

# LOOKING BACK TO FIND A WAY FORWARD: TEACHING FROM MY ANCESTORS

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*Looking back and learning from Indigenous knowledges in education holds the key to supporting change in educational spaces today to be more inclusive and wholistic. Indigenous practices, passed down from generation to generation, hold important knowledge that can be used in classroom teaching. My hope is that by using this Indigenous lens of education, a path for change will be created in the current colonial education system. In this paper, I examine how I view classroom teaching through my own Indigenous worldview and with the support of those Indigenous scholars that have been doing this work for many years before me. I highlight the ways in which Indigenous knowledge systems support education and learning in today's classrooms.*

Indigenous Knowledge (IK) is part of the collective genius of humanity of Indigenous peoples that exists in the context of their learning and knowing from the places where they have lived, hunted, explored, migrated, farmed, raised families, built communities, and survived for centuries despite sustained attacks on the peoples, their languages, and cultures... Traditions, ceremonies, and daily observations are all integral parts of the learning process, allowing for spirit-connecting processes to enable the gifts, visions, and spirits to emerge in each person. (Battiste & Youngblood Henderson, 2009, p. 5)

Looking at the work of Mi'kmaq scholar Marie Battiste and Bear Clan of the Chickasaw nation scholar James (Sa'ke'j) Youngblood Henderson (2009), we can see the importance of looking to Indigenous knowledge systems to support education today. In the following work, I am looking back to my ancestors and how they taught their next generations before settlers arrived, by using the understanding that those who have come before us learned from those before them, and those before them, and so on. Using an Indigenous lens of education that has been passed down from generation to generation, my hope is that we will be able to see a path to changing the colonial system that is in place. In this paper I am constructing how I view classroom teaching, through my own Indigenous worldview and with the support by those Indigenous scholars that have been doing this work for many years before me. In preparation for this work, I will prepare you, the reader with what is known to me from my cultural teaching as "setting the table," this is preparing the work by honouring and acknowledging those whose shoulders I stand upon. My name is Carolyn Roberts, my birth name is Stacey Baker. I am a direct descendant of the hereditary Chief Hunter Jack of the N'Quat'qua nation, he is my great-great Grandfather. I am also a child of the 60's scoop. This was a governmental practice that was

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in place from the 1960's to the 1980's of removing Indigenous children from their homes and adopting them into non-Indigenous homes, as a way to assimilate them into the western European culture. I was stolen from my mother and community as a new born baby. Under the Indian Act and colonial government, I am a member of the Squamish Nation, because my mother married a Squamish man. Through my matriarchal lines, I am Interior Salish from the Thevarge family of the N'Quat'qua nation. On my father's side I am Stó:lō from the Kelly family of the Tzeschten nation. I come from a long line of Indigenous ancestors from what is known today as Southern British Columbia. I returned back home in my early twenties and began my journey to remember who I am and whose shoulders I stand upon in the work I do as an educator and speaker. Throughout my life I have had many opportunities to be in many different spaces as an educator, administrator, and a student. With all of these experiences I have had the opportunity to think deeper about how education unfolds in the classrooms of today, as I have been educating and been a student in classrooms for most of my life. Knowing that the BC education system is built upon the western colonial model of education (Dion, 2022; Battiste, 2013; Parent, 2014), my schooling has been a place of colonial violence and trauma throughout my life as a student and as an educator. I am often left to wonder, how can I as an Indigenous educator shift my teaching practice to be more wholistic and authentic to who I am as an Indigenous person? It is in wanting to shift my practice away from the colonial way of teaching, that I have been taught, to an Indigenous lens that I have within me to remember that I take up this work. Now that I have "set the table" by situating myself within the work, I will now share my learnings of how Indigenous knowledge can support teaching practice.

The colonization of this place now known as Canada, has been devastating to the Indigenous people of this land. Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Simpson (2017) and Papatash Cree scholar Dwayne Donald (2009) speak of colonization as the severing of relationships: severing Indigenous ties to family, land, waterways, communities, and to each other as humans. To counter the act of colonization, I am thinking with an anti-colonial lens in my work as an educator. An anti-colonial lens not only includes the act of decolonizing education and teacher practice, it also includes the story of this land known today as Canada. Anti-colonial speaks to the harm colonization has done to the land, the waterways, the animals, flora, and fauna. It also speaks to how colonization has violently removed Indigenous people from their land, stolen their children, and continues to commit cultural genocide on the first peoples of this land (Truth & Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Anti-colonial speaks to the continuation of harm the colonial government inflicts on Indigenous people as well as the oppression and racism that our current society is built upon (Marsh & Karabit, 2017). It also speaks to the harms of colonization in classrooms, in Indigenous communities, and throughout our government systems. Settler scholar George Dei (2008) speaks to the core of anti-colonial in his work. Dei believes that the core of understanding anti-colonial is that colonization not only denies other perspectives and knowledges, it also denies others' histories and traditions. In summary, anti-colonial speaks to the larger picture of what colonization has done and continues to do on a daily basis to the Indigenous peoples of this land. This lens helps me to think more broadly on the key aspects on what I believe needs to change in colonial classrooms. It supports me as an Indigenous educator to bring other perspectives into colonized classrooms to change the narrative being told in the school system today.

### **Becoming Teacher Ready**

When thinking critically about my work as an educator, the words that I use to center my own personal practice of pedagogy is truth, knowledge, and power. Using these words as guide posts in my teaching, I am always circling back and contemplating the lens with which I teach through. Part of my work is “setting the table” for my teaching practice. Just like what I did at the beginning of this article, preparing the reader for the work, I need to prepare myself as an educator before I teach.

When starting the preparation work of setting the table, I look to Stó:lō academic Jo Ann Archibald (2008) in how she uses the term story ready, preparing ourselves before we step into stories. Archibald speaks of getting story ready by taking the time to make meaning of the work being done. When getting story ready, I am taking the time to listen with an open heart and mind to the story. I also need to learn about myself as a learner and a human being. I then need to take the time and to learn about the knowledge being shared, and consider how I, as an educator, will share the knowledge. I use this reflective process as a tool to get me teacher ready to teach my students. Lummi scholar Michael Marker (2004) speaks to preparatory work in his scholarship, he describes this as the preparatory work of ceremonies to be completed before the work or education starts. Marker (2004) reminds us, “Knowledge is powerful and potentially dangerous if one is not ready to receive it properly; a deep and sublime sense of relationship is required” (p. 106). For me this speaks to the importance of being teacher ready before stepping into a classroom. Haida scholar Sara Davidson also speaks to preparing yourself for the work. The work Davidson has done with her father Robert Davidson in the article “Make your mind strong: My father’s insights into academic success” (2016) speaks directly to how Haida knowledge systems emphasize the wholistic process of looking inward to prepare yourself for the work. I connect with this in my teaching practice by taking a pause point as a way to prepare my mind, spirit, and heart for my work in teaching. This preparation work is what I see as essential to the work that needs to be done in anti-colonial education.

### **Building Relationships**

Along with the importance of the prework in making our minds, hearts, and spirits strong, the work in relationships is also a critical piece of anti-colonial education. Looking to those who have come before me in the work of relationships are Heiltsuk academic Justin Wilson and Coast Salish academic Aaron Nelson-Moody. Their work in transforming classrooms using the potlatch ceremony as their guide, speaks to the importance of a relationship-based educational space. Wilson and Nelson-Moody (2019) teach us that when creating a community, we need to put in the effort to create a safe place for all learners in our care. I have seen students struggle to learn from people that they do not like or feel like the teacher does not like them. This speaks to the essential piece of building relationships. In many Indigenous communities we speak of all being related. Wilson and Nelson-Moody (2019) speak to this as being uncles in the classroom to their students. This speaks to my heart and how I want to be in my classroom, an auntie, one who will tell it like it is, from my heart and with care as a relation.

## **Changing the Learning Environment**

Looking at these concepts as an Indigenous educator, I see them as teachings that have come before the colonization of Indigenous people and this land. Ceremony and intention with the work to be done, has always been part of the process of teaching those within our community. This holds a great deal of importance in the work I do. It means that I personally need to be teacher prepared for my classrooms and also be in the mindset that my classroom is relationship based. Part of my role is holding myself accountable for the work I do in my classroom and being accountable to the students in my care. This means that I need to be personally taking the responsibility to be intentional and mindful in my work as an educator. Settler academic William Ayer (2019) speaks about each student being unique, brilliant, and able to learn if we focus on the relationships within our classrooms. My focus is setting up learning communities by creating the space for my students to learn and grow together by talking, researching, sharing knowledge, and thinking through problems together. Relationality and care are key components to creating this kind of space in my classroom. Settler academic Nel Noddings (2012) work focuses on the importance of care in the classroom and speaks to the importance of relationships in the work of educators. Knowing that both the students and the teachers are contributors in the classroom, makes it a rich environment for learning. My room is always set up in a circle, which shifts the colonial power of hierarchy. It places no one in front or behind each other. Being equal in the space, including myself as the facilitator, allows for the hierarchy of power to be taken away. For me, this connects to my guide post of power. Holding space to shift the balance of power from me being the knowledge holder and the students as vessels to fill up, to holding myself accountable to seeing the students as knowledge holders as well in our learning space together. I guide the conversations and topics, but I am also there as an active participant in learning, alongside the community of learners. This connects to my guide post of knowledge, sharing knowledge from everyone in our learning community, means we all benefit from each other's lived experience.

## **Creating a Culturally Responsive Environment**

Once I have set up the environment of care, my focus then shifts to who is in my classroom: how am I making sure that what I am teaching is being culturally sensitive to the students in my care? Black academic Gholdy Muhammad (2020) speaks of this through her work of culturally and historically responsive literacy. Her work focuses on students' identity and historical background in their learning. Muhammad (2020) states:

If they [students] are going to enjoy a quality of life, and live alongside other people, they must deeply know themselves and the histories and truths of other diverse people. Knowing about the cultures of other people teaches them how to respect, love, and live in harmony with others who don't look or know the world as they do. (p. 67)

Muhammad's work focuses on seeing each student as a whole human being. Their culture and background are the keys to understanding how we can connect to the student and their learning. The focus on relationships allows for each student to see their own brilliance within their education. Learning about the wide variety of perspectives and worldviews of all students

creates the space of respect for every student in the classroom. This connects to my guide post of knowledge, knowing our students and allowing them to be who they are in the classroom, allows the space for us to learn about each other's lived experiences. This also helps students to see each other as human beings which helps students treat each other with a deeper amount of care. Wilson & Nelson-Moody (2019) speak to the importance of bringing cultural diversity into the classroom, allowing for all students to see themselves represented in the curriculum. By doing this, it also gives everyone the opportunity to learn about other cultures and traditions. It supports a broader perspective and viewpoint of the world rather than the traditional narrow western colonial viewpoint.

Some other work that I do before I set foot in each class is asking myself some questions: How will I invite people into my classroom today? How will I create space in the classroom to be welcoming, comfortable, and accessible for all my students? Who are the students in my class and how can I support their learning in my classroom?

Asking these questions helps me keep myself in check and focus on taking care of the students in my care. Knowing that my students are the priority sets up the learning environment as a space of care and ready for an exchange of knowledge.

### **Supporting Community Building in the Classroom**

In an anti-colonial classroom, collaboration is a key component for learning together. Sitting in a circle invites conversation and to be fully present with everyone in the room. In the *Anti-Racist Educator Reads* podcast, Onkwehonwe educator Nick Bertrand (2021) speaks of how his elder Roman Mitchell calls this, bundling our minds. Bertrand says that we as humans learn more when we are together, that there is greater power from a collective mind than a single mind when we are learning (Bertrand, 2021). Collaboration and collective learning have great power in the classroom. Sharing with each other what we know and asking questions helps support and engage all learners within the space (Noddings, 2012). The anti-colonial classroom centers the work around learning with and from each other. This is what I see as the greater good, it allows for all students to grow and learn together. Creating the space to be open and collaborative supports increased learning which is for the greater good of all in the space (Kyndt, Raes, Lismont, Timmers, Cascallar, & Dochy, 2013). This is the opposite of a colonial classroom where students are judged and graded separately, thinking and learning is a quiet one-person job, and it is not encouraged to learn from other students, only the educator. I agree with Mi'kmaq scholar Marie Battiste (2005) when she speaks of Canadian colonial society being marinated in eurocentrism. Today's classrooms are also marinated in colonial power with a top-down dominating style of so-called teaching. I was crippled as a student in these spaces. It brought me to who I am today, wanting to change classrooms for the next generations to come, deriving support from my ancestors and how they guided our learning and upheld us as humans in our communities.

By looking to my ancestors and scholars that have come before me, I have given some examples of the ways Indigenous knowledge systems could support an anti-colonial classroom. Through my Indigenous lens of teaching, I can see that these teachings have the ability to create change in educational spaces for the next generations. The teachings that I spoke about were being teacher ready, setting the classroom up in a circle, creating community spaces for students to be comfortable, safe, and learn from each other, and the opportunity to see the world more broadly. This builds on the teachings of Gixan scholar Cindy Blackstock (2007) as she prompts

us to consider that learning in community creates the space for students to grow in a safe environment. Blackstock (2007) also discusses in her work *The Breath of Life Versus the Embodiment of Life* that “Time is timeless and knowledge is priceless if you believe you are the breath of life versus the embodiment of life” (p. 2). What I believe Blackstock is telling us, is that we are part of life itself, all connected to each other and everything. Looking inward and to our ancestors will provide us the opportunity to prepare our educational spaces for community and relationships to be built. Blackstock (2007) goes on to state: “As Aboriginal peoples, we rely on those who came before us to be right on most things –to have passed on to us the essential knowledge of what it is to be human and to be a member of our group” (p. 2). Connecting this to the teachings I have presented, Indigenous knowledge systems have been in place for thousands of years and they hold many opportunities for all educators to learn from.

For change to happen in classrooms marinated in eurocentrism, we all must take responsibility. I agree with Donald (2009) when he is asking us all to be a part of the process of decolonization as a shared endeavour. One we must all do together in this work in education, if true change in the system is to happen. The lessons I have learned through this process of looking back to my ancestors have helped me become an anti-colonial educator. These lessons are a starting point for other educators to learn about and to do in their classrooms. The process of decolonizing teaching practice and education starts with educators willing to step into anti-colonial work. The hope from this work is that educators will be able to see a way to step into the work as well. My hands are raised for all those brave enough to be change makers in colonial spaces.

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Roberts (2023)

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