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by

Chesare Cardinal

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Abstract

The purpose of this literature review is to begin the conversation on reforming Special Education policy and programming to become culturally inclusive for *Nêhiyaw* children. Exploring natural laws and traditional perspectives of how Indigenous people, specifically Cree, educated, integrated, and treated exceptional individuals will support answering the following questions, *how First Nations culture (i.e. traditional teachings) can guide special education policy to become naturally inclusive? What educational environment is essential for the inclusivity of First Nations culture?*

Keywords: culturally responsive; ethics; exceptional; exceptionalities; inclusion; natural law*;* *Nêhiyaw* (used interchangeably with Cree, First Nations, Indigenous); Special Needs; Special Education; teachings (traditional lessons); Western (used interchangeably with Euro-centric, European)

Dedication

To my beloved *nisîmis* Maverick and late *nimosôm* Albert, who have inspired me to advocate for those silent voices who need to be heard.

I love you.

Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank my supervisor, Professor Makere Stewart-Harawira, whose expertise and compassion were instrumental in formulating a research topic that will impact education policy for *Nêhiyaw* students. Your invaluable feedback has pushed me to work harder and delve more into the literature.

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Literature Review

Conducting a literature review on Indigenous knowledge implies that Eurocentric research can reveal an understanding of Indigenous knowledge. The problem with this approach is that Indigenous knowledge does not mirror classic Eurocentric orders of life. It is a knowledge system in its own right with its own internal consistency and ways of knowing, and there are limits to how far it can be comprehended from a Eurocentric point of view. (Battiste, 2002, p. 2)

1 Introduction

Deficient special education services for *Nêhiyaw* (Cree) students are not new occurrences (Phillips, 2010). Current special education policies are not conducive to student success, as they still practise forms of oppression such as self-contained classrooms (Skiba et al., 2008). Identifying special needs is often a sign of "deeper problems in assessment, instruction, administration, and a lack of support for western-based, psycho-educational interventions or Indigenous therapeutic approaches" (Mallett, 2008, p. 11). Conducting a literature review to support reforming Special Education policy for First Nations students will further demonstrate the need to incorporate culture and ethical practices. First Nations inclusionary practices have impacted societal perspectives towards acceptance (AFN, 2000; Chrisjohn 1998; as cited in Mallet 2008). Throughout this paper, First Nation designation is used within the constituents of the Indian Act defined by treaty status rather than the term Aboriginal (INAC, 1983a). The questions I would like answered by the literature are:

1. *How First Nations culture (i.e. traditional teachings) can guide special education policy to become naturally inclusive?*
2. *What educational environment is essential for the inclusivity of First Nations culture?*

2 Methods

The purpose of this literature review is to begin the conversation on the Special Education policy and programming for *Nêhiyaw* (Cree) children. Exploring the topic of special education, self-revelations led to writing about how *Nêhiyawak* (Cree people) traditionally educated, integrated, and treated exceptional individuals. The word "exceptionalities" is used in this paper per the definition as an extraordinary individual who is celebrated and appreciated, in place of using the label of special needs, disabled or handicapped. Dr. Shawn Wilson's work on Indigenous Research Methods will guide this literature review. Dr. Shawn Wilson is Opaskwayak Cree from northern Manitoba and currently resides on Bundjalung land on Australia's east coast. His work focuses on interrelated concepts of Indigenous ways of knowing, culture and identity. Further support is provided towards the inclusivity of *Nêhiyaw* natural laws to guide special education policy; scholarly work and personal anecdotes will also be included.

2.1 Article Selection

Utilizing online search engines through the University of Alberta libraries database and Google Scholar, article selection was based on the following key terms: culturally responsive; ethics; exceptional; exceptionalities; inclusion; natural law*; Nêhiyaw* (used interchangeably with Cree, First Nations, Indigenous); Special Needs; Special Education; and teachings (traditional lessons). The authors were chosen based on their approaches concerning education by using a cultural lens and locality. Author preference was given to those who were from Alberta, Canada and North America. Professor and peer suggestions were also considered in selecting literature based on themes previously identified and presented.

2.2 Indigenous Research Methodology (IRM)

> *It is upsetting that Western researchers have for so long come into our communities and assumed to know us, but in fact, they know nothing about us. This why we need an Indigenous Research Methodology. (E. Steinhauer, 2002, p. 70)*

According to Dr. Shawn Wilson (2001), IRM means talking about "relational accountability" (p. 177). Dr. Evelyn Steinhauer (2002) from Saddle Lake First Nations and a professor at the University of Alberta shared the same sentiment regarding Indigenous research, suggesting knowing "the cultural protocols, values, beliefs of the Indigenous group you are studying" (p. 73) is essential. Also, Dr. Cora Webber-Pillwax, an Associate Professor at the University of Alberta from Calling Lake, Alberta, states, "a researcher must make sure that the three R's – Respect, Reciprocity, Relationality- are guiding the research" (personal communication; as cited in E. Steinhauer, 2002, p. 73). Self-transformation is fostered within IRM as it allows critical reflection and active participation throughout the whole process (Webber-Pillwax, 2002). Indigenous researchers will no longer be objectified while engaged in a relationship through their methodology (Shawn Wilson, 2001).

Ontology

The nature of our existence, as we may live in one world, as individuals, we experience life differently, which is ontology (Shawn Wilson, 2008). Wilson (2001) compared ontology to constructivist theory, in the sense it allows "more than one reality" (p. 176) to exist. These individual experiences shape our beliefs in navigating through a shared reality. Traditionally, our *Nêhiyaw* intuition in the form of dreams and vision; influenced how we treated one another (E. Steinhauer, 2002). Understanding how we shape realities, an exploration of the chronological evolution of *Nêhiyaw* education is necessary. For *Nêhiyaw* people, we valued each member of the tribe as "the Native view holds no hierarchy; each individual is placed in the center of a

circular world" (Stan Wilson, 1998, p. 2). The ontology allows us to justify the existence of individuals with exceptionalities as gifted and purposeful.

What is Real?

Individuals with exceptionalities were ordinary amongst tribes. However, humans' evolution has procured a variety of gifts, both cognitive, physical and spiritual. Special Education can produce biased perspectives on how to educate students with such gifts in today's society. Reverting to the ethical underpinning of traditional customs will allow authentic inclusionary practices to be fostered.

Epistemology

Epistemology is the study of the nature of thinking or knowing (Wilson, 2008). Biologically, we are made up of many experiences our ancestors have gone through by blood memory or otherwise known as cellular memory. Cellular memory allows us to act naturally without having any direct knowledge in a particular situation (E. Steinhauer, 2002), a notion conceived by the late Elder Lionel Kinunwa. Both Dr. Patricia Steinhauer (2001) and Dr. Evelyn Steinhauer (2002) were influenced by Kinunwa and "became convinced that Indigenous people have cellular memory embedded in their molecular structure and that knowledge guides people today" (P. Steinhauer, 2001, p. 185). The choices we make are directly linked to our past, present and future realities. Shawn Wilson (2001) connected epistemology to "positivism and postpositivist theory, as it is based on the idea that it is up to us as humans to interpret reality" (p. 176). Ancestral roots provide us with a sense of belonging and generational knowledge that influence our realities (P. Steinhauer, 2001). Indigenous knowledge is complex and derived from ancestral teachings, which we must acknowledge and revitalize those practices in connecting with students.

How do I know what is real?

Nêhiyaw people are spiritual beings originating from the cosmos and stars. Utilizing knowledge keepers will connect our pre-existing and existing knowledge as they are the gatekeepers to the spiritual realm. We will know *"what is real"* if it *"feels right,"* otherwise known as ethical morals.

Methodology

Attaining knowledge and answers through discovery is referred to as methodology (Wilson, 2008). For this paradigm to be enacted, we must constantly question *why* things are done in a specific way. Such as, *why do students with exceptionalities need self-contained classrooms?* Although, "as individuals, we are taught to be responsible for ourselves, we are reminded that we must never think of ourselves in isolation" (E. Steinhauer, 2002, p. 77). Why do we continually segregate students based on abilities and intelligence? Why are *Nêhiyaw* (minoritized) students likely to be coded or labelled with a learning disability or impairment? Similar to constructivist theories, Wilson (2001) states that "different societies will create their unique realities; research methodologies need to find a mutual meaning of what this reality is "(p. 176). The methodology will allow us to explore these questions' cultural implications and how culture can shape our classrooms today.

How do I find out more about this reality?

Adopting culture as an inclusion method will allow Special Education to transform into culturally responsive learning environments. Becoming culturally responsive will allow every student to flourish in a setting that is compassionate and accepting.

Axiology

Ethical morals that guide our reality to discern valuable information are referred to as Axiology (Wilson, 2008). *Nêhiyaw* education systems are ethically based, as they are "built upon the concept of relational accountability" (Wilson, 2008, p. 77). Webber-Pillwax (2002) states, "any research that I do must not destroy or in any way negatively implicate or compromise my integrity as a person, as a human being" (p.168). Both Indigenous researchers and educators must balance Western and Indigenous ideologies to transform today's schools, which is challenging (Battiste, 2013). Furthermore, "critical theory works on the ethic that the researcher's methodology is working toward societal change to make things better" (Wilson, 2001, p. 176). Special Education needs to be transformed to include both ethics and culturally responsive application. Axiology will allow us to adapt traditional practices to nurture ethical caring.

What will this knowledge be used for?

Indigenous research needs to serve the whole community and is based on natural laws. The practice of *Kiseywatisowin* (love/kindness), *Sohkisowin* (strength), *Kweyaskatesown* (honesty) and *Wichihtowin* (sharing) will provide the theoretical framework needed in Special Education policy and programming.

2.3 Analysis

As research in Special Education for First Nations students is under-researched, providing more contexts in this area will dramatically support this vulnerable student population. The conceptual framework balances *Nêhiyaw* teachings, ethical and culturally responsive education models, which supports *Nêhiyaw* natural laws. The expected outcome is for education

policies to acknowledge that *Nêhiyaw* society is naturally inclusive based on their traditional teachings in a progressive way.

3 Results

Examining how First Nations culture (i.e. traditional teachings) can guide special education policy to become naturally inclusive, the main themes that arose from the literature were historical oppression (ethnic disparity), perceptions of special needs, and ethical education.

3.1 First Nations Education

> *Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) recognizes that this vision (First Nations education) can only be achieved through an education system that puts the learner's achievement at the centre of all decision-making and a learning culture. Improving the educational outcomes of First Nation students at all levels requires the pursuit of three broad but complementary goals:*
>
> *1. Enhance the quality, accessibility and relevance of educational program and supports for First Nations students.*
>
> *2. Strengthen the planning, management and accountability of First Nation education programs and supports based on practical and meaningful First Nation education systems.*
>
> *3. Foster interconnections and collaboration between First Nation educators, federal, provincial/territorial governments and other stakeholders. (INAC, 2006, p. 70)*

First Nations education is a complex system as it has endured many variants inflicted by the Canadian government. The historical impact colonialism has on First Nation students' underachievement is a substantial piece of the puzzle (Mallett, 2008). However, when speaking about First Nations education in this review, the position taken will be the "traditional ontology, methodology, axiology, and epistemology" (Wilson, 2008, p. 70) of Indigenous people. The foundation for First Nations education is deeply rooted in our connection to self, nature, and

community. Eurocentric systems and culture were taught as the most dominant pedagogy (Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999); although “no educational systems are perfect, few have a history as destructive to human potential as Canada’s obsession with assimilation” (Battiste, 2017, p. 180). Due to Canada’s clandestine relationship with First Nations people, it is no surprise that traditional education systems’ spirit has been lost.

In Canada’s first century, that t*ruly patriotic spirit* would be evident in the many individuals who devoted their “human capabilities to the good of the Indians of this country.” (Milloy, 1999, p. 6). First Nations education has historically been a place of colonization, oppression, and assimilation. During Sir John Alexander Macdonald’s first term (1867-1873, 1878-1891) as the Canadian Prime Minister, his first assimilative official policy was referred to as building *sacred trust*, which was alluring to First Nations peoples due to the selfless nature of the words used (Milloy, 1999). Treaties and subsequent agreements were the first items to frame Canada’s relation with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples (Battiste, 2017). However, these treaty agreements were violated as the government enforced methods to conform First Nations people into mainstream Canadian society. First Nations people “saw these obligations as *sacred promises* for their friendship, moving and allowing settlement on their lands, while subsequent governments saw these treaties as ways to get more land and as a part of their assimilation plan, to be conveniently forgotten until they needed them” (Battiste, 2017, p. 52). Traditional teachings and methodologies were not recognized as beneficial to Canadian society; however, First Nations education is based on the collective good in mind, whereas Eurocentric beliefs lacked diversity and promoted individualism. As Hampton (1995) states, “diversity is the third standard of Indian education as it does not just focus on the philosophical or the political guide of the community; it also serves everyone in that tribe” (p. 24). Canada enforced the idea of

Indian education being governed and methodized by non-Indians (Hampton, 1995). Canadian education needs a total transformation to support the First Nations education sovereignty.

First Nations education is rooted in the following natural laws: *Kiseywatisowin* (love/kindness), *Sohkisowin* (strength), *Kweyaskatesowin* (honesty) and *Wichihtowin* (sharing). The natural laws provide an ethical code to treat others with respect. Elder Ida Bull (personal communication, May 22, 2019) shared a sentiment from her father about a couple of men who lived in the community with disabilities; "you see those men over there (not pointing out their physical disabilities) they are the highest-ranked when it came to traditional teachings, and they are very well respected." As Indigenous people's sense of self is rooted in the land, we must recognize this "sacred bond with the land is more substantial than a procreated relationship" (Wilson, 2001, p. 91). The relationship with yourself allows for critical reflection to occur, vital in Indigenous research and education. Society must understand Indigenous communities rarely accept academic work that is of personal gain as "Eurocentric education systems are rooted in settler/colonizer discourse (Windchief & Ryan, 2019, p. 86). As previously mentioned, contemporary First Nations educators are tasked with walking between Western academia and Indigenous epistemology. Adopting critical self-reflection for transformative education to take place for students with exceptionalities will allow for personal growth.

Nêhiyaw culture values inclusion and diversity, which was cultivated through kinship (Hampton, 1995). Incorporating family, community, and nature into current education systems will encapsulate First Nations education's essence. Ermine et al. (1995) states, "Aboriginal people have their responsibility in the birthright to take and develop in the epistemology congruent with holism and the beneficial transformation of total human knowledge" (p. 103). Self-actualization allows *Nêhiyawak* to enact their birthright in living a healthy holistic lifestyle

(Ermine et al., 1995). Due to contrary belief, in First Nations culture, there was no hierarchy; instead, it was embedded in service to others, mother earth, and self. All members' gifts were recognized and valued, especially those potentially viewed as unique or exceptional. Each individual is placed in the centre of a circular world, where all things are interconnected and must live in harmony (Stan Wilson, 1998a, p. 2). Elder Ida Bull (personal communication, May 22, 2019) reinforced this idea of growing up in a traditional home about treating people no different from each other; "human wise we are all God's creation, and as Cree people, we should look at that." Including the significance of traditional *Nêhiyaw* kinship systems will allow for an authentic experience of First Nation education.

The importance of traditional teachings in education

Traditional education systems are situated in a culture that relied on oral history and teachings, making it difficult to conceptualize today's practice. According to Webber-Pillwax (2001), "intellectualization of Indigenous ways of being and knowing can inhibit or distort opportunities for Indigenous people to experience connections and personal transformations" (p. 173). Indigenous educational pedagogy allows students to learn through observations and practical experience, which fosters real experiences and individualized instruction (Battiste, 2017). Dr. Stan Wilson (1998a) explains, "it is time for the school system to explain spirituality from a Native perspective so that children will understand that religion is not necessarily about spirituality" (p. 1). As we continue to explore traditional First Nations education, an homage to the spirituality aspect is needed, such as "kinship with all living things in the universe, in living a life of cosmic citizenship" (Wilson, 1998a, p. 2). It is believed that *Nêhiyaw* people originated from the stars in connection to the creator and spirit world. Our ancestors still live in the stars and provide us guidance each day. In addition to being related to all living organisms, we need to

enact our relational accountability to respect and take care of all our relations (Wilson & Wilson, 1998b). These complex relationships develop an ethical piece supporting special education by fostering student relationships with all living beings.

3.2 Special Education

> *While acknowledging the uniqueness and the varied gifts our children and the importance of the history of our First Nations people, our vision is to move towards and enriched and empowered future for our children through a learning environment that:*
>
> *a) celebrates differences and similar-arities,*
>
> *b) is inclusive and holistic and,*
>
> *c) advocates for education rights, including those in the Treaties. (Tati Nikaniyak Project as cited in Mallett, 2008, p. 18)*

In special education literature and research, it is apparent that the significant discrepancies are within federal funding and lack of comprehensive policies. For example, a First Nations administrator Debra, stated, “the level II and III funding process can be stigmatizing because the school has to paint such a horrible picture of a student to get funding” (personal communication, n.d; as cited in Mallet, 2008, p. 147). The omission of these critical pieces leads to enormous consequences such as further oppression, segregation, and racial discrepancies. Schools operated by the federal government and religious order, such as the residential schools, lacked an understanding of “psychology and behaviour, they see an individual who does not have the cognitive ability to read or write, so schools put them aside in a different group” (Cutknife, personal communication, May 22, 2019). Segregation is where the most critical piece of Special Education policy and programming has steered away from traditional methods. As First Nations people, “we are unable to break our sense of isolation because we are unable to identify and

describe the sources of such isolation consciously" (Webber-Pillwax, 2002, p. 186). As a result of student isolating practises, Special Education becomes a question of civil rights and equity, especially for First Nations students. Historical corrosive relations of power and educators' ethical responsibility to acknowledge and expand student identities challenge those power relationships, which allows Nêhiyaw students to view themselves as successful (Battiste, 2017). Far too often, we fail to acknowledge individuals with exceptional gifts, including those with disabilities. However, recognizing and developing Special Education policy in consultation with communities becomes an obstacle for progression in this area. Adopting "holistic preventive and proactive services may prevent or lower the incidence and frequency of inappropriate special needs identification" (Skrtic, 2002; Stainback & Stainback, 1999; Garter & Lipsky, 1989; Wang & Reynolds, 1997; as cited in Mallet, 2008, p. 11). Moving away from provincial school models will allow the federal government to recognize First Nations as *capable* of developing culturally responsive educational systems. The ongoing failure of education policy and programming for *Nêhiyaw* students is perplexed; there is a desperate need for transformation (Mendelson, 2008). Utilizing the existing research, we can acknowledge contributions to special education for First Nations students in the capacity of social justice and ethical education as critical pieces.

Special Education arose from the civil rights movement in the 1970s to protect individuals with disabilities by enforcing legislation such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1975. IDEA advocates for "free appropriate public education to eligible children with disabilities throughout the nation and ensures special education and related services to those children" in the United States of America (IDEA, 2021). Other examples include the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and The United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006. However, according to Phillips

(2010), “there is no special education law respecting First Nations students with special needs; only special education policies and guidelines” (p. 8) in Canada. There is “an over-representation of ethnic and language minority students in self-contained Special Education classrooms, which raise significant civil rights and educational concerns” (Skiba et al., 2008, p. 265). Dunn (1968) indicated special programs were denied access to equitable educational experiences and services as children were forced into classrooms with similar learning profiles. Also Dunn states, “an overwhelming majority of students served in programs for students with mental retardation came from “low-status backgrounds” and experienced broken, disorganized, and inadequate homes” (Artiles & Trent, 1994, p. 411). Similarly, individuals with disabilities in Canada were further oppressed and segregated from their First Nations communities as federal support was non-existent for First Nation schools. Socio-demographic factors associated with economic disadvantages revealed disproportionate representation rates in the Special Education program s for students of colour (Skiba et al., 2008). The heavy reliance on federal school systems to support individuals with exceptionalities translated into using provincial models in First Nations schools without the input or consultation from the community, elders, parents, chief and council.

Societal bias impact parents' perception of students with exceptionalities being included in mainstream classrooms. To promote inclusive learning environments in today’s school programs, we must consider parents' attitudes on the inclusion of students with exceptionalities (Paseka & Schwab, 2020). In Table 1, an overview of parent's attitudes towards inclusive education per disability type; “the data collected was from a nationwide German survey where 2000 parents participated” (Paseka & Schwab, 2020, p. 261).

Table 1. Parent's attitudes towards inclusive education per disability type.

	Total Sample (N = 2,000)		Parents whose child attends regular classes (n = 1,490)		Parents whose child attends inclusive classes (n = 418)		Significance-test
Kind of disability	% of parents with negative attitudes	% of parents with positive attitudes	% of parents with negative attitudes	% of parents with positive attitudes	% of parents with negative attitudes	% of parents with positive attitudes	χ^2 (df = 1)
Inclusion of student with physical disability	9.8%	88.6%	10.6%	88%	7.2%	92.2%	$\chi^2 = 4.67^*$
Inclusion of student with learning disability	25%	71.2%	27%	69.7%	18.8%	79.1%	$\chi^2 = 12.41^{**}$
Inclusion of student with behavioural disorder	45.6%	49%	48.2%	46.3%	38.4%	58.5%	$\chi^2 = 16.22^{**}$
Inclusion of student with mental disability	53.1%	40.9%	56%	37.8%	44.2%	50.7%	$\chi^2 = 21.52^{**}$

The percentage of parents who did not answer the question or indicated that they cannot decide between no or yes can be calculated by 100% minus the percentage of parents with negative and positive attitudes. *p < .05, **p < .01;

For children with a behavioural or learning disability, the consent for inclusion from parents was low, meaning that they felt that particular group needed a separate classroom. In contrast, the parents' acceptance rate for children with physical disabilities is higher. Although this is a German-based survey, it provides more context to the conversation of parental attitudes on Special Education. In the United States, the secretary of education published a highly "controversial report that claimed verbal ability and subject matter knowledge are critical factors in improving student achievement, whereas teacher education is questionable" (Brownell et al., 2005, p. 242). Generalizations about the effects of poverty on parenting may also yield unwarranted assumptions but families from groups overrepresented in special education (Skiba et al., 2008, p. 273). These perceptions do not progress special education; we need to support all students, especially those in First Nations communities, with adequate teacher preparation programs to train and include culture. As students from poverty-stricken backgrounds, they are more likely to be taught by teachers with less experience and expertise in poorly funded schools. The challenge remains recruiting and maintaining both teachers of colour in particular assignments or specialized programs (Barron: Donovan & Cross, 2002; Peske & Haycock; as cited in Skiba et al., 2008). The inclusion of culture would positively impact this area's development and reflect the community's belief in education. Promoting a culturally responsive

and inclusive policy that allows students with exceptionalities to flourish in any educational setting is needed.

The need for special education research

All learners are diverse, and when we consider the cultural realities of each student we begin to nourish a sense of belonging and success (Battiste, 2017). As previously stated, there is no federal education law for First Nations education in Canada, "meaning that no law mandates Special Education services for those needing it" (Phillips, 2010, p. 76). First Nations education needs to be given autonomy and be provided adequate funding opportunities to support such a gifted student population comparable to provincial school systems.

> *Holding the provincial systems as templates for First Nations special education has several problems. First, First Nations have had little or no input into the development of such a system. Second, there is no evidence that these provincial systems are appropriate and meet First Nation students' needs who require special education services. Finally, it absolves the federal government from developing a national system in scope (Phillips, 2010, p. 76).*

Examining teacher preparation programs based on First Nations' expertise will allow us to illustrate culture's power for exceptional students.

3.3 Ethical Education

> *In the beginning, when God created humanity, God intended us to be humble and to approach everything humbly. (Sunchild, personal communication, n.d; as cited in Lightning, 1992, p. 136)*

Ethical education is the protection of human rights. As we continue to explore this topic, it is essential for us to identify the varying worldviews and how they impact people's social constructs on exceptionalities. As Willie Ermine (2007) states, "the ethical space is formed when two societies with disparate worldviews are poised to engage each other" (p. 193). The

examination of society's perception and historical oppression have impacted views on Special Education. Education requires an ethical space where Western or First Nations knowledge can coexist to inform solutions (Ermine, Sinclair, and Jeffrey, 2004; as cited in Blackstock, 2011, p. 1); a possible solution in addressing these disparities is culturally responsive and inclusive teaching models. Battiste (2017) , Ermine (2007), Lightning (1998), support that involving the community; Elders, and knowledge keepers are critical to First Nations special education policy as we engage a more authentic pedagogy.

Teachers' perceptions on special education are based on Eurocentric systems that have dismissed Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy (Battiste, 2017). Acknowledging that two educational systems exist: general education and special education which are based on predispositions, will allow transformation to begin. The words inclusion and inclusive education; are often lumped together; however, they bear separate meanings. Inclusion is about meeting the educational needs of all students, whereas; Inclusive Education is about identifying disabilities and homogenous classrooms (Lavlani, 2013). There are 11, 807 students that have self-identified as First Nations in the provincial school system; this does not account for any on-reserve student population numbers (Alberta Government, 2021). In Alberta, schools have coded 89, 705 out of 733, 588 students with special needs (Alberta Government, 2021). Identification of special needs in First Nations schools are 2-3 times higher than provincial rates (AFN, 2012). Across Canadian provinces between the years, 1992 to 2009, "data has indicated rates for special needs students were between 17% to 52% for First Nations students" (Phillips, 2010, p. 7). As a society, we have adopted a pragmatic medical model that views disability as a limitation and uses it to sort and segregate people. Special education funding is not provided for enhanced, gifted or subject-specific programs, which inhibits First Nations abilities to celebrate gifted children (Phillips,

2010). Exclusion is a common practise but this is also where it becomes an issue of social justice. Congruently, the current curriculum is not inclusive, making it impossible for inclusion to occur in classrooms. A new curriculum that is equitable must be developed to atone past beliefs actions based on Eurocentric educational practices to progress education for all students. (Battiste, 2017). Noddings (2012) stresses the importance of "educators acting morally and do unto others as they would have done to them" (p. 56). Furthermore, Elders Bruce and Ida (2019) specified teachings that surrounded the treatment of exceptional individuals:

1. *Do not stare, as staring was a corrective behaviour (Paksap)*
2. *Do not point or point out differences*
3. *If you make fun of someone, then you will become like that*
4. *What goes around comes around*
5. *Treat others the way they would like to be treated*

Ethics provides teachers, leadership and communities with guiding principles and morals needed in schools today.

Addressing Ethics

> *Ethics entertains our capacity and integrity to stand up for our cherished notions of good, responsibility, duty, and obligations (Ermine, 2007, p. 195).*

Families directly impacted by a monocultural society and 'the one size fits all' model need to challenge current educational systems. We need to believe in all members as a contributing body—those students who have exceptionalities challenge personal constructs of what it means to be genuinely inclusive and compassionate. Elder Francis Whiskeyjack (personal communication, May, 19, 2019) advocates for humanitarianism where everyone is human and equal rather than exclusionary practices. As, "humans create the order of society and create the

laws that will govern that society" (Ermine, 2007, p. 99); therefore, we have the power to change Special Education policy to be ethically driven. We rely too heavily on a higher power, religious beliefs, historical education models to guide our initiatives; however it impedes societal transformation. As educators, "it is our professional obligation to take responsibility for cultural competency; most importantly, it is our collective obligation as treaty people" (Burm, 2016, p. 20). Ethical education allows for a transformative space to be created where all students feel safe—and valued.

4 Theoretical Framework

The human mind is meant to be connected to others in compassion and love (Lightning, 1992, p. 70). First Nations education is rooted in the following natural laws: *Kiseywatisowin* (love/kindness), *Sohkisowin* (strength), *Kweyaskatesowin* (honesty) and *Wichihtowin* (sharing). These natural laws provide an ethical code on how to treat others with respect. *Nêhiyaw* philosophy is founded in natural laws as outline by E.Steinhauer (2002):

- *Kiseywatisowin (love/kindness), before humility, we must be kind*
- *Sohkisowin (strength), strength and determination in the body*
- *Kweyaskatesowin (honesty), we must lead honest lives with complete integrity*
- *Wichihtowin (sharing), help on another and involve everyone*

This set of ethos allows society to conceptualize holistic change in the treatment of exceptional individuals, "it is the act of living the belief that makes them real" (Wilson, 2001, p. 178). If we focus on policies for this vulnerable population we can evoke transformation in schools. Webber-Pillwax believes "deconstructing and decolonizing will serve some purpose, but will not necessarily bring us to a better state of existence as Indigenous people" (p.170). Therefore, focusing on the root of relational accountability to all our relations (E. Steinhauer, 2002) will

serve as a more profound solution in addressing culturally responsive and inclusive programming for *Nêhiyaw* students with exceptionalities.

5 Findings

It is difficult to say if the literature has answered: *how First Nations culture (i.e. traditional teachings) can guide special education policy to become naturally inclusive?* However, support is provided to transform First Nations' Special Education policy and its need to be rooted in traditional ethical teachings. It is essential to understand the history of education, critically reflect, and serve the community with any Indigenous research. Culturally responsive and inclusive frameworks for special education will benefit these programs tremendously. In addition to that, restructuring policy and reporting is required. Shifting biases on individuals with exceptionalities from deficient to gifted will honour all students as equal members of society.

5 Gaps in the Literature

Research in Special Education for First Nations students is under-researched, which follows perennial and colonial models. From the Indigenous paradigm, “knowledge is seen as belonging to the cosmos, most of which we are a part of and where researchers are only the interpreters of this knowledge” (Wilson, 2008, p. 38). Providing more contexts in this area will improve policy and programming that is culturally inclusive and responsive. In addition, culturally responsive school models are under-researched and unrepresented in teacher/leadership preparation programs and education policy; however, it does have a significant impact on schools' ethical obligations.

7 Conclusion

There were a lot of Indigenous scholars that I connected with; in particular, it was the authors who spoke about situating yourself within the research. As Webber-Pillwax (2001) states, “we

know what we need to sustain ourselves, to support our well-being" (p. 72). Finding literary evidence to support my idea of traditional inclusionary methods for individuals with exceptionalities was a very humbling experience. To support my well-being and healing journey situating myself in a classroom with kin who were deemed "mentally retarded" was motivation. Constantly questioning, what would learning look like for my brother and grandfather? How will they be treated? Will they be accepted? Those are the questions I asked myself while doing this research, using the literature to help me find those answers. I genuinely believe that if we adopt Indigenous epistemological models in classrooms, we would not need to isolate those with exceptionalities. Finally, I would like to end with this quote by Battiste (2017) "teaching is the psychology of hope, and hope is a cause and the consequence of action" (p. 175).

Ekosi

8 Future Recommendations: Culturally Responsive Education

As we begin to explore culturally responsive models to answer ethical education for students with exceptionalities, we must also acknowledge the role school leadership plays. Culturally responsive classrooms have been expanded to include multiple epistemologies such as Indigenous approaches (Khalifa, 2016). However, "administrators and educators need to respectfully blend Indigenous epistemology and pedagogy with Euro-Canadian epistemology and pedagogy to create an innovative, ethical, trans-systemic Canadian educational system" (Battiste, 2017, p. 168). Strong school leadership retains good teachers resulting in a lower turnover rate. Culturally responsive school leadership is under-researched and unrepresented in education policy; however, it does have a significant impact on schools' ethical obligations. Elder Francis Whiskeyjack (personal communication, May 19, 2019) shared a story on the insensitivities of past administrators and how it has impacted him:

> *"It was painful to watch administrators talk through prayers, honour songs, or even when an Elder spoke. Due to this lack of respect, it was hard to entrust these individuals with my education. We need to listen to our children; that is what we do as Elders. We listen. It is important to develop that sacred relationship and bond".*

Race and racism is a complex topic for teachers and students, but if we confront the concept of racial superiority, decolonization consciousness in Canadian education is eliminated (Battiste, 2017). The principal role is the most recognizable piece of education systems as they are the driving force for both community and district-wide initiatives. Khalifa (2016) "states that principals are unprepared to lead diverse schools with an implemented policy that would respond to diversity issues and articulate meaningful discourses around student diversity" (p. 1279), stressing leadership's preparation programs as essential to student success. Critical consciousness is developed through further examination of traditional Euro-centric school models; by assisting problematic students in special education as a result of "intelligence and inconsistencies between the kinds of knowledge possessed by some students and those valued in schools" (Lavlani, 2013, p. 22). For example, Mallett (2008) interviewed five teachers in an Anishinaabe (Ojibway) community, southeast Manitoba to discuss the identification of special needs students, placement and programming. Mallet (2008) found that "three of the five informants integrated traditional-Anishinaabe cultural- knowledge, skills, and perspectives into the administration and programming of special education delivery; this integration of cultural practices facilitated differentiated instruction and resulted in inclusive programming" (pp. 23-24). The cultural teachings discussed were based on the Anishinaabe Clan System (Roseau River Self Government Initiative, 1992; as cited in Mallett, 2008, p. 63):

- *Crane clans teaching is Belief*
- *Fish clans teaching is Truth*
- *Loon clans represents Faith*
- *Hoof clans is the Gift of Life*
- *Bird clans is Knowledge*
- *Marten clans teaching is Honour and Respect*
- *Bear clan represents Strength*

As we continue to move forward in education, “conceptualizing children's learning and intellectual development is situated in sociocultural contexts and inextricably linked with power issues and privilege” (Lavlani, 2013, p. 22). Meaning educators must separate personal biases regarding minoritized student populations such as students with disabilities through a more culturally responsive route to celebrate each individual's gifts, with administrators guiding these practices.

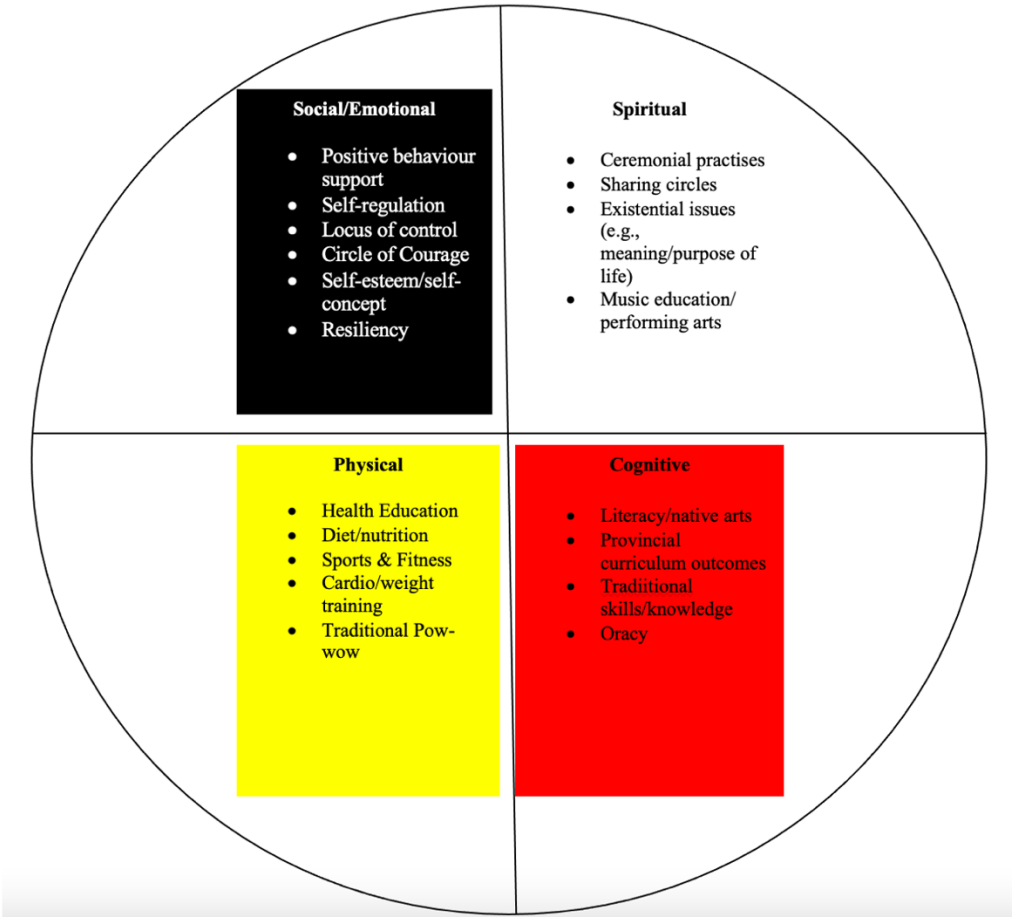
The last stakeholder when it comes to addressing ethical education is the community. *How do we foster an environment that promotes ethical caring?* Elder Francis Whiskeyjack (personal communication, May 19, 2019) said, “having people with much patience, understanding and caring; however, there is not enough of that”; as ethical caring restoring natural caring conditions on the notion of being cared for (Noddings, 2012). Ethics can be viewed as promoting empathy for one another and allowing varying worldviews and perceptions to coexist. To address humanistic diversity emerges the Breath of Life Theory, “which cultures the manifestation of relational worldview principles” (Blackstock, 2011, p.6). Classrooms need to preserve security and strengthen relationships with other students, the community and the natural world to identify each students spirit (Blackstock, 2011). Educational systems must recognize community ethos to

establish boundaries derived from cultural imperatives, "where Knowledge Keepers provide us with the codes of conduct as human beings within our communities" (Ermine, 2007, p. 195). First Nations communities need to exercise their voice when it comes to knowing what will benefit their children, as they know best.

Culturally Responsive Exemplars

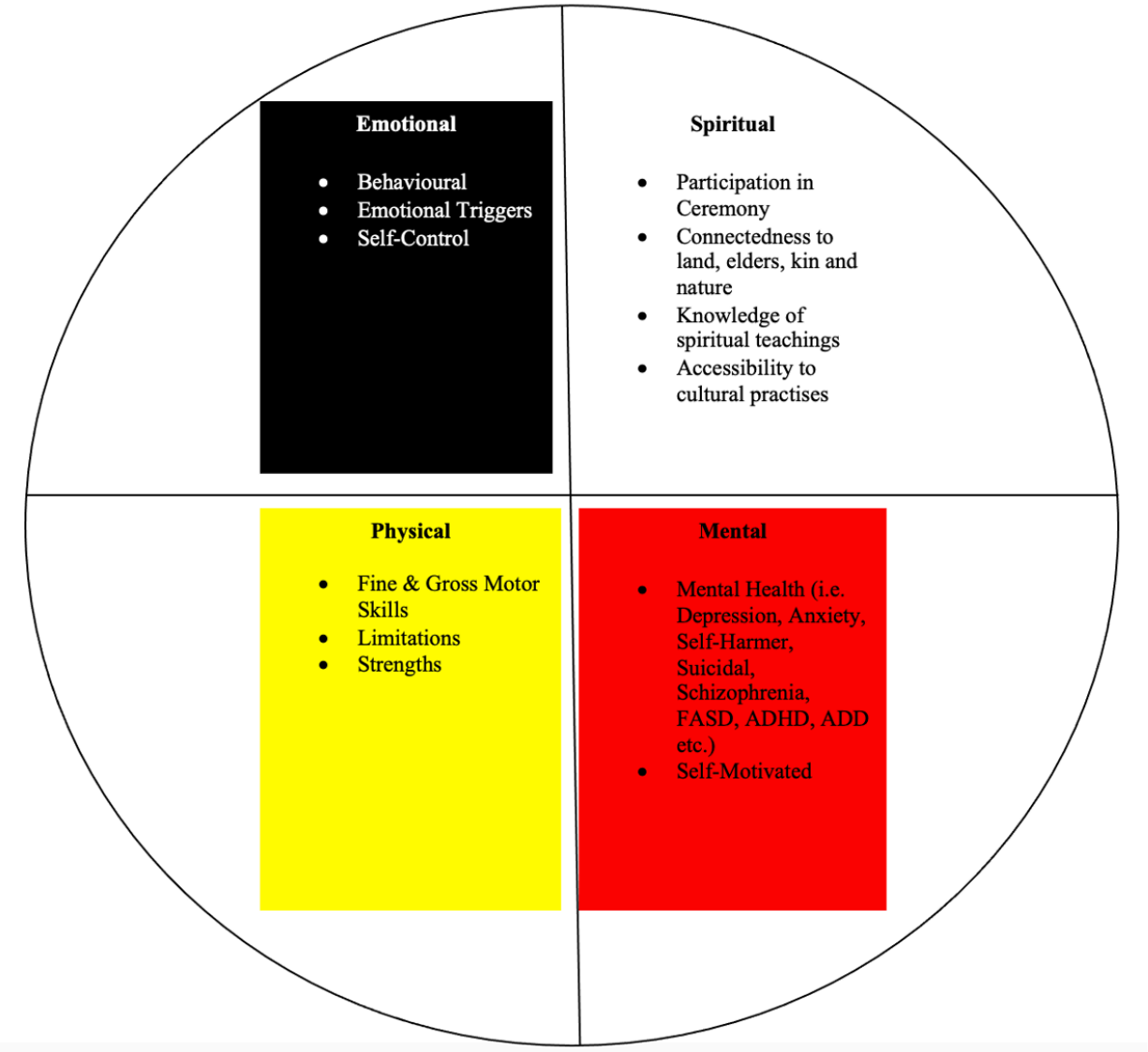
The following figures will provide exemplars of how schools can begin to incorporate *Nêhiyaw* culture in Special Education (Inclusive Education) policy and programming:

Figure 1: Inclusive and De-colonizing First Nation Student Support Services



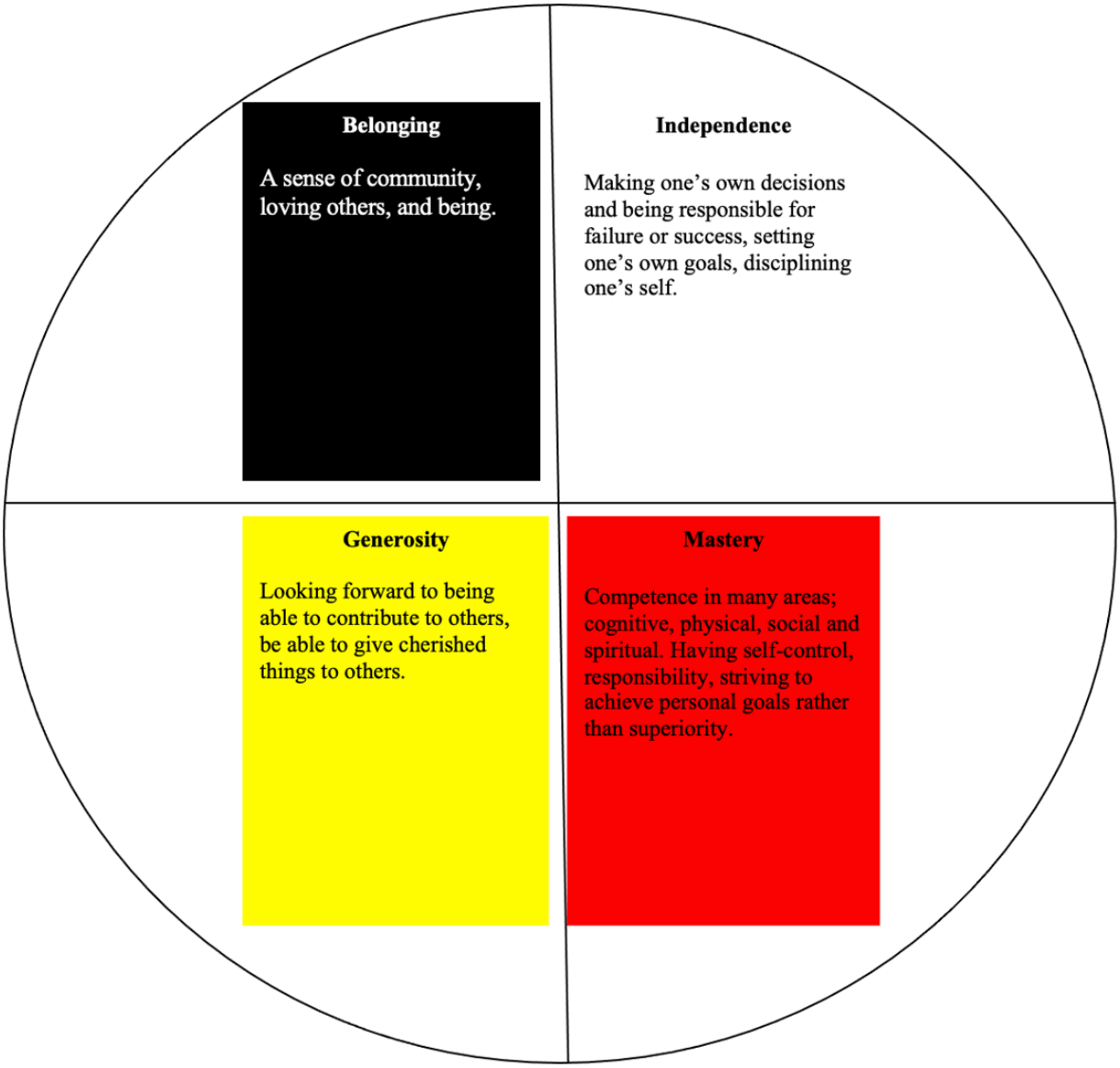
(Mallett, 2008, p. 20)

Figure 2: Individual Program Plan- Îyiniw Mamtohnehicikan Framework



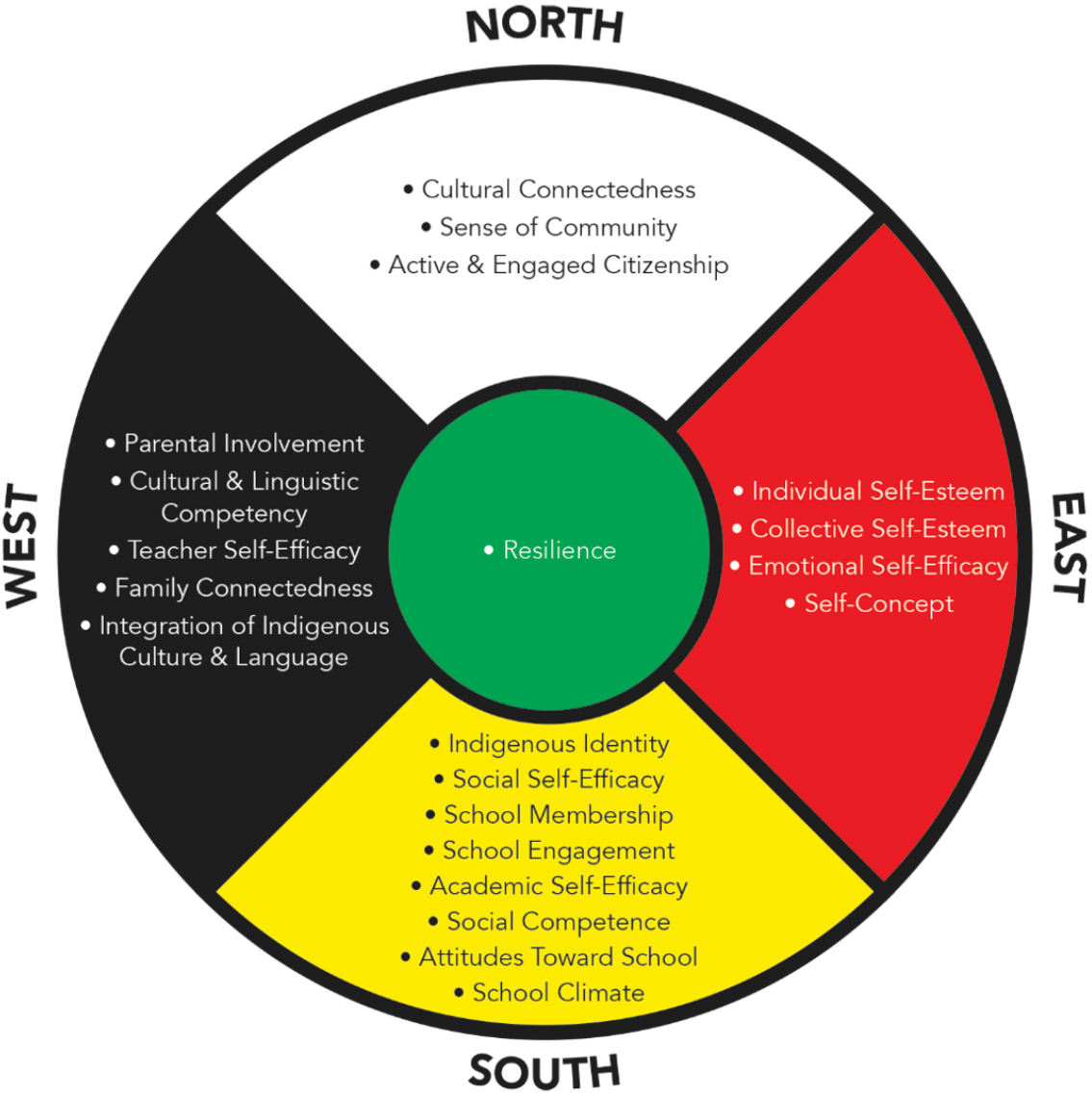
(Cardinal, personal communication, May 29, 2019)

Figure 3: Circle of Courage Philosophy



(adapted from Brokenleg & Bendtro, 2005)

Figure 4: Indicators of Success within the Medicine Wheel



Teacher Handbook: https://www.brandonu.ca/bu-cares/indicators-student-success/medicine-wheel/

(Brandon University, 2021)

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