

**Indigenization: Holistic Learning and Weaving  
Indigenous Ways of Knowing into the Curriculum**

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Author Note

A capstone project submitted to Thompson Rivers University in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Education.

Presented July 23, 2023

Last modified: Thursday, July 26, 2023, 12:00 PM

**Abstract**

This paper is set within the context of my life journey as a teacher working in a dynamic and diversified school division and as a student in the Master of Education program. During my career, I have had the privilege of teaching and learning within varied international and intranational educational models and contexts. Throughout this journey, I have ascertained the critical importance of the power of different and diversified pedagogical approaches of teachers as they navigate the curriculum, form, and foster effective relationships with their students, and create an atmosphere of care within their classrooms and school communities that supports the learning of all. Teachers have an obligation to create opportunities for students to flourish within these systems that provide a more holistic framework of education in Canada, namely through Indigenization that fosters student capacity, success and well-being. Indigenization is a process through which Indigenous People bring their Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing (pedagogies and perspectives) into spaces that were not necessarily designed for those ways. Educators will work as Indigenous allies to support collective learning for all students. The implications are that if we want to create atmospheres and environments within school communities where every student succeeds, we must advocate and work as allies to create and foster the development of a holistic Indigenized approach.

*Key Words:* Indigenization, holistic education, pedagogy, culture of care, Indigenous ways of knowing

**Acknowledgements**

Tansi Kitamiskatinawaw -"I greet you" - This capstone has been written on Treaty 8 Territory, the ancestral home of the Beaver, Cree, Dene, Inuit and Metis people. I honour the Indigenous peoples who have lived here since time immemorial and give thanks for the land I cherish, where I live and learn. I would like to thank the many Elders I have had the privilege of working with in my school division and community for the last seven years. This work would not be possible without them and their sharing of wisdom and knowledge.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### My Lived Experiences and Journey in Education

I began my teaching career in 2002, half a world away in a private *hagwon* (academy) in the bustling streets of Seoul, South Korea: a minority presence and a small-town foreigner living in a vibrant metropolis. The people of Korea were thirsty for knowledge, with the need to learn and speak English being a priority for most members of the middle class and elite. Striving to fit into a world with Western amenities and ideals, the people of Korea were changing to create a new hybrid culture that could compete with the West, with all the chain restaurants and box stores that lined the streets of North America.

This somewhat ‘alien’ invasion was surface level at best, for off the main roads, through the alleyways and in the quiet countryside; the prevalence of Korean culture, religion and beliefs were as alive and strong as ever. The slight bow and nod of the head as strangers greeted each other in passing, the rhythmic sounds of *hangul* (Korean language) that filled the crowded old cobblestone streets where ancient pagodas and palaces are still nestled amongst the towering high-rises and skyscrapers brimming with extended families living together in crowded spaces.

*Figure 1:* Gyeongbokgung Palace, South Korea (own photo).





A perfect duality, a combination of modernity and tradition forming into one, a country and people, launching themselves into the future while still deeply rooted in their ancestral past. *Chaemyoun*, 'the concept of face,' gives the Korean people their stoic personas, where one's reputation, influence, dignity, and honour guide their daily lives, with deep reverence in respect for family and ancestral ties and an irrevocable need for education and success in fulfilling the designs of their life: achievements they sought to obtain, not only for themselves but for their family, their communities and their nation. What was the impetus and driving force behind a country of people wanting to learn and achieve so much?

*Figure 2: Namdaemun - The North Gate, South Korea (own photo).*



After returning to Canada from Korea, I continued expanding on my international teaching experiences by attending The University of the West Indies in Trinidad and Tobago. Trinidad was a vibrant and busy Caribbean Island with a unique blend of cultures making up the busy atmosphere. Like most areas of North America, the British had also colonized the area, and Western Europe's overpowering colonialist and imperialistic ideals had also been implemented. In the schools, students sat in rows in their perfectly stiff, starched, pressed uniforms, never

speaking out of turn, still learning a colonial curriculum, stifled by outdated ideals and Eurocentric values.

*Figure 3: The Red House, Trinidad and Tobago (own photo).*



Order and respect was the model of the behaviour of all students, never speaking out of turn or having their thoughts or things to say with what they were learning. A robotic and monotonous etiquette that had been transferred to them by their parents and their grandparent before them. Living in poverty but still attending, respecting, and valuing the institution that held them down, with kindred regard to knowing that with an education, they might one day break free of the cyclical oppression through their learning, yet few of them ever did and continued to struggle in the political turmoil and instability that their nation struggled with through postcolonialism.

*Figure 4: Comprehensive High School, Trinidad and Tobago (own photo).*



It seemed as though their identity and vibrancy were diminished during the day, their innate and multifaceted cultures, values, and beliefs acting as secondary passengers within their journey. But it was in the coolness of the evenings, after the hot sweltering days with blistering sun and hours spent in crowded classrooms, when the city's streets came alive with children. They could break free of their daytime constraints, running barefoot through the streets in light cotton shirts, with the soft rhythmic sounds of their laughter and pan drums ringing through the air and the smell of curries and chutney wafting from the street vendors' carts... this carefree feeling and euphoric lifestyle of island life were content and one in itself. How were Trinidadians able to find value and still have respect for the systems that were so unrepresentative of themselves and their worldview?

I returned to Canada in the middle of winter, with the heavy fog and constant drizzling skies of the lower mainland blanketing the city and suburbs. Arriving back in the classroom and the city after living overseas for three years, Canadian schools now seemed foreign to me, the

students were different, and there was a subdued and almost passive-drained energy. Apathy and discourse against what was being learned was the general feeling of many students.

Over the next twenty years, as I moved further North and experienced different groups and ages of students learning in distinct settings and contexts, an apathy and disconnect towards education only intensified. Our schools were becoming increasingly multicultural, and many of our students were more complex with their needs while at school. Graduation rates were plummeting, with constant behavioural problems and many students experiencing trauma and social-emotional crises; they were more disengaged than ever.

Being in the North, high percentages of my students were Indigenous, and their demographic seemed to suffer the most in what seemed to me to be an almost educational crisis. During this time, I began to think critically and reflect on the state of education in our country and my current province. I asked myself several questions: How were similar education models flourishing worldwide in different contexts? Why were so many of my students falling through the cracks and failing as they continued their educational journey? At what point would a decision be made to change the curriculum and the teacher's pedagogical practices to support and foster our students' successful learning and education? How could I foster a spark and revive a love of learning in my students in a capacity to propagate change and perpetuate growth and intrinsic motivation in them to value the education they were receiving?

### **Developing My Interests and the Significance of the Topic**

It was during the past few years, as I completed my coursework as a student in the master of education program, that many of the questions I had, began to be answered. I was exposed to several new philosophies and theories about education, teaching, and learning, paired with the benefits and deficits of many of these perspectives. Lessons from Peggy McIntosh as I unpacked

my invisible knapsack to understand the realms of power and privilege more theoretically and truthfully in my own context (2003). Paolo Freire and his philosophies and the belief that education should challenge learners, showing them the existing power structures and inherent inequalities so they can one day transform themselves and change the once-prescribed course of their lives (2007). Pinar and his writings on “reconceptualization,” with his notion of *currere*, allowed me to analyze my journey with education and educational experiences and reflect on my pedagogical beliefs and practices (2022). Finally, Maria Montessori and Nel Noddings showed me how educational methods could allow children to learn naturally and be fostered in their growth through ethical caring within their learning journey (2010/2022).

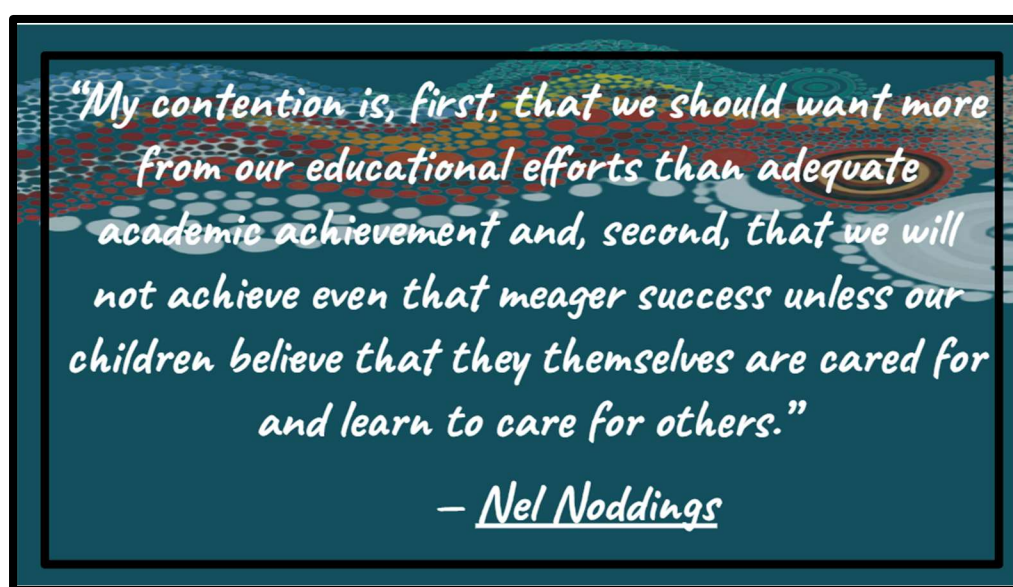
Figure 5: Child’s potential (Maria Montessori,2022)



Looking at my journey through this new and more critical lens and infusing reflection into my daily practice, I went through a transformational learning experience. I saw the commonalities in my encounters with the differing worldviews and outlooks I have worked with and realized that I had ascertained the critical importance of the power of different and diversified pedagogical approaches of teachers as they navigate the curriculum. To approach their teaching and learning practices holistically: forming and fostering effective relationships

with their students and creating an atmosphere of care within their classrooms and school communities that supports all learning. Students in our systems are failing and floundering in the standardization of data-driven results and assessments, leaving them feeling more disconnected from what they are learning in their classrooms, their teachers, and schools, being categorized by their achievements and, more often, their deficits.

Figure 6: Culture of Care (Nel Noddings, 2010).



The last several years have allowed me to work closely with my school leaders and colleagues to apply the foundational knowledge of First Nations, Metis and Inuit people to teachers and students in my school community as part of our process of supporting the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions Calls to Action. I work alongside our school Elder to support her and her teachings to students that support Indigenous ways of knowing and learning and align them directly with curricular outcomes. Working through this process made me realize that several answers to my previous questions could be easily and succinctly answered by weaving Indigenous ways of knowing into our current curriculums and adapting to more holistic child-

centred teaching and learning practices and approaches. Teachers have an obligation to create opportunities for students to flourish within these systems that provide a holistic framework of education, namely through Indigenization that fosters student capacity, success, and well-being. I claim this because we must seek to go beyond the limitations of our current Western models of education and go beyond the acknowledgement of Indigenous people and to make space, both figuratively and literally, through the Indigenization of our current curriculums and educational structures.

Indigenization is a process through which Indigenous People bring their Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing (pedagogies and perspectives) into spaces that were not necessarily designed for those ways. This will be in the classrooms and learning spaces of our school communities and will be a part of all teaching and learning through the application of Indigenization across the curriculum woven together with the current curricular outcomes. Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators will work as allies, working with the Indigenous Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and organizations from our community to support collective learning for all students. The implications are that if we want to create atmospheres and environments within school communities where every student succeeds, we must all advocate and work as allies in creating and fostering a holistic Indigenized approach that is braided and woven into our Western knowledge.

### **Presenting an Argument**

I argue that every child has the right to develop to their full potential as spiritual, emotional, social, and physical beings in an inclusive and diversified space to meet these needs with the support of educators whose pedagogical practices bolster and uphold a holistic education model. Current Western education models are framed by a dated, superior, and



oppressive worldview which informs epistemological and pedagogical practices that are failing many students in our school systems today. I believe, and as Madjidi argues, in an Indigenized, holistic model of education, learners experience multifaceted understandings that go beyond the limits of the curriculum allowing individuals to embark on a path of lifelong learning that embraces individuality and supports the growth and respect of the community and others, valuing “wholeness, spirituality, and diverse modes and means of learning” (2008, p.85, 101).

Indigenization provides an increasingly accepting and multicultural approach to education within its systems. It offers “the ability to celebrate with the other in a manner that transcends all barriers and brings about unity and diversity” (Rosado, 2017). Indigenization is not just ideal for Indigenous learners; the holistic approach of Indigenous ways of knowing and the values of lived experiences within the process are suitable for all learners and educators, which also fosters a caring in education that provides a preeminent foundation for moral education and powerful incidental learning (Noddings, 2010). There is contestability to this argument, a precarious line of cultural appropriation that will need to be navigated throughout the process as new procedures and adaptations of pedagogy are acquired. Within the caution of this contestability, educators are responsible for decolonizing their traditionalist practices to make critical changes to their philosophies when teaching the students of today and tomorrow within their inclusive and diversified classrooms.

Indigenous knowledge systems are diverse and complex and unique to the areas in which they are transferred from being embedded in each place's environment, people, and communities. Within this process, it is essential to note that the goal is not to replace our current Western knowledge systems with something new but to weave Indigenous knowledge into a deliberate combination of one, so learners can appreciate both systems of knowing. We can commit to



working to support the failings of our current systems to foster effective relationships and supports in our school environments where every student succeeds in a community where they are represented and supported. I plan to review several resources that support our responsibility as educators to foster Indigenization and Indigenous ways of knowing within our curriculums, paired with applying the process of my own experiences with Indigenization, including the successes and susceptibilities involved.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Educators and the Responsibility to Decolonize Practices and Foster Indigenization**

Today, our education system, with its Eurocentric and patriarchal links to a Western European worldview, memorization of facts and the production of students once meant to work in the factory system of an era that has long since passed. It was designed for homogenous groups of individuals and is now still being used in heterogeneous and culturally diverse classrooms worldwide, the dream and promise of equal access to life with the promise of meritocracy for all the labours of life a guarantee of the system. This system disenfranchises many and gives power to the most privileged in our society. Long gone are the days of learning by doing, with the learner having an active rather than passive role in their educational journey.

Most Canadian adults grew up in an education system that did not teach about Indigenous Peoples. The history of colonization within our country, including the residential school system and Indigenous cultures, traditions, and worldviews, is unfamiliar to many, including educators. This can make the prospect of teaching Indigenous content in a way that supports reconciliation daunting. Although some provincial authorities have begun to change their curriculum to support a more decolonized and competencies-based approach that supports many ideologies of Indigenization, many provinces, along with some educational leaders, still have mandated curricular content with standardized testing that continues to take over their core values in their local school divisions. This Westernized model is failing in diverse and multicultural classrooms across our country today.

In Canada's current political and social environment, we are working towards preserving multiple worldviews and the numerous ways of seeing, learning, and thinking in our country. In our path towards reconciliation, preserving the cultural teachings of Indigenous knowledge and

Indigenous ways of knowing for the diverse peoples across our nation is of the utmost importance. The Truth & Reconciliation Commission of Canada states that “reconciliation is about establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country” (2015. p. 6). The Commission calls upon all Canadians to change behaviours to support and build mutual respect, which is especially important to educators in our classrooms today, as many are in a process of limbo, waiting for these calls to be answered by others.

Indigenous people are pushing for reforms to education for their children, but all students would benefit from these educational shifts and new curricular approaches within our Canadian classrooms. Through Indigenization, we can move from linear models to the interconnectedness of the circle, which can guide the development of pedagogy and vision for the future (Bell, 2014). Bell (2014) describes and states:

Interconnections create a mutually sustaining environment where logic and linear thought are transcended to reveal synthesis and dynamic interdependence. Balance and respect provide order and structure to the whole and all its relationships and interconnections while providing an appreciation for the ‘awe’ of it all.

We can use these examples and concepts of wholeness and holism to convey the importance of interconnectedness with balance and respect for all, students and teachers alike.

Indigenous scholars Verna J. Kirkness and Ray Barnhardt discuss the elements of teaching and learning that educators can take to decolonize their pedagogical practices. In “The Four Rs – Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, and Responsibility” (2001), Kirkness & Barnhardt discuss small steps that are easily taken to Indigenize their practice: respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility. Educators can respect Indigenous cultural integrity, provide

education relevant to Indigenous perspectives and experiences, foster reciprocal relationships with all stakeholders in the school and community and demonstrate responsibility through participation (2001). Within this context is the pivotal role of the educator in advocating for, changing, adapting, and applying their practice to foster relationships and nurture the values to support every child in developing into their full potential in a holistic and indigenized sense.

### **Inclusive and diversified learning.**

Inclusion can be defined as the practice or policy of providing equal access to opportunity and resources for all people, especially those who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized. Inclusive learning practices and meeting the needs of an increasingly diversified population have made the classrooms of our school communities increasingly challenging to navigate with the complexity of their student demographics. Diversity is defined as looking at each person's uniqueness, qualities, and characteristics. Celebrating how we are all different within ourselves but also hold elements of sameness with each other. Knowing that all individuals hold unique and multicultural worldviews and identities that make up a greater whole. Diversity and inclusion often go together, thus allowing our schools to become places where diversity is celebrated, unity is embraced, and all individuals feel safe and welcomed.

Several dimensions can categorize school diversity, their students' academic ability and functioning, cultural and ethnical backgrounds of students (language, race, religion, country of origin), gender, socio-economic status etc., categorizing and grouping students into streams of 'differences.' Students are categorized by their education codes, ranging from cognitive differences to physical and medical disorders. If diversity were to be focused on primarily, students could be continually segregated and stratified based on their differences. There needs to be a change in our education model and instructional practices that allows all to become more

inclusive and accepting of this multiculturalism. Diversity and inclusion are about capturing the uniqueness of the individual, creating an environment that values and respects individuals for their talents, skills and abilities to benefit the collective, and allowing students the chance to explore and understand worldview, allowing them to celebrate the diversity of their values and beliefs while fostering a sense of unity and worth.

In the words of Rosado, “The essence of multiculturalism, the undergirding concept of multicultural education, is the ability to celebrate with the other in a manner that transcends all barriers and brings about a unity in diversity” (2017). Indigenized education erodes the patriarchal and colonialist view that many curriculum programs studies support, expecting all students to have the background knowledge that comes from a place of power and privilege (Battiste, 2013). Fostering effective relationships throughout the classroom will allow all students to become more engaged and invested in their learning and allow for more meaningful teaching and learning throughout the curriculum. Rosado (2017) states that managing diversity is:

“An ongoing process that unleashes the various talents and capabilities which a diverse population bring to an organization, community, or society, to create a wholesome, inclusive environment, that is ‘safe for differences,’ enables people to ‘reject rejection,’ celebrates diversity, and maximizes the full potential of all, in a cultural context where everyone benefits. Multiculturalism, as the art of managing diversity, is an inclusive process where no one is left out. Diversity, in essence, is a safeguard against idolatry, making one group the norm for all groups” (p.4).

Using Indigenized processes within the practice of educators allows for the fostering of diversity to be established within a safe and caring classroom environment will help foster and develop student growth.

***Culture of care and fostering effective relationships.***

Everyday approaches of genuine care and concern, working on forming relationships and acknowledging each student allows for an inclusive environment that fosters achievement and improvement, facilitates student ownership of their learning process, and cultivates students who actively engage in learning with their peers and community. Students are the curriculum. The more we embrace an indigenized student-centred approach to teaching and learning through strength-based ideals and holistic learning models, the more success we will achieve. The exploration of individual cultures within a diverse community will allow the students an opportunity to examine shared values and their sense of belonging, beliefs, traditions and languages, allowing me as a teacher to promote and sustain an inclusive learning environment where diversity is embraced, and students are welcomed, cared for, honoured and respected (Rosado, 2017).

Fusing learning with differentiated experiential learning opportunities will help solidify student learning and appreciation and include input from parents and other stakeholders within the school community. Nel Noddings' s work highlights the value of the ethics of care under the educational umbrella (2010). Nodding's construct of care and the importance of fostering it, giving it and emulating it within our classrooms is of critical societal importance. She believed that education with care through modelling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation allows for the natural transformation and sharing of ethics and values and allows children to "believe that they are cared for and, thus, learn to care for others" (Smith, 2020).

Looking at other educational theorists like Paolo Freire, we are made to realize that the key to liberation is the awakening of critical awareness and the individual's thinking process. In his writings of the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire stated, “The teacher is, of course, an artist, but being an artist does not mean that he or she can make the profile, can shape the students. What an educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves” (2007).

Our education system is constructed within an oppressive model that benefits privileged people (Freire, 2017). Within practice, educators must strive to provide students with a classroom environment based on a culture of care and support for each individual and their family. Allowing students to know more about themselves allows them to become more involved in learning in their educational journeys. Freire (2010) states, “Teachers and students (leadership and people), co-intent on reality, are both subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge” (Horton, p.187). Through this attainment of knowledge in their own reality through reflection and action, individuals can discover themselves as re-creators (2007). This partnership and fostering of effective relationships in learning is critical in establishing an authentic culture of care for students and educators alike. It is key in the process of Indigenization.

### ***Indigenous ways of knowing and holistic education.***

Madjidi (2008) outlines the importance of lived experiences with Indigenous ways of knowing for educators and students, and making these provisions for students is essential to support all. Students in their classrooms bring unique and diverse perspectives, cultures and lived experiences and share them with their peers. Through these opportunities, they can construct meaning from the context of their lives, engage in activity inquiry and engage with

their learning. They will also develop skills that encourage them to holistically maintain their individuality and diversity while simultaneously exploring unity within the classroom community.

Using the process of Indigenization as a universal learning design infused with Indigenous ways of knowing will accommodate all learners and needs in the classroom and make all assignments and assessments manageable for students to complete successfully. Rosado also discussed how the management of diversity should be comprehensive and holistic for it to work for all individuals that are a part of the process (2017). A holistic approach to teaching and learning within the curriculum fosters student growth and achievement. Madjidi also articulates that having Indigenous peoples in the research, design, and implementation of Indigenous ways of knowing is crucial if it is to be learned (2008). Having these Indigenous to teach and guide educators throughout the Indigenization process is critical.

Holism is woven into Indigenous epistemologies, including the individual understanding of self and their relationship to the community, other living things, nature and the divine. This philosophy significantly impacts pedagogy and classroom practice as it seeks to educate the ‘whole person,’ giving educators a ‘springboard’ to easily change their teaching to support Indigenization. In the documentary *The Living Stone* [film], there is a transparent understanding of the holistic nature of traditional Indigenous (Inuit) education and how it is intertwined as an intangible part of the daily lives of the people and communities it is constructed from. So integrated into a cultural transmission through the storytelling of oral tradition and incorporated into the knowledge-based teachings of respected Elders in the principles and values of familial and tribal groups, Inuit education is the backbone of their people, their histories, their lives and a part of the very fibre of their identity. The Inuit, living in one of the harshest environments on

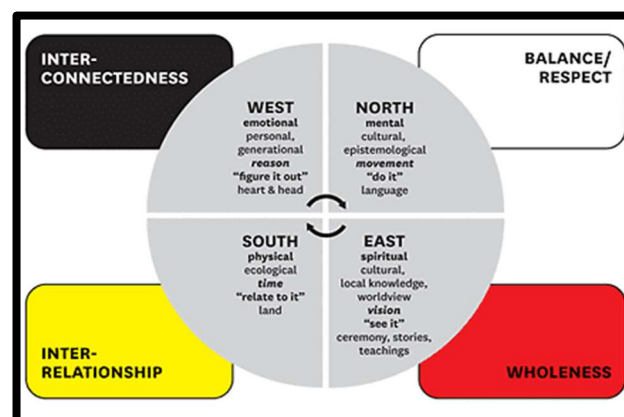


our planet, have a life-or-death approach to cultural teachings to their young, as their very lives depend on this transmission of information about themselves, their way of life and their communities.

Throughout *The Living Stone* [film], the power and importance of storytelling are relayed. The stories told by an Inuit father to his children were not just used to pass the time during long winter days and nights of perpetual darkness; instead, they acted as a valuable way of sharing information to ensure the young members of the communities absorbed the needed teachings of survival. The Inuit's natural environment was the source of all life for their communities, but at the same time, it was the source of all death; a balanced and harmonious relationship was not kept in check. Relational pedagogies of land-based education are not new, “places produce and teach particular ways of thinking about and being in the world... relationships to land are familial, intergenerational and instructive” (McCoy et al. 2016. p.9).

Looking at *The Living Stone* [film] as an example, we can see the value of community, learning by doing, and the decisive importance of storytelling. The Indigenous representation of the Medicine Wheel shows the interconnectedness, balance/respect, inter-relationship, and wholeness of all living things.

Figure 7: Indigenous Medicine Wheel (edcan.ca, 2023)



## Summary

Indigenization provides a holistic framework of an inclusive and diversified learning environment in which all students have the capacity to succeed. For Indigenization to occur within our education systems today, educators must work to successfully infuse Indigenous ways of knowing and being into the curriculum. Key to this success is a change in practice and pedagogy that will allow educators to collaborate with all stakeholder groups to support and uphold student learning. Respectful understanding and planning must be researched, all parties engaged, and space provided for these undertakings to be actualized (Silta Associates. 2007).

In Indigenization, it is of the utmost importance to allow Indigenous youth the educational opportunity to learn in their language and experience ways of knowing and doing, a signal that traditional knowledge, language, and skills are essential, have validity and are needed for future sustainability. Indigenous knowledge is dynamic and contains ‘the depth and breadth of knowledge’ that will allow for competencies to be learned in balanced harmony, seeing Indigenous people overcoming the historical imbalance of power and becoming active leaders in educational pursuits (Silta Associates. 2007).

Within this literature review, I showed the responsibility of educators for creating a culture of care that fosters effective relationships and celebrates individuality through unity and diversity and making changes to complete this process through Indigenization. Recognizing the validity of Indigenous worldviews, knowledge, and perspective allows indigeneity to be expressed through incorporating and weaving Indigenous ways of knowing and doing into our existing systems. Within my application chapter, I will discuss my professional experiences with decolonizing my teaching practices and the infusion of Indigenization into the curriculum of my classrooms and schools.

### **Chapter 3: Application**

#### **Professional Experiences with Indigenization**

I spent several years away from the teaching profession and moved to a new province during this break. Having spent all of my education, teacher training and professional practice in British Columbia, returning to teaching in Alberta was in a different realm regarding recognizing and understanding Indigenous cultures and histories in our country. Recognizing this deficit in understanding with many of my colleagues, I have worked towards using my knowledge of Indigenous ways of knowing and learning to create a collective efficacy of Indigenization with the staffs of school sites I have been a part of. Growing collectively with my colleagues through collaborative practices and generative dialogue, which acts as an impetus to support all students' success.

Within my observations of education in my current school division, I have also witnessed the growing number of students becoming increasingly disengaged with their educational journey. Many students, especially in our diverse classrooms, need to be more engaged in what is being taught and feel an inclusive atmosphere and community that includes this diversity. As discussed previously in my literature review, key elements need to change and evolve within our current practices that will easily be linked to our curricular standards that will support this diversity, foster unity, and create a stronger sense of belonging for all (Rosado, 2017). As I have previously argued, a holistic and Indigenized approach paired with our present methodologies will allow for critical changes to be made and supported to understand a young student's learning preferences fully, strengths and circumstances through making changes to their educational environments that will foster effective relationships with students and ensure all students succeed (Madjidji, 2008).

## The context

I currently reside in a medium-sized city in Northern Alberta and work for one of the three teaching divisions within the city. My division is a diverse learning community with eighteen schools, 8,500 students in preschool to grade twelve, along with 1,000 staff, teachers and support workers, learning and working together. The division currently provides several programming opportunities, including KinderPAL, French Immersion PreK-12, Montessori PreK-6, Christian Education Academy, Sports Academy Programs, Outreach Education, International Baccalaureate, Trades Education, Music Programming, STEM Learning, Home Schooling, and International Student Education. The mission statement of my school division is a learning community in which every student succeeds, and the division is guided by several principles in which it holds itself accountable to stakeholders, including the following questioning statements: Is it good for students? Will it build trust and good relationships? Will it help us improve? Is it a responsible thing to do? and, Are we being open, honest, and ethical?

*Figure 8.* Medium-sized community in Northern Alberta (Vavrek, 2023).



Within my school division's priorities, reconciliation is supported and marked as a collective responsibility to work towards the 'Calls to Action on Education' established by Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC, Final Report, 2015). My current provincial teaching authority in Alberta has also mandated the application of foundational knowledge about First Nations, Métis, and Inuit for all students within our school systems. Therefore, it is imperative that all teachers understand several processes of Indigenization through the understanding of historical, social, economic, and political implications of Indigenous people in Canada, working to not only support the processes of reconciliation but also through it provide and promote different pedagogical practices.

*Figure 9. Every Child Matters - Whole School Mural Project (own photo).*



*Figure 10.* Tipi Teachings with Cree Elder - Cultural Knowledge and Curriculum Consultant (own photo).

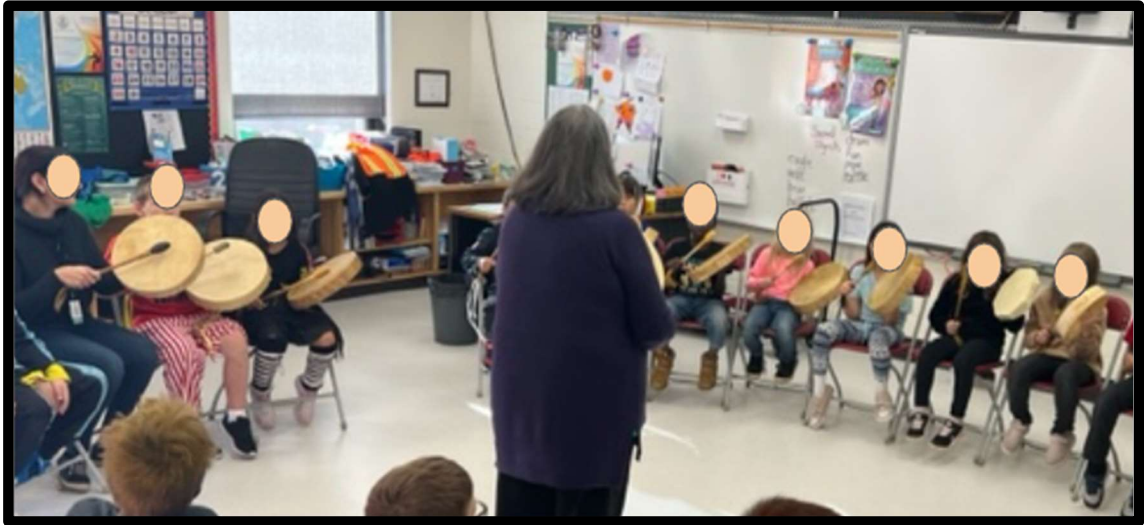


Key to this priority is the falling graduation rates in student demographics, resulting in almost a quarter of our students not receiving their high school diplomas. This number was substantially higher for the identified Indigenous students in our city. The division has worked to provide several new innovative opportunities for staff and students to learn more and learn differently, especially regarding the contemporary experiences, traditions, cultures, and ways of knowing of Indigenous peoples of our Treaty 8 Territory and Canada. The division provides Indigenous programming in the form of cultural presentations, working with Indigenous Elders, and providing Indigenous family liaisons to support students and parents. Indigenous students account for 10-30% of the student population at each school site across the division. Although the division has worked towards reconciliation strategies throughout its schools, this methodology needs to be more consistent, and the existing infrastructure of resources and



financial support should be stretched to reach and support all students and their families successfully and equitably.

*Figure 11. Grade 3 Students drumming with Cree Elder (own photo).*



### **The classroom, students, and the curriculum**

As stated in previous chapters, using Indigenized processes within educators' practice allows for fostering diversity within a safe and caring classroom environment to help stimulate and develop student growth (Rosado, 2017. Noddings, 2007). Using the model of Indigenization and holistic practices focuses on the 'whole' child and requires information from the multiple perspectives of the teacher, student, caregivers and the community. Holistic and Indigenized pedagogies and practices also require measures from multiple places: in the classroom and beyond, involving the dimensions of physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional aspects of the child/student. This practice is exemplified throughout *The Living Stone* [film] and is discussed extensively by Madjiji (2008). Holistic Indigenized practices are continuous and extend through a process that involves the students as learners, which provides differentiated and experiential

learning opportunities that foster student growth and achievement and envelop individual growth paired with community building (Madjiji, 2008).

*Figure 12.* Tipi - Historic Dunvegan (own photo).



*Figure 13.* Grade 4-6 students making traditional bannock - Historic Dunvegan (own photo).





The use of Indigenization and Indigenous ways of knowing in my daily practice was essential. Previously, teaching junior high, I worked to infuse Indigenous ways of knowing into my daily practices, forming genuine and lasting relationships with my students, using differing teaching and assessment practices within the curriculum, and providing learning opportunities that focused on learning alongside my students. These holistic views supported and fostered student development and allowed a culture of care to be quickly established and maintained, which celebrated individuality through unity and diversity and supported the individual worldview of all students. In my multicultural classroom and school community, this helped foster my relationships with all my students and their families from every background and ability. These practices pair well with our existing structures, curriculum, and practices rather than replacing current and existing systems.

*Figure 14.* Grade 2 students - Inuit soap carving with Cree Elder (own photo).



*Figure 15.* Grade 1 students learning the Métis jig (own photo).



As a non-enrolling teacher in a kindergarten to grade 6 school, I strive to bring new learning experiences to my school community. Working closely with a Cree Elder to enhance learning experiences through doing and being immersed in Indigenous language and cultural teachings. These activities promote awareness of Indigenous ways of knowing and values and help promote a safe and caring school community built on respect and values. This work has allowed the Indigenous population of the school to feel recognized, celebrated, and supported while allowing the multicultural identities of others to be embraced. These opportunities have also allowed students to learn and grow with their classroom teachers throughout this process. A whole school process of celebrating the values and virtues of the Seven Sacred Teachings has been used to monitor and promote student learning. This works again to foster the growth and development of the ‘whole’ child, not only at school but within their homes and community.

Figure 16. Seven Sacred Teachings school art - Amanda Morris (own photo).

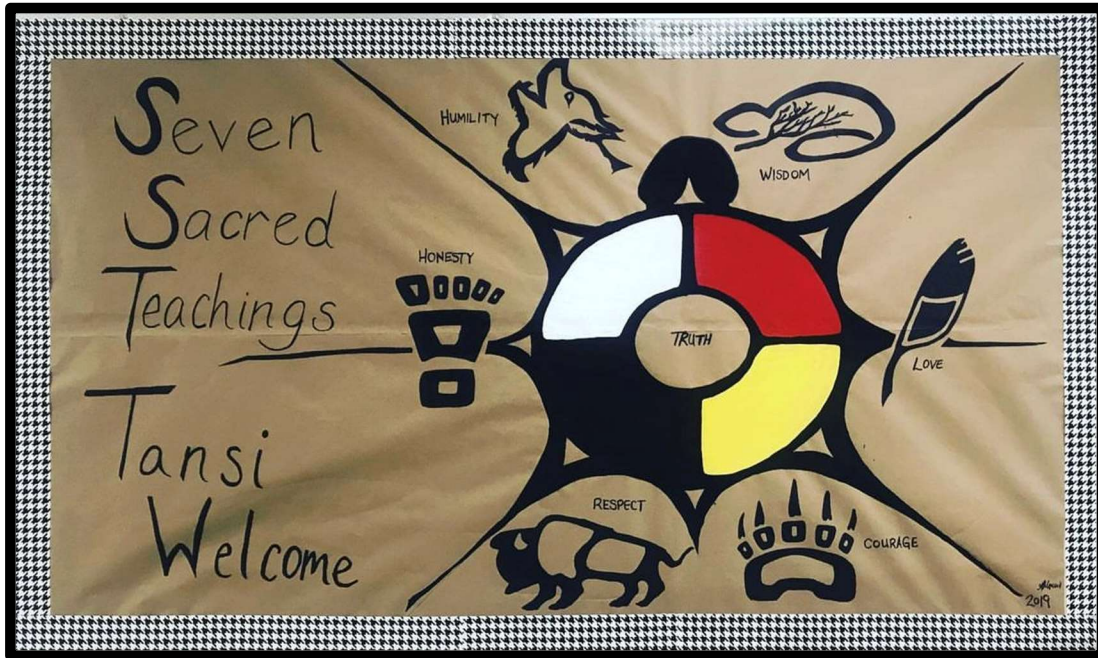


Figure 17. Grade 5 students - Interactive First Nations, Métis and Inuit Floor Map of Canada (own photo).



Students learn more when they have experienced their own realities and can recreate the knowledge that they have experienced. Through experiential learning, the attainment of knowledge in their own reality through reflection and action, students as individuals can discover themselves as re-creators in a process of Indigenization. This holistic approach, viewing the



student as a whole and individual person, is the root of the pedagogical concept of Indigenization and promotes balanced relationships between people and between people and their environment.

*Figure 18.* Indigenous high school students learning with Cree drum keeper. (own photo).



### **Successes and susceptibility**

Through a holistic approach to pedagogy through ideologies of Indigenization, I have witnessed many of my students flourish throughout the process, Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners alike. What is often good for one student is good for all students. Indigenous ways of knowing aid in fostering the growth and development of the whole child and allows educators to form relevant, lasting, and meaningful relationships with their students.

This past June, I had the privilege of being visited by several of my past junior high students who were now graduating. They made the trek to my new school through the city to find me, dressed in their caps and gowns, to visit and share their plans for the future. The most meaningful of these visits came from a young Indigenous boy, now a man, who had struggled

with school in general as a junior high student. Our exchange started with him sharing that I had been right about him all along, that he could do it, but it just took a little longer for him to figure that out and see it for himself. He graduated with his peer group and was also able to attend the division's Indigenous graduation ceremony, where he received the symbolic eagle feather from the same elder who had taught him in junior high all those years ago.

*Figure 19.* Indigenous student graduation ceremony. Gift of the eagle feather from Cree Elder (own photo).

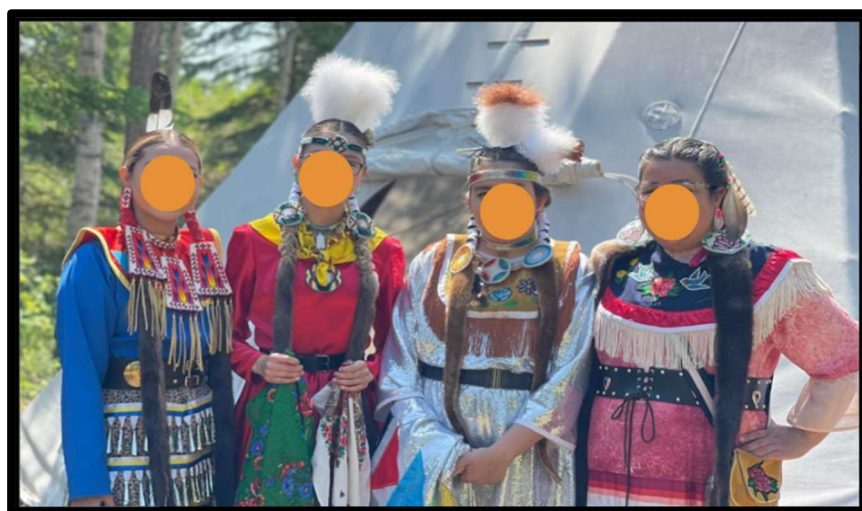


*Figure 20.* Indigenous Graduation Ceremony (own photo).



The division has also reported an increased number of students successfully completing high school this past year, with a record number of students choosing to participate in the Indigenous graduation ceremony. Many of the students attending reported that it was due to the exposure to their Indigenous culture at school, where they could learn more about their history, culture and people and embrace it.

*Figure 21.* Graduating students dressed in their traditional regalia (own photo).



*Figure 22.* Indigenous dancers (own photo).



This process of Indigenization for me, within my own context and experiences, has been full of many successes but also riddled with susceptibilities. One complicating factor is the lack of Indigenous Elders and Indigenous employees within the division that can meet all students' needs through teachings and knowledge sharing. This lack of human resources has led to the school division actively recruiting Indigenous graduates from the division and community to return and work throughout the Indigenization processes to support all student growth and success.

### **Remaining hurdles**

While the process of Indigenization itself is riddled with challenges, there are more benefits to supporting the success of all students with the adaptation and modifications of pedagogies and philosophies. These changes will work with our current systems to strengthen and support student success in their education journey. One hurdle in implementing Indigenous knowledge in education systems is cultural appropriation and lack of 'trained and certified' Indigenous teachers. Outsiders, 'non-Indigenous' teachers are trying to explain and implement empirical knowledge of the Indigenous worldview that they cannot share and transfer to subsequent generations. Many teachers are trying to incorporate and share this knowledge, albeit with good intentions, but without the development and understanding to share the knowledge effectively.

Other implications include colleagues, teachers and support staff, who have pushed back against the process, choosing instead to uphold and promote the more standardized and Westernized curricula they are used to. For some, the unwillingness to participate in the Indigenization process comes from being overwhelmed with their current teaching circumstances, but for others, it comes from fear. As Madjiji and Restoule (2008) write, it is

often the fear of the unknown or fear of making mistakes within the process, as the lines between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation are not always clear. I have had several discussions to try to delineate this feeling of fear and unease in the process, sharing that appreciating different cultures and traditions should be approached with some cautions but recognizing that it is a meaningful and beneficial part of life, learning, identity, and community, and approaching it with good intentions is a start.

Indigenous teachers often find themselves torn and conflicted in Western schools and classrooms with feelings of being an outsider in their staff and amongst their students. This lack of Indigenous teachers is due primarily to the low graduation rates and post-secondary opportunities available to Indigenous students as they age and have limited opportunities, they feel they can pursue. Indigenization and infusing Indigenous ways of knowing into the curriculum, school culture, and community will see more students prospering and succeeding in a more welcoming, safe, inclusive, representative, and respectful learning environment.

Other impediments to the process are the available resources and materials for the subject matter. Materials are created that are often only usable by the cultural group that it was intended for and cannot necessarily be shared between linguistic and cultural groups. The creation of many resources lies on the shoulders of the Elders of communities; frequently, there is limited consultation with Elders, and sometimes they are not included in several of the processes they are required to be a part of. Elders are “the keepers of the knowledge” and must be included and supported to create the materials and resources needed to pass on the information. Much of their information and knowledge comes from the ‘oral tradition,’ much of the lessons and information they share through stories and myths are lost when written and not appropriately conveyed in a storytelling setting and experience. Implementation of the work required to meet these mandates,



and create materials/resources, is often without subsistent funding, and several of the goals and resources needed are not followed through to fruition.

*Figure 23. Cree Elder and Amanda Morris (own photo).*



## Summary

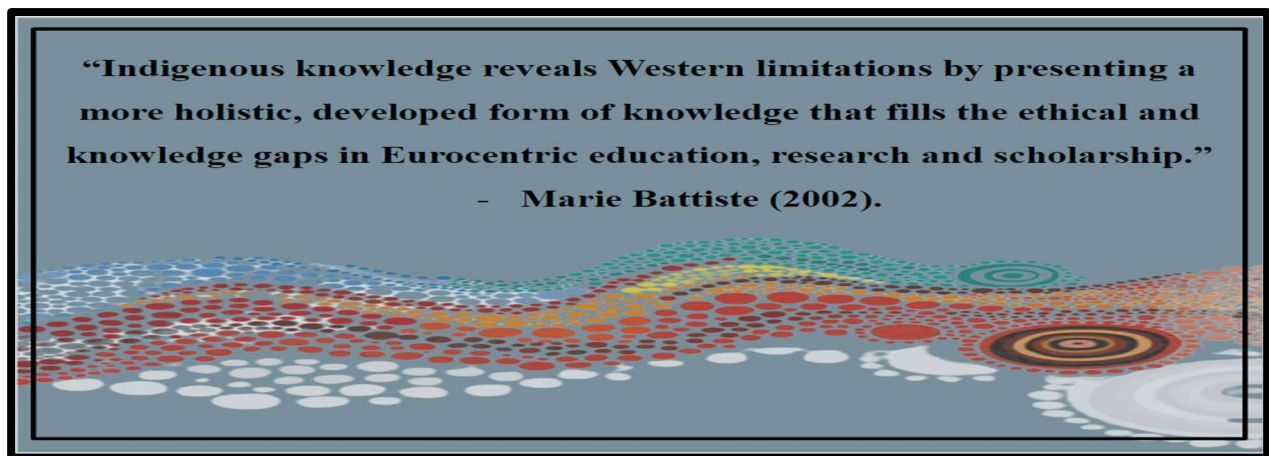
Indigenizing within our school divisions is a dynamic and creative process for engaging students, teachers, and stakeholders to strengthen inclusive communities that respect and understand the critical value and importance of Indigenous ways of knowing and practices belonging to the diverse Indigenous populations of our country. Creating a dualistic and pluralistic approach to pedagogies and epistemologies provides a sense of unity for those that learn and educate within these systems. Students can become more involved, represented and recognized through these practices and become active participants that flourish in their educational journey.

## Chapter 4: Conclusion

### Summary

Every child has the right to develop to their full potential as a spiritual, emotional, social and physical being in an inclusive and diversified space to meet these needs with the support of educators whose pedagogical practices bolster and uphold a holistic education model. Meeting these individual needs for students is a pivotal and intrinsic part of this developmental process. Indigenization, in itself, benefits all learners and stakeholders within the learning community. All individuals within the process gain a richer and more holistic understanding of their world through an awareness of Indigenous ways of knowing, knowledge and perspectives. Indigenization promotes a worldview that celebrates diversity and unity, creating a shared understanding of the world and providing opportunities for reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

*Figure 24. Indigenous Knowledge (Marie Battiste, 2002).*



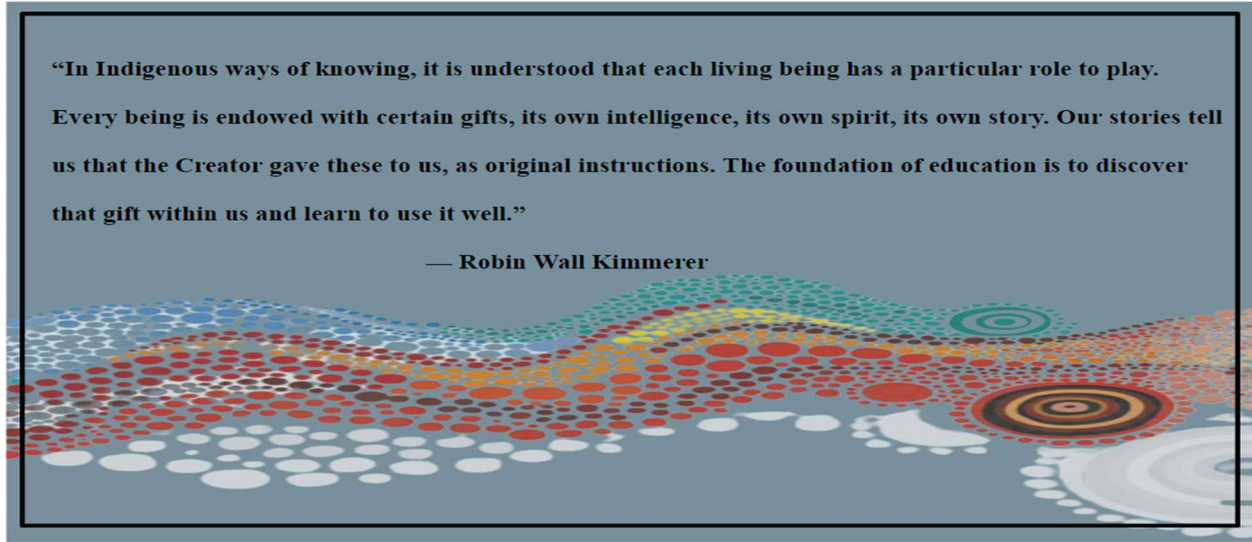
As outlined in my literature review, in an Indigenized, holistic model of education, learners experience multifaceted understandings that go beyond the limits of the curriculum allowing individuals to embark on a path of lifelong learning that embraces individuality and

supports the growth and respect of the community and others, valuing “wholeness, spirituality, and diverse modes and means of learning” (Madjidi. 2008, p.85, 101). Indigenization provides an increasingly accepting and multicultural approach to education within its systems. It offers “the ability to celebrate with the other in a manner that transcends all barriers and brings about unity and diversity” (Rosado, 2017).

Indigenization is not just ideal for Indigenous learners; the holistic approach of Indigenous ways of knowing and the values of lived experiences within the process are suitable for all learners and educators, which also fosters a caring in education that provides a preeminent foundation for moral teaching and powerful incidental learning (Noddings, 2010). In our existing education systems today, systemic gaps must be addressed and modified for more children to succeed in our changing and diversified world.

The writing of this capstone seminar through my synthesis paper has allowed me to reflect on the diversity and unity of my worldview and experiences, both as a student in the master of education program and as an educator for the past twenty years in both international and intranational settings. Reflecting on my early experiences with education in different settings and contexts has allowed me to understand the importance of changing many of our education systems' current beliefs and policies. I find myself having a new sense of purpose, with the apathy that had permeated into my practice after more than a decade within classrooms where little to no change was taking place to create a better plan and experience for the students of ‘tomorrow.’

Figure 25. Indigenous ways of knowing (Robin Wall Kimmerer, 2015).



Writing this synthesis paper has also allowed me to see the successes I have personally accomplished as an educator with the processes of Indigenization for my students, fellow teachers and the larger school community and division as a whole. Due to my leadership journey and the desire to improve my self-efficacy, I have taken the initiative to work with division leaders and community members to bring Indigenized concepts to my practice and to my school community, and several policies mandated and upheld within my school division. Working in a school community with many Indigenous students and students from multiple ethnicities and backgrounds, approaching education and learning from a more student-centred approach helps foster a sense of belonging and community for all students.

Within this journey, I have understood the importance of forming a relationship with the members of the Indigenous communities where I live, learn, play and make my home. Including the Elders of my area in this learning, journey is critical, as valuing their knowledge and ways of knowing, preserving it, and honouring it to share it with tomorrow's students as they embark on a more holistic educational journey that strives to educate the whole child. Although my journey is

far from over, much work is still to be done. Learning from those who have experienced the world around me in different ways is an integral part of my continuous and lifelong learning journey; reflecting again on the Indigenous representation of the medicine wheel, showing interconnectedness, balance, respect, and wholeness in all things helps me to be a better educator for my students.

## **Implications**

As I conclude the contemplation of my work throughout the last few years of my academic experience, many of the questions I had at the beginning of my journey and this paper remain fervent in my mind. At what point would a decision be made to change the curriculum and the teacher's pedagogical practices to support and foster our students' successful learning and education? How could I foster a spark and revive a love of learning in my students in a capacity to propagate change and perpetuate growth and intrinsic motivation in them to value the education they were receiving? While I have undergone a transformational journey with my own pedagogy, going through a metamorphosis of changes and embracing modes and models of Indigenization, many still need to reflect on their own practice to make the necessary changes.

For Indigenous knowledge to be infused into education successfully, there needs to be successful and collaborative work done with all stakeholders in the community, especially parents and Elders. Respectful understanding and planning must be researched, all parties engaged, and space provided for these undertakings to be actualized. In Indigenization, it is of the utmost importance to allow Indigenous youth the educational opportunity to learn in their language and experience ways of knowing and doing, a signal that traditional knowledge, language and skills are essential, have validity and are needed for future sustainability. Indigenous knowledge is dynamic and contains the depth and breadth of knowledge that will

allow for competencies to be learned in balanced harmony, seeing not only Indigenous people overcoming the historical imbalance of power and become active leaders in educational pursuits but offering all students an educational environment in which they can all succeed.

Madjiji and Restoule (2008) posed the question, “What is our responsibility?” (104).

Their response,

“At a time of spiritual, ecological, and social crisis, the opportunity exists to turn towards Indigenous-based holistic frameworks for knowing and learning, to help humanity develop a sense of respect and relationship with all Creation. In this age of rapid globalization and increased interaction and interdependence across cultures, the need to consider Indigenous ways of knowing and learning has never been more relevant” (p.104).

There needs to be a change made to our current systems to protect and promote the success of all students within our classrooms today. As I have argued, discussed and applied to my own practice, these goals can be achieved through an Indigenized approach of holistic education and learning with Indigenous ways of knowing interwoven into these existing systems.

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