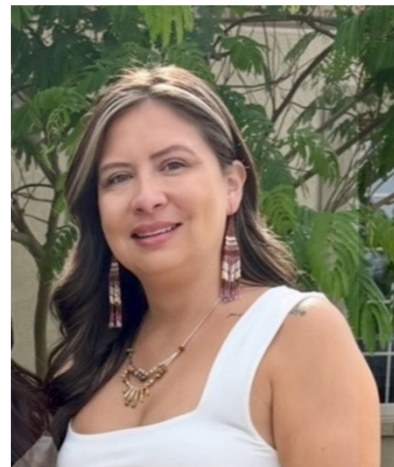


Who We Are: Voices of Indigenous Early Childhood Educators

As part of the AECEO Guiding Committee on Truth and Reconciliation's ongoing commitment to bringing attention to Educators, this article focuses on Educators from diverse Indigenous communities. Committee members Sherry Lickers, Louise Humphreys and Wendy Rahman worked together to develop guiding questions and reached out to Educators in the Métis, First Nations and Inuit communities to invite and work with them to share their stories.

We are very grateful to Lacey King-Smith, Pauline McKay, Sarah Spethmann and Kahentiiosta Yen for your thoughtful contributions and willingness to share, and Sherry, Louise and Wendy for leading and facilitating. The following profiles are a testament to all of your work and commitment.

Kahenttiosta Yen



What inspired you to pursue a career in early learning and childcare?

From an early age I wanted to be a kindergarten teacher, in high school I volunteered in kindergarten classes, and completed co-op in a child care. After those experiences I wanted to continue in the field and went to school to obtain my ECE.

What do you find most rewarding about working with young children?

Supporting their growth through developmentally appropriate activities, learning about the child, and building on their interests, and continuing to guide children in their learning journeys.

Can you share a bit about your cultural background and how it influences your teaching approach?

I am Kanien'kéha from Kahnawake Mohawk Territory, as a young child I attended a Mohawk immersion school and learned from the land. The teachings I received from the Educators have left a lasting impact on my life and my deeper understanding on how nature plays a role in the child's understanding of the world around them. I continue to use the knowledge and teachings I received to provide Indigenous teachings and the ways of knowing with children and families I work with.

In what ways do you integrate cultural knowledge and traditions into your curriculum or classroom environment?

Throughout the child care, there are words in Indigenous languages from the area I work in, I try to use the Seven

Grandfather teachings when working with children, educators, and families. Emphasizing on the cultural knowledge and understanding of the world we are living in, the earth sustains our daily lives, and how to respect what we are giving.

Where do you find inspiration for your teaching methods and program development?

I have met so many amazing and wise individuals in my journey within early learning, I do try and gather information from various First Nations, Indigenous organizations, and community programs that provide Indigenous teachings for the early years.

What keeps you motivated to stay in this field? What factors would encourage you to continue growing in this profession?

My motivation is seeing the change in how Early Childhood Educators are being seen now, there is more professionalism, a better understanding for the early years, and how integral it is to continue pursuing the vast knowledge of children 0-6, which will lead in a better life, more kind children and adults. Having a deeper understanding of what is my purpose, how can I share my knowledge, culture, and background with others.

Kahenttiosta Yen is Kanien'kéha from Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Territory, Quebec. Bear Clan. She is the Child Care Director of Ska:na Family Learning Centre, working within 3 municipalities in the southwest region of Ontario. She holds a diploma in Early Childhood Education since 2005 and Bachelor of Social Work minor in Psychology from the University of Windsor since 2018.

Lacey King-Smith



What inspired you to pursue a career in early learning and childcare?

After I finished my first year at Sheridan College I needed to work. So my aunt got me a supply job at her daycare at Mississaugas of the Credit at Ekwaamjigenang Children's Centre. I pretty much just fell in love with the work and love working with the children.

What do you find most rewarding about working with the young children?

I like the big and little accomplishments children make and I just get excited for them, like putting on their own socks, potty training them, learning new skills like with scissors and learning using Anishinaabemowin words. It's very exciting watching children with all their milestones and seeing these little people become big people.

Can you share a bit about your cultural background and how it influences your teaching approach?

I'm from both Six Nations and Mississaugas of the Credit, so I am both Mohawk and Ojibwe from both sides of my family.

Our centre is Anishinaabemowin, so we learned about Ojibwe culture - we use Ojibwe language, and we have socials. Every Monday a cultural teacher from the elementary school will come with their children and we smudge. We smudge every Monday with all the children.

In what ways do you integrate cultural knowledge and traditions into your curriculum or classroom environment?

With our curriculum, when we do documentation, we also add our Seven Grandfather teachings to the documentation. So an example is, oh, this friend helped this friend, and we can say the Seven Grandfather

teaching was love or was respect. So we use those Seven Grandfather teachings for our curriculum, and we just talk about it with our children, most of our older preschoolers understand the Seven Grandfather teachings. Seven Grandfather teachings are Love, Respect, Wisdom, Bravery, Honesty, Humility, Truth. We do drumming and we sing - and they love the bear song.

We have our key words posted in the room: Please, Thank you, Washroom, Washing hands, Go outside and our little hand drums and our shakers and our sticks. We also have a family wall, so they have pictures of our families, and it also has the Anishinaabemowin word and the English word.

When I was younger, I was in immersion Mohawk, so I kind of knew that and then I kind of lost it because I didn't go back to immersion or go back to classes. But I am starting to go into a Level 1 Ojibwe class because I still kind of struggle learning because I'm rolling my tongue with some words, but we do use the language a lot, we'll say, Ojibwe words: aanii, boozhoo, baamaapii - like, hi - bye.

We'll say the animals like bunny, waabooz - we just use simple words. Also when we are serving our lunch, we call it naawkwe wiisnidaa -like time to eat, and namadabin - sit down - some little command words. For milk we use doodooshaabo - like would you like more doodooshaabo or for water - would you like more nibi? We use simple words for these little ones.

Where do you find your inspiration for your teaching methods and program development?

Pretty much with the kids, because every group is different and you get inspired by these new kids coming in, coming out. It's really nice because we are connected to the elementary school and the older kids will come

say hi to us, they'll say, I remember when we did this, I remember we did that and then that kind of inspires me more because they remember me - I've impacted them in some way. So it's really nice to see the older kids say hi and stuff like that.

What keeps you motivated to stay in this field? What factors would encourage you to continue growing in this profession?

Pretty much my coworkers, we're a pretty good fit. We pretty much became like circle of friends - big family. We went through a lot of obstacles together and we made it.

And also the community that my centre is in, a lot of these kids that are coming in, the parents I grew up with. So it's kind of funny to see the kids I grew up with - their kids. And so it's nice.

There's always time to grow because there's always something different to learn with each child - every child's different. You've got to learn different tactics to help them, nurture them and help them with behavioral issues too. And just different families coming in, coming out, you just kind of grow. Like a tree you keep growing every little branch that you can.

How does being an artist relate to anything in your job? Is that helpful?

It's helpful because the kids always make me draw their stuff for them. Like, can you draw me a rainbow? Can you draw me a horse? Can you draw me a dinosaur? Can you draw this? Can you draw my family when I was on vacation?

The kids also inspire me to write books. I am in the works of writing a small, little series of books about words to help with Anishinaabe, like a little girl lost her moccasins, and she has to find them if they're up or down, just easy words for these kids to learn.

How is it different from the urban centres when you're on First Nations territory, to participate in early learning centres?

When it's nice out we do spend a lot of time outside. We have a nice trail that the kids can go in and sometimes we're integrating with the kindergarten program because in the kindergarten program here they spend 2 hours outside every day. They made a fort, where they have a fire, and they learn about fire safety. It's a really, really cool program that they have going right now.

Preschoolers participate in this too because they're going to start going into kindergarten in September. So we go to see how the program is and just get them used to the program for the fall.

We also have the Grandfather playground and in the Grandfather playground there's a little fire pit and that's where we smudge. And then we have another area of our playground, and it's the four medicines - it's our medicine garden. And then we have a green space - it's just like a big green space. And then we have our actual playground - it's wooden structures and wood chips.

Have you always worked at the Centre on the reserve, or have you worked at the urban site too?

I've pretty much just been on reserve. And it's nice too, because our community is so tight knit - just last week one of our Elders took our kids to the sugar bush and taught us how people made maple syrup. It was nice because it was pretty much just walking over to a field and the sugar bush is right there.

At our daycare, we pretty much just have a bunch of little Res kids running around. They love being in nature, love learning new things, they love to garden, and they love to help. When we did our medicine garden it was so nice to see. They're like, oh - we use this to smudge and I'm like or we give this tobacco to nature. We teach them that you have to give back to Mother Earth. So if they want to take some sticks or they want to take some rocks back to our playground, they have to give tobacco to Mother Earth, or they like to use as a trade - we're taking this, you could have this. Just some little teachings here and there. And it's so funny because they're really sporadic. They're not planned or anything. It's just very natural - if the situation comes, then we show them the teachings.

This is an edited transcript of an interview conducted between Sherry Lickers and Lacey King-Smith.

Lacey King-Smith is from the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. Lacey has been a Registered Early Childhood Educator for nine years and is currently working at Ekwaamjigenang Children's Centre.

Pauline McKay



What inspired you to pursue a career in early learning and childcare?

I've always loved children since I was young. I started babysitting at a young age. My Mom was also an ECE supervisor, so I got a job working in her childcare centre part time when I was a teenager. I looked into other careers, but it was always child care that I was most drawn to.

What do you find most rewarding about working with young children?

It's an amazing feeling knowing you are playing such an integral role in the growth and development of these children. I love watching them change and develop self confidence. It's wonderful to witness them becoming their own person and continually learn new things. This job is so rewarding, and it is an honour to help guide these children in a good way.

Can you share a bit about your cultural background and how it influences your teaching approach?

I am Tsimshian (west coast of BC) on my father's side and Algonquin and Irish on my mom's side. Unfortunately, like many of us, I did not grow up learning my culture. My dad is a residential school survivor. He did not practice or even speak about culture while I was growing up. My grandma on my mom's side is Algonquin. Because of the time when my mom was growing up, there was a lot of shame in being Indigenous. It was definitely not something to be proud of back then. So it was not until when she was older, that she started to slowly learn

about her connection to the Algonquin community. It was not until I was in my early 20s that I decided I wanted to learn more about my culture. I started attending pow wows and different community gatherings to learn more. I believe that this is the main reason why I love the work I do within the Indigenous community with our youngest children. I love learning along side the children and instilling that cultural pride from a young age!

In what ways do you integrate cultural knowledge and traditions into your curriculum or classroom environment?

One of the first things we do when we enroll new children into our programs is acknowledge their cultural background. It is important that the children know who they are and where they are from and continually hear how special they are because of this. Our program is for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children; so it is very diverse and ever changing in terms of the cultural curriculum focus. We do things like daily prayer and smudging, reading cultural stories, drumming, jigging, pow wow dancing, eating traditional foods and having Elders or traditional knowledge keepers visit our program regularly, to name a few. We also are guided by the 7 Grandfather Teachings, the Métis Values, and the Inuit IQ Principles in all aspects of our work. These teachings help guide our ways of working together with the children, families, and our coworkers.

Where do you find inspiration for your teaching methods and program development?

I am currently the Child Care Manager; however, when I was working more directly with the children, I was

always inspired by knowing how it feels to grow up without my culture and language. I always felt and still do, to an extent, that there was something missing in my life. It wasn't until I was older that I realized that it was that cultural connection and knowledge that was missing. I want to help ensure that the children enrolled in our programs know who they are and are proud of who they are, especially when they leave us to join mainstream society.

**What keeps you motivated to stay in this field?
What factors would encourage you to continue
growing in this profession?**

I cannot ever imagine working in a mainstream childcare centre. I just would not get the same fulfillment that I get working with Indigenous children and their families within my own community. I'm always so happy to run into former students from our programs who still

remember me with fond memories. It's a wonderful feeling knowing that I've had a positive impact on their lives. It makes me feel like I'm helping to make a positive impact not only on their future but helping to better our community overall.

Pauline is a proud member of the Tsimshian and Algonquin Nations. She has been a Registered Early Childhood Educator since 2017 but has several years of experience in the field prior to this. She currently works as the Indigenous Childcare Manager for Makonsag Aboriginal Head Start in Ottawa.

Sarah Spethmann



What inspired you to pursue a career in early learning and childcare?

My journey into the early learning and childcare field began during my Grade 12 year of high school. At the time, I wasn't entirely sure what path I wanted to take for post-secondary education, so I took the opportunity to explore different options. Reflecting on my past experiences, I realized I had always gravitated toward roles that involved working with children—babysitting, coaching sports, and teaching dance. These experiences confirmed my passion for educating and mentoring young learners, though I wasn't sure exactly where it would lead.

When I began my early learning and childcare studies, I didn't fully know what to expect. However, as I immersed myself in my coursework and gained hands-on experience, I quickly discovered a deep appreciation for the field. Engaging with children, understanding their development, and fostering their growth became more than just a career choice—it became a passion. This journey has shaped my professional path and reinforced my commitment to providing meaningful, high-quality early learning experiences for young children.

What do you find most rewarding about working with young children?

One of the most rewarding aspects of working with young children is the opportunity to learn alongside them. Their natural curiosity and excitement for discovery create an environment where learning is a shared experience.

Seeing the world through their eyes—full of wonder, possibility, and imagination—reminds me to appreciate the small moments and the joy in everyday experiences.

Children have an incredible ability to embrace the playfulness of life, turning even the simplest tasks into moments of joy and creativity. Their enthusiasm and energy make each day unique and fulfilling. Being part of their community of learners, where we grow and explore together, is truly special. It is a privilege to support their development, foster their sense of belonging, and help them build the foundation for a lifelong love of learning.

Can you share a bit about your cultural background and how it influences your teaching approach?

I am Métis, and my maternal family, originating from St. Boniface, Manitoba, later established roots in northern Saskatchewan. My ancestral roots trace back to the Letendre, Dumas, Parenteau, Piche, Parisien, and Falcon families. My Métis heritage deeply influences my teaching approach, as it is rooted in experiential learning and a strong sense of community—values that align closely with early childhood education.

In Métis culture, learning happens through hands-on experiences, storytelling, and passing down knowledge through generations. This belief mirrors how young children learn best—through play, exploration, and meaningful interactions. By fostering a supportive and inclusive community around each child, I strive

to create an environment where learning is a shared journey. Through play-based and experiential learning, I encourage children to develop a love for discovery, just as my ancestors did when passing on skills, traditions, and ways of life.

In what ways do you integrate cultural knowledge and traditions into your curriculum or classroom environment?

As a Métis educator, I incorporate cultural knowledge and traditions into my teaching by focusing on hands-on experiences, fostering a strong sense of community, and ensuring that the interests of the children drive learning. Métis culture values experiential learning, where skills and knowledge are passed down through active participation, storytelling, and a deep connection to the land—practices that align naturally with play-based and inquiry-driven early childhood education.

Storytelling, in particular, holds deep significance in both Métis culture and early learning. It is a way of passing down history, sharing knowledge, and fostering imagination. Through storytelling, children not only develop language and communication skills but also build connections to culture, identity, and community. Whether through traditional Métis stories, oral narratives shared by the children, or creating stories together through play, storytelling helps bring learning to life in an engaging and meaningful way. Incorporating this tradition into daily learning helps children develop a strong appreciation for different perspectives, strengthen their sense of belonging, and encourage creativity and curiosity in their exploration of the world.

Where do you find inspiration for your teaching methods and program development?

I find inspiration in many places—through collaboration with co-educators, in nature, and within different environments. However, at the core of my teaching and program development, the greatest inspiration always comes from the children themselves.

I rely heavily on careful observations of the children to guide all curriculum decisions. By paying close attention to how they interact with materials, engage with one another, and express their existing knowledge, skills, culture, and connection to their communities, I can create meaningful and responsive learning experiences. This child-led approach ensures that programming

remains relevant, engaging, and reflective of their interests, fostering an environment where curiosity and exploration thrive.

What keeps you motivated to stay in this field? What factors would encourage you to continue growing in this profession?

The opportunity to share knowledge about foundational early learning practices and pedagogies keeps me motivated in this field. Over time, as I have taken on various roles within the field, my passion has evolved beyond working directly with children to advocating for the profession as a whole. I am deeply committed to helping parents, guardians, and other professionals understand the complexities and significance of the early years.

When I reflect on my growth in this profession, my focus always returns to the educators. They are the backbone of early childhood education, and their well-being and professional development are essential to quality care and learning. To continue thriving in this field, I find it vital to be part of a passionate early childhood community—one that values collaboration, continuous learning, and advocacy for the profession.

Sarah Spethmann is a Métis citizen and has been a Registered Early Childhood Educator since 2012. Sarah currently works at the Métis Nation of Ontario as an Early Learning Specialist.