

Reviving ininiw kiskinomakēwin (Cree Education) protocols in the Misipawistik Cree Nation Health Authority Doula Program

2023 Social Connectedness Fellowship Program
in Partnership with Misipawistik Cree Nation

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Cree Nation



**SAMUEL CENTRE
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report and final output will build on the work of Elders and Knowledge Keepers of the kiwētōtētān working group and SCSC Fellows to document the benefits of land-based education, and define ininiw kiskinomakēwin (Cree Education) specifically as it relates to the Prenatal Doula Program. Connecting women and families to the land and their communities' original traditional teachings is essential to keeping the lessons and knowledge alive.

The ininiw kiskinomakēwin model differs from Western education in that it is life-long and holistic, including mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of learning and growth. Ininiw kiskinomakēwin identifies important teachings shared in each stage of life from oskawāsis (~0-1 years) to oskāpēw/oskayiskwēw (early adulthood). Upon my observance in the MCN Health Authority Prenatal Program, first year teachings include but are not limited to:

- Birth being viewed as a ceremony;
- cradleboard teachings;
- placenta and belly button ceremony;
- naming ceremony;
- walking out ceremony;
- introduction to Sundance;
- sharing circles;
- discussions on child rearing;
- and breastfeeding.

With the support of the First Nations Health and Social Secretariat of Manitoba (FNHSSM), Misipawistik Cree Nation (MCN) has piloted the Doula Program to train Indigenous birth helpers and reclaim birth traditions for new and expectant mothers.

1. INTRODUCTION

Indigenous birthing ceremonies have been passed on for generations. Long before colonisation, Indigenous mothers who were expecting a baby were seen as a spiritual vessel holding life inside them. Everything had meaning, and birth was one of the more sacred traditions. The whole community would come together as one to help prepare for a new life entering into this world. Prior to the Westernization of birth, the arrival of an Indigenous infant was a cultural event that allowed community members and families to celebrate, welcome, and support the new babies and their parents with culture, language, and a connection to place or the land. Indigenous women and people giving birth were venerated as life-givers in their duty as carers for future generations and their Nations.¹

However, since the implementation of the Indian Act, which was first introduced in 1876, Indigenous peoples have been forced to assimilate and adhere to government policies. These policies consisted of the banning of all traditional ceremonies, including Indigenous birthing ceremonies and traditional teachings related to pregnancy and birth.² “The *Indian Act* in Canada, in this respect, is much more than a body of laws, and has for over a century have controlled every aspect of Indigenous life.”³ Having lost these teachings, many new and expectant mothers have suffered from a loss of identity, language, and culture. Many Indigenous communities were forced to move their traditions underground. To practice their sacred ceremonies, they often had to travel for

¹ Caroline Fidan Doenmez et al., “Heart Work: Indigenous Doula Responding to Challenges of Western Systems and Revitalizing Indigenous Birthing Care in Canada,” *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth* 22, article no. 41 (January 16, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12884-021-04333-z>.

² Bob Joseph, “21 Things You May Not Have Known about the Indian Act,” Indigenous Corporate Training Inc., June 29, 2023, <https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/21-things-you-may-not-have-known-about-the-indian-act>.

³ “The Indian Act,” indigenousfoundations, https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/the_indian_act/.

many kilometers into the forests – away from Indian agents and the government – to keep their ceremonies alive.

Residential schools were a large part of the history of colonization and the assimilation of Indigenous peoples of Canada. Implementing residential schools involved removing Indigenous children from their homes, families, communities, and depriving them of their culture.⁴ “The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) concluded that residential schools were “a systematic, government-sponsored attempt to destroy Aboriginal cultures and languages and to assimilate Aboriginal peoples so that they no longer existed as distinct peoples.” The TRC characterized this intent as “cultural genocide.”⁵

Mothers were often hit the hardest. Families were forced to try to hide their children, and mothers forced to hide their pregnancies for fear that government agents would forcibly take children from their homes, never to be seen again. In 2021, Lt-Gen. Steven Whelan announced, “It is with sadness that our nation was made aware of the shameful and tragic discovery of the 215 Indigenous children buried at a Canadian Residential School in Kamloops, British Columbia.”⁶ To date, 2,218 unmarked graves have been found at various residential schools across Canada and the remains of Indigenous children continue to be uncovered.⁷

⁴ Bob Joseph, “Why Continuity of Indigenous Cultural Identity Is Critical,” Indigenous Corporate Training Inc., June 6, 2023, <https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/why-is-indigenous-cultural-continuity-critical>.

⁵ “Residential School History,” NCTR, October 26, 2021, <https://nctr.ca/education/teaching-resources/residential-school-history/>.

⁶ National Defence, “Government of Canada,” Canada.ca, June 1, 2021, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/maple-leaf/defence/2021/06/mourning-canadas-215-indigenous-children.html>.

⁷ Indigenous Watchdog, “Missing Children and Burial Information (71-76),” Indigenous Watchdog, n.d. <https://www.indigenouswatchdog.org/subcategory/missing-children-and-burial-information/>.

Such cultural assimilation practices caused severe harm to all Indigenous peoples, families, communities, and future generations. With all the changes brought on by these policies, many mothers did not receive the medical attention desperately needed, and infant mortality rates steadily climbed. Presently, Indigenous mortality rates are twice as high compared with other Canadians.⁸ Canadians overall experience exceptional maternal health services, with a “maternal mortality rate of 7.8 per 100,000 live births between 2008 and 2010.”⁹ Unfortunately, Indigenous women and non-Indigenous women do not experience the same standard of care or share the same glowing maternal health markers. For example, “Indigenous women in Canada have a two times higher risk of maternal mortality in comparison to the general Canadian population. Indigenous women also experience higher rates of adverse outcomes including stillbirth and perinatal death, and, in some cases, low-birth-weight infants, prematurity and infant death.”¹⁰

As stated by Jaime Cidro et al., “The role of Indigenous doulas is transforming how Indigenous women understand the power of their own bodies, their connection to culture and kinship networks, and the political space they occupy cannot be understated.”¹¹ The Prenatal Doula program at Mispawistik Cree Nation (MCN) employs

⁸ Amanda J. Sheppard et al., “Birth Outcomes among First Nations, Inuit and Métis Populations,” Statistics Canada, Catalogue No. 82-003-X, *Health Reports* 28, no. 11 (November 2017): 11–16, ISSN 1209-1367.

⁹ Sangita Sharma et al., “Canadian Indigenous Womens Perspectives of Maternal Health and Health Care Services: A Systematic Review,” *Diversity & Equality in Health and Care* 13, no. 5 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.21767/2049-5471.100073>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Jaime Cidro et al., “Being a Good Relative: Indigenous Doulas Reclaiming Cultural Knowledge to Improve Health and Birth Outcomes in Manitoba,” *Frontiers in Women’s Health* 3 (October 31, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.15761/fwh.1000157>.

trained Indigenous birth helpers to advocate for, empower, and support Indigenous mothers/parents as part of their crucial role.¹²

Indigenous doulas are tasked with responding to complex community needs, which frequently include the need for trauma-informed care and harm reduction. They troubleshoot Western systems, including advocating against systemic racism and sexism, making them invaluable hospital aids. Having an Indigenous birth helper during labour while in medical settings helps create a space of comfort, connection, and trust. Unfortunately, community-based Indigenous doula services also face challenges outside their job descriptions, such as obtaining sustainable funding for their work or fighting for a living wage.¹³ Overmedicalization of Indigenous birthing by Western medicine results in loss of the spiritual aspect of birth. Western hospital practices often only address the physical aspect of health, at the expense of the emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects of birth, which are essential to Indigenous health practices. Colonisation and maternal health disparities for Indigenous women in Canada are interwoven and have a significant impact on socioeconomic status and health outcomes.¹⁴

2. RESEARCH METHODS

Indigenous research methods are different from many traditional academic research methods because they emphasise being in community, and the importance of storytelling, personal reflection, and work on building trust between all involved in the

¹² “Annual Report 2019-20,” FNHSSM, 2020, https://www.fnhssm.com/_files/ugd/38252a_833d274892bb446ca53085e2f0e403e4.pdf?index=true.

¹³ Jaime Cidro, Ashley Hayward, and Larissa Wodtke, “Position Paper: Indigenous Doulas as Intervention for Violence against Indigenous Women and Girls,” ohchr, January 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/cidro-hayward.pdf>.

¹⁴ Ashley Hayward and Jamie Cidro, “Indigenous Birth as Ceremony and a Human Right,” *Health Hum Rights* 23, no. 1 (June 2021): 213–24, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8233033/>.

research. Practices are passed on orally and through journals, books, and articles. Indigenous Research Method approaches are more personal and help the researcher build a deep connection to the people, places, and history they are researching. This is a process that prioritizes the belonging of all parties involved. Attending ceremonies, meeting with program doulas, and other MCN staff, speaking with Elders, engaging in the community, engaging with new and expectant mothers in the program, as well as reading journal entries, and reviewing literature, were all essential to my research.

Throughout the fellowship, I was fortunate enough to spend a total of two weeks in Misipawistik Cree Nation. Alongside MCN Health Authority Prenatal Program's birth helpers, I was able to plan and prepare three events for expectant mothers. During this time, I was able to see how such programs impact and benefit Indigenous communities. Time spent in MCN will be expanded on in a later section titled 'The Personal: As Guiding'. I am thankful to Misipawistik Cree Nation, Elders, Knowledge Keepers and community members of the kiwētotētān working group for the time, stories and resources they provided.¹⁵ In addition to spending time in community, I got to know people in a meaningful way and informed my own observations through Indigenous research methods.

3. LIMITATIONS

There were a number of limitations I encountered throughout this research. The first of these limitations was physical distance, which limited the time I was able to spend in MCN, and therefore the frequency of my interactions with community members. Although I am from Misipawistik Cree Nation, I currently live nearly five hours

¹⁵ I am especially thankful to the MCN Health Authority Prenatal Doula Program, and MCN Lands Department.

away. Spending time in the community near Elders, the program directors, birth helpers, and families to build relationships and gain understanding, was one of the most important aspects of this project. Another limitation to this research project included limited data. The few doula programs that are being piloted in Canada are all quite new, and there is minimal statistical data to analyze and compare. As of 2020, there were five Indigenous doula collectives, and the major theme persistent throughout all of them was the need for sustainable funding.¹⁶

4. KEY FINDINGS

Since the signing of Treaty 5 in 1875 between First Nations in Northern Manitoba and the Government of Canada, Misipawistik Cree Nation (MCN) has lost much of their identity, language, and nationhood due to the denial of their culture, land, language, and way of life. As such, with the help of their Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and alongside their elected Chief and council, Misipawistik Cree Nation are working tirelessly to restore their territorial jurisdiction, reclaim their culture, and create a more vibrant, connected community.¹⁷

MCN Health Authority's Prenatal Doula program is helping to lead this reclamation process by reconnecting generations of mothers, non-binary, two spirited people, parents, fathers, babies, and children to the land, to spirit and to one another. Ininiw kiskinomakēwin (*Cree education*) is a lifelong holistic journey which focuses on the spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical aspects of growth and learning. By attending the events and ceremonies held by the Prenatal Doula Program in MCN, I

¹⁶ Larissa Wodtke et al., "The Need for Sustainable Funding for Indigenous Doula Services in Canada," *Women's Health* 18 (2022): 174550572210939, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17455057221093928>.

¹⁷ <https://misipawistik.com/>

was able to experience the impact that traditional programming can have on building strength, connection, and belonging in a community. In the coming sub-sections, I will explore the importance of traditional teachings, the importance of land and language, and address the need for reclamation of birth as ceremony.

4.1 Teachings

One of the most crucial roles of the doula is to reconnect mothers and parents to traditional teachings. The doulas share the community's original teachings and ceremony around child development, from conception through the first year of life. Ceremonies and teachings include, but are not limited to, discussions around cradleboard teachings, child rearing, breastfeeding support, belly button and placenta burial ceremonies, introductions to Sundance ceremonies and traditional parenting. Their goal is to reconnect the next generation of children of parents to their culture, language, and identity. These ceremonies are passed down from Elders to the doula coordinators during events held by the Prenatal Doula program and through events held by the community. During my time at Misipawistik Cree Nation (my home nation), I was able to see first hand how reconnecting helps women engage with the land in a spiritual, physical, and social sense.¹⁸

After participating in ceremonies on our traditional land, I was able to see how mothers and families truly glowed, their whole aura vibrant and healthy. In discussion with other participants, I found people felt enlightened and whole. Witnessing the program participants and the birth doulas come together and care for one another was

¹⁸ Matthew Wildcat, "Learning from the Land: Indigenous Land-Based Pedagogy and Decolonization," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3, no. 3 (2014), <https://doi.org/https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/22248/18062>.

beautiful. The trust between the birth helpers and expectant mothers in the program was exemplified in the way they spoke and shared with one another. Whether being in a safe space such as a sharing circle, or in an informal place such as a community hall, the comfort and joy brought out of the women by the doulas was exemplified through their laughter, deep talks, and complete honesty.

By being more involved in the community and connected to ceremonies, new and expectant mothers feel more supported and cared for.¹⁹ This enables and empowers these mothers and their families to develop positive relationships and cherish their identities.²⁰ Having a community-based doula provides Indigenous mothers and families with a safe, nurturing support system during pregnancy, into postpartum and early parenthood. Often called 'Indigenous Helpers,' doulas support mothers seeking traditional teachings related to each stage of life, from *oskawasis* (the first year of life) to *oskapew-oskayiskwew* (early adulthood).²¹ Cree Elders and Knowledge Keepers help define and implement *oskawasis* teachings to the new and expectant mothers in the Prenatal Doula program. This is achieved by attending and supporting camps, prenatal days, cultural events, and traditional ceremonies. Traditional knowledge is passed on by oral storytelling during ceremony or sharing circles.

The belly button and placenta ceremony is a valued traditional ceremony held by mothers and families during the first year of life. Elders lead families in a ceremony of prayer, offerings, and burial of the placenta or belly button, back into Mother Earth. By participating in this ceremony, children are 'planted' in their community. This, in turn,

¹⁹ "Annual Report 2019-20." FNHSSM, 2020.

https://www.fnhssm.com/_files/ugd/38252a_833d274892bb446ca53085e2f0e403e4.pdf?index=true.

²⁰ "Other Research & Projects," FNHSSM, 2023, <https://www.fnhssm.com/copy-of-copy-page-new-4>.

²¹ Jaime Cidro et al., "Putting Them on a Strong Spiritual Path: Indigenous Doulas Responding to the Needs of Indigenous Mothers and Communities," *International Journal for Equity in Health* 20, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-021-01521-3>.

gives them a rooted connection to Mother Earth and their home communities. As many children are no longer born on their traditional lands, ceremonies such as placenta and belly button burial are crucial in reconnecting our children to their home. Sharing circles are held by Elders to provide a safe place for mothers and families to feel supported.

Support carries a different meaning for all. To some, it may include mental support, such as releasing heavy feelings in a private sharing circle. To others, it may be spiritual support in reconnecting to their home community and identities. Many cultural traditions are closed practices, meaning their details are shared only amongst community members, however a core element of all traditions is the presence of Elders and Knowledge Keepers.

4.2 Land and Language

A crucial component of Indigenous pedagogies, lifeways, knowledge generation, and knowledge transmission, has been and continues to be, land-based education. Indigenous peoples' systems of knowing and interacting with the environment were damaged and disrupted by their expulsion from their lands and traditions. This disruption from land-based communities and knowledge is one of the main reasons Indigenous people have poor health indicators and outcomes.²² Indigenous peoples' reconnection to the earth can therefore revitalise their knowledge systems and methods of knowing and being, which many believe benefits the physical and spiritual health of Indigenous peoples.²³ Being on the land, and establishing healthy relationships with one another and the land, are key to wellness in Indigenous communities, and they are both

²² Mande McDonald, ed. Hayden King, *A Yellowhead Institute Special Report: Indigenous Land-Based Education in Theory and Practice* (Yellowhead Institute, 2023).

²³ "Learning from the Land." CASS, n.d. <https://cass.ab.ca/indigenous-education/learning-from-the-land/>.

a significant part of Indigenous education. Being on the land adds a value to these new and expectant mothers' lives as it leads to the development of a deep sense of connection and belonging to their home communities. Integrating traditional Cree teachings into these ceremonies will assist in keeping Cree culture alive for future generations. Teaching younger generations who come up through the doula program helps reaffirm identity.²⁴

4.3 Indigenous Birth: Ceremony, Strength and Belonging

Indigenous birth ceremonies ensure that new mothers and expectant parents start their new journey in a calming, centering, and sacred way. Indigenous peoples from all nations incorporate some type of ritual and ceremony into labour and birth. Smudging, drumming, singing, and bathing are some of the rituals that can be part of labour and birth.²⁵

There are numerous barriers preventing the reclamation of birth as a ceremony. The authors of 'The Detrimental Effects of Obstetric Evacuation on Aboriginal Women's Health' state, "the lack of social support that women experience because of obstetric evacuation is related to separation from their families and communities, as well as a lack of support from medical professionals during labour and delivery."²⁶ This statement addresses feelings associated with urban medical spaces, labour evacuation, and mistreatment received during birth. Mothers tend to feel lost when they are released

²⁴ UCN, "Article 6 - The Importance of Indigenous Language," University College of the North, April 27 2022, <https://ucn.ca/2022/04/article-6-the-importance-of-indigenous-language/#:~:text=Our%20Cree%20language%20makes%20our,ancestors%2C%20past%2C%20and%20traditions>

²⁵ Karen Lawford, *Stories and Teachings About Birth* (National Aboriginal Council of Midwives, 2017).

²⁶ Ann Marie Corrado, "The Detrimental Effects of Obstetric Evacuation on Aboriginal Women's Health," *University of Western Ontario Medical Journal* 86, no. 2 (2017): 28–29, <https://doi.org/10.5206/uwomj.v86i2.2000>.

from urban hospitals to return to their communities. They often feel disconnected, without direction and unsure where to go for help.²⁷ Indigenous infant mortality rates are over double that of non-Indigenous infants.²⁸ This is due in part to the racism and neglect the mothers face when they are brought to these facilities.²⁹ Indigenous women need better “access to prenatal care, local birthing opportunities, and postpartum support” this would help improve the wellbeing of our communities³⁰.

Birth will always be considered a sacred event in Indigenous cultures. Newborns are meant to enter the world, immediately welcomed with celebration and awe. It is meant to be a transformative time for the new mother, growing family and community as a whole.³¹ Recognising the significance of birthplace and appreciating the sacredness of birth is vital to the process of reconciliation and upholding Indigenous rights.³² Birth ceremonies are aimed at helping children enter the world in a meaningful way by reaffirming their cultural identity and enabling the community to care for the child.³³ This would create a positive impact on communities, mothers, families, and ultimately the children being born, who hold the future.

4.4 A Strong Spiritual Path

Indigenous doulas offer spiritual, mental, and physical support to expectant mothers and families. Indigenous doulas differ from western models as they value the

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Amanda J. Sheppard et al., “Birth Outcomes among First Nations, Inuit and Métis Populations.”

²⁹ Perinatal Services BC, *Honouring Indigenous Women’s and Families’ Pregnancy Journeys: A Practice Resource to Support Improved Perinatal Care Created by Aunties, Mothers, Grandmothers, Sisters, and Daughters* (Vancouver, BC: Perinatal Services BC, 2021).

³⁰ Amanda J. Sheppard et al., “Birth Outcomes among First Nations, Inuit and Métis Populations.”

³¹ National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health, *The Sacred Space of Womanhood: Mothering Across the Generations* (NCCAHA, 2012).

³² Perinatal Services BC, *Honouring Indigenous Women’s and Families’ Pregnancy Journeys: A Practice Resource to Support Improved Perinatal Care Created by Aunties, Mothers, Grandmothers, Sisters, and Daughters*.

³³ Ashley Hayward and Jamie Cidro, “Indigenous Birth as Ceremony and a Human Right.”

spiritual aspect of pregnancy and birth. There are also many socioeconomic conflicts in small communities which may affect some mothers heavily. Indigenous doulas offer guidance and can help women find the resources they may need. Therefore, It is crucial for Indigenous doulas to be trained in harm reduction and trauma-informed care, as it helps clients or program participants navigate the many barriers at hand. It is also necessary that Indigenous doulas assist in supporting cultural aspects and traditional values of birth and raising a family.³⁴ Creating spaces and holding events that enable the mothers to feel heard and valued, builds confidence and sets the tone for healthy relationships with others in community and within oneself. Building relationships with participants and expectant parents, providing advocacy and support is the core of their work. In turn, Indigenous doulas are able to provide mothers and communities with unconditional care, unconditional support, and assist in putting them on a strong spiritual path during pregnancy, birthing, and the post-partum period of parenthood.

4.5 The Personal as Guiding

The core of my research was built upon being in community and witnessing the impact of Indigenous birth practices coming back to community. As a member of Misipawistik Cree Nation, identifying as an Indigenous mother, and birth helper, this project was very personal. I attended the four day long Doula camp, and was deeply impacted by all the love and trust shown between the doulas and the program participants. Seeing the community come together as one was very touching. In addition, the program coordinators allowed my participation in programming,

³⁴ Jaime Cidro et al., “Putting Them on a Strong Spiritual Path: Indigenous Doulas Responding to the Needs of Indigenous Mothers and Communities,” *International Journal for Equity in Health* 20, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-021-01521-3>.

ceremonies, and planned events. Participating in traditional ceremonies, such as the belly button and placenta burial brought my children, and myself closer to our home community. The ceremony rooted my children to the land, instilling in them a deep sense of pride in where we come from. Cedar baths and reiki sessions held by Elders were also very transformative and made me reflect on my own past traumas, resiliencies, and brought me closer to myself. After all this time spent in my community, I feel more connected to who I am as a person, and where I come from. The sense of belonging I have gained since the start of the fellowship is indescribable. I am forever humbled and grateful; in many ways, I was personally able to experience the impact that traditional programming can help build in communities.

During one of my stays, I was able to assist in the planning, preparation, and hosting of a Mommy Shower for expectant mothers of the program. In preparation, we planned games to play, such as 'Mommy Charades'. We also prepared 20 gift bags for the program participants, which included snacks, cups, socks, and lotion to make the women feel special and valued. In addition to the planning, we spent close to eight hours shopping and preparing a meatball dinner. We rolled meatballs by hand, made homemade bread, fried rice, lemon meringue pie, and a large cooked ham. Though it was a small turnout of four women, the doulas chose to deliver meals to the many participants unable to attend. In doing so, I was able to see the dedication and deep care shown by the doulas.

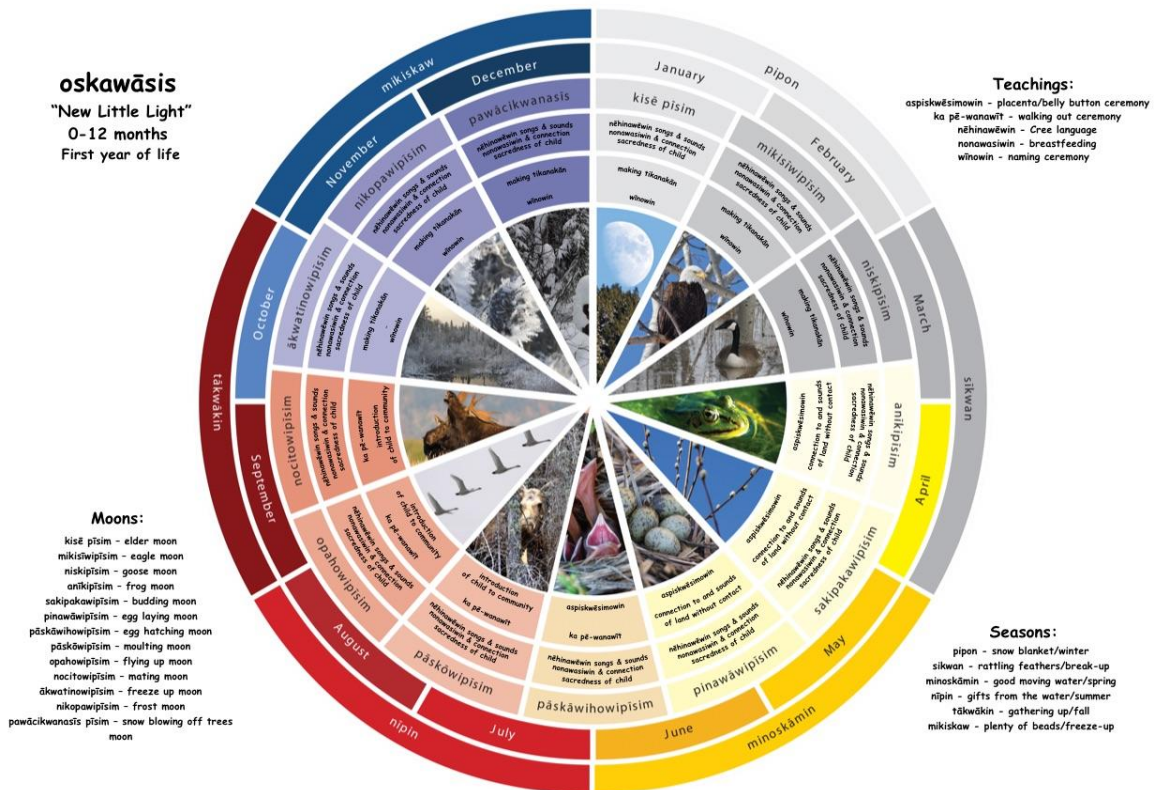
Alongside the doulas, we also hosted a cake decorating class for mothers and children in the program. It was wonderful to see the twenty participants feel and be so connected to one another. During the cake decorating class, I listened to women tell

stories, visit one another, and contagiously laugh. Witnessing this process of kinship and community made me think of how much connection and joy the program brings to its participants.

Through this Fellowship, I was able to reconnect with my home community in a new way. While summer is a busy time for MCN, with ceremonies and programming, the time I was able to spend there was life-changing and reaffirming. Spending time together was tremendously personal to me and I have built relationships I hope will continue well into the future.

5. CREATIVE OUTPUT

My final creative output for this project is a calendar wheel of *oskawāsis* (first year), traditional Cree teachings for Misipawistik Cree Nation's Health Authority Doula Program. The purpose and significance of my final output is providing a calendar of



teachings for the MCN Health Authority Prenatal Doula program, built off teachings and context shared by community knowledge keepers, Elders, and community members, reflecting all shared resources from the *kiwētōtētān* working group members.

6. IMPACT + ASSESSMENT

6.1 Assessment: Importance of Program

The Doula program is integral to the process of reviving *ininiw kiskinomākewin* (Cree Education) protocols, such as birth being regarded as ceremony. It keeps the growing community connected with each other, the land, the Elders, and allows the same connections to bloom for new children being born into Indigenous communities of Canada. The Doula program, through teachings, ceremony, advocacy and community support make way for future generations to find themselves, and stay rooted to their land, culture, and identity. In reclaiming traditional practices and ways of knowing, we are continuing to heal generational trauma and undo harm caused by settler colonialism, systemic racism, and the westernization of medicine.

With many cultural practices and traditions having been taken from Indigenous peoples, it is now essential to revive them. This is being done in communities such as Misipawistik Cree Nation, by community leaders, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and community members who hold the teachings and continue to share their experience, strength, hope, and knowledge with the youth and community members willing to learn. During my time spent with community, the program leaders, and participants, it was easy to see that this kind of change begins with practicing or participating in, learning and listening to, traditional teachings and the language.

Positive change is possible with the implementation of more programs such as MCN's Prenatal Doula Program. In the future, I hope to see all Indigenous people have access to an Indigenous birth helper, and the option to give birth safely in their home communities. Many parents and mothers who have turned to Indigenous doulas and birth helpers for support gain lifelong relationships. Programs and initiatives like the MCN Prenatal Doula Program are changing the trajectory of families lives by ensuring new expectant mothers, parents, and families are not alone, nor isolated in their communities. Through their time, commitment, and genuine care, they help build belonging and a sense of connection to mothers and parents. In turn, mothers are able to break through personal barriers, continue their journeys of raising healthy children, and become positive role models in their homes and community.

6.2 Assessment: Birth as Ceremony and Reclamation

Birth was once viewed as “the first ceremony,” where children were born, and welcomed into their families and communities.³⁵ The environment was filled with love and language, which led to knowing of who we – Indigenous peoples – were and are, and the knowing of where we come from.

Early colonialism impacted the way Indigenous people receive medical care.³⁶ The Westernization of medicine changed the way birth was once viewed, and affected the traditional ways Indigenous children were once welcomed into their new journey of

³⁵ Laura Beaulne-Stuebing, “These Indigenous Women Are Bringing ‘the First Ceremony’ - Birth - Back to Their Communities,” CBCnews, December 18, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/unreserved/indigenous-birthing-practices-1.6687501>.

³⁶ Marla Monague, “Bringing Birth Home: Restoring Indigenous Midwifery,” Association of Ontario Midwives, 2019, <https://www.ontariomidwives.ca/bringing-birth-home-restoring-indigenous-midwifery>.

life.³⁷ Reclaiming the power behind birth as a ceremony is essential, as it is the foundation for Indigenous mothers, families, expectant parents, and children to truly begin to know themselves, their culture, traditional teachings, build true connections, take pride in their community, and develop a holistic sense of belonging. As Kim Samuel states in her book 'On Belonging,' "Every person, by simple virtue of the fact that they are born, has the right to belong. It's a framework for enshrining the deep value of our human connection to people, to place, to power, and to purpose."³⁸

7. CONCLUSION

Birth helpers are becoming more prevalent across Canadian Indigenous communities, both urban, rural and remote. They are partially a resurgence of Indigenous cultural knowledge, but also a reflection of the resistance of long held medical practices that have served to disenfranchise traditional approaches to pregnancy and childbirth.³⁹ With initiatives like MCN Health Authority's Prenatal Doula Program being implemented, newer generations, and future generations are gifted with traditional knowledge and teachings passed on by community Elders. Younger generations coming up through the Doula program, and re-connecting parents⁴⁰, all benefit from teaching space. The importance of Indigenous birth helpers, reviving birth

³⁷ Colleen Varcoe et al., "Help Bring Back the Celebration of Life: A Community-Based Participatory Study of Rural Aboriginal Women's Maternity Experiences and Outcomes," *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth* 13, article no. 26 (January 29, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2393-13-26>.

³⁸ Kim Samuel, "The Right to Belong," chapter in *On Belonging: Finding Connection in an Age of Isolation* (New York: Harry N Abrams, 2022), p.197.

³⁹ Jaime Cidro et al., "Putting Them on a Strong Spiritual Path: Indigenous Doulas Responding to the Needs of Indigenous Mothers and Communities," *International Journal for Equity in Health* 20, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-021-01521-3>.

⁴⁰ This term refers to someone of Indigenous ancestry, who may be disconnected from their community, culture or traditions, however, they are engaging in the process of re-connecting to their community and ancestry.

as ceremony, and implementing traditional teachings into early stages of life is vital to the healing and reconciliation of Indigenous peoples of Canada.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge and thank the community of Misipawistik Cree Nation, MCN Lands Department, MCN Health Authority, MCN Health Authority Doula program, and kiwētōtētān working group members. Thank you to Becky Cook, Valentina Mckay, Rhonda Cook, and Jennifer Richardson for all your support, your commitment, dedication, and work shown, to not only myself, but the entire community of Misipawistik Cree Nation. Seeing how hard all of those involved in MCN Health Authority Prenatal Doula Program, MCN Lands Department, and Misipawistik Cree Nation's Health Authority work is very inspiring, and in turn, inspires me to stay connected and become more involved in my community.

Lastly, I want to express endless gratitude to the Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness for providing me with this opportunity. It has given me a deep connection, a new sense of belonging, and roots to my community. It has been an experience I will never forget.

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