

**Decolonizing Educational Practices through Fostering Ethical  
Relationality in an Urban Indigenous Classroom**  
**Décoloniser les pratiques éducationnelles en favorisant la  
relationalité éthique en classe autochtone en milieu urbain**

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Article abstract

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# DECOLONIZING EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES THROUGH FOSTERING ETHICAL RELATIONALITY IN AN URBAN INDIGENOUS CLASSROOM

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**ABSTRACT.** To foster the success of young Indigenous learners, our study partnered with an urban Indigenous school in Alberta's capital region. This paper explores the decolonizing practices that emerged through the ethical relationships developed with students and staff guided by the Cree wisdom teachings of wicihitowin and wahkohtowin. A group of Indigenous and Canadian university and school-based co-researchers worked with a class of students over four years (from grade 6 to 9) incorporating Indigenous knowledges with the mandated Social Studies curriculum. The teachings included Cree language, land-based activities, ceremony and story. Students expressed appreciation for the teachings and the opportunities they had experienced over the course of the study; it was a small step towards decolonizing education.

## DÉCOLONISER LES PRATIQUES ÉDUCATIONNELLES EN FAVORISANT LA RELATIONALITÉ ÉTHIQUE EN CLASSE AUTOCHTONE EN MILIEU URBAIN

**RÉSUMÉ.** Pour favoriser la réussite des jeunes apprenants d'origine autochtone, notre équipe a collaboré avec une école autochtone située en milieu urbain, dans la région de la capitale albertaine. Cet article explore les pratiques de décolonisation qui ont émergé des relations éthiques développées entre les élèves et membres du personnel, guidés par les enseignements cris wicihitowin et wahkohtowin. Un groupe collaboratif de chercheurs universitaires et scolaires ont travaillé avec un groupe d'élèves pendant 4 ans (de la 6<sup>e</sup> année du primaire à la 3<sup>e</sup> secondaire). Ils ont inclus des savoirs autochtones au programme d'univers social, tels que la langue, les activités sur le terrain, les cérémonies et les histoires d'origine crie. Les élèves ont partagé leur appréciation en lien avec les savoirs et les opportunités vécues au cours du projet de recherche. Cette étude constitue un pas vers la décolonisation de l'éducation.

In a four-year SSHRC funded study that aimed to foster the success of young Indigenous learners, one of our three partner schools was an urban Indigenous school in Alberta's capital region. Our aim was to explore the possibilities for curriculum to expand students' access to Indigenous knowledge traditions. The communities' visions were for schools to facilitate

learning grounded in Indigenous cultures, histories and place-based sensibilities (Battiste, 2013; Munroe, et al., 2013; Nielson, 2010; Sheridan & Longboat, 2014). Indigenous students face systemic challenges to their learning due to the historical and cultural irrelevance of current curricula, in addition to the long-lasting effects of colonization, such as intergenerational trauma, poverty and identity confusion (Assembly of First Nations; 2011; Hare & Pidgeon, 2011; Kanu, 2007; St. Denis, 2009).

Our work with the schools confirmed some of the challenges faced in using colonized pedagogies with Indigenous students. We were inspired to imagine other curricular approaches for both Indigenous and Canadian students. This paper explores the decolonizing practices that emerged through our fostering of ethical relationships with students and staff at the urban Indigenous school guided by the ethics of *wíchítowin* and *wahkohtowin*.

## THEORETICAL UNDERSTANDINGS

Our study acknowledged the need for decolonizing curriculum, but moved beyond critique to embrace wisdom traditions and Indigenous knowledges that guided us on how to proceed (Corntassel, 2012; Littlebear, 2009; Michell, 2011). For the work at the urban Indigenous school, Dwayne Donald (2016) introduced two Cree concepts:

*wíchítowin* refers to the life-giving energy that is generated when people face each other as relatives and build trustful relationships by connecting with others in respectful ways . . . *wahkohtowin* refers to kinship relations and teaches us to extend our relational network so that it also includes the more-than-human beings that live amongst us. (p. 10)

These concepts promoted ethical relationality, emphasizing that ethical forms of relationality support life and living and its continuance. A purely human understanding of ethical relationality is significantly impoverished in respecting this sacred ecology.

Learnings grounded in Indigenous place-based sensibilities develop an ethical space of possibility for restoring relationships between Indigenous and Canadian peoples (Ermine, 2007). Recognizing that we live in an interconnected world, we are also guided by an ecological consciousness (Cajete, 1994; Sheridan & Longboat, 2014). Grounded in this Indigenous worldview, we engaged students and each other to pay attention to nature, place, myth, metaphor, imagination, art and spirit. Remembering, respecting, and attending to knowledges and ageless wisdom traditions offered us hope and meaning (Alfred, 2005).

## THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Our research was participatory and based in an Indigenous research paradigm (Wilson, 2008). Following Indigenous research sensibilities (Smith, 1999), the cultural values of relationality, respect, reciprocity, and relevance were integral (Wilson, 2008). Our approach accentuated the inherent human capacity to co-create knowledge based on experience and sought participation throughout the research process, shared ownership and ethical and contextual validity (Edwards et al., 2008). We understood learning to occur through relationships, and knowledge as place-based and contextual emerging directly from within Indigenous communities. We aimed to weave Indigenous knowledges and tradition into existing curriculum in order to create balance for student learning. Together we learned from our curricular explorations at the school sites.

### *Our Experiences in an Urban Indigenous Classroom*

*The school setting.* The urban Indigenous K-9 school, the only one of its kind within the district, focused on Indigenous culture and language. Co-principal investigators Diane Conrad and Dwayne Donald worked with graduate research assistants, teachers and students over a four-year period. The students at the school were mostly Indigenous and bussed in every day from various locations around the city. Students' origins varied; some had strong roots in surrounding Indigenous communities while others had lived in the city since birth. Students' home lives also varied, with some coming from large families and others from single parent homes. The combination of inter-generational trauma, loss of land and historical identity, the impact of residential schools, and poverty, all combined to make conditions for building community in this school setting a challenge.

The school population was approximately 460, but the numbers of students attending on any given day varied widely. The class that participated in this project had about 30 students registered. We began when the students were in grade 6 and followed them through to grade 9. Due to factors such as food insecurity and families frequently moving house – often back and forth from Indigenous communities – attendance was, however, highly variable. A core group of ten to twelve students were constant participants and actively took part in the in-school and land-based learning opportunities.

The fact that students lived in widely dispersed areas and were bussed to school presented challenges not only in fostering community, but also in developing relationships with parents. Another effect was a lack of sports programs or other extra-curricular activities available to the students – precisely the sorts of activities that excite students about coming to school.

*The research team.* The partnership with the school began slowly, as relationships took time to develop. Dwayne, guided by the teachings of wicìhitowin and wahkohtowin, met with Elders, and recruited key individuals

to work in the classroom with students. Among the co-researchers were Dale Saddleback, who was an expert in Cree language, an Indigenous knowledge-keeper and a doctoral student supervised by Dwayne. Working alongside Dale was Etienna Moostoos-Lafferty, a Cree educator and master's student also supervised by Dwayne. She had eight years of teaching experience both on and off-reserve and also did province-wide consulting, raising awareness about Indigenous education and history, the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action, treaties, and contemporary realities of Indigenous people in Alberta. The school-based co-researcher with the project was Natalie Burns, the Social Studies teacher of the participating class. Her strong interest in Indigenous education led her to actively seek a position in an Indigenous school to teach Indigenous students.

*Connecting to curriculum.* Etienna and Natalie were tasked with connecting Dale's traditional teachings to the Alberta curriculum, specifically to the Social Studies class which Natalie taught. How they did this was left up to them, a task that they initially struggled with, given the restrictions of colonized education (Kanu, 2007). They agreed to adopt a fluid and organic approach that allowed more space for Dale's teachings. The situations that Indigenous students typically face often create challenging circumstances in the classroom (Rahman, 2013), hence they both stressed the importance of personal commitment and passion for teaching Indigenous students. They described the emotional toll that working with children who live in difficult circumstances can have, and thus identified a need for educators and researchers who are resilient, knowledgeable, and dedicated to the long-term success of their students.

Natalie's and Etienna's process of integrating Indigenous knowledge into the curriculum mirrored Dale's intuitive and responsive way of teaching. In their first year of working together, Etienna attended each class with Dale. This allowed patterns to be established. Natalie was present for all of Dale's teachings, and attended other events as her responsibilities at the school allowed. By the end of the first year of Dale's weekly sessions with the students, Natalie and Etienna were always present together. Etienna took notes on her observations of the students, how the relationships progressed, and on the general themes explored.

Natalie and Etienna described their collaborative process as conversational and relational. Following each session with Dale, the two discussed their thoughts on what had been taught or what had occurred in the classroom, and the possibilities for re-working the key concepts into regular classroom activities. This was sometimes very deliberate, as in one instance when they developed a comparison between Cree history and society (as taught by Dale) and the history of the Aztecs, which was part of the mandated curriculum. The majority of the connections made were unplanned and emerged

organically when presented with an opportunity to refer to Dale's teachings. An example of this was in referring students to Dale's teachings during a lesson on treaty relationships in Canada. Natalie believed that this was an effective way of conjoining Indigenous traditional teachings with the Alberta curriculum, as it allowed the students time to process and to absorb what Dale and others, such as visiting Elders, had taught. Through constant reminders to recall the Indigenous teachings during regular classroom work, connections were made and the teachings brought back to students' minds.

*Decolonizing educational practices.* Battiste (2013) highlights several recommendations to decolonize education; many of her guidelines include affirming the importance of Indigenous knowledges. Indigenous knowledge systems include traditions, treaties, relationships to people and land, Indigenous science, arts, humanities, and legal traditions (Battiste & Henderson, 2009). Indigenous knowledge is not found in books and scholarly journals, but was (and still is) embedded in relationships, songs, ceremonies, symbols, and works of art (Battiste & Henderson, 2009). The decolonizing practices in this study included many of the above. Further, the diverse pedagogical approaches employed were noted by the researchers, as a reclaiming and re-energizing of much of what was lost through the indignities of colonial education. These traditional Indigenous approaches to learning are generally not a good fit with mainstream curricula; however, Etienna and Natalie agreed that they had positive effects on the students, individually and collectively.

*Letting go of power and control.* In creating space for teaching Indigenous knowledge, a willingness was needed by the school leadership and the classroom teacher to give up control or power to allow for a de-colonizing experience. With the blessing and support of the leadership team, Natalie was able to open space and time in her teaching schedule to learn alongside the class. Natalie described that for her, it was an easy decision as she understood how essential this project was to foster Indigenous identity, relationships and to make room for traditional teachings. Opening space in the schedule allowed for students to be led in their learning by Dale's teachings rather than being bound by a mandated curriculum alone.

*Remaining open.* Both Natalie and Etienna acknowledge how much they learned from Dale's teachings and the various land-based learning opportunities that occurred throughout the project. As trained teachers, they also learned from Dale the value of remaining open and intuitive, to be in relationships with students, to teach without a set agenda, and to be open to the possibilities that result from such an approach. Etienna admired the fact that Dale came to each class without a fixed agenda as an important part of the decolonizing process. Dale's method of teaching mirrored the way that he was taught by Elders.

*Creating a welcoming space.* Dale spent time with the students every week and they looked forward to their time with him, often asking with interest when he was coming. Dale approached students as human beings who he offered to mentor and teach as the Elders had taught him. He did not ask the students to address him as a teacher or researcher, or even by his surname; to the students he was just “Dale.” The combined efforts of Dale, Etienna and Natalie created a welcoming and open space for students. They came with varying degrees of knowledge of traditions and ceremony; some students had connections to land and to traditional teachings, while others had none at all.

The ethic of *wícihitowin* (Donald, 2016), which guided the relationships between the research team, students and Elders, was demonstrated in that everyone involved recognized each other as fellow human beings and worked hard to put respect and love at the forefront of their interactions. Guided by Elders’ teachings, as Dwayne describes, when enacted in good ways, much good can flow from the understandings of *wícihitowin*. In Dale’s teachings, as relationships as kin were key to how the class and teachers related to one another, students were presented with opportunities to be curious and to ask questions about their identities and the concerns they had.

*Allowing students to engage on their terms.* Etienna and Natalie admitted that often students remained quiet and put their heads on their desks, but because this was allowed, it enabled the students to simply listen in their own ways to Cree language, to drumming, singing, or to storytelling. Dale described that process of learning as not merely a passive act, explaining how our spirit is still in tune with the teachings even if one is sleeping or seemingly unengaged. Each day, students were accepted at their own chosen level of engagement, which lowered the potential for disrespectful behaviour. If anything, it created a relationship based on trust and appreciation.

Students were active in many activities and played integral roles in ceremony and protocol. Each class, for example, began with a smudge ceremony. Dale discussed the importance of starting in a good way and provided opportunities for the youth to lead the smudge each day. Part of the decolonizing process for this study involved reclaiming the presence of tobacco in learning. Dale was consistent in his teachings of protocol and reminded students of the importance of tobacco, because in its presence, true learning transfer occurs.

*Cree language integration.* Of most importance to Indigenous knowledge systems are Indigenous languages as they are described as “unlocking” knowledge (Battiste, 1998, p. 24). Dale layered his gift of Cree language throughout his teachings over the years. Each classroom visit and land-based experience had strong elements of language, with Cree terms accompanying all lessons. Writing on the whiteboard or explaining to the students the Cree word for

rock, berry, or tree are examples of how he integrated language into each interaction. Beyond his ability to translate English terms into Cree and label familiar items, Dale described the true beauty of language by explaining the literal or descriptive nature of nehiyawewin (the Cree language). Whether Dale was talking about land, ceremony, or stories, he continuously modelled for students the importance of language acquisition in the youths' lives; his passion for language makes him a "living educational treasure" (Battiste, 2013, p. 185).

*The art of story.* Storytelling was not just a decolonizing act for Dale (Simpson, 2011); it was the basis for educating and passing down wisdom. Dale did not have a resource he pointed to, no video for students to watch, nor a textbook to read: knowledge was transmitted orally simply and effectively. Dwayne (2016) also emphasizes that we need stories and mythologies that teach us how to be good relatives with all our relations – human and more-than-human.

Growing up as a Cree woman, Etienna was cognizant of the inherent sacredness of many of the oral teachings that were shared with the students; allowing them to remain oral traditions was important to both her and Dale and therefore the teachings were not documented. Just as oral teachings are understood as sacred to Etienna, so was the act of listening. Through her own family teachings, being respectful to the stories and to the storyteller was deeply important.

*Land-based learning.* All of the researchers for this project described the teachings and ceremonies that were held on the land as being the most powerful. When these activities occurred, students were entirely engaged, fully themselves and at ease. The ceremonies the group engaged in were described as moving and deeply meaningful. It was during land-based outings that the concept of wahkohtowin (Donald, 2016) was most effectively taught. The students were asked to be mindful of the ways that human beings are enmeshed in relationships that enable us to live. When Dwayne led students on the land-based outings, he stressed how reliant we are on the land, animals, water, etc., for our survival and that our more-than-human relatives should be treated with the deep respect that they deserve. It was at those times that researchers witnessed the students being in relationship with one another and with the land.

## CONCLUSION

Etienna described her deep appreciation for what Dale and others brought to the students, and the guiding ethics and approach that Dwayne had established (Donald, 2016). She imagined how her life might have been different and richer, if she had been offered these teachings while she was in



school. Both Etienna and Natalie felt strongly that such opportunities for Indigenous knowledge learning and experiences should be offered to both Indigenous and Canadian students. Such knowledge can open up conversations and combat racism and ignorance.

Etienna and Natalie concluded the final year of the study with a sharing circle to discuss with the students their future aspirations, as their transition to high school was fast approaching. They expressed how emotional the circle process was as the students shared more than expected; they expressed appreciation for the teachings and the opportunities they had experienced over the course of the few years together. They expressed that their most memorable times were those spent on the land. It was evident to Natalie and Etienna that the students understood Cree laws, wisdom and the teachings of wahkohtowin.

The relationships that this research and teaching team fostered with the students – with an emphasis on ethical relationships throughout, was important to all, and deeply felt. The project endeavoured to acknowledge and honour the significance of relationships, including attending to how histories and experiences position us in relation to each other, and how our futures as people in the world are similarity tied together (Donald, 2016). Etienna described the beauty that she saw and experienced as people came together in ethical relationality; the humans and the more-than-human-beings. Living and learning the Cree concepts of wícihitowin and wahkohtowin has been a small but important step in decolonizing education.

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