

An Anishinaabe Perspective on Children's Language Learning to Inform "Seeing the Aboriginal Child"

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Abstract

This paper critically examines attitudes and professional practices based on Western-European epistemologies that perpetuate the socio-cultural mismatch between many Aboriginal children's home and school. In the spirit of the Calls to Action by Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, an Anishinaabe¹ collaborator on the NOW Play interdisciplinary collaborative research project advocates for social responsibility and cultural competency in research and educational praxis within the context of the early learning and child care environments of Aboriginal² children. Culturally sensitive approaches for "seeing the Aboriginal child" are illustrated for moving forward in supportive relationships to promote research and learning in early learning and child care settings. This paper underscores and illustrates the first priority for researchers and educators: to take the time in research and pedagogical encounters to really "see" the Aboriginal child through appreciation of the sociocultural, philosophical, and linguistic distinctiveness of Aboriginal families.

Discovery of new knowledge in novel contexts and refinement of understandings with new insights, once consolidated are foundational to knowledge mobilization strategies that include professional development training. A generative process uncovers more effective strategies that honour Indigeneity³ and meet Aboriginal children's learning needs.

Introduction to the Context

This paper arises from my role as a collaborator on the interdisciplinary team of NOW Play project researchers and draws on my expertise in Aboriginal education, language and literacy development in early learning and childcare contexts and the field of speech-language pathology. The NOW Play research project aims to bring an interdisciplinary collaboration of university-based researchers and expert educators together with community-based early learning educators and child care practitioners,

¹ The term Anishinaabe refers Anishinaabemowin-speaking people and the group includes the Algonquin, Chippewa, Delaware, Mississauga, Odawa, and Ojibway and Potawatomi people of the Great Lakes Region.

² The term Aboriginal is commonly used in Canada and is used in this paper to refer specifically to the Indigenous people in Canada (Helin, 2006). "Aboriginal" is the term used in the Canadian Constitution to refer to Indian, Inuit and Metis".

³ According to the International Labour Organization of the United Nations, the concept of indigeneity refers to: *tribal peoples whose social, cultural and economic conditions distinguish them from other sections of the national community and whose status is regulated wholly or partially by their own customs or traditions or by special laws or regulations, and to peoples who are regarded as Indigenous on account of their descent from the populations which inhabit the country at the time of conquest or colonisation.* (Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169). Article. 1.

parents and other caregivers of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children (Northern Oral Language and Writing Through Play, website). Critical discourse ensures the integrity of research and mobilization of locally-developed contextualized practices across theories of language and literacy development, assessment, and professional learning in this project. A collaborative, relationship-based process integrating Aboriginal cultural knowledge and ways of learning is foundational to the project long-term goal of developing a family literacy model tailored to the needs of educators and parents/caregivers in northern communities.

As a NOW Play project community collaborator I strive to inform a process of disrupting the status quo of Western-based research and educational approaches and bring forward the need to change the way we “do” education and school-based interventions and research. This paper will identify complex issues to consider within a wide context of home-school-community and will illustrate reflexivity to inform praxis, overcoming cultural bias and developing culturally safe practices.

Educators and researchers face challenges in collaborative relationships with Aboriginal communities due to epistemological differences and professional attitudes that stem from historical subjugation of Indigenous knowledge. Most educators and investigators are unaware of the sociolinguistic practices and cultural background of the Indigenous community and language and learning assessments do not take into account the cultural and ideological differences (Ball, Bernhardt, & Deby, 2006; Ball & Lewis, 2005; Jonk & Enns, 2009). Development of our professional cultural competency allows us to have a glimpse into what it means to experience learning and assessment from the perspective of an Indigenous consciousness.

This paper presents case narratives to illustrate how an Indigenous learning paradigm can be honoured and how to develop orality consciousness within an Aboriginal context. I describe an Aboriginal pedagogy developed from my research in an elementary school that is inclusive of thinking, intuitive reflecting, experiencing and doing, relating and feeling (Peltier, 2016). This model is shared to inform the NOW Play research project process of creating a wholistic⁴ family literacy model. A wholistic learning experience for the Aboriginal child is especially relevant as it honours Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing. The Aboriginal pedagogy is beneficial to all learners by stimulating a learning paradigm inclusive of ongoing meaning-making and learning, student belonging in the classroom community, and reinforcement of identity and value as a learner. A context that stimulates all aspects of the learner and emerges from being in-relationship with early learning educators and staff, Aboriginal children and families will fuel creative processes for multi-literacy cultural connections, play-, narrative-, and inquiry-based learning processes.

Developing the role of allies in Aboriginal education and early language and literacy development is foundational to an ethical research relationship that places the vision of the Aboriginal community in the center. “Seeing the Aboriginal child” requires non-Aboriginal educators and researchers to work from an observational and listening stance that informs a contextualized inquiry in research in the NOW Play project.

⁴ The ‘w’ at the beginning of this word places emphasis on balance in the circular, inter-relational aspect of an Indigenous paradigm. The term is used here to invite a critical response to the term “holistic” associated with a Western-European Christian ideology (“holy”) and the violence of the colonial project which have inflicted harm and caused myriad spaces of emptiness (“holes”) within Indigeneity.

FitzMaurice (2010) illustrates his challenging role as a non-Aboriginal researcher and ally and states that “meaningful alliances . . . require a voluntary giving up of advantage as a coming together on the Other’s terms. . . . Attempting Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal alliances . . . requires a full consideration of the intersecting manifestations of power, race, and colonization” (p. 353). Battiste and Henderson (2000) and Battiste (2008) discuss protective factors for Indigenous knowledge and ethical approaches in culture-based research.

Background

Addressing bias – Western literacy and Indigenous orality

Western literacy and Indigenous oral traditions are situated within two different types of knowledge or epistemological frameworks and modes of discourse and oral traditions have been misrepresented. Indigenous scholars, hermeneutic researchers and postcolonial theorists have examined historical contexts, cultural differences and educational implications of Western literacy and Indigenous orality traditions. In classical Greece, conceptions of Western literacy arose from Plato’s theory that only rationality founded on logic and cognition are the method and goal of education. The Western tradition created “a Cartesian dualistic notion of a print/oral split whereby the value of textual necessity was prized over oral and experiential knowing” (Kulnieks, Longboat, & Young, 2010, p. 22). When a binary opposition of Western literacy versus Indigenous orality is perceived, Aboriginal cultures are defined as oral traditions and the discourse follows that they are non-literate societies. Chamberlin (2000) explores how the English word holds social and political power while the Indigenous orality of traditional Aboriginal cultures affects how knowledge is imparted to Aboriginal students in a way that does not conform to Western logic. A CBC interview of anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner explains that “a different tradition leaves us tongueless and earless towards this other world of meaning and significance” and fuels marginalization (as cited in Chamberlin, 2000, p. 136).

Dichotomous thinking regarding Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples interferes with respectful relationships and solutions to educational, social, and political inequities. Kulnieks, Longboat, and Young (2010) distinguish Western and Aboriginal ways of knowing about the world in terms of world views, consciousness, and modes of discourse rather than in terms of a Western-literate/Aboriginal non-literate dichotomy. Chamberlin (2000) applies postcolonial theory to acknowledge contradictions in our dichotomous thinking and talking about language. The author (p. 138) describes the Aboriginal context, pointing out that “every culture has eyes and ears” and forms of writing with meaningful signs and symbols are just as important as the stories and songs. “Every culture not only sees things, but also *reads* them” and “every culture not only hears but also listens to things”.

Indigenous ways of coming to know and Indigenous knowledge have been marginalized in the formal Western-European-based educational system and when oral language is considered as a teaching method, it has historically been the literate Western tradition that is implemented. Piquemal (2003) illustrates the dichotomy between native North American oral traditions and Western literacy and implications for narratives in educational practices. “Orality tends to reveal a world in terms of action, process and becoming,” whereas “literacy is directional and focussed, allowing the viewer to select and dissect from the field of visual experience [textual representations]” (Frey, 1995, as cited

in Piquemal, 2003, p. 115). Piquemal discusses the differences between orality and literacy in how narratives are read, heard, and understood in that Western literacy consciousness usually requires an analysis and deconstruction of texts, whereas orality consciousness implies that meanings arise from the story as a whole in a holistic context.

In spite of new theoretical approaches and political will to enter into new relationships towards educational transformation, orality consciousness remains to be less important than literary consciousness in the schools and the oral tradition of Aboriginal learners is ignored. Literacy has become the hallmark of Western societies and the privileging of written language in schools has created overpowering positions of the literate Western tradition in schools (Piquemal, 2003). Orality and literacy are different in how stories are read, heard, and understood (Cajete, 1994; Piquemal, 2003). “Most schools pay attention only to Western forms of storytelling and ignore Native oral traditions of storytelling” (Piquemal, 2013, p. 119) that relate to Aboriginal culture, identity, and socialization. Archibald (1990) discusses the problem in education where Aboriginal people find it difficult to find a suitable bridge between orality and literacy and the author advocates for recognizing “First nations orality . . . as having intellectual as well as social benefits to learners” (p. 78). Kulnieks, Longboat, and Young (2010) discuss the hermeneutic reading event for meaning making and explains that within an oral culture the storyteller integrates and synthesizes meaning from dynamic interaction and unification of mind with the lesson of place. Such a landscape and storytelling dynamic has generative qualities pertinent to current literary traditions and curricula.

Creating space for the oral tradition and Indigenous ways of knowing

Indigenous scholars acknowledge the power of attitudes, beliefs and values within society to transform educational space and identify Indigenous thought and ways of being that are foundational for dialogic inquiry regarding contemporary issues and equity (Battiste, 2010; Dion & Dion, 2004; Simpson, 2004 & 2014). An essential principle of an Aboriginal paradigm is perception of the big picture or seeing all contextual interconnections and this wholism is an essential principle of Aboriginal epistemology. Western ways of knowing are closely tied to viewing the world objectively with scientific and rational thought and logic. Aboriginal ways of knowing focus on the “heart-mind connection” (Gehl, 2012) and an “inner space or incorporeal knowledge paradigm” (Ermine, 1995). Dumont (1976) explains this perception as “a primal way of *seeing*” or “360° vision” that is different from a view of the world “in its tangible form and in a linear fashion . . . [Ojibwa] regard their own personal life and history as the mysterious complement of ordinary and non-ordinary reality . . . expressed as *simultaneous* realities” (p. 78).

Scholars from diverse academic and cultural perspectives have provided information about Indigenous knowledge as a process situated within a context of relationships. A few examples from the body of literature are presented here. Anishinaabe scholar Ray (2012) illustrates that Indigenous knowledges are not like Western knowledges. “Traditional knowledges are not held to the standards and constricted to the boundaries of Western knowledges” (p. 90). Mi’kmaq scholar and educator Battiste (2008) states that “no uniform or universal Indigenous perspective on Indigenous knowledge exists—many do” (p. 501). Indigenous knowledge is an animated process and experience. Cree philosopher Ermine (1995) discusses Indigenous knowledge as an interaction of life

experience, relational collectivity, and inner knowing, for example, “experience is knowledge” (p. 104).

Respect for and acknowledgement of different forms of knowledge and ways of knowing go a long way toward creating relationships in life-long learning and research collaborations that are responsive to the vision of the Indigenous community. The re-telling of traditional stories from Indigenous elders maintains an interconnected body of ancestral knowledge in the classroom. Indigenous knowledge means different things depending on what the listener knows, understands, and experiences and listener interpretation is governed by what they need to focus on. How human relationships with place are understood and experienced ties directly to the relationships that Aboriginal people have with each other. Educational and environmental theorists identify the problem with specific subject areas in school that compartmentalizes education into discrete subject areas and this is a disservice to students when opportunities for understanding the connections between language, location and environment and appreciation of interconnectivity and inter-dependence with the Earth and nature are ignored.

Cultural competency and cultural safety

Universities and training programs do not adequately address cultural bias and the development of culturally safe practices within the Indigenous learning context. Teachers’ and professionals’ epistemologies are Western literacy-based and focus on abilities to write and represent information in specific ways. Academic disciplines represent very compartmentalized knowledge into specialties while Aboriginal people perceive a wide ranging and wholistic knowledge base (Kulnieks, Longboat, & Young, 2010). Mainstream approaches to educational assessment often focus on the learning deficits of Aboriginal people and ignore positive outcomes (Cappon, 2008, p. 61). Rather than seeing the Aboriginal child as “at risk” and in need of educational and specialized child development approaches and responding by enacting our Western-based teaching and consultative roles of evaluation, assessment, and intervention, we can support the child’s autonomy as a learner by appreciating cultural differences and by striving to acquire cultural competence. Ball (2008) investigated the practise of speech language pathologists and their training needs and illustrated a process model to approach cultural safety in practice. Practitioners’ engagement in observing, listening, interacting and reflecting leads to understanding interactions among members within the cultural community on their own terms. Respecting the child’s cultural identity and way of being without challenge or harm means that the teacher or practitioner’s interactions promote cultural safety.

Professional engagement in a process of developing cultural competency honours the Aboriginal child as we value their unique cultural, social, historical and political experience and honour our role as learners in the Aboriginal education context to develop understanding about the wide context of the home-school-community-nation. Learning about and coming to understand the experience of colonization and socio-cultural-linguistic impacts of displacement from the land and intergenerational trauma from residential schools is a personal process that requires commitment and time.

Researcher and educator relationships with Aboriginal people have been shaped by popular historical discourses of stereotypes and racism in Canada. Dion (2013a) is an Aboriginal educator who illustrates “learning in and through relationship” and the process where true, respectful relationship-building creates “valuing of Indigenous peoples” in the

schools. Dion (2013b & 2007) leads teachers to overcome their personal resistance to the transformational process which she describes as “the perfect stranger” phenomenon, a form of racism. She leads teachers to examine the source of biased attitudes and to examine their relationships with Aboriginal peoples and to move forward in developing relationships with Aboriginal students and communities.

Of particular relevance to engagement within the Indigenous research and school context is understanding the relationship of the child, school, and community to develop teaching and assessment strategies. Hart (2007) illustrates a strong focus on people and entities coming together to help and support one another in their relationship within the community. He refers to Weaver (1997) who coined the term “communitism” to describe the “sense of community tied together by familial relations and the families’ commitment to it” (Hart, 2007, p. 32). Aboriginal peoples’ ways of knowing are complex, and understanding the educational and research implications requires turning our attention to see the breadth and depth of issues from the perspective of the child’s community and family.

Today, Aboriginal people are in the process of critical awakening and cultural resurgence and Aboriginal cultural and identity factors are complex. McCaskill, FitzMaurice and Cidro (2011) explain that Aboriginal identity is understood through a complex process pertaining to how one self-identifies (e.g., sense of self, family background, personality, socialization experiences, etc.) as well as how members of the larger society perceive them (e.g., positive or negative stereotypes, media images, effects of residential schools and colonization, etc.). An individual’s identity is about ‘meaning’ and is formed and maintained as a social process of interaction with others. Identities are both individually unique and collectively shared. Sense of cultural identity and supportive relationships are strongly associated with school success of particular relevance for Aboriginal student engagement in school.

Professional and social responsibility are motivating factors as we respond to the Truth and Reconciliation *Calls To Action* synopsis report (Truth and Reconciliation Canada, 2015b) and engage in relationship with Aboriginal peoples toward educational transformation. As Aboriginal people tell their stories, Canadians in general—and educators in particular—are being exposed to the history of Canada concerning the Aboriginal peoples’ experiences of losing Indigenous languages and cultural ways of knowing, doing, and being with family and community (Government of Canada, 2008; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015a, 2015b; United Nations, 2008). Federal and provincial governments support a climate of change, and decolonization processes are advancing in Canadian society and schools. Wholistic healing processes and the reclamation of cultural practices such as the oral tradition and language, and family and community ways of being in relation are called for in light of reconciliation.

Speech-language pathology transformation

Aboriginal students have experienced biased educational practices based on colonial discourses, racialized identities and misunderstood Indigenized English language varieties. Non-Aboriginal researcher, Sterzuk (2011 & 2008) draws on postcolonial and critical race theory to discuss these issues and to make a contribution to radical changes in teacher training and Aboriginal education. Speech-language professionals can be

supportive allies for transformation in their work that can build communicative competence and empowerment. Professional practice guidelines concerning clinicians working with Aboriginal populations in Canada recommend that the speech-language pathologist work in collaboration with people in the community who are proficient in the language or dialect and who are from the same cultural background as the child. Recommendations for effective, culturally and linguistically appropriate services responsive to community values and needs are described (Speech-Language & Audiology Canada [SAC], 2010). It behooves speech and language pathologists engaged with service provision to Aboriginal children to use a lens of viewing the Aboriginal child's presenting profile of speech and language behaviours to identify dialect and socio-linguistic cultural differences versus speech and language impairment and to communicate this to teachers and family members.

It is important to note that the historical subjugation of Indigenous languages and knowledge has also impacted the values of *Aboriginal* teachers, parents, and community members. In most instances, Aboriginal people have not had the opportunity to engage in a formal educational setting with their children that honours Aboriginal identity and ways of learning and interacting. Aboriginal parents and community members have a long history of hurt and distrust regarding formal education. Involving the learner's parents and family in learning assessment and programming can facilitate trust and increase parents' interest to engage with their children at the school. Consequently, cultural integrity will be safeguarded as Indigenous people model the oral tradition and relational, process-based ideology of Indigenous pedagogy and thought within the context of the educational institution. Additionally, as Aboriginal parents and community members participate, their capacity to be acknowledged as knowledgeable and helpful resource people can be realized and celebrated. Transition issues between the home and school/childcare center can be better understood and responded to when the child's family is involved in the child's childcare program or school.

"Seeing" the Indigenous Child through Case Narratives

The following case scenarios are presented here to illustrate how seeing the Aboriginal child relates to culturally responsive research and teaching praxis. Experience and maturity as a speech-language pathologist and educator who engages in critical, reflective practise supports my contribution.

Twenty years ago, my speech-language professional practise experiences, observations, and intuitive processing as an Aboriginal woman, supported my sensitivity to culturally-based communication patterns and relationships to emerge. I worked in a community mental health clinic setting, and one winter, an Anishinaabe father and child visited me for a series of weekly sessions. My work at this setting followed a Western-centered medical model. I first documented deficits and assigned one or two labels to define the child's disability, and this was followed by a written treatment plan with explicit speech and language targets and exact pre-planned language stimulation techniques based on behaviour modification protocols for each session. The two-and-a-half year-old girl had been born with a cleft palate and she arrived at the clinic in a tiny sleigh pulled by her father. This little girl's parents had been navigating the health system to access medical specialists and procedures located in the city five hundred miles away and her dad showed commitment to bring her for speech therapy in their community. I recall abandoning my specific intervention goals and behaviour modification approaches to correct her speech

that I had pre-planned for the session. Instead, I put on my coat and opened the windows along one wall of the therapy room. The three of us observed and talked about the birds and trees and took turns blowing bubbles out of the windows. We happily noted their course of movement in the wind, exclaiming “Pop!” when each met their demise. This girl has grown into a beautiful, personable young woman and when I was recently back in the community and saw her working, I shared this story with her. She laughed and shared a big smile and said that she would ask her dad to remember and share this story about her early life.

A few years later, I was in private practice and worked out of my home. A parent had been contacted by her four-year-old son’s early childhood educator in response to him “failing” the kindergarten screening. It was the Anishinaabe boy’s father who brought him to see me for language programming. I remember highlighting vocabulary and concept learning in a play-based approach. The boy’s dad was over 6 feet tall and he was receptive to getting down on the floor in my small play room with his child. I was familiar with the father’s role in our community as a heavy equipment operator and strategically made available a variety of trucks and vehicles and books and pictures about heavy equipment. I observed that the boy and his father named every type of vehicle and machine, labelled parts in detail, and sorted and grouped the items by function and features! It became clear that this little boy spent much time with his father and knew a lot about working with equipment to dig, push, or pull material and move things. After seeing them a few times and visiting the early learning center, I felt confident that this child was capable and had excellent language-learning supports and relationships in his environment. I did not consider the Western-based speech and language screening results at face value and did not see this young boy as language-deficient. This, I knew, was enacting my clinical judgement and was based on my Indigenous perception of the big picture surrounding this case. I encouraged family members and educators to keep doing what they were doing. I think that if this child had been seen by a clinician using a Western pedagogy without cultural competence, he would have been seen individually for session after session of labelling and describing activities using picture cards perhaps with his father sitting outside in the waiting room. Sadly, this child’s father passed away a few years ago. Recently it was my pleasure to see his son (who is now a young man) working in the city. We chatted about his success in school and his new job and together we storied about the special time when he was so small in comparison to his dad while they played on the floor together.

In my consultative role with the NOW Play project, I had the opportunity to view a transcript and six-minute video from an Aboriginal early learning context where a child’s grandfather demonstrated skinning a marten. I appreciated the opportunity to observe the interaction and to reflect on the cultural paradigm. Grandfather knelt at the table with his grandson on his lap and he spoke into the child’s ear as he demonstrated to the group of several children who were gathered around. He provided hand-over-hand experience for his grandson as he shared holding the knife and demonstrated how to separate the pelt from the animal’s head and feet. The little boy and the other children moved in to closely watch the procedure. I could not help but notice how the educators brought chairs and asked the children to sit down at the table during the interaction because I have never seen anyone sit while engaging in an activity like this together in the community context. Use of a sharp knife in close proximity to young children is a novel experience in most schools, and most certainly, supporting a young child to cut with it is unheard-of. I also thought about a barrier

to this learning opportunity in the schools as health and safety legislation precludes such activities and involvement of the Aboriginal community.

Grandfather talked about what he was doing and named the animal, directing attention to features such as markings on the pelt. He related this activity to some of the children's home experience, and mentioned certain children's family members who are hunters and fishermen. Grandfather recounted seeing different colours of martens in their natural habitat. The children talked about what they were seeing and one child held his nose to express how he was feeling. The early learning teacher shared her knowledge by speaking about what part of the animal was being skinned and she directed the children's attention to actions. What an excellent culture-based activity that builds the identity and self esteem of the children and creates space for an Indigenous paradigm of learning by seeing and doing. The grandson's identity and pride are especially honoured by the creation of space for Grandfather as teacher.

Language Revitalization and Bi-Literacy School Contexts

In the institutions of education and care, Indigenous languages are not particularly visible and in spite of this, Indigenous children naturally create a space where they can use their language. Within early learning and childcare settings, Indigenous language use tends to occur in or around literacy. The local Indigenous language is frequently printed to label objects and places in the class/room and reference is made to pictures in story books using names for animals, family members, places. An Indigenous child attending an early learning or childcare program in a First Nation community and situated within the context where educators/practitioners speak the Indigenous language, are immersed within a local literacy (e.g., Cree language, Anishinaabemowin). Since the official language of the institution is English, the child experiences a bi-literacy environment, engaging receptive and expressive oral and written language skills and they develop first and second language abilities.

Such a bi-dialectal educational context is supportive of language maintenance and revitalization efforts of the Aboriginal community and provides an impetus for involvement of family and community members to honour the oral tradition. Hornberger (1997) discusses the societal and grassroots impacts on the maintenance of minority languages and states, "...the status of Indigenous literacies is linked to larger political, economic, and attitudinal forces" (p. 358). Teachers and Elders in the Indigenous community demonstrate that Indigenous language counts and attitudes change as political will is created from the bottom-up for Indigenous language literacy. As multiple literacies are demonstrated in Canada, the child's Indigenous language is valued as a wonderful resource and Anishinaabemowin or Cree language for example are not seen as a problem, Hornberger states that local literacies will thrive in such a situation. The storytelling oral tradition provides learners with opportunity to become immersed in the culture/language/thought process of coming to know the self in relationship to others and the Earth.

Engagement in Discovery and Innovation

Respect for Anishinaabe ecological relational knowledge and awareness of Indigenous pedagogy in the classroom is supportive of socially-responsive educational transformation that leads educators and practitioners to provide stimulating approaches and

engagement in innovation. The educational model of inquiry-based learning in group collaboration with teachers is in-line with this shift in our role from ‘lead knower’ to ‘lead learner’ (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 5). In the learning context of the Aboriginal child, we have opportunity to question and investigate our existing knowledge and assumptions and to foster a culture of inquiry.

Receptivity to different ways of interacting and speaking facilitates an attitude of appreciation and respect that is counter-intuitive to prescribing Standard English based on teachers’ and practitioners’ Western-based professional training and socialization experiences. Researchers and educators examine the language that Aboriginal children bring to school in consideration of the oral language tradition and how they share their understanding of the world in story. “The persistence of stories and story telling suggests that it is central to an Aboriginal intellectual tradition and provides the core of an educational model” (Graveline 1998, p. 64). Speech-language practitioners and linguists have described First Nations dialect and illustrated how it as an integral component of an individual’s identity and represents a culturally relevant link to the home community and land base (Ball, 2006; Ball & Bernhardt, 2008). Peltier (2014) offers a model for including dialect in positive communication experiences in school, plus skill development for code-switching for “home talk” and “school talk”. Non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal researchers have described the oral tradition and unique narrative features of Aboriginal students (Pesco & Crago, 1996; Peltier, 2014 & 2011).

An Indigenous Pedagogy

An educational approach is described by Peltier (2016) to demonstrate a culturally relevant wholistic learning process that honours learner autonomy in a classroom setting where an hierarchical power structure is absent in the Circle. This is different from a Western-centered formal learning context where the teacher or practitioner is an authority-figure and are perceived to hold all of the knowledge or answers to questions that arise. The Anishinaabe oral tradition is illustrated through presentation of local Teachings and learner engagement in Story Circles. The figure below represents aspects of a wholistic teaching/learning process that involves all aspects of the learner with engagement in: listening and thinking; intuitive reflecting and visioning; experiencing and doing (engaging in reflective experiences in Place, drawing, writing); and relating and feeling (storying). Often times in a conventional pedagogical approach to curricula, much emphasis is placed on the student’s thinking and demonstration of knowledge through text (pen, paper, computer keyboard). In this approach, listening, processing verbally presented information, and time for inner reflection and coming to understand are important aspects. An Indigenous cosmovision ideology is shown by the two colours forming the background of the schematic. Ways of knowing from within an Indigenous knowledge paradigm and pedagogical process negotiate the physical world as well as the unseen. Receptivity to the world of the imagination, not in the sense of making an escape from reality, but as a valid means of engaging reality on terms that reflect the Indigenous learner’s own meanings and values is demonstrated in this process.

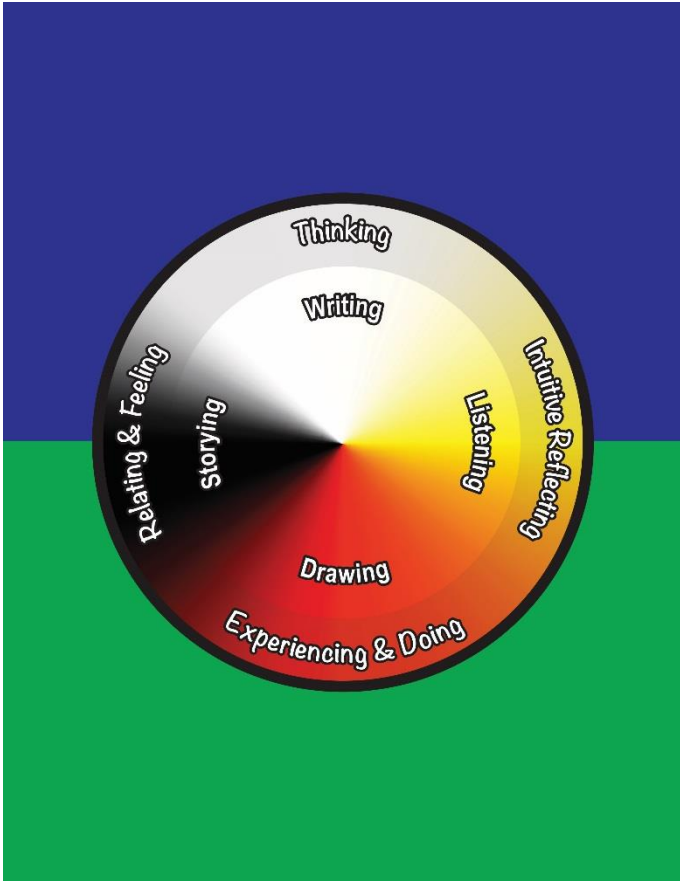


Figure 1. Wholistic Anishinaabe Pedagogy (from Peltier, 2016)

This pedagogical model honours an Aboriginal process of relational learning and is applicable to an early learning or childcare environment. A story, legend, video, or book can be shared to focus the children's attention and a related activity involving movement or the creation of a product can be followed by a facilitated visualization process or alone-time for reflection. A sharing Circle bringing everyone together to talk about their thinking and experiences offers opportunity to listen and learn from each other and to inform ongoing investigation and inquiry. This process creates space for learning in a wholistic way that taps into many aspects of the learner; this benefits children of different cultural backgrounds, abilities and interests and increases opportunity for learning to appreciate different perspectives and worldviews. The Circle is inclusive of everyone and is an enjoyable experience where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners participate as listeners without the teacher's expectation to talk. Opportunity for silent reflection and inner processing of the story and responses from peers is something that is not typically valued in a Western-centered pedagogy. The Circle is beneficial to all learners. It builds self-esteem by giving the child an opportunity to play an important role in a group process and reinforces their identity and belonging.

A transformative process of educator action and reflection emerges when educators and practitioners initiate contact with Elders, keepers-of-the-language, and knowledgeable people in the community and embody a listening and observing stance. This Anishinaabe pedagogy can be considered as a framework for a family literacy model.

Conclusion

The goals of social science research are related to having a practical impact that contributes to the solution to social problems and achievement of social goals. Too often, researchers succumb to external pressures to ‘create change’ and this results in a premature rush to implementation before new relationships and new understandings have been consolidated. My role in the NOW Play action research project as a community consultant has presented an opportunity to contribute to a critical examination of the perspectives, belief, and values of the educator and researcher in the formal, Western-based context of the early learning environment. A transformative process of researcher and educator action and reflection emerges from a culturally sensitive lens to develop a culturally competent way of “seeing” the Aboriginal child. My professional and personal roles and expertise serve to inform a critical process of understanding about Western-European epistemologies and educational approaches that maintain the socio-cultural mismatch between the Aboriginal child’s home and school.

The Indigenous research paradigm supports being-in-relationship with the learner in a respectful way to appreciate cultural and socio-linguistic differences and culture-based interactions and pedagogy that support the Aboriginal child’s self-concept and learning. Supporting all learners to gain deep understanding of Indigenous perspectives and knowledge is facilitated by socially responsible teachers and educational practitioners utilizing an approach that: values family and community members and keepers-of-the-language and their perceptions of what is relevant; invites Elders, family and community members to lead culture-based and land-based learning and stories; and presents opportunities to engage in a wholistic Indigenous pedagogical process based on the oral tradition inclusive of thinking, intuitive reflecting, experiencing and doing, relating and feeling.

The topic of this paper focuses on “seeing” the Aboriginal child by being-in-relationship with the learner to understand the context of what the Aboriginal child is experiencing and responding to and enacting culturally sensitive approaches that honour Indigenous ways of knowing. As teachers and practitioners develop cultural competency, formal learning environments undergo change to be more inclusive and respectful of Aboriginal people. This process serves to mitigate some of the challenging factors affecting Aboriginal student achievement such as bullying, racism, peer discrimination, and teacher discrimination, while building self-concept and identity, enjoyment of school, a love for the Land, and developing the whole child.

Opportunities arise as researchers and investigators observe local educators, families and community members supporting the learning of the Aboriginal child through Indigenous wholistic ways of thinking expressed in the language of connection and relationship. Aboriginal teachers and community members can put Indigenous knowledge to use in listener-storyteller interactions, play and dialogue. A myriad of possibilities exist for further inquiry and exploration that arise from the children’s sense of wonder and the potentiality of the learning environment to highlight the gifts of the child. Experiencing a shared activity with an Aboriginal family or community member serves as a spring-board for multi-literacy cultural connections. Oral language, play, and experiential exploration and skill development can be addressed in learning opportunities such as: venturing out on the land to investigate animal habitats and to observe animals and their behaviour; engaging in story-telling and legends about nature and our relationships with each other, animals,

and the land; seeing and talking about related topics by looking at and creating books, photos, videos. I could say, “The sky is the limit”, however, from an Indigenous perspective the expanse of the universe and the potential of the child are limitless.

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