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Cree Nation

Reclaiming Education: Indigenous Control of Indigenous Education

The Power of Traditional Education

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The power of education is something that Indigenous peoples in Canada have long understood. Canada's settler colonial legacy of White supremacy and racism has had a long-lasting effect on the state of Indigenous education today. The inhumane treatment of Indigenous peoples through policies of assimilation and the government sponsored residential school system has left many Indigenous communities in Canada at a disadvantage.

Canada has left Indigenous communities marginalized socially, economically, culturally, and spiritually. This has resulted in the tragic loss of Indigenous language, culture, and identity in many communities. Some Indigenous communities are forging a way forward and practicing resiliency against Western colonial boundaries through taking control of their own education. This report explores the many positive effects that Indigenous-led, Land-Based and Traditional Education can provide to Indigenous youth and communities. Culturally relevant Traditional Education creates spaces where Indigenous youth can find their unique identity, develop self-confidence, and positive self-perception, connect to their land and culture, learn and support language revitalization, heal and sustain positive mental health and well-being, and foster social connectedness and belonging.

In order to support the important work already being done by Indigenous-led traditional learning spaces, the Government of Canada must financially support grassroots education initiatives and Indigenous-led traditional learning models, as well as be held accountable for their past and present promises to Indigenous peoples. In addition, the current Western model of education must be re-thought to be more culturally inclusive for Indigenous students. Finally, individuals must take responsibility for their awareness, advocacy and allyship to support Indigenous self-determination in Canada.

TERMINOLOGY

- While different understandings of these terms exist and this report is unable to define them, I will be distinguishing between **Land-Based education/learning** and **Traditional Education/learning**. This report recognizes that **Land-Based Education** occurs on a spectrum and may look different for each individual, but its defining aspect is that it takes place on the land. Although it can include various degrees of cultural and traditional activities, it is typically situated within the Western educational space. The project described in this report recognizes **Traditional Education** as something different; while it includes Land-Based teachings, it aims to completely move away from the Western idea of education, which may include Traditional Education as an 'add on'. This project is working to define what Traditional Education might look like in Manitoba, specifically from a Cree/Nehinaw and Ojibway/Anishinabe perspective.
- This report uses the terminology of **Indigenous** as an umbrella term to describe the original inhabitants of the land that was colonized by settler groups, which

includes the distinct groups of First Nations, Inuit, and Metis people in Canada. It is important to recognize that diversity exists within nomenclature, and to avoid prescribing identity to entire diverse groups I will be specific about the nation I am referring to when possible.

- Throughout this report I will use the term **Canada**, however it is understood that this refers to “what is currently Canada”. This terminology opens the possibilities for imagining futurities beyond the settler state.¹

INTRODUCTION

Education is one of the major contributing factors to social, cultural, and economic development. Inclusive and quality education has the power to determine the trajectory and condition of an individual’s life. Education is a key point of intervention for addressing inequalities that exist amongst marginalized communities.² In Canada, education has been used by the government as a tool of cultural genocide, and “generations of racist-inspired policies [have] produced intergenerational underachievement and alienation.”³ As the government has failed on its promises to provide relevant, decolonized and sustainable education for Indigenous students, grassroots organizations have taken control and worked to develop and build Traditional Education systems that decentre Western interpretations of Indigenous education⁴ and centre community-led education initiatives.

¹ Lee, Damien. Twitter Post. January 31, 2018. 8:47 am.

<https://twitter.com/damienlee/status/958698343135244288?lang=en>

² Bodkin-Andrews, G. and Carlson, B., “The legacy of racism and Indigenous Australian identity within education”. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 19(4) (2014): 784.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Hansen, John, “Cree Elders’ Perspectives on Land-Based Education: A Case Study.” *Brock Education Journal* 28 (1) (2018): 75.

This report will examine the legacy and consequences of settler colonialism on Indigenous education, culture, identity, and languages, as well as outline the power of Indigenous control of Indigenous education. Inclusive and quality Indigenous-led education for Indigenous students has the power to foster positive self-identity, self-confidence, and self-perception, cultivate a deep connection to the land and Indigenous culture, and support language revitalization, community healing, positive mental health and well-being, and social connectedness. This report aims to advocate for existing and future Indigenous-led places of learning, and raise awareness on the positive benefits that Traditional Education has on Indigenous students and communities.

Research and Outreach Methodology

In order to learn about Indigenous schools and education initiatives and support the early development of a Traditional Education system in Manitoba⁵, Elders, Knowledge Holders, and representatives from established Indigenous-led traditional learning places/spaces were contacted through e-mail and over the phone. With the support of Becky Cook, the program coordinator of the Misipawistik Pimatisimēskanaw Program, a program run by members of the Misipawistik Cree Nation that offers

⁵ The Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness Fellowship works with partners, including the Misipawistik Cree Nation, to support initiatives that are working to build social connection and belonging in their communities. Part of this partnership aims to support communities in Manitoba who are looking to develop an Indigenous-led traditional learning space to overcome social isolation amongst Indigenous youth. An Indigenous-led traditional learning space offers culturally relevant teachings to Indigenous students and fosters a sense of pride and belonging.

culturally relevant teachings to help students reconnect with their culture, rebuild connections to their ancestral land, and promote healthy living, I was able to set up interviews. In accordance with social distancing measures, the interviews were conducted via Zoom or by phone. The interviews were conducted using mainly open-ended questions regarding important aspects of Traditional Education and the logistical considerations of establishing a traditional learning space in Manitoba. Open-ended questions allowed interview participants to organically share their stories and expand on their personal knowledge and experience. To ensure everyone's words were remembered accurately, the interviews were recorded, and a written transcription of the conversation was created and sent to the interview participant for their final review and consent.

The interviews were conducted in two parts. The Part 1 interviews focused on speaking to representatives from established places of learning that focus on Indigenous cultures and languages, including the Turtle Lodge Centre of Excellence in Indigenous Education and Wellness, the Kaniyasihk Cree Immersion School, the Akwesasne Freedom School, as well as the Misipawistik Pimatisimēskanaw Program. The Part 2 interviews focused on talking to Elders and Knowledge Holders to discuss and identify important aspects of Traditional Education as well as logistical considerations for developing a Traditional Education system in Manitoba.

This report is written and shared in the spirit of advocacy and learning. It is important to acknowledge that the insight and knowledge shared in this report is not my knowledge, but the knowledge of the interview participants. It is thanks to the Elders and Knowledge Holders who participated in the interviews and were generous enough to share their knowledge with me that this report was written. These stories and insights were shared with me in the spirit of OCAP, standing for ownership, control, access, and possession, which asserts the First Nation right to data collection processes in their communities.

ISSUES & EVIDENCE

Settler Colonial Canada and White supremacy

It is often taught that Canada's history began with the arrival of the Europeans; they came, discovered, and settled. We learned that upon arrival, there were Indigenous people living here, but they willingly formed strong economic, religious and military bonds with the Europeans.⁶ What is left out of that teaching is the brutal story of colonialism, genocide and White Supremacy. Settler colonialism has shaped the history and development of what we now call Canada. Institutions that were set up by the settler colonial government such as our legal system, healthcare system, and education

⁶ "Discover Canada - Canada's History", last modified October 26, 2015, accessed August 1, 2020, <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/publications-manuals/discover-canada/read-online/canadas-history.html>.

system, still exist today and continue to uphold Eurocentric values and ideas of White supremacy. As author Janelle Brady argues, these systems normalize whiteness and are not a phenomenon of their own but are part of global White supremacy that came in with colonialism and continue with neo-colonialism.⁷

The relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples has historically been one of domination, mistrust, and exploitation. The European settlers justified their colonial actions by considering Indigenous peoples, as well as other minority groups, to be 'The Other'. They were often described as savages and barbarians, which was used as justification for the European settlers' aims to assimilate and "civilize."⁸ The 1867 Indian Act gave legal justification to the Canadian government to control various aspects of Indigenous peoples lives, with no regard for the sovereignty of Indigenous nations.⁹ Legislation was used to "strip indigenous peoples of basic human and legal rights, dignity and integrity, and to gain control over the peoples, their lands and natural rights and resources."¹⁰ As stated by the Accord on Indigenous Education, colonization has either legally outlawed or suppressed Indigenous knowledge systems, specifically language and culture, which has significantly contributed to low

⁷ Janelle Brady, "Education for Whom?: Exploring Systems of Oppression and Domination." *Canadian Journal for New Scholars in Education* 8 (1) (2017): 119.

⁸ Ibid, 121.

⁹ Ibid, 121.

¹⁰ Historica Canada and Heritage Minutes. 2020. "Residential Schools in Canada: Education Guide." Accessed July 30, 2020. <http://education.historicacanada.ca/en/tools/261?c=18>, 1.

levels of education attainment and high rates of suicide, incarceration, unemployment, and family and community separation.¹¹ This history of oppression and genocide has had powerful implications on education, both historically and presently.

The Intergenerational Effects of Residential Schools

One of the main tools used in the genocide of Indigenous peoples and culture was the residential school. Residential schools were church operated religious schools, sponsored by the federal government, established to erase Indigenous language and culture and assimilate Indigenous children into a Euro-Canadian society.¹² The residential school system was in operation across Canada from 1830 until the 1990s, with the last federally funded residential school being closed in 1996.¹³ At the height of their operation in 1931, more than 80 residential schools remained open.¹⁴ Children were required to attend residential schools and were forcibly removed from their homes, families and communities. While the testimony and experiences of residential school survivors varies across Canada, residential schools were “rife with starvation, neglect,

¹¹ Association of Canadian Deans of Education. 2010. “Accord on Indigenous Education.” Accessed July 30, 2020. www.csse.ca/ACDE, 6.

¹² “Residential Schools in Canada | Historica Canada Education Portal.” n.d. Education.Historicacanada.Ca. Accessed August 5, 2020. <http://education.historicacanada.ca/en/tools/261?c=18>.

¹³ “Residential Schools in Canada | The Canadian Encyclopedia.” n.d. Wwww.Thecanadianencyclopedia.Ca. Accessed August 5, 2020. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/residential-schools#:~:text=The%20Mohawk%20Institute%20in%20Brantford>.

¹⁴ Bougie, Evelyne, and Sacha Sénécal, “Registered Indian Children’s School Success and Intergenerational Effects of Residential Schooling in Canada.” *International Indigenous Policy Journal* 1 (1) (2010): 37.

and physical, emotional and sexual abuse, often including isolation from normal human contact and nurturing.”¹⁵

The negative implications of residential schools did not end with the closure of the last school in 1996. Intergenerational trauma continues to affect the well-being of Indigenous communities today in many ways. The long term effects of residential schools has seen an increase in psychological challenges, including high feelings of anger, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, low self-esteem, and suicide.¹⁶

Residential schools operated on the notions of “punishment, abuse, coercion and control,”¹⁷ leaving survivors with a warped sense of nurturing and care, which has left many survivors with little to no positive modelling of nurturing and parenting. As residential school survivors grew up and had children of their own, this trauma was often transmitted to their children, perpetuating the cycle of trauma created by the Government of Canada.

This has had various negative socio-economic implications for Indigenous communities across Canada, including unemployment, disproportionately high involvement in the justice system, high rates of homelessness, high rates of domestic

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ “Intergenerational Trauma and Residential Schools | The Canadian Encyclopedia.” n.d. Wwww.Thecanadianencyclopedia.ca. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/intergenerational-trauma-and-residential-schools>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

abuse and family violence, substance abuse, and poor housing conditions.¹⁸ In addition to the abuse and the immense damage done to the individual through residential schooling, students were forbidden from speaking their Indigenous languages or performing their traditional music and dance¹⁹, causing tremendous damage to Indigenous identity, language, and culture.

Loss of Identity, Culture, and Language

The United Nations declared 2019 the year of Indigenous languages to raise awareness of the global decline in Indigenous languages. At that time, around 40% of an estimated 6,700 languages spoken around the world were at risk of disappearing, the majority of which were Indigenous languages.²⁰ This is partially due to globalization and the domination of English and other national languages. However, the marginalization of Indigenous communities and government policies of assimilation, such as Canada's residential school system, are largely responsible for the loss of Indigenous language, culture, and identity. The loss of language is also a loss of diverse knowledge, cognitive perspective²¹, unique culture, and identity. Although education in

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Historica Canada and Heritage Minutes. 2020. "Residential Schools in Canada: Education Guide." Accessed July 30, 2020. <http://education.historicacanada.ca/en/tools/261?c=18>, 1.

²⁰ "International Year of Indigenous Languages 2019: About". N.d. Accessed July 28, 2020. <https://en.iyil2019.org/about#about-1>.

²¹ Prodanovic, Konstantin. 2013. "The Silent Genocide: Aboriginal Language Loss FAQ." Accessed July 28, 2020. <https://www.terry.ubc.ca/2013/10/16/the-silent-genocide-aboriginal-language-loss-faq/>.

Canada has historically been used as a tool for the eradication of Indigenous language and culture, education that is led by Indigenous peoples, for Indigenous peoples, is essential in revitalizing language, culture, identity, and belonging.

Indigenous Control of Indigenous Education

In 1972, the National Indian Brotherhood, now the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), wrote a policy paper titled “Indian Control of Indian Education”.²² The paper outlined the failures of the Western education system for Indigenous students and the importance of Indigenous peoples having control of their own education. The paper outlined how Indigenous control over Indigenous education provides individuals with a strong foundation of empowerment that allows for pride, self-efficiency, and the ability to fully contribute to the development of their families, clans, communities and nations.²³ Education can be used negatively as a tool for erasure and indoctrination; however it can also be used as a tool for development, empowerment, and liberation. As Senator Murray Sinclair, Chief Commissioner of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission says, “Education is what got us into this mess, and education is key to getting us out of it.”²⁴

²² Assembly of First Nations. 2010. “First Nations Control of First Nations Education”. Policy Paper, 2.

²³ Assembly of First Nations. 2010. “First Nations Control of First Nations Education”. Policy Paper, 4.

²⁴ “Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples Requires Action On Education.” 2017. HuffPost Canada. April 5, 2017. https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/roberta-jamieson/indigenous-reconciliation-education_b_15828986.html.

Indigenous-led education that centres a culturally relevant curriculum, culturally safe learning environments, immersive language learning, culturally competent teachers²⁵, and generally uplifts Indigenous Knowledge and tradition as valuable, has the power to positively change the trajectory of a student's life. With the release of an updated version of the 'Indian Control of Indian Education' report in 2010, it is evident that more can be done to ensure that "Canadian children of every racial origin have the opportunity during their school days to learn about the history, customs and culture of this country's original inhabitants and first citizens."²⁶

Existing Places of Learning: Indigenous-led Education

The calls for action outlined in the AFN's paper have been largely ignored by the federal and provincial governments of Canada; however resiliency and self-determination within Indigenous communities have always existed and can be seen in the various efforts by grassroots groups to build Indigenous-led traditional learning spaces that provide Indigenous youth with culturally relevant teachings. As part of this project, I had the pleasure of speaking to representatives from four Indigenous-led traditional learning spaces including, the Akwesasne Freedom School, The Kaniyasihk

²⁵ Longboat, Kahontakwas Diane. 2012. *Soul Of Sovereignty, The Impact Of Culturally Responsive Education On The Academic Achievement Of First Nations Students*. Ottawa, Ont.: Assembly of First Nations. 13.

²⁶ Assembly of First Nations. 2010. "First Nations Control of First Nations Education". Policy Paper, 2.

Cree Immersion Land-Based School, The Turtle Lodge International Centre for Indigenous Education and Wellness, and the Misipawistik Pimatisimēskanaw Program.

The Awkwesasne Freedom School: Founded in 1979, the Awkwesasne Freedom School (AFS) is an alternative school for Mohawk children in Akwesasne, a reservation located along the St-Lawrence River which straddles the provinces of Ontario and Quebec in Canada, and the State of New York in the United States.²⁷ This community-created and community-led school was founded by Mohawk parents concerned with the lack of cultural and linguistic services available in local public schools, and has adopted a total Mohawk immersion curriculum.²⁸ The AFS believes in reversing the assimilation process by teaching everything from Kindergarten to grade 6 in the Mohawk language and to reclaim and instill a sense of pride within the students surrounding Mohawk traditions, values, ceremony, language, and culture.

The Kaniyasihk Cree Immersion Land-Based School: Founded in 2004, the Kaniyasihk Cree Immersion Land-Based School is a non-profit educational institute specializing in Cree Culture and Language.²⁹ They offer participants the opportunity to connect to the land by engaging in land-based activities such as hiking, gardening, canoeing and

²⁷ “Akwasasne Freedom School (Canada).” n.d. Base.d-p-h.Info. Accessed August 5, 2020. <http://base.d-p-h.info/en/fiches/premierdph/fiche-premierdph-130.html>.

²⁸ “Akwasasne Freedom School.” n.d. Www.Facebook.Com. Accessed August 5, 2020. https://www.facebook.com/pg/Akwesasne-Freedom-School-125290000834845/about/?ref=page_internal.

²⁹ “Kâniyâsihk Culture Camps.” n.d. Www.Facebook.Com. Accessed August 5, 2020. https://www.facebook.com/pg/nehiyawUniversity/about/?ref=page_internal.

dogsledding, as well as learning how to fillet fish, cut meat and preserve, from a Cree perspective.³⁰ This school also houses the kâniyâsihk Research and Development Institute (kRDI), which specializes in translating, transcribing and documenting Indigenous languages, as well as professional development, workshops and assessment of language and land-based programming.³¹

The Turtle Lodge Center of Excellence in Indigenous Education and Wellness: Founded in 2002 following a vision received by founder Elder Dave Courchene Jr., the Turtle Lodge was built by volunteers to fulfil the vision of truth, and bring healing to people and peace to the world.³² The Turtle Lodge was founded upon ancestral, land-based teachings that bring balance to life and promote Original Peoples' knowledge, positive identity, self-esteem and self-sufficiency.³³ The main goal of the Turtle Lodge is Mino-Pi-Mati-Si-Win – A Good and Peaceful Way of Life.

The Misipawistik Pimatisimēskanaw Program: Founded in 2016, the Misipawistik Pimatisimēskanaw Program offers culturally relevant teachings to help students in Misipawistik (Grand Rapids) reconnect with their culture, rebuild connections to their

³⁰ "Kâniyâsihk Culture Camps". N.d. Home. Accessed August 5, 2020.

<https://kaniyasihkculturecamps.com/home-english>.

³¹ "Kâniyâsihk Culture Camps". N.d. Indigenous Research and Scholarship. Accessed August 5, 2020.

<https://kaniyasihkculturecamps.com/k%C3%A2-n%C3%AAy%C3%A2sihk-m%C3%AEkiw%C3%A2hpa-en>

³² "Turtle Lodge." N.d. About the Turtle Lodge. Accessed July 30, 2020. <http://www.turtlelodge.org/about/>.

³³ Ibid.

ancestral land, promote healthy living, and provide an education.³⁴ The program has partnered with Adult Education and the Grand Rapids school to allow youth who participate in the program to gain a Native Studies or Cultural credit.³⁵ The Misipawistik Pimatisimēskanaw Program focuses on trying to engage students in learning by teaching students about their history, land, language, and culture, as well as providing them an alternative method of obtaining school credits that can be used for graduating or obtaining meaningful employment.³⁶

KEY FINDINGS

Major Positive Implications of Traditional Education

Through the interviews with Elders, Knowledge Holders, and representatives from Indigenous-led established places of learning, various themes emerged that highlight the ways in which Traditional Education can develop the spiritual, cultural, emotional, physical, and social elements of youth. All interview participants reflected on the desire and need for more Indigenous-led traditional learning places, and the positive implications of Traditional Education, including: a connection to the land and culture, a positive sense of identity, confidence, and self-perception, language revitalization,

³⁴ Program Implementation Report. 2018. "Misipawistik Pimatisim ē skanaw (Life Path) Land-Based Learning Program: A program to revive the Nēhinaw way. Accessed July 25, 2020. 1.

³⁵ Misipawistik Cree Nation. *Misipawistik Pimatisimēskanaw: Learning to revive the Nēhinaw way*. Pamphlet

³⁶ Ibid.

positive mental health and well-being, community healing, and social connectedness and belonging.

The Importance of Land & Culture for Self-Determination

A major theme discussed throughout the interviews with Elders, Knowledge Holders, and representatives from Indigenous-led established places of learning was the importance of land and culture for Indigenous self-determination. Through colonization in Canada, Indigenous peoples were prohibited from practicing their languages and land-based cultural traditions, but through Traditional Education, the connection to the land and culture can be restored. Interview participant Elder Dave Courchene, Founder of the Turtle Lodge in Sagkeeng First Nation, stated that,

You learn to understand that there is the Creator, that you feel the Creator through the love that it has for you, and feel that love in the land itself.³⁷

Indigenous communities tend to view the land as spiritual and healing; the land itself and the plants, animals and resources on the land are provided by the Creator for people to live and sustain themselves on, and this is taught to be respected and sustained for future generations to use.³⁸ Elvera Sargeant, who does outreach and funding for the Awkwesasne Freedom School (AFS), shared with me the school's

³⁷ Courchene, Dave (Founder of the Turtle Lodge in Sagkeeng First Nation), interviewed by Lateisha Ugwuegbula via Zoom on June 16, 2020.

³⁸ Hansen, John, "Cree Elders' Perspectives on Land-Based Education: A Case Study." *Brock Education Journal* 28 (1) (2018): 75

Thanksgiving Address (TA), which they used to develop their curriculum. The TA holds great meaning and is additionally used at longhouse for ceremonies, and to open and close events, meetings, and the students' school days. The TA recognizes that Mother Earth has given us the duty to live in balance and harmony with each other and all living things, and reminds each individual to give thanks to the natural world and each other.³⁹

Elvera spoke about the importance of thinking about the faces of the next seven generations in the decisions we make today, and the AFS's value of instilling environmental stewardship and community within students and the important implications that has for creating a sustainable future.

Among all interview participants, Land-Based Education was recognized as essential for teaching the traditional ways of life and for teaching lessons for living and survival that have been taught for thousands of years.⁴⁰ Interview participants spoke about how Traditional Education is very hands-on and experiential, and required more than studying culture from a textbook; it requires traditional, land-based teachings taught by Elders, Knowledge Holders and community members. Traditional and Land-Based Education allows students to be knowledgeable in their ancestry and have a deeper connection to their culture. For students, in addition to providing a deeper

³⁹ Sargent, Elvera (Outreach and Fundraising for the Awkwesasne Freedom School), interviewed by Lateisha Ugwuegbula via Zoom on June 18, 2020.

⁴⁰ Hansen, "Cree Elders' Perspectives on Land-Based Education", 75.

connection to the land and ancestry, learning about your culture can have a major positive effect on educational achievement levels, motivation, and success. A report written by Kahontakwas Diane Longboat stated that “academic performance is inextricably tied to an education that is firmly grounded in the context of culture and language and founded on history, spiritual beliefs, songs, ceremonies, the land or place of origin, art, music, oratory, contemporary community customs and Nation building for First Nations citizenship.”⁴¹ Traditional Education that centres land-based teachings and cultural connections offers students the opportunity to feel connected to their history and ancestry.

Education for Positive Identity Formation, Self-Confidence, and Positive Self-Perception

Another major theme that came out of the discussions with Elders and Knowledge Holders was the significant effect of Traditional Education on a student’s positive identity formation, confidence, self-perception, and mental health. Linda Ballantyne, who is the chair of the Frontier School Division board and the Education Director for Misipawistik Cree Nation stated that,

*I see big changes in students who have come into a program and they learn about who they are, where they come from, why they're here. It builds a strong sense of pride in who they are, it builds self confidence. It makes a huge impact and huge differences in people's lives.*⁴²

⁴¹ Longboat, Kahontakwas Diane. 2012. *Soul Of Sovereignty, The Impact Of Culturally Responsive Education On The Academic Achievement Of First Nations Students*. Ottawa, Ont.: Assembly of First Nations. 71.

⁴² Ballantyne, Linda (Misipawistik Cree Nation), interviewed by Lateisha Ugwuegbula via telephone on July 6, 2020.

Education is significant for identity formation. In the case of many Indigenous people, residential schools and the current Western education system has taken that away.

Elder Dave Courchene said that,

Unfortunately, many of our people have not reached that level of confidence in their own identity, because they don't know about it.

Floyd Sutherland, from Peguis First Nation, spoke about how Traditional Education is ultimately about understanding yourself. He stressed the importance of Traditional Education in fostering a sense of belonging and faith within oneself,

*We have to love ourselves in order to love others.*⁴³

Traditional Education offers Indigenous youth the opportunity to develop a sense of pride in their identity and hear from an Indigenous perspective about their ancestry, their history, and their uniqueness. The 1972 First Nations Control of First Nations Education policy paper outlined the importance of education for identity formation by stating that “unless a child learns about the forces which shape him: the history of his people, their values and customs, their language, he will never really know himself or his potential as a human being.”⁴⁴ Floyd described that he would take his students out in nature and create a little circle in the bush which would be their classroom. He would

⁴³ Sutherland, Floyd. (Peguis First Nation), interviewed by Lateisha Ugwuegbula via telephone on July 31, 2020.

⁴⁴ Assembly of First Nations. 2010. “First Nations Control of First Nations Education”. Policy Paper, 3.

use the trees to illustrate and teach about identity and a student's individual strengths and weaknesses. He said that,

You've got go back to your roots, because your roots will tell you who you are and hold you together and you'll be strong.

He mentioned using the redwood tree to teach about a student's identity and strengths as an individual. He said,

It's a big tree – but the roots don't go very deep. But they intertwine with each other, and the wind will never knock them down because the roots will hold together to be strong.

Lessons taught in school should teach a student to understand themselves, reinforce their positive identity formation, and instil within them a sense of pride and possibility; they must be taught that they come from a strong and valued community and that they have the ability to achieve their dreams.

Education for Language Revitalization

As mentioned earlier in the report, Indigenous languages globally, as well as in Canada are at a high risk of being lost. Indigenous-led traditional learning places such as the Turtle Lodge Center of Excellence in Indigenous Education and Wellness, the Kaniyasihk Cree Immersion School, the Akwesasne Freedom School, as well as the Misipawistik Pimatisimēskanaw Program, are working to revitalize their Indigenous languages and ensure their future survival. Many interview participants spoke about the importance of lifelong learning and not confining language learning to the 'school hours'.

They mentioned that learning was never supposed to be separate from living and from your everyday life. Charlie Ettawacooop of Norway House Cree Nation stated that,

*If you really, really want to learn about your language, you have to learn it from at home and the community – you have to hear it every day for you to understand it and speak it. For me teaching you the basics of Cree is helpful, but you have to go out there and learn it, but it is possible. It is possible to learn your language again.*⁴⁵

For schools like the Awkwesasne Freedom School, everything is taught in the Mohawk language, which helps students as well as their families to learn and practice the language. Elvera stated that,

One of the things that I've observed over the years is that the parents that send our kids there, they end up learning the language a little bit more than when they didn't have children at our school. So they make that effort to be able to help their kids at home. Or sometimes our students will end up teaching their parents to say certain words.

Traditional learning spaces use various methods and techniques to teach their Indigenous languages, allowing the students, their families, and their communities to learn and use it. This is important for language revitalization as well as identity. Many interview participants spoke about the loss of language as the loss of identity. Dave Swanson, from Norway House Cree Nation, stated that,

*It's part of our culture. It's part of our history. It's part of who we are.*⁴⁶

Learning, acquiring, and demonstrating fluency in your culture's language can contribute to positive identity formation and self-esteem, community well-being, and

⁴⁵ Ettawacappo, Charlie (Norway House Cree Nation), interviewed by Lateisha Ugwuegbula via telephone on June 16, 2020.

⁴⁶ Swanson, Dave (Norway House Cree Nation), interviewed by Lateisha Ugwuegbula via telephone on June 10, 2020.

cultural continuity.⁴⁷ Language is important for the transmission of Indigenous oral histories, tradition, knowledge, laws, spirituality, ceremony, and relationships.⁴⁸ As language has been one of the main targets of colonization, the opportunity for language revitalization offered by Traditional Education is significant in the movement for decolonization.⁴⁹

Education for Mental Health, Well-being, and Healing

*Our people have been held back for all those years, for about 150 years. So we need a lot of healing to go on.*⁵⁰

Wayne Mason, Fisher River Cree Nation

The trauma that exists due to the physical, emotional, and sexual abuse endured by survivors of residential schooling continues to affect Indigenous communities today through unresolved intergenerational trauma. Bessel van der Kolk, author of *The Body Keeps the Score* states that “more than anything else, being able to feel safe with other people defines mental health; safe connections are fundamental to meaningful and satisfying lives. The critical challenge in a classroom setting is to foster reciprocity: truly hearing and being heard; really seeing and being seen by other people.”⁵¹ For many

⁴⁷ Bougie, Evelyne, and Sacha Sénécal, “Registered Indian Children’s School Success and Intergenerational Effects of Residential Schooling in Canada.” *International Indigenous Policy Journal* 1 (1) (2010): 37.

⁴⁸ Cameron, Laura, Dave Courchene, Sabina Ijaz, and Ian Mauro. “The Turtle Lodge: Sustainable Self-Determination in Practice.” *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 15 (1) (2019): 11

⁴⁹ Ibid. 11.

⁵⁰ Mason, Wayne (Fisher River Cree Nation), interviewed by Lateisha Ugwuegbula via telephone on June 16, 2020.

⁵¹ Van Der Kolk, Bessel. 2015. *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma*. London: Penguin Books. 354.

Indigenous students who attend Western schools, really being seen and heard is not a reality. Indigenous-led Traditional Education that teaches the traditional way of life, ceremony and culture can offer an avenue improving mental health and well-being and for healing. Wayne Mason, from Fisher River Cree Nation stated that,

Going to ceremony helps them to stay grounded and stay going in this good direction and keeping balanced. In a lot of ways, we can get off balance so easily. And now, you know, we don't realize it sometimes, you got to go back to ceremony and get some healing and get balanced again.

When asked about the ways that education can affect mental health and the importance of ceremony for Traditional Education, Wayne spoke about how for him, learning about the traditional way of life and participating in ceremony saved him, and for some, can be important for healing. Wayne shared that,

It's a way of developing a sense of confidence and self-esteem and identity; that's what you need to go through in order to be able to deal with all those issues.

Indigenous-led Traditional Education aims to give students a positive perception of self, which can have a hugely positive effect on confronting the intergenerational trauma created by the residential school system. Linda Ballantyne noted that,

It gives them a clear understanding of our history, like a lot of people don't know why our communities are in such situations. And I think if you understand what happened, if you understand the impact of residential schools and the Indian Act and what that did to our people, then I think, you know, once you get a good understanding of that, then you can see a way out and you can understand why our communities are suffering. I think that's what people need here. I think a lot of people are just kind of accepting our situation. So yeah, it helps people understand and move forward.

As laid out in the Turtle Lodges Sustainable Self-Determination in Practice report, Traditional Education can impact community healing and well-being by disrupting colonial boundaries and offering practices of “everyday acts of resurgence – speaking the language, practicing ceremony to connect to the land, building healthy relationships among Indigenous people, sharing teachings, and educating others.”⁵² In addition to Traditional Education providing a space for healing, being on the land and spending time in an outdoor environment positively impacts students overall mental health and well-being. Tyler Lavalle, who teaches at a school in Grand Rapids, spoke about how students today deal with a lot of stress and anxiety, and learning out of the land, beyond the four walls of the classroom, allows students to connect to traditions and knowledge that is important to them and their people.⁵³

Discussion: Social Connectedness & The Right to Belong

While Traditional Education allows for the various benefits discussed in this report, ultimately, Traditional Education has incredible influence in creating a sense of belonging and fostering social connection and community. Kim Samuel, Founder of the Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness, defines belonging as “a state of wholeness: the experience of being at home in the social, environmental, organizational, and

⁵² Cameron, Laura, Dave Courchene, Sabina Ijaz, and Ian Mauro. “The Turtle Lodge: Sustainable Self-Determination in Practice.” *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 15 (1) (2019): 11.

⁵³ Lavalle, Tyler (Misipawistik Cree Nation), interviewed by Lateisha Ugwuegbula via Zoom on June 17, 2020.

cultural contexts of one's life."⁵⁴ Belonging is about resilience and connecting with people, place, power and purpose⁵⁵; Traditional Education offers this to Indigenous students. Linda Ballantyne stated that,

I think that we can build a sense of community through education. I think that when we learn about us, we learn who we are and where we come from, and our connection to the land, I think that all of those things help us to build a stronger community.

Indigenous-led traditional learning spaces provide Indigenous students the freedom to feel at home on the land and in their communities, and teaches them that they are valued members of society with the ability to positively contribute to society. Many of the interview participants spoke about the Traditional Education model's ability to give attention to developing the whole child, spiritually, emotionally, physically, and mentally, rather than just academically. Traditional Education creates a space where Elders, Knowledge Holders and teachers can recognize each student's gifts and help them develop their whole being to fulfil a meaningful life and contribute to their communities and society. Interview participant Ron Cook from Misipawistik Cree Nation spoke about the sacredness of the child; in English, the word *awâsis* translates into *child*, but in Cree, it means *this one is shining*.⁵⁶ He stated that,

Our role as caregivers, as relatives, as people in the community is to keep that light shining in that child as long as we can.

⁵⁴ Samuel, Kim. "Our Bodies and Brains Need Belonging." Medium. November 20, 2019. <https://medium.com/@kimsamuelcanada/our-bodies-and-brains-need-belonging-43b871bcee93>.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Cook, Ron (Misipawistik Cree Nation), interviewed by Lateisha Ugwuegbula via Zoom on June 11, 2020.

Ron stated that once the child grows up, they become *okicitewak: The Great Heart*, one who gives all of themselves for the good of the community and shares their light. This is what Indigenous-led Traditional Education is teaching its children. Traditional Education has the power to keep the light shining within each child by giving them the space to develop a positive identity, self-perception, and confidence, by fostering a deep connection to the land and Indigenous culture, by immersing students in their ancestral languages, by allowing for community healing, positive mental health and well-being, and by fostering social connectedness and belonging.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We've got a lot of work ahead of us. We're trying to convince the government that no, you're not off the hook yet.

Wayne Mason, Fisher River Cree Nation

This report explored the legacy and some of the consequences of settler colonialism, specifically on Indigenous education, as well as the power of Indigenous control of Indigenous education. These recommendations are targeted towards various levels of government and institutions that owe Indigenous peoples truth and reconciliation.

#1: Government Funding

National and provincial governments should provide funding for grassroots education initiatives and support Indigenous-led traditional learning models, including

Indigenous Institutes of Higher Learning. Although Canada has formally recognized the need and importance of Indigenous control of Indigenous education, The Assembly of First Nations recognizes the Government of Canada's continued "failure to adequately fund and support First Nations education in a sustainable and meaningful manner."⁵⁷

Implementation of grassroots education initiatives that provide Indigenous-led learning spaces requires adequate and unattached funding and support from government funding organizations.

#2: Government Accountability

The Government of Canada has a fiduciary responsibility to provide financial support and restore what has been taken away.⁵⁸ Government organizations often expect reports and evaluation measurements from communities to show accountability for how their financial support has been used, however it is important to consider that the government must be the ones to show accountability to Indigenous communities. Financial support for education initiatives should come with government accountability measurements to ensure that Indigenous communities developing traditional learning spaces are kept informed by the government on regular and on-going improvements of educational support for Indigenous learners.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Assembly of First Nations. 2010. "First Nations Control of First Nations Education". Policy Paper, 7.

⁵⁸ Ijaz, Sabina (Worker and Volunteer at the Turtle Lodge), interviewed by Lateisha Ugwuegbula via Zoom on June 16, 2020.

⁵⁹ Assembly of First Nations. 2010. "First Nations Control of First Nations Education". Policy Paper, 18.

#3: Rethinking the Western School System

For Indigenous students who may not have access to Traditional Education, we must recognize the need for transformative educational change and rethink the Western school system to be more culturally inclusive. All educational institutions, including universities and colleges must provide and support Indigenous education. Western school systems must rethink the curriculum to include and teach to all students Canada's settler colonial legacy and mistreatment of Indigenous peoples, as well as Indigenous histories, languages, culture, and traditions. Other transformative educational changes include culturally responsive teacher training, pedagogies, and student assessments, valuing Indigenous knowledge, revitalizing Indigenous languages, conducting culturally respectful Indigenous research, and creating anti-racist welcoming learning spaces.⁶⁰

#4: Individual Allyship and Advocacy

Individuals must commit to learning about the challenges that some Indigenous peoples face in Canada, as well as globally, and commit to unlearning and thinking critically about colonial ideas of Indigenous peoples and culture. In addition to raising

⁶⁰ Association of Canadian Deans of Education. 2010. "Accord on Indigenous Education." Accessed July 30, 2020. www.csse.ca/ACDE. 5, 8.

awareness, individuals must use their power and privilege to engage in meaningful action where they have influence. Individuals must hold their governments accountable to support Indigenous-led education initiatives as well as to rethink the Western school system to be more culturally inclusive.

IMPACT

The key findings and recommendations of this report aim to support the work already being done to develop Indigenous-led places of learning for Indigenous youth. The interviews conducted through this project can assist in building a foundation of knowledge to support the early development of an Indigenous-led traditional learning system in Manitoba. The Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness (SCSC) should continue to partner with the Misipawistik Cree Nation and other Indigenous communities, as well as develop relationships with various stakeholders invested in this work to continue to support inclusive education and Indigenous self-determination. In addition to continued support, SCSC should continue to raise awareness and advocate for Indigenous-led education initiatives and encourage future Fellows, partners, and organizations to unlearn ideas of education that stem from a colonial mindset and consider the ways inclusive education affects communities.

CONCLUSION

Education is the bridge that joins our understanding and our acceptance. Once we accept our past, understand why things are the way they are, then we can move forward, and we can build strong, healthy communities.

Linda Ballantyne, Misipawistik Cree Nation

Settler colonialism has left a far reaching and dark legacy, particularly for Indigenous education. As outlined in this report, Indigenous communities have been dismantling this colonial legacy and forging a bright path forward through Indigenous-led Traditional Education and working to build strong and healthy children and communities. Inclusive education is not only an investment in developing a flourishing child but an investment into creating a thriving community. Indigenous knowledge illustrates an abundance of values that everyone can learn from, including the sacred duty to care for the youth. The knowledge shared in this report is an example of the significant work being done by various Indigenous communities to create a bright and positive future for generations to come. Traditional Education allows Indigenous youth to uncover the beauty and value that has always existed within them and their communities.

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