

# Engaging Indigenous Urban Youth in Environmental Learning: The Importance of Place Revisited

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## **Abstract**

*This paper describes the evolution of an environmental learning program for Indigenous, urban youth called **Bridging the Gap**. A critical pedagogy of place provides a theoretical framework to engage in practitioner-reflection, exploring the decisions made while revising the original program to make it both culturally and ecologically relevant. Using an action research methodology, the practitioner-researcher resolves to continue to seek resolution to relevant aspects of marginalization in attempt to facilitate reinhabitation for **Bridging the Gap** learners while emphasizing the program's place-specific social, economic, and ecological situatedness.*

## **Résumé**

*Cet article décrit l'évolution d'un programme de sensibilisation à l'environnement pour la jeunesse urbaine autochtone, appelé **Bridging the Gap**. Une pédagogie critique de l'espace fournit un cadre théorique pour éveiller à une réflexion pratique, explorant les décisions prises lors de la révision du programme original pour le rendre à la fois culturellement et écologiquement pertinent. Par une méthodologie de recherche active, le chercheur-praticien décide de continuer de chercher une solution aux aspects pertinents de la marginalisation, pour tenter de faciliter la réhabilitation des apprenants de **Bridging the Gap**, pendant qu'il fait ressortir la place spécifique du programme dans son contexte social, économique et écologique.*

**Keywords:** Indigenous, place, socio-ecological, reinhabitation, marginalization

## Introduction

Life is full of choices. Yet sometimes the most influential aspects of our lives are those that we don't choose. Our families, our ethnicity, the places where we grow up—these reflect the critical “unchoices” in our lives. As an environmental educator, researcher, and human, I am becoming increasingly aware of the impacts these “unchoices” have on me, and the children that I teach and learn with. With this awareness comes a sense of responsibility and a commitment to carefully decide how I develop my environmental learning<sup>1</sup> programs.

Coupled with a growing sense of an “impending environmental crisis” comes a recognition of the human role in contributing to it. Indeed, this sense

of crisis has historically been a powerful impetus for environmental learning. Transforming behaviours and relationships with the environment, and ultimately developing individual and community capacity to actively engage in environmental stewardship, is generally regarded as environmental learning's ultimate goal (Hungerford & Volk, 1990; Tilbury, 1995). However, there are various mechanisms, strategies, and techniques employed in environmental learning to achieve this goal.

As an environmental educator, I am determined to think carefully about the choices I make when developing programs, as I become critically aware of the various influences that impact my decision making process. Non-formal environmental learning programs targeting school age children frequently seek to meet curriculum standards from formal education, thereby becoming accountable with a larger educational system. When striving to meet these curriculum outcomes and "fit" within other national and/or international mandates, I must question: How relevant are these standards within a local context, and to my specific place?<sup>2</sup>

As the field of environmental learning evolves and our societies become increasingly diverse and complex, I am mindful that all education is political and inherently value laden. All rational thought in today's post-colonial contexts requires questioning of context, values, and relativity (Willinsky, 1998). To adequately accommodate a multiplicity of views requires consideration that, "curricula are created by people within temporal, political, cultural, economic, and cultural contexts," (Ornstein, & Hunkins, 2004, p. 62), with models and techniques, "filtered through a political or social lens, especially race, class, and gender" (p. 91). These complex issues must be considered when seeking to teach and plan in inclusive ways. What is worth knowing in environmental learning and who should be involved in deciding this? Whose views are most important? Are we prepared to be critical of national and/or international mandates, or even challenge them? Would it be more beneficial to instead develop teaching and learning strategies that are contextualized at a local level, relevant within a specific place and its unique social, environmental, and economic contexts? This paper will explore these issues while describing my pedagogical decision making process in developing and delivering a program for urban Indigenous youth called Bridging the Gap.

### The Context - Situating the Bridging the Gap Program

Bridging the Gap initially began in 2004, as an innovative, non-formal environmental learning program based in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Winnipeg is the capital of and largest city in the Canadian province of Manitoba. The city lies at the confluence of the Assiniboine and Red Rivers, a historic focal point of routes travelled by Aboriginal peoples. The rivers provided transportation for trade and knowledge sharing, and linked many Aboriginal peoples. The general area surrounding Winnipeg was populated for thousands of years by

Aboriginal peoples who would use the area for camps, hunting, fishing, and trading. Winnipeg is located within the prairies of Western Canada, in a native tall-grass prairie ecosystem. At one time, tall grass prairie covered one million square kilometres in central North America, and in Manitoba alone, the tall grass prairie covered one and a half million acres. Today, tall grass prairie is all but gone. In Manitoba only 1/20<sup>th</sup> of 1% of the original tall grass prairie remains.

I developed *Bridging the Gap* while employed with the City of Winnipeg's Naturalist Services Branch. Naturalist Services Branch has been actively involved in developing and delivering curriculum aligned, environmental learning programs for youth in urban contexts—playing a key role in promoting awareness of the cultural and ecological benefits of Winnipeg's natural areas and encouraging stewardship of natural habitats within an urban setting. Native habitats within the city including wetlands, aspen parkland forest, and endangered tall grass prairie are now permanently protected from development through policy measures. Resident indigenous plant and animal communities are now preserved as an integral component of the city's ecological and cultural heritage.

However, like many large cities, the majority of Winnipeg's high quality natural areas are located in the suburbs and few natural areas are found in the downtown area. As a result, for students in inner-city neighbourhoods, there are inherently fewer opportunities to visit and explore high quality, urban natural areas. Coupled with this, an over-representation of low-wages, poverty, and family instability commonly persist in inner-city neighbourhoods. *Bridging the Gap* was designed to attempt to address these issues. The program was created to provide free programs for Grade Four students from Winnipeg's inner-city. As part of a full-day field trip, children visit high quality, urban natural areas, spending time in guided explorations, facilitated discussions, hands-on activities, and data collection. When *Bridging the Gap* began, it originally had an ecology-based focus and was designed to address learning outcomes from Manitoba's Science curriculum. The program has since evolved to reflect some of its place-specific attributes.

Using an action research methodology, the program focus is now being continuously modified to reflect three key considerations. First, the fastest growing segment of the province's population is Aboriginal, home to the largest urban Aboriginal population in the country (Hanselmann, 2001; Mays, 2005), and the highest percentage of Winnipeg's population of Aboriginal youth lives in and attends school in the core part of the city, within the inner-city (Statistics Canada, 2003). For the group of learners participating in *Bridging the Gap*, over fifty percent are of Aboriginal descent (Métis, First Nations, or Inuit).

Secondly, there is a close fit between the program's goals and traditional Indigenous cultural values, identified as concepts at the heart of sustainability and a need to rekindle traditional cultural values of sustainable living for this urban, largely Indigenous population, affected by historical issues related to

colonialism (disruption of culture and loss of connection of land) (Aikenhead, 2000; Cajete, 1999). In exploring ways to respectfully include traditional Indigenous cultural perspectives within the Bridging the Gap program, the ongoing challenge has been to ensure that attempts to do this meaningfully support learning while respectfully reflecting the local cultural traditions, languages, beliefs, and perspectives. What initially began as “token” attempts to include traditional Aboriginal cultural ideas has since become a more holistic approach to making the program culturally relevant. What is hoped is that the decisions I have made to date, and those that are yet to come, will continue to reflect and be relevant to the specific place that I inhabit along with the children and others taking part in the Bridging the Gap program.

### Theoretical Framework: A Critical Pedagogy of Place in an Urban Indigenous Context

David Gruenewald’s (2003) critical pedagogy of place provided the theoretical framework to engage in a process of critical reflection about my pedagogical decision-making process when including Indigenous knowledge in Bridging the Gap. A critical pedagogy of place was selected as a framework with particular relevance to Bridging the Gap in relation to the potential influences while revising the original program. From my perspective, a critical pedagogy of place not only provides an ideal structure to improve my understanding of this program and my pedagogical decision making process, it also expanded my views on how place-based education can be applied, and the role of critical, place-based approaches within broader educational reform movements.

As the ideas and approaches in environmental learning have continued to change and evolve, researchers and educators are beginning to reconceptualize environmental learning, viewing it as broader and more inclusive of the complex influences on learners within the unique communities in which they live (Nichols, Tippins, Morano, Bilbao, & Barcenal, 2006). Gruenewald’s critical pedagogy of place calls for an ecological, place-based critical pedagogy. He argues that critical pedagogy and place-based education can be synthesized into a critical pedagogy of place, converging two educational traditions: place-based education (which seeks to connect learners with local social, cultural, and ecological communities) and critical pedagogy (concerned with power structures and decision making in education). Drawing upon aspects of both educational traditions, Gruenewald’s critical pedagogy of place challenges educators to consider the nexus of culture, environment, and education, unique to specific places. Gruenewald (2003) states that a critical pedagogy of place seeks to:

Identify, recover and create material spaces and places that teach us how to live well in our total environments (reinhabitation); and (b) identify and change ways of thinking that injure and exploit other people and places (decolonization). (p.9)

With these two intertwined objectives of reinhabitation and decolonization combined into one overarching goal, a critical pedagogy of place is a good fit with the Bridging the Gap program. Indigenous educational contexts can be in First Nations reserve communities or as in this case an urban inner city. Each context may require distinct methods of facilitating “cultural-border crossings” and may vary from place-to-place.

The following analysis reflects the changes I have made as a researcher-practitioner in Bridging the Gap as the program has transitioned from using the provincial science curriculum as the primary focus and the starting point in designing learning experiences, to a program that is adapted to and accounts for Bridging the Gap’s unique socio-ecological situation. In analyzing my decision making process within a critical pedagogy of place, I became intrigued by the notion of “inhabiting” versus “residing” in a place and the potential existence of a continuum between these two. This continuum reflects my belief and those shared by other Aboriginal educators (Aikenhead, 2000; Cajete, 1999) that learning is a lifelong continual journey, one that we embark upon along with the learners we work with, ideally moving towards inhabiting a place. As the primary program developer in Bridging the Gap, have the decisions I’ve made to date contributed to movements towards reinhabitation while achieving progress towards the broader goals of the program? I dare to say yes. I believe the success realized to date with Bridging the Gap is based on a commitment to:

- embracing the local;
- using a customized, participatory pedagogical approach;
- reconsidering the role of the formal curriculum; and
- re-thinking what “success” is and how it is measured.

### *Embracing the Local*

The Bridging the Gap program was originally conceived as an opportunity to address issues of inequity, specifically in terms of access for a specific group of learners to hands-on learning experiences in high quality natural areas. The original focus was on providing traditional “nature study” experiences for the participating inner-city youth. Bridging the Gap has retained its original focus on studying local ecosystems, natural areas, and the habitats indigenous to the specific places where the children and I live, for example, the indigenous flora and fauna of tall grass prairie preserves within Winnipeg. As the program has evolved, however, the scope of issues addressed has expanded beyond addressing the original issues of physical access for learners and unequal distribution of natural areas within a city.

As the program has evolved, an increasing emphasis has been on embracing its urban context and the concept of an “urban habitat.” Children are now encouraged to recognize that humans are dependent on the natural

world and use living things and natural resources. They are guided to discovering that “nature” exists within an urban context and consider their role as residents of an urban habitat and what it means to live respectfully from the land within this context. For example, after sharing ideas about how wildlife living within local natural areas meet their habitat needs, children discuss some of their similar needs for food, water, and space. After discussing some of the traditional ways that humans have met their needs (traditional plant use, hunting, trapping), children are guided to consider how the ways in which these needs are met have changed over time, particularly in contemporary, urban settings. Learners are guided to reconsider common misconceptions of human relationships with the land (i.e., food does not come from the store and water does not come from the tap). As a result of these changes, feedback from children indicates that many now acknowledge human dependence on the natural world and its resources for survival as illustrated in some of the following statements: “We have a habitat so we are part of nature”; “I am (a part on nature) and my parents too and without it there wouldn’t be anything to eat”; and “We need food and water and all that comes from earth.” As part of the program’s site visits, opportunities are now facilitated for children to participate in stewardship activities that are relevant within an urban context such as clean-ups and trail building. Students also continue to indicate that they are interested in environmental stewardship as they share ideas about concrete, everyday changes they can make to be responsible environmental citizens within an urban context. As one student put it, “We cannot keep the tap on long cause it takes water from other animals.”

In addition to the importance of local ecological study, Bridging the Gap activities, teaching and learning strategies, and overall goals, have adapted to become more reflective of the specific cultural contexts where the program takes place. Relevant cultural attributes of Bridging the Gap are now embedded in the program goals, embraced proactively, as integral components of Bridging the Gap, not as afterthoughts or add-ons. The overall learning objectives for the program still include the original ecological concepts and skills from the science curriculum, but now also place equal emphasis on relevant learning outcomes from Manitoba’s *Aboriginal Languages and Cultures Curriculum Framework*. Accordingly, key learning objectives for Bridging the Gap now include children’s ability to: recognize how knowledge of plant and animal populations and interactions helped Aboriginal peoples to survive in the past, demonstrate proper protocols when working with Elders, and describe the traditional Aboriginal perspective on natural resources (e.g., natural resources are not owned and all resources are to be shared).

The involvement of Elders in Bridging the Gap has been critical. Elders continue to be involved in the outdoor field trips as part of Bridging the Gap and provide traditional cultural teachings, but additional changes have been made to enhance their involvement and improve the cultural relevance of the

program. As a follow-up to the field trips, children now participate in a series of in-class, follow-up activities, exploring Indigenous knowledge and working with Elders. More exposure to Elders and Indigenous perspectives now facilitates opportunities for relationship building. In one activity, children work with a local Elder to explore the teachings of the Medicine Wheel. With the approval and guidance of the participating Elder, the Medicine Wheel is used in *Bridging the Gap* as a model to depict an ecological web, helping children to visualize interdependencies and connectedness among all life forms. In another activity, students interview an Elder to ask questions about traditional relationships with the land, perspectives on natural resource use and ways to show respect for the land and nature's gifts. Children also are prepared in advance by the classroom teacher to ensure they are aware of proper protocols for working with Elders, for example, in the ceremonial presentation of tobacco. These important changes have helped to ensure that Indigenous perspectives are shared meaningfully with children in a more authentic, comprehensive context.

Consideration of distinct worldviews was important when seeking to develop compatible learning experiences and teaching strategies. A continued emphasis within *Bridging the Gap* is to reinforce the concept that humans are animals, a concept aligned with the traditional Indigenous view of human's relationship with the natural world. This required assuming a distinct viewpoint where all humans, perceived as animals, are part of a larger ecological system. Children involved in *Bridging the Gap* are now encouraged to view themselves as human animals, an integral and interdependent part of the environment—not removed from it. Rather than having a distinct or superior status to other life forms, all human activities are discussed as integral aspects of the environment. Other changes made in *Bridging the Gap* have included using present verb tenses to indicate that the Aboriginal practices and knowledge are useful in contemporary society (versus applicable only in the past) and seeking out local interpretations rather than representing all Indigenous peoples as the same, or making generalized, stereotypical statements.

As a result of the changes made and the revised focus of the program, feedback from children indicates that their experience in *Bridging the Gap* has transcended into new types of understandings of environmental stewardship, which reflect both ecological and cultural learning. Not only do many of the children now demonstrate recognition and appreciation of how traditional knowledge contributes to understanding plant and animal interactions, but also in many cases their verbal and written feedback illustrates that they acknowledge the intrinsic eco-cultural connectedness within the concept of environmental stewardship. For example, when asked to describe what they learned from the Elder, student responses have included: "The Elder teaches me about Mother Earth that helps us live and keeps us living and keeps plants growing and animals too"; "Mother Earth made us...we live in nature and without the Mother there wouldn't be people"; "We need food and water and all that comes from

Mother Earth”; “Mother Nature gives us gifts and is important...if there was not earth there would be like no Mother or air, water, shelter and life”; and “It (earth) takes care of me so I will take care of it.”

The success realized with Bridging the Gap has resulted largely from embracing place-specific ecological and cultural attributes. Acknowledging that learning about, in, and for the environment requires moving beyond generic or universalized approaches, I have chosen to de-emphasize the role of broad mandates and resist demands for standardization. Instead, by “embracing the local,” Bridging the Gap’s unique place-specific attributes have become the starting points when developing new program goals and selecting teaching and learning strategies. In doing so, as indicated in both formal and informal feedback from students, Bridging the Gap continues to effectively support student learning within multiple domains.

### *A Customized, Participatory Pedagogical Approach*

An education for the purposes of cultural decolonization and ecological reinhabitation requires support for community-based learning (Sharp, 2002). For Bridging the Gap, this required me to be critical of existing relationships in education and curriculum development, while seeking to develop locally relevant strategies, working in collaboration with multiple educational sectors and linking educational objectives to community needs. By facilitating focus groups and other consultation mechanisms, Bridging the Gap now includes opportunities for dialogue and community-based decision-making, and joint analyses between all stakeholders. A primary focus for Bridging the Gap, however, was involving Elders as full participants in the program, seeking to acknowledge differences between the “professional knowledge” of classroom teachers and other relevant forms of knowledge.

Elders must have an active role in education, be treated as professionals, and be acknowledged as leaders, deeply entrenched in educational foundations and seen as authoritative community stakeholders (McKinley, 1996; Sutherland & Tays, 2004). The Elders involved in Bridging the Gap are now engaged as prime stakeholders and full partners in Bridging the Gap, and continue to play a crucial role in all aspects of the program, as an integral part of revitalizing traditional cultural perspectives and modes of transmitting knowledge. Now engaged as full partners in program development and delivery, the participating Elders in Bridging the Gap are positioned as fellow educators. Elders are involved not only in the delivery of Bridging the Gap activities, providing traditional teachings related to environmental stewardship, they are also consulted when refining program goals, developing new teaching and learning activities, and creating customized assessment strategies. With these changes, Bridging the Gap has begun to challenge prevailing notions of who educational “experts” are and how teaching and learning occurs.



Learners in Bridging the Gap are introduced to Elders as “the original teachers,” repositories of traditional knowledge and managers of Indigenous knowledge systems. Modelling of traditional forms of knowledge sharing within Bridging the Gap provides children with a holistic and experiential approach to learning about Indigenous perspectives of environmental stewardship. With extended learning activities in Bridging the Gap (multiple times per year) that involve Elders, children are now provided with more opportunities to practice proper protocols for working with these teachers. In fact, many of the children participating in Bridging the Gap are now not only fully aware of the proper protocols for working with Elders, but many indicate that listening to Elders is one of the highlights of their experience in the program. The Elders have also expressed gratitude for being able to participate in the program, viewing the experience as an opportunity to rekindle traditional forms of intergenerational knowledge sharing. Using this customized, participatory pedagogical approach has not only helped to ensure that the Elders are not viewed as decorative or symbolic, it has created richer and more authentic learning experiences for the children, while facilitating Elder engagement in the education system in a meaningful way.

### *Reconsidering the Formal Curriculum*

Bridging the Gap was originally designed to fit within the existing mandated curriculum, addressing grade level curriculum outcomes and subject matter. Some such as Weston (1996) have insisted that in order to succeed, environmental learning must be emancipated from the constraints of the school system and the reproduction of existing norms and values. Adequately reflecting Bridging the Gap’s specific socio-ecological attributes required a willingness to challenge the universalization of environmental learning and prevailing demands for standardization, accountability, and assessment in light of the program’s target audience.

As a non-formal educator, de-emphasizing the role of the formal curriculum was a challenging proposition while modifying Bridging the Gap and required significant work and courage. However, through a process of dialogue with participating classroom teachers, Elders, as well as many of the programs funders, the curriculum emphasis has changed. With Bridging the Gap’s new emphasis on embracing the local ecological and cultural attributes, these place-specific elements are now the starting point when developing teaching and learning activities, not the formal curriculum. Specific Learning Outcomes from the provincial curricula are now selected based on the following criteria. First, Specific Learning Outcomes must be relevant to the types of natural areas that are studied in the program (wetlands, tall-grass prairie, and aspen parkland forests) and the specific issues involved in preserving and protecting these natural areas (as well as the resident plant and animal populations within the urban setting). Second, the Specific Learning Outcomes must provide suitable

connections to the Elder's cultural teachings and align with specific Indigenous knowledge bundles. As a result, curricular Specific Learning Outcomes are incorporated in the program if they fit with the local ecological and cultural realities—not vice versa.

Endeavouring to teach from within a culture rather than about a culture, and through dialogue with the participating Elders, the program goals have been revised to ensure that Indigenous knowledge is presented as being interconnected with many areas or fields of thought, fitting into a holistic point of view instead of being bound to a narrow, discipline specific context. In a marked shift from its original focus on addressing solely the provincial science curriculum, Bridging the Gap now integrates several complementary standards into learning experiences. Although many key concepts addressed in the program are still aligned with the provincial science curriculum, an interdisciplinary approach is now used where there is equal emphasis (in both instructional approach and assessment) on science and Aboriginal language and cultures, with additional connections made to other disciplines such as Social Studies, English Language Arts, Mathematics, and the Arts where appropriate. As a result, while working with Elders, children participating in Bridging the Gap activities experience Indigenous perspectives related to environmental stewardship as knowledge which exists in discrete bundles, with information framed around relationships such as the interconnectedness of humans, animals, plants, the earth, and the Creator.

While modifying Bridging the Gap, I have also developed a more thorough understanding of the value of the multi-stakeholder, multi-sectoral approach to teaching and learning that the program employs. As a non-formal educator, my ability to build upon my existing networks and acquire funding to bring Elders into the formal education setting in a meaningful way has proven extremely valuable. Bridging the Gap no longer duplicates existing teaching and learning activities. It provides a value-added, facilitative role, supporting classroom teachers who in several cases suggest they struggle to find ways to integrate traditional Indigenous knowledge in their own programming. Bridging the Gap has modeled one approach to doing this while providing the participating Elders with an opportunity to be invited into the classroom in a meaningful context. The classroom teachers and the participating Elders continue to express their gratitude for this opportunity.

### *A New Perception of "Success"*

To address the increasing complexity of issues affecting the program, required transforming Bridging the Gap's goals and structure, and an expanding the scope of the teaching and learning activities. Accordingly, the perception of the program's "success" has also changed. By reinforcing place as a primary experiential/educational context, Bridging the Gap now employs adaptive and locally relevant methods, learning content, and strategies, attempting to address

various aspects of social and ecological marginalization to support a continued process of reinhabitation. I am excited about the positive changes that have been made and the indications of success to date, but have also become mindful that reinhabiting and decolonizing place takes time and involves significant work in the face of globalist pressures. Coming to terms with this as a practitioner, a form of “success” itself, required developing a willingness to celebrate the smaller signs of progress that have occurred as a result of the changes made in Bridging the Gap to date. While hesitating to suggest that my expectations for the program have lowered, I sense that they have perhaps become more realistic.

Like many other environmental educators, I have what could be referred to as idealistic ambitions and hopes for the future of the world, and the potential of the transformative role of environmental learning. Although I have not abandoned these hopes entirely, I have accepted that transformations of behaviours, and ultimately developing individual and community capacity to actively engage in environmental stewardship, takes time. I have accepted that feelings about a place take longer to develop than abstract knowledge that can be acquired relatively quickly (Owens, 2003) and that coming to knowing is a lifelong journey—one that won’t be accomplished through one program alone. I cannot expect children to instantly develop “pro-environmental” behaviours as a result of participating in Bridging the Gap or any other program for that matter, and to measure the success of Bridging the Gap based on such an ambitious goal neglects to account for some of the important achievements that the program has and hopefully will continue to make. In fact, my biggest failure as a practitioner in Bridging the Gap continues to be a reluctance to celebrate some of the incredible measures of success that the program has accomplished. Coming to terms with the fact that histories of cultural and ecological injustices cannot be resolved quickly, and certainly not through one program, I am becoming more appreciative of the progress made with Bridging the Gap and the various ways success has manifested itself. Along with a change in expectations for the program, a more critical reflection upon what “success” might actually look like has also emerged.

The changes made in Bridging the Gap have been largely based on embracing the interrelated ecological and cultural attributes of environmental stewardship for a specific group of learners. Doing this required placing equal emphasis on ecological and cultural learning outcomes, de-emphasizing the role of the formal curriculum and transforming the process of developing and delivering teaching and learning activities. It is therefore important to celebrate the progress I have made in engaging Elders in Bridging the Gap. By involving Elders in Bridging the Gap, Indigenous perspectives related to environmental stewardship are presented by the original teachers. Indigenous knowledge, a process of learning described by the phrase “coming to knowing” (Aikenhead, 2000) is not meant to be taken out of context and cannot be instantly transmitted—it is knowledge that is

earned by first establishing relationships of trust. By providing greater opportunities for children to work with Elders while learning and practicing the proper protocols involved, children now have opportunities to build these relationships. In facilitating this, Bridging the Gap has achieved tremendous success. Children's ability to demonstrate appropriate protocols and behaviours when listening to an Elder is now positioned as an important learning outcome in Bridging the Gap. The majority of the learners in Bridging the Gap are able to demonstrate appropriate protocols when listening to Elders because I now spend more time preparing students and making them aware of proper protocols. Learners have even indicated that "listening to the Elder" has been a highlight of their involvement with Bridging the Gap, a huge success and an important starting point in engaging these early years students in Indigenous knowledge, working with Elders, and developing a comfort level in learning about environmental stewardship from a cultural perspective.

One of the most satisfying accomplishments realized up to now involves my own process of "coming to knowing." In my journey as a co-learner in Bridging the Gap there has been a transformation of my own thinking as a researcher-practitioner—the emergence of my willingness to be patient, while becoming more critical of my preconceived notions of how success can be measured in environmental learning and make more informed decisions about program modifications and revisions. I am now more aware of the diverse forms of knowledge and types of educational expertise, transitioning from a narrow view of Elders as an "educational resources" to now considering them my colleagues, advisors, and co-educators. In doing so, I have expanded upon my own preconceived notions of who the experts in environmental learning are and what "environmental learning" is—enhancing my own understanding while contributing to the creation and development of beneficial educational programs. With my evolving conceptions, there has emerged a new level of trust in my own professional expertise and willingness to challenge pressures to conform to externally imposed standards and mandates. Generic environmental learning is inadequate. However, good environmental learning must move beyond simply "using the local community and environment as a starting point" (Sobel, 2004, p. 7). It is critical to ensure that local communities have a greater say in defining what "environmental learning" is.

## Conclusion

It has been suggested by others that all education is in environmental education. Whether or not this is true, not all environmental education is good education. In today's world many of us find global information available at our fingertips, yet often neglect to consider the direct relevance of this information within the places we actually reside and seek to inhabit.

Environmental learning grounded on a set of basic principles or an imposition of universal values ignores the particularities of varied socio-ecological contexts. Even what some propose can be considered “best practices” must be called into question, assessed based on their relevance to the specific socio-ecological contexts in which we work. My experience with Bridging the Gap has caused me to more critical about the choices I make when designing my programs, given me the courage to question prevailing notions of “best practices,” and changed the way I view environmental learning.

Mindful that environmental learning has traditionally represented the voice and vision of the white middle-class (Russell, Bell, & Fawcett, 2000), there is a need to come to terms with the potential “monoculturalism” that pervades it. As Canadian society becomes more complex, more ethnically, linguistically, and geographically diverse, and more urbanized, people of diverse ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and racial groups, along with the working class, continue to be underrepresented in environmental learning, overlooked, or playing marginal or insignificant roles. As a practitioner, part of this challenge will be my ability to recognize that different cultures may value different bodies of knowledge and different ways of knowing while remaining cognisant that all education is political and value laden. It is essential that when planning programs I continue to be cautiously aware of the potential for education to be used negatively to maintain a certain status quo, and I must remain willing to challenge prevailing norms and demands to fit within generalized guidelines and practices. During a period of growing demands for accountability and pressures to fit within national or internationally mandated priorities, I have a new sense of responsibility to consider the relevance of these to the specific places in which I work.

Whether or not education can save the world, or whether the world needs saving in the first place, humanity’s role in historical and contemporary social, economic, and ecological injustices cannot be ignored. I choose to believe in human capacity to contribute to positive change in seeking resolution to injustice, as we endeavour to reinhabit our shared home. With this opportunity comes an accordingly huge responsibility. I must be cautiously aware of the lure to conform to universalized standards and the potential to inadvertently or unintentionally reinforce a specific status quo or worldview. I choose to believe that education plays a critical role in seeking to resolve the root causes of environmental problems and commit to do my part. Mindful that “no one lives in the world in general,” (Geertz, 1983, p. 262.) I will continue to carefully consider how my decisions as a researcher, educator, and human reflect and influence my own lived experiences and those of others I am engaged with. Although the transformative goals of environmental learning may be lofty, I have found that when applied at the local level and made relevant to a specific place, there is the potential to realize progress in preserving cultural and ecological integrity. Challenged to “do my part” and “be the change,” the ideal starting place is clearly my own backyard.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Although various opinions exist regarding nomenclature, my view and use here of the term environmental learning is inclusive of “environmental education,” “education for sustainable development,” “education for sustainability,” and other relevant terms
- <sup>2</sup> The use of the term place is used here with a view that place embodies multiple dimensions, including, spatial, geographical/political, and temporal.

## Notes on the Contributor

**Natalie Swayze** is presently employed full-time as the Executive Director of the Canadian Network of Environmental Education (EECOM). She has an academic background in Environmental Science, Geography and Education, and experience working as an environmental educator, ecologist, project manager, and teacher. As a part-time graduate student, her research interests involve exploring respectful and meaningful ways to include Indigenous knowledge in environmental learning. **Contact:** nswayze@eecom.org

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