

Indigenizing Curricula: Developing a Pedagogy of Relationship that Centers on the Child

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We believe that efforts to Indigenize curriculum are long overdue, given the damaging impact on the wellbeing of Indigenous children in public and Indigenous schools arising from assimilationist policies, such as residential schooling and the colonialist nature of school curricula. The impact of these policies has continued across many generations, as many Indigenous parents and grandparents feel ill-prepared to pass on their traditional languages and knowledge to their children. Some Indigenous parents are resisting the teaching of their community's language to their children.

Indigenizing curricula starts with a recognition that current curricula promote non-Indigenous values and worldviews, implicitly teaching all Ontario children to value non-Indigenous ways of being. There are few to no opportunities for Indigenous children to learn about who they are, nor to learn their Indigenous language and the culture within which it is grounded. Additionally, the truths of historical and contemporary relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples have been hidden and/or distorted.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's *Calls to Action* (2015) awakened all Ontarians to the need for Indigenous representation in curriculum development to provide Indigenous truths about the contributions of our Elders throughout Canada's history. The Calls also heighten awareness of the need to fulfill responsibilities of treaties between governments and First Nations, and to recognize and honour the First Peoples of the territory on which we live and teach.

In response, efforts to Indigenize curricula are underway. For example, the Ontario Teacher's Federation (OTF) ran a pilot project to assist teachers in a community of schools servicing a First Nations community to use experiential learning as a way to integrate Indigenous content into the existing curriculum (see https://www.otffeo.on.ca/en/learning/tlc/report/integration-of-indigenous-content-through-experiential-learning-into-existing-curriculum/#?area_of_focus%5B%5D=1558).

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To extend and enrich these efforts, we propose that curricula in Ontario classrooms should include *local* Indigenous knowledge, and should introduce important concepts of Indigenous identity, land, history, values and beliefs, culture, and worldview. We further argue that Indigenous ancestral knowledge, worldviews, and life skills would enrich teaching and learning in classrooms across Ontario, as all children and teachers would benefit from learning essential life concepts, such

as the Anishinaabek concept of *Bimaadiziwin*, which we translate to mean *living a good life while being a good person*.

Our proposed approach to the Indigenizing of curriculum is based on the Odawa, Potawatomi and Ojibway (Anishinaabemowin) knowledge and experience of Yvette Maniwabi and Sandra Peltier, educators in the Wiikwemkoong Board of Education. Yvette is an Anishnaabe Kwe (woman), Odawa and an Educator who prides herself in being Gashi (mother) and Nokomis (Grandmother) as she continues her journey of giving her students a strong sense of identity, their ancestral language and connection to Creator while learning together through Anishnaabe Niin). Sandra Peltier learned the Odawa language at home from her parents and has always believed that her First Nations' Languages are the foundation of Anishnaabe peoples' identities. Yvette and Sandra are also research practitioners in a partnership project, Northern Oral language and Writing through Play (NOW Play), together with the other authors: Jeffrey Wood (early learning lead for Moosonee & Moose Factory Island District School Area Boards & a professor of education at Laurentian University, who is of Métis and settler ancestry), Shelley Stagg Peterson (former rural Alberta teacher who taught Indigenous children in Lac La Biche and Wetaskiwin elementary schools, now a professor at OISE/University of Toronto and NOW Play project director), and Nicola Friedrich (former Ontario elementary teacher and contributor to the Aboriginal Family and Community Literacy Curriculum (AFCLC) Mixed Mode Training, now project and data coordinator with the NOW Play project). We have been working together on collaborative action research to support Indigenous children's Anishnaabe language and cultural learning through the Northern Oral language and Writing through Play (NOW Play) partnership project.

We present four foundational principles that can be adapted by teachers in public and Indigenous schools across Ontario. We emphasize that our specific examples are appropriate for our children because the knowledge comes from the land and the people of our community. It is important for teachers to develop relationships with the Indigenous peoples of the land on which they are teaching when adapting the principles to their classrooms.

The first principle for Indigenizing curricula is *Anishnaabe Niin*: Centering curriculum on the child in relation with

the knowledge and experience of their ancestors. In this way, children come to know who they are and where they have come from. Yvette helps children recognize that the beat of their heart is the spirit living within them. She tells children that they have to nourish the spirit by continuing to learn their Indigenous languages, worldviews, and ways of being, and by striving to stay connected to the Creator and to all creation.

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Bimaadiziwin is the second principle for Indigenizing the curriculum. Yvette tells a story about a boy in her kindergarten class that exemplifies teaching centered on *Bimaadiziwin* and the Anishnaabek Seven Grandfather Teachings:

One day a student did something wrong. Yvette asked the class, "Who did it?" Students replied, "Not me, not, me." She spoke briefly about the Grandfather Teaching of Truth and invited whoever was responsible to approach her later. As the children played, one student approached Yvette and in a quiet voice said, "I did it." Yvette smiled and recognized the ways that the student's actions embodied all of the Grandfather Teachings. She said, "Awe miigwech (thank you) for telling me the truth. That took a lot of courage and humility to admit it was you." Yvette continued: "Miigwech for being honest with me and yourself for telling me the truth. My heart is full of love and respect." She then said, "You have just shown how you have learned all the Seven Grandfather Teachings (Truth, Humility, Courage, Honesty, Respect, Love, and Wisdom). Now you carry the gift of Wisdom." Yvette asked the child for permission to share his story with classmates and to use his story to teach the Seven Grandfather Teachings to others. He was beaming with pride and said "yes".

Taking up an Indigenous pedagogical approach, Yvette used the situation to teach the child the ways of

Bimaadiziwin, rather than the typical non-Indigenous approach of providing some form of consequence for a wrongdoing.

When teaching Indigenous words and concepts, it is important to recognize the complexities of the language, coming to know the cultural understandings that have been interwoven to create the complex meanings of each word.

A third principle for the Indigenizing of curriculum is for teachers to develop relationships with the family and community members of the Indigenous children in their classrooms, recognizing the First Peoples of the land on which they are teaching. Just as the knowledge that Yvette and Sandra have imparted to us comes from grandparents and other relatives, teachers can invite Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers to share ancestral knowledge and worldviews with them and with children in their class. One of the legacies of residential schools is that many Indigenous parents and other family members mistrust schools and other institutions. As such, we recommend that teachers initiate the development of relationships, finding ways to involve themselves in activities in the Indigenous communities, and seeking ways that the community members feel is appropriate for learning from Elders and Knowledge Keepers.

A fourth principle is to recognize that the concepts embedded within the words of Indigenous languages come from thousands of years of relationships with the land. The complexities embedded within these generations of learning and experience are incomplete and partial if we simply try to match Indigenous words with English words. When learning Indigenous languages, it is important to start with the complex interweaving of the Indigenous language's concepts. We must start with whole concept and then strive to understand the rich layers of meaning and interconnections of concepts and experiences within Indigenous words.

When considering how Indigenous worldviews and pedagogies enrich all children's and teachers' lives, we

propose that school success be reconceptualized as more than achievement of curriculum objectives. Essential goals for our teaching should be to nurture the spirit within each child, to come to know Indigenous children by reaching out to their families and communities, and to support all children in living a good life (*Bimaadiziwin*) that embodies the Seven Grandfather Teachings. When teaching Indigenous words and concepts, it is important to recognize the complexities of the language, coming to know the cultural understandings that have been interwoven to create the complex meanings of each word.

Taking these steps is a beginning toward reconciliation in our classrooms. The move toward decolonizing the curriculum and our schools is a much broader project. In the meantime, we challenge all teachers reading our article to take up these principles to confront the colonizing nature of the curriculum that has led to the stolen spirits of Indigenous children, as Yvette expresses in her poem:

Dedicated in memory of my parents.

Before You Stole Me

*I was that child learner before you took me
I was that child whose playground was Mother Earth
I was that child who was taught by the four legged
and plant life
I was that child who learned how Mother Earth
sustains all my Relations
Only to be stolen because of who I am Anishinaabe
Now it has taken the death of many Relations to have
our historical perspective told from a child's eyes.*

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