

**THE STORIES WE SHARE: AN INDIGENOUS EXPERIENCE IN EDUCATION**

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this to my wife Ania, my sons,  
my grandsons, my parents, all my relations and my ancestors.

Thank you for your support throughout this journey,  
allowing me to unpack and rediscover my story.

I would also like to thank Dr. Christine Martineau  
for her guidance, wisdom, and knowledge.

I thank Creator for bringing us together.

All my relations, Hiy Hiy

## Abstract

Indigenous people of Turtle Island continue to struggle with colonialism ever since first contact with Europeans in 1492. The lasting effect of colonialization provides Indigenous students with many obstacles and challenges in our Canadian education system. In particular, the dark legacy of Residential Schools and the Sixties Scoop has caused irreparable damage to the survivors of those assimilative systems and their children. It is because of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the 94 Calls to Action that school administrators and teachers are becoming more aware of the systemic racism that exists in education. This theoretical and reflexive research will engage in a deep exploration of my story, as a Plains Cree/ *nehiyaw* Sixties Scoop Survivor and Catholic school teacher, in the context of the available literature around Indigeneity and Canadian education. I investigate and unpack the mechanisms of systemic racism in our education system and how it is holding back Indigenous families, students, and teachers from fully participating in an education system that honours all Ways of Knowing and Being. By employing an ethic of care and critique, we can begin the healing process for both Indigenous families and educators to rebuild trust in our education system. Using academic literature and my own life story as an Indigenous student, teacher, and now graduate student, I sought to learn from my own experiences. In keeping with the teachings of the Medicine Wheel, I employed a holistic, inclusive approach under the guidance of an Elder and Knowledge Keeper throughout the process.

Keywords: Indigenous, School, Stories, Oral Tradition, Reconciliation, De-colonization

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## Introduction

My spirit name is *kinawapikwaw mistatim*, the horse that stands apart and looks out. It was bestowed upon me by Cree Elder Dale Awasis during a Pipe ceremony and Sweat Lodge naming ceremony. The Spirit Horse came to me for a reason. As a schoolteacher, it is necessary that I provide and maintain a safe space for my students to thrive and grow. It is the stallion that stands apart and protects the herd, and that is my purpose, to stand apart and protect our Indigenous students so that they can succeed at school. This capstone research project is the culmination of the past two years of study, self-discovery and hard work put into the healing and recovery from the trauma brought about from the Sixties Scoop and colonization of our education system. My initial intentions were to engage our school's Indigenous families in a Bison hide scraping and learn from their stories, but Creator had a different plan for me. Instead, I turned my focus inwards to undertake the sometimes painful but necessary steps to understand what systemic racism looks like in our Canadian education system. This is my story told as a student, teacher, researcher, leader and *nehiyaw* (Cree) person.

## Research Aims

Being a *nehiyaw* (Cree person) and a Sixties Scoop survivor, I really needed to do a deep dive into Indigenous issues in Canada. As I progressed through my graduate studies, and read more Indigenous research literature, it became more apparent that I needed to focus on the barriers that keep our Indigenous students from finding success in school. There are many factors at play and a variety of reasons why Indigenous students are falling through the cracks of our Canadian education system. As a researcher and educator, I've really had to undertake a deep and critical examination of my role in the education system and how it impacts the Indigenous students I teach. The more I learned, the more questions I had about my role as a teacher.

How has my own education assimilated me into white society, created an unconscious bias, and a deep sense of shame towards myself and my people? What is it that I am doing (or not doing) that may impair my relationships with Indigenous students and their families? How would being a Sixties Scoop survivor impact my attitude towards Indigenous students? These were the questions I had to ask myself as I unpacked my experiences to tell my story. If I cannot tell my own story truthfully, how I can ever listen to the stories my Indigenous students and their families have to offer? To be an Indigenous person is to be in relationship with others. Before we can be in relationship with others, we must first be in relationship with ourselves. My research journey begins here, by telling my story and unpacking it so I can understand where I came from, where I am now and where I am going. As Joseph Couture (2013) said “Each person has a purpose and a place. It’s up to you. You have all the answers within you. There is within you a voice that tells you who you are and where you are” (p. 201).

### **Sharing My Story**

The learning and growing process that I have undergone while completing my graduate studies and research has led to a path of deep self-discovery and growth. In conducting Indigenous Research Methodology (Weber-Pillwax, 1999), I now believe it is necessary to recognize and account for my own experiences, biases, and perspectives as the researcher. Therefore, I must give account of my own story before I can begin to understand the stories of others. I am *nehiyaw* (Plains Cree) and Métis from *amiskwacîwâskahikan* (Beaver Hills House), what settlers now called Edmonton, on Treaty Six territory. My ancestors and birth families come from Onion Lake Cree Nation, Buffalo Lake Métis Settlement and Fort Vermillion. I am a Sixties Scoop survivor, and this is my story.

I am the youngest of six siblings and my birth mother was struggling with her own demons, the result of the legacy of damage caused by the Indian Residential School system. In desperation, she made the agonizing decision to give me up for adoption. I was immediately placed in foster care and made a ward of the Province of Alberta. It would be seven months until I was placed with a white family that had moved from Berkley, California to a small farm in rural Alberta. I became a part of an assimilative system that would later become known as the Sixties Scoop (Sinclair, 2007).

My adoptive parents are well educated, both having attained graduate school degrees. My adoptive father was an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister and would later work tirelessly fighting for Black civil rights and marching with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. In Alberta, he became a beekeeper, a farmer and the director of Family and Community Support Services for the town of Edson. My mother was a clinical social worker and worked alongside adoption agencies in California placing Black American children in adoptive families. They are both retired now and live in Edmonton. My adoptive parents (I will now refer to them as my parents) have a biological daughter, five years older than I am.

I grew up on a small subsistence farm, situated in a valley along the McLeod River just north of the hamlet of Peers, Alberta. The log cabin we lived in was built in 1913 and was one of the first white settler cabins in the area. We had no running water or plumbing. The only source of heat was a wood stove in the living room and a wood cookstove in the kitchen. We did have the luxury of a hand operated pump in the kitchen, so getting fresh water was very convenient. We raised goats, chickens, honeybees and grew vegetables and an assortment of herbs and berries. Glaciation, and years of erosion had left mineral and nutrient rich soil at the bottom of



the McLeod Valley. It was lush and fertile land that would become an integral part of who I am as an Indigenous person.

I've known I was adopted as far back as I can remember. I was loved and felt very much a part of my family, but adoption comes with its own challenges. Although I had a loving family, I still felt different and that something was missing. I didn't look like my parents or my sister, but that really didn't matter until I started Kindergarten. The elementary school that I attended was situated in the Hamlet of Peers. The surrounding farming community was predominantly white, consisting of Ukrainian, German, Scottish and English settler families originating from the early 1900s. It was a white community and I stood out from my classmates.

My first encounter with racism was with an older child on the playground. I would have been either in kindergarten or Grade 1, while the older boy would have been in Grade 6. It was during recess and the older boys were playing on the soccer field. I wanted to play, but being young and shy, I stayed on the sidelines over by the hockey rink boards. The soccer ball came my way, and I ran to retrieve it. I wanted to be helpful and return the ball to the older boys. I picked up the ball and turned to give the ball back, but instead the older white boy pushed me down and stood over me. I'll never forget his words, "Dirty Indian, stay down." Those words felt like a knife plunged deep into my breast, literally. I could feel the hurt as a physical pain in my heart.

This was not the only racist experience I would have at school. I can remember learning about "Indians" and having to make cardstock headbands and feathers. We would decorate them with crayons or felt markers. I was young, but deep down inside I knew this was wrong and it felt awkward. I was an Indian, pretending to dress-up like an Indian. We learned only about the historical Indian, a "savage" race of people that once occupied the plains of Canada. There was

never any mention of the Indian Residential School system or the Sixties Scoop. My ancestors were remembered as buckskin-clad people, using stone-age tools and living in poverty until the white man came to save them.

I did not see myself represented in the curriculum. We read books like “Dick and Jane at the Seashore” and learned about the roles of men and women in society. They were always white. Men wore suits and fedora hats, and went off to work every day, while women wore aprons and kept the home running smoothly. At recess, we would play imaginary games like “Cowboys and Indians” in the forest at the edge of the schoolyard. Nobody wanted to play the “Indian” because they were the antagonist, the savage that the “Cowboys” needed to subdue and eventually “kill”. I didn’t want to be an Indian, I wanted to be a Cowboy. Summers were difficult seasons because my skin turned dark. I can distinctly remember being in the bathtub as a kid and trying to scrub off my dark skin so it would be lighter coloured like my white friends. This is not something an eight-year-old should be worried about.

Throughout junior and senior high school, I kept my head down and for the most part, did everything that was expected of me. For a time, I kept my hair long with encouragement from my mother. She loved my long black hair. But there was an incident with an airport border officer during a Spring Break visit to my grandmother’s. The inspecting officer asked if I had alcohol or drugs in my luggage. My mother stepped in immediately to protect me, since I was only 15 years old at the time. She was instructed to back off by the officer and I was asked again if I had any alcohol or drugs in my bags. Of course, I said “no” since I didn’t have anything of that sort in my luggage. My belongings were thoroughly searched and left in a pile for me to repack. There was no offer of apology; I was only told to “move along” to allow others to move

through the line. I was certain my appearance as a visibly Indigenous person was cause enough to arouse suspicion.

Once we got home, I asked my mom to arrange for me to see a hairdresser. I had my beautiful long black hair cut short. I was ashamed to look Indigenous and I wanted to look white. I started to wear chinos and dress shirts instead of jeans and t-shirts like I used to. The shame I felt as a brown-skinned person was overwhelming, and I wanted nothing to do with my heritage, traditions, or culture if it meant that I would not have to suffer the racism of being anything other than white. However, I did find comfort and safe spaces at school with my art teachers in junior and senior high. They saw me for who I really was and afforded me a place and space in which I could let my guard down and be myself. I could explore what it meant to be Indigenous through my artwork.

My efforts to remain white-washed continued into adulthood. I studied psychology for two years at Red Deer College and got married to a white woman who had been my high school sweetheart. We had a child together during my second year of studies. After leaving college I enrolled in the Canadian Armed Forces Reserves and applied to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. After serving for a year in the armed forces, I was accepted into training with the RCMP. A high school colleague of mine had also been trying to apply to the RCMP and was having no luck. The news of my acceptance was more than he could handle, and he told me that the only reason I got in was because I was Native. When I got to Depot Division for training and met my troopmates, I found out that only three of us were Indigenous, one Black and the rest were white.

I would have to say, training was a positive experience for me, and I had good memories of my time at Depot. However, my time spent in southern Alberta as a young Indigenous Mountie was quite different. I had a supportive trainer and he believed in my ability to become

an exceptional police officer, but the racism and microaggressions towards Indigenous people were considerable within the RCMP ranks. I've heard it all when it comes to microaggressions. Some of the examples were *you're a credit to your race Jethro, how come you didn't end up like the rest of those Indians?* I often heard *present company excluded*, before someone launched into a tirade about how difficult Indians were. One incident that has stuck in my mind happened as we prepared to get involved in a stolen vehicle pursuit near Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump. I had a 4x4 police SUV and was needed for pursuit off-road. The subdivision dog handler was being called in for tracking if needed. The guys in my detachment meant this comment as a joke, but it was hurtful none the less. They said to me "Be careful out there Jethro, that RCMP dog has already had a taste of red meat, he might come after you!" I left the RCMP after two years, seeing the writing on the wall and knowing that as an Indigenous person, my career options would be limited. The stress of the job had also taken a toll on my marriage. We ended our relationship just prior to me leaving the RCMP.

A few years later I would retrain to become a Chartered Industrial Designer in Toronto, earning my Bachelor of Design degree at the Ontario College of Art & Design University. The cultural diversity of Toronto let me breath freely for once. I blended in and the colour of my skin no longer mattered to anyone. I was free to live authentically and didn't need to pretend to be something else other than who I was, an Indigenous man. Although, I still felt that despite my life experiences and education, I was held back from upward mobility with employment, and I felt that it was my Indigenous heritage that was a major factor.

I worked for an office furniture company for several years, first working in the warehouse doing menial tasks as manual labour. I was eventually allowed to get out on job sites to learn how to do the furniture installs. This took me all over the Greater Toronto Area, southern

Ontario, northern Ontario, and New York State. It wasn't until our installation team began to become more racially diversified that management started to look at me more seriously as a supervisor. I eventually left that company but continued to work in furniture installs while completing my degree. I incorporated a business that allowed me to do design work and installations as a contractor. That was the only time I had true autonomy and was given full responsibility on larger jobs. Recently I was able to reunite with a former colleague from our furniture installation days. We had become good friends, we trusted and relied on each other. He was candid with me. He said, "Jethro, I gotta tell you, I really don't trust Indians, but you were one of the really good ones. I could rely on you, but some of them...man, it's hard to rely on them sometimes." At this point my feelings weren't hurt by his comments, but it just reinforced what I already knew, people don't trust us and it's an uphill battle just to get equal footing in this white world.

Moving back to Edmonton, I couldn't find work as a designer, so I became a Red Seal Journeyman Welder, eventually leading to a career as a high school teacher. I have been with my school division for eight years now and moving closer to a leadership position. During these years in education, I have really worked hard to reconcile my past experiences with racism in education. In doing so I have had to turn my gaze inwards to examine my biases, assumptions, and attitudes towards my own people. Even within the education system, I don't see myself represented in the faculty and staff. I can probably count on one or two hands the number of Indigenous teachers or staff I have met over the last eight years. As I make my move towards leadership, I cannot count one Indigenous assistant principal or principal of which I am aware in the school system.

In my leadership journey I have discovered that having allies is critical to opening doors of opportunity and advancement. Having assistant principals and principals who believe and support the advancement of Indigenous faculty is so important and necessary. However, I have had colleagues come up to me and ask “Jethro, how is it that you turned out so normal?” At that moment in time, I had not progressed far enough on my journey of self-discovery and was woefully unprepared to call out this individual for her racist remark. Even though I had been the target of micro-aggressions my entire life, I could not bring myself to challenge my work colleague.

As I progressed through my graduate studies and learned more about leadership and how my story as an Indigenous teacher/leader would grow and develop, I started to find the confidence to call people out on their micro-aggressions. One particular story stands out. It had been a stressful semester navigating my way through teaching in a pandemic and juggling graduate studies at the same time. I had reached the end of my rope at that point in time. My graduate supervisor had given me a gift of sorts to lift my spirits. She told me that I would be the very first Indigenous student to graduate from the Master of Educational Leadership program at Concordia University of Edmonton. This news really picked me up and I was very excited to share this with some of my school leaders. One assistant principal was very happy for me and responded to the news by saying “Oh wow Jethro, don’t worry about getting your master’s done, you got this in the bag!” Of course, he meant nothing by this comment, and clearly, he was trying to be supportive of my situation, but I had been facing a lifetime of microaggressions. I called him out on this and said that the comment was racist. He did back down and apologized to me. I was finally finding my voice and learning to resist the racism in our society.

Putting the work into leadership graduate studies also gave me time and space to re-examine the racism I felt towards our Indigenous students and their families. I was a Sixties Scoop survivor and raised by a white family in a white education system. I had learned how to navigate the uncomfortableness of being Indigenous in white society. I could act and perform as a white person and life became easier for me. I turned this lens on my Indigenous students and tried to guide them gently onto the path that I was raised on. I now realize that this perpetuates the racism that I was brought up in. I'm learning to unlearn and it's uncomfortable and brings up the hurt and trauma that I internalized as a young child.

### **Related Literature**

The literature chosen for this project creates a story that informs the reader of the research into systemic racism in education, suggestions to remedy these problems, and how decolonizing education can be envisioned. My story is reflected in the literature, not only as an Indigenous student, but as a teacher and researcher. I am interested in knowing where I have come from, where I am now, and where I will be going in the future. The literature reflects this and weaves together research and recommendations that can strengthen and expand our education system for students, teachers, and educational leaders.

### **Systemic Racism in Education**

Studies have been conducted to examine the underlying problems with Indigenous education programming aimed at raising graduation rates and academic success amongst Indigenous students in Canada (primarily the Prairie Provinces). One such study (Gebhard, 2018) showed that, despite efforts to create an inclusive and culturally sensitive education environment, systemic and prevalent racism is what holds back many Indigenous students from finding success. While additive Indigenous content in curriculum is a positive step towards

reconciliation, it is our colonial view of others (those who are colonized) that requires the real change. It is more important to recognize and talk openly about our racism, rather than have inclusion of cultural curriculum and programming.

As a Sixties Scoop survivor, I too formed racist attitudes towards my own people. I was raised by a white family in a white settler farming community. Even though I was raised to respect others and not speak ill of others, our prevalent ways of being excluded others from fully participating in society. Our education system is predicated on maintaining the status quo. Educators often have lowered academic expectations of their First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students, even before they start school. This attitude comes from a deficit ideology perpetuated from systemic racist ideas we have about marginalized people and their cultures (Gorski, 2019). These students are racialized and categorized in contrast to the predominant white culture (Gebhard, 2018).

The lasting damage goes far beyond the individual experience—it is systemic:

Racism experienced on an individual level does harm to one person, which in turn can affect one's family and friends; but racism on a structural level goes beyond the individual. It informs institutions (such as schools, healthcare, and justice) that enact and perpetuate racism against an entire group of people. (Zong, 1994, as cited in Loppie, et al., 2014)

The education system continues to be a significant source of racialization for Indigenous students (Grande, 2005, as cited in Clark et al., 2014). As a student, I often felt judged purely on my skin colour and not my accomplishments. This is an important consideration and reflection in my research. I must recognize and understand how I was racialized as an Indigenous student and how I currently do this to Indigenous students as a teacher. This becomes a story that I can share from two distinct worldviews as an Indigenous person raised in white settler society.



Other studies have explored the notion of white settler resentment as a barrier to Indigenous student success. Schick (2014) explores and discusses the reasons for resistance and resentment towards anti-colonial education in Canadian schools. The author uses the context of a provincially developed program of study, the purpose of which was to provide information about the province and nation and the importance of First Nations in our Canadian society. As the program of study was implemented, principals noticed resistance from white parents and students. Furthermore, Schick focuses on the resentment held towards Indigenous culture in contrast to white settler society. Racism is learned from an early age and is rehearsed and reinforced through how we learn as students. I can relate to this looking back on my experiences as a young student in the 1970s and early 80s. School learning materials and resources exemplified the white ideal, never showing people of colour. Indigenous people were always represented as historical figures, living off the land during the time of early settlers. It was as if we never had a history of our own before the Europeans came. As students, we never learned about contemporary Indigenous people of importance. We simply weren't seen as relevant to modern society.

We as teachers perpetuate this racism (often unintentionally) because we are the products of our education system, so racism becomes systemic. Resentment occurs in many ways but is usually attributed to when the status quo of white supremacy is challenged and the inability to maintain white space. Schick (2014) identifies three types of white racial knowledge: a) knowing *who* you are as a white person, b) knowing *where* to traverse the social landscape, c) know *how* to act in racially acceptable ways. When you identify and are accepted as a white person, navigating white society becomes easier. I certainly learned this at an early age to dress "white" and choose careers that were mainly dominated by white people (i.e., RCMP and the Canadian

Armed Forces). Although, I also learned that you can never escape your skin colour. When you are identified as Indigenous, that wayfinding becomes challenging or impossible in some situations. Reading (2013) describes this as relational racism in the context of everyday interactions: “Relational racism occurs when a person experiences discriminatory behavior from people he/she encounters in his/her daily life” (p. 4). Being aware and identifying this white settler resentment in the context of the school setting is crucial in being able to move forward with reconciliation with our Indigenous communities and students.

Acknowledgement of racism is not enough to provide solutions for success. Specifically, Call to Action No. 10 (Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Calls to Action, 2012) outlines what must be done to reach equity for our Indigenous students and their families:

We call on the federal government to draft new Aboriginal education legislation with the full participation and informed consent of Aboriginal peoples. The new legislation would include a commitment to sufficient funding and would incorporate the following principles:

- i. Providing sufficient funding to close identified educational achievement gaps within one generation.
- ii. Improving education attainment levels and success rates.
- iii. Developing culturally appropriate curricula.
- iv. Protecting the right to Aboriginal languages, including the teaching of Aboriginal languages as credit courses.
- v. Enabling parental and community responsibility, control, and accountability, similar to what parents enjoy in public school systems.
- vi. Enabling parents to fully participate in the education of their children.

vii. Respecting and honouring Treaty relationships. (p. 2)

These Calls to Action represent specific actions that are missing in our current education system. This research project could use any of those items as a launching point for further focused research and planning in my school site.

Finally, how we assess our Indigenous students has direct impact on their success. Our current Eurocentric assessment tools are designed to measure readiness for postsecondary studies or the workforce. These tools do not assess other skills that are vital to the health and prosperity of Indigenous communities and economy. These skills could involve hunting, fishing, trapping and management of biodiversity to ensure the health of the local ecosystem (Miller, 2018, p. 183). When our Eurocentric assessment tools disregards these other skills, we disregard our Indigenous students. Also, Large Scale Assessments (LSAs) methods are best suited to the prior knowledge and experiences of the student's being tested. When marginalized students are denied the knowledge and experiences of the dominant culture, they are at a disadvantage. Modified LSAs suited to the experiences and languages of the students would be preferred (Miller, 2018, p. 184).

### **Complexity and Relational Ways of Knowing**

This topic focuses on Indigenous ways of knowing that challenge how we as teachers have traditionally been trained and how we train new teachers. To give a quick summary of complexity theory (CT), it has its beginnings in science and systems theory, and it is used to describe change. CT focuses on the interactive aspects of living/social systems and how they evolve or adapt through cooperation and competition (Sanford, Hooper, & Starr, 2015). The key element borrowed from CT is the interactive aspects of social systems and how it related to education systems. When CT is integrated with Indigenous ways of knowing, how we as teachers

interact with students changes completely. What is challenged the most is the ideology of competition for marks. For students to maximize their learning and that of their community (i.e., the class or school), the following three principles are utilized:

- 1) Put the learning of your peers before your own learning.
- 2) Create work that will benefit seven generations to come.
- 3) Find your own passion in the course content and use it to energize the community.

These principles foster relational accountability in the learner and the classroom (Sanford, Hooper, & Starr, 2015). The focus is shifted away from the competitive interests of the individual to serve the needs of the learning community and at the same time fosters a passion for lifelong learning in the student and even the teacher.

We can also learn from Relational Ways of Knowing in terms of our approach to research. Shawn Wilson discusses this paradigm as a relationship with the truth. We as researchers do not exist external to what or whom we are researching, but are in relationship with the subject (Wilson, 2008). We cannot separate ourselves from the research because we become part of it as soon as we engage in the work. Wilson goes on to talk about how Indigenous epistemology is based on relationships and even within the Cree language, objects are not named but described in ways that we relate to them (p. 73). When we engage with others in relational ways, we are really engaging with their stories:

Narratives give space for transformative possibilities in teaching and learning, and the story is implied in research discoveries. This includes qualitative research where, we know, that behind every statistic there is a story. Story is a powerful communicative event. It is the sharing of story, the witnessing of story, and the learning from the story

that the Indigenous Elders know hold the potential for shifts in consciousness. (Kovach, 2018, p. 52)

It is within this space that I have created, I am able to engage in relationship with my own story as the research subject and researcher.

### **Shifting from Cognitive Imperialism to Indigenizing Education**

Cognitive imperialism is “a form of colonization that —denies people their language and cultural integrity by maintaining the legitimacy of only one language, one culture, and one frame of reference” (Battiste, 2000, p. 198). From an Indigenous perspective, Cognitive imperialism is the systemic mechanism used to devalue and discredit Indigenous ways of knowing, resulting in a loss of culture, language, ceremonies, and ways of transferring knowledge from one generation to the next. Many Indigenous families still fear that our education system will continue the assimilation and colonization of our cultures (Whitley, 2014). For teachers to make significant changes we must first acknowledge this framework within our education system. Universities also play an important role in making this paradigm shift. These are the institutions where teachers are trained and are implicated in perpetuating Cognitive imperialism. Many universities have made significant changes by offering Indigenous study programs or incorporating Indigenous language and culture courses into their programs. Trent University has made a practice of hiring Elders to teach Indigenous culture and language classes as a part of their Indigenous Studies Department. They feel that language is an integral part of education because “that is where culture is” (Williams, as cited in Gehl et.al., 2010).

### **Indigenizing Teacher Education**

Kitchen and Raynor (2013) undertook an action research project that examined Indigenizing education. The experimental aspect of their action research project was to have an

Elder working in an Aboriginal setting and have educators in a classroom implementing Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy. The purpose was to increase “knowledge and understanding of Indigenous peoples, issues and ways of knowing in Canada and around the world” (p. 41), arguing that this knowledge is relevant to all educators. They challenged teacher candidates

to reflect on the foundational role and ongoing influence of Aboriginal people in Canada, the impact of colonization on Aboriginal communities, contemporary issues in Aboriginal education, and the personal and professional implications of these topics for the teachers of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. (ibid)

Indigenous ways of knowing and learning were engaged with a wholistic approach using ceremony, modeling by instructors, Elders, and guests, talking circles, experiential learning, and introspection/reflection. The authors found that Indigenizing education takes more than learning facts and knowledge. It requires a certain amount of vulnerability on the teacher’s behalf to allow a different worldview to take place.

### **Bloom’s Taxonomy and the Medicine Wheel**

In 1956, educational psychologist Dr. Benjamin Bloom created a learning theory called Bloom’s Taxonomy (Zhou & Brown, 2015). The aim was to support higher level thinking in education utilizing analysis, evaluating concepts, processes, procedures, and principles as opposed to learning facts and figures. In Bloom’s Taxonomy there are three domains of educational learning: (1) Cognitive domain: mental skills (knowledge); (2) Psychomotor Domain: manual or physical skills (skills); and (3) Affective Domain: growth in feelings or emotional areas (attitude). Educators often use the terms K (Knowledge), S (Skills), and A (Attitudes) to describe the goals of the learning process where students should have acquired new

KSAs after a lesson (Zhou & Brown, 2015, p. 89). To augment and compliment Bloom's Taxonomy, the Cree Medicine Wheel offers a fourth domain to the KSAs.

The majority of medicine wheels in Turtle Island (North America) are split up into four equal quadrants contained within one unified circle. They represent the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of people. The fourth "spiritual" quadrant is the missing domain in Bloom's Taxonomy and provides a critical element of human development from an Indigenous way of being (LaFever, 2016). The Cree Medicine Wheel is a wholistic and relational organizational model for human development. This model at the outset looks quite different from the Eurocentric models that are widely accepted in academic circles. Although there are parallels between the models, the Cree Medicine Wheel has deep Indigenous teachings embedded within. There are three main ideas that should be remembered concerning the Medicine Wheel (Wenger-Nabigon, 2010).

- 1) The Cree Medicine Wheel is not a top-down or hierarchical model. Instead, it is cyclical and unending in nature. It contains wisdom and knowledge that has been passed down from generation to generation from our Elders and Knowledge Keepers.
- 2) At a simplified level, the Cree Medicine Wheel teaches us to focus on our external and internal development throughout life. It is divided up into four quadrants representing childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and the elderly. It also represents our physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional wellbeing represented by feelings, relationships, respect and caring.
- 3) The Cree Medicine Wheel is deeply embedded in Cree Indigenous culture. This culture is in danger of being wiped out through loss of Indigenous worldviews, language, knowledge systems, traditions, and environment. It is critically important that this model

of human development be utilized in the healthy development of our Indigenous students, teachers, and others.

The Cree Medicine Wheel teachings support human development through different stages of life and are connected to the natural world (Wenger-Nabigon, 2010). Using a model with this approach allows teachers who are familiar with Bloom's Taxonomy and the KSAs to augment and add a fourth domain. The Medicine Wheel teachings have relational connections to the natural world and form links with *learning from place* (Restoule, 2013).

### **Healing and Spirituality**

Cherubini et al. (2010) illustrate just how important the introspection process is in the healthy development of teachers as they learn and grow, particularly for Indigenous teachers who have suffered trauma because of colonization. One of their participants explained this:

Healing is an essential component of teaching. Our ancestors insist on it. Our past injustices must be acknowledged so that we may move ahead to build a better future for our nation, and I incorporate that on a daily bases [sic] into my classroom. (p. 552).

Spirituality is also entwined with healing. It allows the necessary space for introspection and to be able to reconcile convergent ideologies. The authors noted the importance of spirituality to their participants:

Participants described how spirituality was critical in their negotiation of the dual realities of Eurocentric schooling practices and Aboriginal epistemologies. They considered the wisdom and spiritual traditions as the frameworks for creating classroom environments conducive to learning. (Cherubini et.al., 2010, p. 553)

Without spirituality, healing can never fully be realized in the Indigenous context.



## Research Methodology

The significance of storytelling and the sharing of knowledge is crucial for Indigenous people. We have been doing this since time immemorial. To better understand how our schools can engage with our Indigenous students and families, we must first unpack our own experiences with the education system. My approach uses a reflexive and Indigenous autoethnographic lens to better understand current academic research concerning racism in our education system. Bishop (2021) describes Indigenous autoethnography as “differing from autoethnography by centering Indigenous axiologies, ontologies and epistemologies” (p. 368). As an Indigenous researcher, I identified a need to examine my own story in relationship to a western education system experienced as an Indigenous student. As an outcome of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission findings and 94 Calls to Action (Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Calls to Action, 2012), there has been the impetus to decolonize education in Canada. Studies have been conducted to examine the underlying problems and barriers with Indigenous education programming aimed at raising graduation rates and academic success amongst Indigenous students in Canada – primarily in the Prairie provinces. One such study (Gebhard, 2018) showed that, despite efforts to create an inclusive and culturally sensitive education environment, systemic and prevalent racism is what holds back many Indigenous students from finding success. While additive Indigenous content in curriculum is a positive step towards reconciliation, it is our colonial view of others (those who are colonized) that requires the real change.

Battiste (2013) describes the monocultural approach to education in Canada as *cognitive imperialism* and describes it as a manipulative system built upon prejudicial assumptions with the end goal of sustaining colonial dominance over other cultures (p. 161). The Truth and

Reconciliation Commission (2015) brought to light the systemic racism and coercive policies to assimilate Indigenous children into white society through the Indian Residential Schools system (p. 8). Martineau (2018) points out that our current approach to education continues to fail Indigenous students. She states that

Canadian education is failing Aboriginal people. Education for Aboriginal people has been designed to serve the needs of Canadian identity at the expense of Aboriginal identity. This is evident in the continued focus on the effects of colonization on Aboriginal people as the problem rather than on the continuation of colonization as the actual problem in need of redress. (p. 195)

This necessitates a paradigm shift in how we approach engagement with Indigenous people. Indigenous researcher Weber-Pillwax (1999) explains Indigenous Research Methodology (IRM) and its seven principles that enable discourse when engaging in Indigenous research. These principles are as follows:

- a) The interconnectedness of all living things;
- b) The impact of motives and intentions of person and community;
- c) The foundation of research as lived Indigenous experience;
- d) The groundedness of theories in Indigenous epistemology;
- e) The transformative nature of research;
- f) The sacredness and responsibility of maintaining personal and community integrity;
- g) The recognition of languages and cultures as living processes (pp. 41-43).

There is merit in this approach not only for research, but any interactions we have within Indigenous communities.

Jones Brayboy's (2006) nine distinct tenets of Tribal Critical Race Theory also guided my research and how I determined my approach. Their most pertinent points that contribute to creating pathways to overcoming systemic racism, healing and ultimately holistic health and wellness in our school are the following:

- a) Colonization is systemic and deeply embedded in society;
- b) The Indigenous lens reimagines our Euro-centric concepts of culture, knowledge, and power;
- c) Acknowledging that governmental and educational policies toward Indigenous peoples are intimately linked to assimilative practices and are destructive to their culture and people; and
- d) Tribal Ways of Knowing (customs, languages, beliefs, philosophies, and visions for the future) are central to Indigenous life and lived realities. It is understood how adaptable individuals and groups really are. (Jones Brayboy, 2006, pp. 429-430).

Tribal Critical Race Theory also honors storytelling as a legitimate way to transfer knowledge and data. The oral tradition is a way of being and is embedded in the Medicine Wheel teachings. It is how culture and knowledge are transmitted from generation to generation, a foundation of all Indigenous communities. Knowledge and traditions held by the Elders are given as gifts to the youth through storytelling. This is pivotal in reconciling Euro-centric education with Indigenous education.

In contemporary white settler society, storytelling is not widely accepted in science or research. This research project offers an opportunity to reimagine relationships and the sharing of knowledge with Indigenous families in education. In Indigenous culture, storytelling and oral knowledge transfer are legitimate ways of disseminating knowledge and understanding and, as

such, cannot be separated from theory – it *is* theory (Jones Brayboy, 2006). It is crucial that this tradition of knowledge transfer continues so that our youth and their families can contribute to a healthy school community.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Shawn Wilson (2008) affirms that research is indeed ceremony, and through ceremony we can strengthen the relationships within us. He writes, “The purpose of any ceremony is to build stronger relationships or bridge the distance between aspects of our cosmos and ourselves” (Wilson, 2008, p. 11). My story is the data, collected as storytelling of personal experiences in education as a student, teacher and now researcher. Analysis of data from an Indigenous source is an approach that requires ethics of care and critique. Weber-Pillwax’s (1999) Indigenous Research Methodology (IRM) uses ethics of care at its core, while Jones Brayboy’s (2006) Tribal Critical Race Theory (TCRT) uses ethics of critique as a lens to examine data and it honors storytelling to transmit it. Indigenous ceremony became an integral component to my research analysis. Daily smudge ceremonies, spending time in reflection while being on the land, writing poetry, participating in Sweat Lodge, and spending time with Elders and Knowledge Keepers has shed light on my past experiences in education, allowing me to gain clarity in my research.

The telling of my story is an unpacking of practices aimed at the systemic dismantling of Indigenous culture, traditions, and language with the end goal of assimilation into white, Canadian society. It is also a story of re-discovery, truth sharing and reconciliation that occurs at the personal level. Since the data I gathered is my personal story, I chose to use an inductive coding approach. If I used deductive coding, it would influence the data and what I included in my story. Inductive coding allowed me to express my thoughts and feelings freely without

predetermined coding (Creswell, 2015, p. 128). My story is written chronologically and describes my life experiences through the lens of an Indigenous Sixties Scoop survivor.

### **Describing the Data**

Several reoccurring themes emerged during the analysis phase. The first was how white settler society creates a sense of alienation and marginalization to those who exist outside the norm. This theme emerged from my story early on, especially when I started elementary education. At a young age I didn't understand white supremacy, but I could feel the effects it had on me. I was made to feel different and stand apart from my classmates. This was a sense of alienation that set me apart from my peers, even my family at times. This theme also ties into the next, a curriculum that serves to maintain the status quo, excludes Indigeneity and Indigenous ways of knowing and being. I did not see myself represented in the curriculum, and this further alienated me in the educational experience. Instead, the curriculum made me feel inferior since I could never become white or be accepted as a white person, no matter how hard I tried.

Looking back and reflecting on my childhood, I came to realize how education was used to exclude my people's history. A theme that stood out was how white settler education is used to marginalize Indigenous culture by misrepresenting/omitting history, culture, and traditions through cultural appropriation and misrepresentation of our peoples. I can recall a time in elementary school a classroom activity where we made cardstock "Indian" headbands and feathers. "I was an Indian, pretending to dress-up like an Indian." The irony of the situation really hit home as I took stock of all the examples of racism and marginalization that took place during my formative educational years.

Not being able to truly assimilate into white society brought about a deep sense of internal shame. Not only did school curriculum exclude Indigenous experience, but mainstream

media also constructed and portrayed us as the antagonist. Indians were not to be trusted. We were made out to be violent, drunk, lazy and primitive. As a young person trying to make sense of the world, I internalized these messages. I began to believe what I saw and what I was being taught in school. This is action taken to divorce oneself from Indigenous identity to assume a white settler identity. This theme occurred several times in the data. There were instances when “I didn’t want to be the Indian, I wanted to be a Cowboy” when playacting with peers, or “trying to scrub off my dark skin so it would be lighter coloured like my white friends” and a general feeling of shame to appear Indigenous when I wanted to be white like the others. This theme not only occurred in my younger, elementary school years, but continued into high school and beyond: “My efforts to remain white-washed continued into adulthood.”

Microaggressions such as Ascription of Intelligence (Sue et al., 2007, as cited in Nadal, 2018, p. 60) became more apparent as an adult and I was much more aware of the nuances of this type of racism. Being accepted into training for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) was a huge accomplishment for a young man barely into his twenties. This achievement was not celebrated by all. I had a high school colleague that had been trying to get in without success. Upon hearing of my acceptance for training he said to me “The reason I got in [the RCMP] was because you’re Native.” This microaggression came in the form of a microinvalidation; a jealous accusation (Clark et al., 2014) meant to diminish my accomplishment on the unfounded basis of affirmative action. Deep down I knew that I was accepted to the RCMP on my own merits, but it still stung when people pushed back at every little turn. During my tenure as an RCMP officer in southern Alberta, there were many other instances of microaggressions aimed at me. Such examples as “you’re a credit to your race Jethro”, “how come you didn’t end up like the rest of those Indians?”, “present company excluded”, peppered my daily experiences in the RCMP

detachment. Racism towards Indigenous people in southern Alberta was rampant and it was no different whether I was in uniform or not.

The final themes that emerged were linked to codes and excerpts from my contemporary stories as a teacher and graduate student. Early on in my first year as a high school teacher, I quickly realized how few Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) were represented in my school district. Systemic racism in our hiring practices excludes many Indigenous people from entering the education system as teachers. Reading (2013) describes this as social exclusion, a form of racism that keeps racialized people from fully participating in education, economic, political and health care systems (p. 5). At my site, I am the only Indigenous classroom teacher for a school that has 1232 students. It makes me think about the message we are sending to our Indigenous students and their families. How are they being represented in our education system? As a former student of our education system, I often felt like an unwelcome guest, tolerated at best. Now that I am a teacher, I feel like I am still standing alone, visibly different from my work colleagues.

Having allies has certainly played a key role in my career success as well as academic achievements. Thinking back to my experiences as a student, there were teachers in my life that recognized my talents and provided a safe space for me to be nurtured and grow. This has held true in my teaching career. Having non-Indigenous leaders in my school, who are committed to working towards de-colonizing education, have opened doors for me to grow in leadership roles and encouraged me to pursue higher education as well. These allies understand that there needs to be an unlearning of colonial practices that keep our Indigenous students and teachers from fully participating in Canadian society. Allies within our school also recognize that it is not the responsibility of Indigenous people to lead the change, it must come from within. Pauline Regan

(2010) said, “it is not the responsibility of Indigenous people to tell settlers how to decolonize, to the come the process, or the create opportunity for it. Learning toward decolonising solidarity involves initiative, not Indigenous energy to educate” (as cited in Kluttz et.al., 2020, p. 56). We as Indigenous people cannot bring about change by telling others how it will evolve. Change must be a relational exchange and agreement between peoples, arriving at the same place, from different paths.

### **Key Learnings**

Storytelling to transmit knowledge and data is powerful, especially when it is done in a way that reinforces relationality between people. By examining my own story, one of trauma, loss, discovery, and healing, I can unpack one narrative of many that were created through the history of systemic racism in Canadian education. Indigenous Research Methodology (IRM) combined with Tribal Critical Race Theory (TCRT) has provided me with the tools to better understand my story and make sense of Indigenous people’s experiences in education. Even more, the Medicine Wheel is a model that holds the knowledge to lead us to healing in a relational and holistic way.

Indigenous students feel an unequal power-differential between themselves and the education system (i.e., teachers and administrators). My earliest memories of school placed me outside the social sphere of education. I didn’t see myself or my Indigenous culture reflected in what I was reading, seeing, or experiencing. Never did I see an Indigenous teacher until I was in university. White settler society creates a sense of alienation if you appear outside of the norm. This unbalanced relationship positions Indigenous students at a disadvantage. They are expected to conform to western norms and worldviews. These views either neglect or negate their traditional knowledge and ways of being. White settler education is used to marginalize



Indigenous culture by misrepresenting/omitting history, culture, and traditions. Discipline is often used maintain conformity of the community (Schick, 2014, p. 92). In this type of “education,” the history of the land I live upon started when white settlers came from Europe. Very little information was shared about the history of my ancestors except for what I saw in museums. My people, my traditions and language were cancelled through education. As a young student, I didn’t have an option to reclaim these things. I was at a disadvantage.

Indigenous students feel that their voices are not heard or valued in the education system. Indigenous students do not feel that they are reflected in the culture of the school and educational system and have been positioned as the “other” by school staff (Gebhard, 2019, p. 907). My culture became a checkbox in curricular outcomes that needed to be covered briefly before going onto more important things, like post-Confederation Canadian history. Quite often, I would be the only Indigenous student (or teacher) and be asked to inform lessons from my own experiences. Incidents like these only served to reinforce the feeling that I was an outsider, compounded by the fact that I didn’t know my own traditions or knowledge because of the Sixties Scoop. However, there were voices of support and allyship that allowed me brief occasions of acceptance in school.

Having teacher allies within the school is important for success. My English and Art teachers were the ones create space for me to express myself in a safe place. They allowed for me to truly express my feelings and experiences as a young Indigenous person. If it were not for them, I would not have pursued an undergraduate degree in Design and eventually an undergraduate degree in Education. When an Indigenous student feels safe and is recognized for their strengths, success is more likely to occur. I was able to use my strengths to find success in post-secondary fields of study. As an Indigenous teacher, allyship within my own school gave me the confidence needed to apply and pursue graduate studies in Educational Leadership.

“These interpersonal relationships within the school environment can be particularly influential to the development and school success of students” (Whitley, 2014, p. 165). However, students can be made to feel marginalized when there is resistance to de-colonizing the curriculum. White settler resentment is a concept that Carol Schick created to describe the anti-Indigenous resistance to reconciliation in our Canadian Prairie provincial education systems (Schick, 2014). Schick explores and discusses the reasons for resistance and resentment towards anti-colonial education in Canadian schools. The author uses the context of a provincially developed program of study for which purpose was to provide information about the province and nation and the importance of First Nations in our Canadian society. As the program of study was implemented, principals began to notice resistance from white parents and students.

Furthermore, Schick focuses on the resentment held towards Indigenous culture in contrast to white settler society. Here are some things Schick bring to our attention regarding resistance to Indigenizing our education system:

- 1) Racism in Canada is learned from an early age and is rehearsed and reinforced through how we learn as students. We as teachers perpetuate this racism (not intentionally) because we are the products of our education system, so racism becomes systemic. Ironically, I became racist towards Indigenous students, judging them against Eurocentric values and norms, even before I really got to know them.
- 2) Resentment occurs in many ways but is usually attributed to when the status quo of white supremacy is challenged and the inability to maintain white space.
- 3) There are three types of white racial knowledge: a) knowing *who* you are as a white person, b) knowing *where* to traverse the social landscape, c) know *how* to act in racially acceptable ways (Leonardo, 2009, as cited in Schick, 2014, pp. 98-99). I learned at an

early age that resistance to whiteness would make my life difficult, and it was easier to assimilate. I became culturally whitewashed in order to fit in and easy my way through Canadian society.

If we as teachers are to shift away from cognitive imperialism towards Indigenizing education (Battiste, 2000), the resistance Schick talks about must be recognized for what it is: racism. As a schoolteacher and researcher, I had to take a hard look at where my own racism came from and needed to put a plan into action on how to de-colonize my worldview. This plan became a combination of graduate studies and working closely with Indigenous Knowledge Keepers, Elders and an Indigenous graduate studies supervisor. This plan has put me on the moccasin path towards Indigenizing my own teacher [re]education.

As a Sixties Scoop survivor, I had no prior knowledge of ceremony, language, or culture, other than that which I already carried in my blood. As Indigenous children are taught to pay attention and listen to their Elders, I too listened to my Elders such as Elder Betty Letendre, Elder Jerry Wood, Elder Francis Alexis, Elder Francis Whiskeyjack, and Elder Dale Awasis. They have become my teachers, and share, through their stories, knowledge from as far back as time immemorial. Elders and relations become familial-curriculum makers carrying and passing on intergenerational knowledge (Lessard, 2015). I had to become vulnerable, letting go of my Western European ways of learning to rediscover my own Indigenous teacher education and how to seek others to make curriculum.

This new way of learning and knowing cannot exist unless there is a framework of knowledge to support it. In my readings, I came across Bloom's Taxonomy (Zhou & Brown, 2015, p. 89), a model that I was familiar with from my education undergraduate degree. I took notice that Bloom's Taxonomy completed three quarters of the Cree Medicine Wheel. The four

aspects of human development are 1) Physical, 2) Emotional, 3) Mental, 4) Spiritual (Fiddler, 1990, as cited in Sanderson, 2010). If I was to continue my Indigenous education, I would need to add the fourth element of Spirituality and integrate the teachings from my Elders and Knowledge Keepers. This would complete the model and framework to allow my personal and professional growth. The Cree Medicine Wheel teaches us how to be in relationship with the natural world, others and most importantly, ourselves (Wenger-Nabigon, 2010).

The final piece of my research that links to the literature is the process of healing and spirituality. I leave this to the last because it was the missing piece of my journey. It was through my personal efforts and asking my ancestors for guidance that I began to find healing and spirituality. Cherubini et al. (2010) reinforce the need for introspection, especially for Indigenous teachers to find healing from trauma caused by colonization. I was no different, having lived experiences of trauma as a Sixties Scoop survivor and often feeling like the lone Indigenous person trying to exist in a white world. The Cree Medicine Wheel has given me healing by allowing for the reconciliation of convergent ideologies: Eurocentric knowledge and Indigenous Ways of Knowing.

### **Next Steps**

All our students deserve an equal chance at success in school. Our sphere of influence as school leaders and teachers reaches further than we can imagine. How we approach our pedagogy with our Indigenous students has a direct implication on their success. For generations Indigenous students have been assimilated and re-educated in the Western European worldview. The research is showing that we as teachers need to take a step back and create space for self-reflection and become relational with each other, and ourselves most importantly. Shawn Wilson says that “relationality is in the relationship that one has with the truth. Thus, an object or thing is

not as important as one's relationship to it" (Wilson, 2008, p. 73). When we as researchers become reflexive, we must re-engage in a relationship with ourselves, share our stories and rediscover where we came from, where we are, and where we are going. I will take the findings of my study to better inform decisions at the Leadership Council level (administration and department heads) and work cooperatively with support programs like Braided Journeys and Pathways to Education to put theory into practice.

As the Career and Technology Studies (CTS) department head, I have influence in the direction we take our department. I foresee the 2022/2023 school year as an opportunity to restructure how we approach our pedagogy and shift our current leadership model. This will comprise inclusion and integration of Indigenous worldviews and focus on projects that matter not only to our Indigenous students, but for all our students. As a department, we will transition from a top-down leadership model to a circular model where all CTS teachers have an equal part to play. More involvement from Indigenous families and community Elders will also be key in shaping what and how we teach our classes. As a next step, more involvement and support from Braided Journeys and our Knowledge Keeper will also be vital to implementing new strategies in labs and classrooms. I have already begun to engage with our knowledge Keeper, bringing Plains Cree Knowledge and Ways of Being into my welding shop at school. Results from this action research will also be formational as I progress into higher leadership roles within our Edmonton Catholic School Division.

### **Conclusion**

As all stories do, this one must conclude, though it is not the end. This is an account of my current journey into healing the trauma caused by the Sixties Scoop, white colonial education and coming to terms with it through graduate studies, research, working within the Medicine

Wheel, Knowledge Keepers, and Elders. On my journey I have discovered what Indigenous research can look like. Indigenous ontology, epistemology, methodology and axiology is relational and living (Wilson, 2008). We are stories to be shared and learned from and that we can resist colonialism by Indigenizing ourselves and our education (Battiste, 2000). We can still utilize Western European knowledge, by allowing Indigenous Ways of Knowing to exist and be taught in our schools (Wenger-Nabigon, 2010). The Medicine Wheel is central to the path of healing (Cherubini et al., 2010). We already strive to develop our minds, bodies, and emotions but not necessarily our spirits. The spiritual aspect is a key component to living a balanced and holistic existence, one that is in relationship to others and most importantly, to ourselves. These stories are meant to be shared, just as research should be. Our ancestors knew this since time immemorial and have used stories to pass knowledge from one generation to another. Unpacking my story and making sense of it as a teacher and researcher will serve to inform my path forward. I have looked to where I was yesterday, where I am today, and where I am going tomorrow.

### **Epilogue**

The following poem was written as a final reflection and presentation for a graduate course on curriculum and has become an important piece of my research. I was given the freedom to choose the format for my presentation, demonstrating what I had learned from the course, and I would share these findings with my classmates. The pull was strong and clear; I was to write a poem. Athletes call it *being in the zone*, artists call it *being in flow*. Call it what you will, my ancestors came to me and whispered what needed to be said and I wrote this poem in one sitting. This is another way in which I can express my learning journey as a researcher, being in relation with my story, and coming to terms with my past, present and future. It is a

story of what education has looked like, where we are now and where we can take it into the future for generations to come.

### **Curriculum as Stories**

It's the stories we weave that make us whole.

As a single thread we stand alone,

Isolated by our own narrative.

A voice standing in the dark,

With no points of reference,

Other than the threads of our own story.

Only when we begin to weave our stories,

And listen to others' voices that we truly begin to grow.

We begin to weave, twist, and braid these stories,

Binding them to our consciousness and spirit.

\*\*\*

A young Native boy stands alone at the edge of the school yard,

His long black hair moves with the breeze.

He feels the earth beneath his feet,

The place where his ancestors once walked,

But he doesn't know this yet.

An errant ball rolls his way,

He wants to play and goes to retrieve it,

But a shadow comes over him.

The boy is pushed to the dirt, sudden and jarring.

More jarring are the words.

“Dirty Indian, stay down”.

The words hurt more than the fall,

They cut deep in the boy’s spirit leaving a mark.

The boy will carry this mark for the rest of his days.

He believes these words,

Why wouldn’t he?

The boy doesn’t see himself in the books he reads,

The movies he sees,

The teachers he learns from.

The boy doesn’t see himself,

He believes this and carries this mark for the rest of his days.

\*\*\*

A teacher stands alone at the front of a classroom.

All eyes are turned, focused, and waiting,

A brief moment of silence hangs between the teacher and students,

Like a heavy dark curtain that only knowledge can push aside.

The students are waiting for it; they’ve been trained for it.

Passively waiting for the dance to begin.

We teach, they learn.

They sing our song, and we sit in judgement.

Did they get it right? Do they understand my story?

Learn the words, know the steps, be just like me.



I've passed the torch of knowledge,  
Bringing light to those who stand alone in the dark.  
I'm such a good teacher, aren't I?

\*\*\*

I'm standing alone on the gravel banks of a river.  
I've pulled my canoe ashore, and I gaze upon the landscape.  
The water is dark and swift, a gathering place for my ancestors.  
We are connected to this place and know it by name.  
The river gives life, and it can take life.  
It's a place for us to meet and learn from each other.  
The river also has knowledge to give,  
It's been here longer than we have been.  
The rocks beneath my feet have been there even longer,  
They are the Old Ones.  
They're telling me stories of how we came to be.  
All I have to do is be silent and listen to them,  
But I struggle with that.  
Sometimes I feel that my story is more important,  
And the stones are just stones.  
But they are wiser than I am,  
And they sit patiently until I am ready to listen.

\*\*\*

I am back in my canoe and paddling upstream.

The current is swift and relentless.

My lungs, shoulders and back are on fire.

I dig deep with my paddle and feel like I make little progress.

But I must keep moving forward.

The good hunting grounds and traplines are up there,

That is where I need to go.

I meet others along the way, an Elder and his grandson.

They too wish to return their ancestral hunting grounds,

And set traps when the winter comes.

We travel together in my canoe.

The work seems not so difficult anymore,

As the Elder and his grandson lean into the work of moving us forward.

We paddle together in unison,

The rhythm of our paddle strokes and beating of our hearts is like a drum.

It is the beating heart of our Mother.

When we make camp in the evenings, we tell stories.

We learn from each other, we *see* each other.

I become the student once again,

Learning from the Elder and learning from his grandson.

They hold stories from their ancestors,

And now I hold those stories too.

They are precious gifts given to us from the Creator and those before us.

When we tell and share these stories,

We give a little piece of ourselves to others.

We become a part of others.

When we stop to listen to their stories,

They become a part of us.

The Elder and his grandson depart,

Having found the trailhead to their hunting cabin.

Although they have left me alone,

I am no longer alone.

They still travel with me on my journey.

I carry them in my heart.

\*\*\*

I'm back in my classroom,

But I no longer stand alone.

My ancestors are standing with me,

The Elder and his grandson are standing with me.

All eyes are turned, focused, and waiting,

Waiting to tell *their* stories.

We complete a circle,

An unending river of consciousness,

Bound by our stories and experiences.

Our narratives are woven together to create a beautiful tapestry.

Rich in content, culture, and history.

The thread of my own story is tightly interwoven with others,

Becoming stronger, resilient, and dynamic.

We begin the dance,

But we now co-create the steps.

We teach together, we learn together.

We sing our song and celebrate together.

My students have moved along on their journey,

Graduated and no longer walk these halls.

I don't feel alone at the front of the class anymore,

Their stories are a part of me,

And I pass them along to the new students.

I carry them in my heart.

- All My Relations, Hiy Hiy/Maarsii

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