner, individuals from the various Local Partnership Teams (LPTs), the project manager, and the project director. The CPC will develop and assess achievement of progress indicators and overall project goals.

Local Partnership Teams (LPTs) are essential to our model of governance. Prior to undertaking any collaborative action research, we will form a Local Partnership Team (LPT) with each of our partner organizations. Each LPT will be composed of (a) a co-applicant and/or a staff member from a partner organization, (b) the project director, and, very importantly, (c) research practitioners from participating northern Indigenous and rural communities associated with the partner organization. The research practitioners will ensure the perspectives, knowledge, and the ways of teaching and learning of their communities are integral to decision-making and communication within their LPT and across the project.

Successful practices in the previous project will be carried into the proposed project. For example, the leadership team within each LPT will engage in collaborative decision-making and ensure two-way communication with all research practitioners in their LPT; communication across LPTs will occur at whole-project meetings and via LPT leaders as they share information from quarterly meetings of the CPC; and biannual updates to which all LPTs contribute, will be distributed to everyone in the project.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Our shared work has brought us to a collective space of reflecting on the oft-quoted words expressed in Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (2021) *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*:

From the vantage point of the colonized, a position from which I write, and choose to privilege, the term "research" is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, "research," is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world's vocabulary. (p. 1)

We are also aware that we write from the privileged position of researchers and continue to reflect on what that means given the outsider/insider positionalities of us and our community partners who are our co-researchers. We recognize that the process of learning how to enact Indigenous perspectives on ethical research in our project is ongoing; it must be intentional, and it must involve vulnerability and humility. We should always be listening to and observing the modeling provided by Indigenous community members who are part of the NOW Play partnership.

The principles of ethical research are alive in the assumptions and practices that form the warp and weft of the NOW Play project. In the time that has elapsed since the first NOW Play project began, partner Indigenous communities have developed local ethical protocols, and consultation beyond the schools is integral to NOW Play research. Community leaders teach us about how research will be conducted in their communities through the questions they ask about proposed practices. We would not consider initiating a branch of the project without



consulting members of the participating Indigenous communities. Dissemination of research findings no longer takes place without invitations to participating teachers, early childhood educators, and community members to collaborate in the planning of what will be reported, and the intended audience and purpose. As we move forward with NOW Play 2, we humbly pause and reflect to ensure that our research aligns with the four principles gleaned from our review of the aforementioned policy documents. To this end we offer closing thoughts with the understanding that our conclusions always bring us back full circle to our opening questions. We continue to ask, is our work just and equitable? Do we attend to the principles of reciprocity and relational accountability? Does our research align with Indigenous worldviews? Finally, does the NOW Play partnership project foster self-determination? Our commitment to enacting ethical and relational partnership research with Indigenous communities is intentional and ongoing and we continue to receive new lessons as we move forward. This process did not end with the shift from the first project to the second project, or with our review of the policy documents; rather we continue to reflect deeply about our responsibilities to our partnering communities, and the youngest generations that will benefit most from this research. The Indigenous research panel that occurred in May 2022 is an example of our ongoing commitment. More than this, it offered a collective intellectual hub for bringing these lessons forward and to dream future collaborations that are co-created with partnering Indigenous communities. It is in this spirit that we continue to be reflexive in our work and humbly attend to the lessons so graciously offered by our community partners and co-researchers.

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