

## Awakening Indigenous Knowledge: Perspectives and Experiences of Indigenous Early Childhood Education Diploma Students

### L'éveil des connaissances autochtones : perspectives et expériences d'étudiants autochtones au diplôme d'éducation à la petite enfance

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Article abstract

We draw on a focus group discussion amongst four Indigenous northern Ontario early childhood educators (ECEs) from an Indigenous postsecondary institution's ECE diploma program, to show the important contributions of programs offered by Indigenous postsecondary education institutes to Indigenous cultural revitalization. We are the Indigenous Elder, two instructors, and senior administrator of the program, as well as a non-Indigenous university professor. We argue for Indigenous community-generated curricula that embody local Indigenous cultural knowledge, values, and practices, drawing on themes arising from analysis of focus group data: participants felt that they brought limited knowledge of their Indigenous language and culture to their program, and participants experienced an awakening of Indigenous knowledge through their participation in Indigenous practices outside the core curriculum.



# AWAKENING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE: PERSPECTIVES AND EXPERIENCES OF INDIGENOUS EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION DIPLOMA STUDENTS

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**ABSTRACT.** We show the important contributions of programs offered by Indigenous postsecondary education institutes to Indigenous cultural revitalization, drawing on a focus group discussion amongst four Indigenous early childhood educators (ECEs) from an Indigenous postsecondary institution's ECE diploma program in northern Ontario. As co-authors, we are the Indigenous Elder, two of the instructors, and the senior administrator of the program along with the non-Indigenous university professor. We argue for Indigenous community-generated curricula that embody local Indigenous cultural knowledge, values, and practices, drawing on themes arising from analysis of focus group data. Participants felt that they brought limited knowledge of their Indigenous language and culture to their program, and participants experienced an awakening of Indigenous knowledge through their participation in Indigenous practices outside the core curriculum.

**L'ÉVEIL DES CONNAISSANCES AUTOCHTONES : PERSPECTIVES ET EXPÉRIENCES  
D'ÉTUDIANTS AUTOCHTONES AU DIPLÔME D'ÉDUCATION À LA PETITE ENFANCE**

**RÉSUMÉ.** Nous présentons les contributions importantes des programmes offerts par les établissements d'enseignement postsecondaire autochtones à la revitalisation culturelle autochtone, en nous appuyant sur une discussion de groupe entre quatre éducateurs de la petite enfance (ÉPE) autochtones du programme menant à un diplôme en ÉPE d'un établissement postsecondaire autochtone située dans le nord de l'Ontario. En tant que co-auteurs, nous sommes l'aîné autochtone, deux instructeurs, l'administrateur principal du programme ainsi que le professeur d'université non autochtone. Nous préconisons les programmes d'études générés par la communauté autochtone qui incarnent les connaissances, les valeurs et les pratiques culturelles autochtones locales, tout en s'appuyant sur les thèmes découlant de l'analyse des données des groupes de discussion. Les participants ont estimé qu'ils avaient apporté une connaissance limitée de leur langue et de leur culture autochtones à leur programme, et les participants ont connu un éveil des connaissances autochtones grâce à leur participation dans des pratiques autochtones hors du curriculum de base.

A meta-analysis of 49 research studies conducted between 1980 and 2015 shows a relationship between teacher educational attainment and quality of early childhood education (Manning et al., 2019). This body of research supports legislative changes regulating early childhood education made in the Canadian province of Ontario over the past 15 years. Implemented through the Early Childhood Educators Act (ECEA) and the Child Care and Early Years Act (CCEYA) (Government of Ontario, 2007, 2014), these changes include new definitions of professional practice, the creation of a regulatory body (the College of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario [CECE]), the requirement that educators working in Ontario must obtain the status of Registered Early Childhood Educator (RECE), and the stipulation that they must remain in good standing with the CECE (Government of Ontario, 2014).

As we show in this paper, the mandated requirements for formal qualifications from accredited early childhood diploma programs have opened possibilities for northern Ontario Indigenous early childhood educators (hereafter ECEs), their families, and their communities to provide enhanced early childhood care. These same requirements have also created hardships for northern Indigenous early years centres and their staff. With the goals of enhancing Indigenous children's academic success, their cultural awareness, and their positive sense of identity and belonging, Aboriginal Head Start programs offer early learning programs for children aged 18 months to 6 years of age in First Nation communities and in urban centres (Gunn et al., 2011). Prior to the implementation of Ontario's early childhood legislation, childcare workers in many Aboriginal Head Start programs and early learning centres in rural northern Ontario brought qualifications that did not include formal postsecondary training, which is the only pathway that can lead to provincially recognized credentials. To keep their licensed childcare programs, these northern Indigenous communities have had to find the means to fund ECEs' postsecondary program registration and the substantial expense of travel to and subsistence in distant urban communities. Hiring replacement staff during the weeks and months of the childcare workers' absence while taking the courses incurs additional costs.

The sizable geographic distance between Indigenous ECEs' communities and the urban communities housing ECE diploma programs have presented challenges for the ECEs and their families. The ECEs must either uproot their families to live in the urban centre or leave their families for months at a time while attending face-to-face classes and fulfilling practicum requirements in the designated urban early learning sites (Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada, 2017; Peterson et al., 2019; Preston, 2008; Preston et al., 2011).

#### OUR STUDY: PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The postsecondary institution that is central to our paper, Oshki-Pimache-O-Win, The Wenjack Education Institute, is an Ontario Indigenous institute. Formally

established in 2001, the institute was created by Nishnawbe Aski Nation, and it “represents the legitimate, socioeconomic, and political aspirations of its First Nation members of Northern Ontario to all levels of government in order to allow local self-determination while establishing spiritual, cultural, social and economic independence” (Nishnawbe Aski Nation, 2020, np). The mandate of Oshki-Pimache-O-Win, The Wenjack Education Institute (hereafter Oshki-Wenjack), is to provide postsecondary training to Indigenous students living in remote northern Ontario communities. Oshki-Wenjack works with First Nation communities to build capacity in health, education, and economics to support Indigenous self-determination (Hodson et al., 2019). In 2007, Oshki-Wenjack created partnerships with non-Indigenous colleges and universities to offer accredited postsecondary programs. One of those programs was an ECE diploma program that serves Indigenous ECEs in northern Ontario. At the time this research was conducted and as we write our report of the research, Oshki-Wenjack was not accredited to offer its own ECE diploma program. Presently, it partners with a mainstream college to deliver an ECE program; however, the college’s program offers little flexibility for Oshki-Wenjack to fulfill its mandate in providing Indigenous early learning knowledges and pedagogies (Battiste, 2008; Styres, 2017) within the course syllabus.

Four of the authors of this paper work or have worked in Oshki-Wenjack’s ECE diploma program. Lori was the program coordinator and later the field practicum advisor. During that time, she designed curriculum, assessment practices, and advancement and evaluation strategies in partnership with the affiliate college staff and Oshki-Wenjack instructors. She also taught core ECE courses and supported field practicum advisors as part of her coordinator role. Eugema has been a part-time instructor in the Oshki-Wenjack program for the past four years while also serving as the RECE supervisor in a local Aboriginal Head Start program. Brenda is an Indigenous Elder who has provided support for students and staff at Oshki-Wenjack for 12 years. She also teaches classes in the Indigenous Wellness and Addictions Prevention Program every year. Brenda has provided cultural and spiritual services, including traditional therapy and traditional healing, for 29 years as a registered social worker in the larger community. Kim is the former academic director responsible for the ECE diploma program.

Participants in a partnership project that aims to develop approaches, principles, and resources to support young children’s language and writing and their teachers’ and ECEs’ professional learning, we designed a mini-research project examining the role of Oshki-Wenjack’s ECE diploma program in supporting our students’ work with children to revitalize the communities’ Indigenous languages and cultures. We worked with Shelley, a faculty of education professor who is the principal investigator of the larger SSHRC-funded partnership project, to design research that would inform our teaching and the ECE diploma program.

We believe our findings will be important to faculty in Oshki-Wenjack's ECE diploma program and that they will also contribute to broader conversations about the postsecondary education of Indigenous ECEs in Canada. We highlight the experiences and perspectives of rural and remote northern Indigenous ECEs, who have an important role to play in reconciliation but whose voices are often not heard in such conversations.

The research questions guiding our study were:

1. What role has the Oshki-Wenjack's ECE diploma program played in supporting northern Indigenous ECEs' implementation of culturally sensitive curriculum in their Aboriginal Head Start and other early learning settings?
2. What challenges do ECEs face in their implementation of Indigenous-focused early learning curricula?

In this paper, we use focus group data to argue that the disruption in the generational passing-on of cultural knowledge makes Indigenous-centered ECE diploma programs within Indigenous institutions critically important. Through their daily interactions with children in their northern Indigenous communities, Indigenous ECEs have a significant role to play in connecting children to their cultures, languages, and histories. Indigenous knowledge-based ECE training has great potential to position Indigenous ECEs at the forefront of initiatives responding to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's (2015) Calls to Action, including Education #12 on developing culturally appropriate early childhood education programs for Aboriginal families, and Education for Reconciliation #62 on providing the necessary funding to postsecondary institutions to educate teachers on how to integrate Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into classrooms. The research we report in this paper underscores the need for Indigenous ECE diploma programs within Indigenous institutions and may be used to inform program development that is underway.

#### **NEED FOR INDIGENOUS-CENTRED ECE DIPLOMA PROGRAMS**

The financial, emotional, and childcare challenges faced by northern Indigenous ECEs, their families, and communities add to the ongoing struggle of all Indigenous peoples in Canada to “unravel the effects of generations of exploitation, violence, marginalization, powerlessness, and enforced cultural imperialism on Aboriginal knowledge and peoples” (Battiste, 2013, p. 25). Indigenous peoples need to seek out what will work best for healing within their own communities. The history of relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada has been dominated by assimilative educational policies and practices, which have led to the marginalization of Indigenous languages, cultures, and ways of teaching and interacting with children.

Requirements for formal postsecondary training follow Eurocentric curricula and standards and thus continue assimilative practices to the present day. While participating in diploma programs that reify European pedagogies, knowledge, and ECE identities, Indigenous ECEs are taught to “distrust their Indigenous knowledge systems, their elders’ wisdom, and their own inner learning spirit” (Battiste, 2013, p. 24). There is a profound disconnect between Indigenous ECEs’ life experiences and world views and Eurocentric diploma programs that perpetuate dominant views of what an ECE should be and do. Additionally, lack of consideration of the everyday hardships that northern Indigenous ECEs experience in fulfilling legislative mandates for postsecondary training perpetuates the inequities that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s (2015) Calls to Action decry as counter to the goal of reconciliation and, as supported by the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), achieving “the minimum standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of the Indigenous peoples” (p. 28).

Eurocentric postsecondary programs exacerbate Indigenous language and knowledge loss as a result of many decades of forced institutionalization of Indigenous children. Separated from their families while in residential schools, generations of Indigenous children were taught by non-Indigenous teachers. Teachers punished children for speaking their languages and made children feel ashamed of who they were (Anuik et al., 2010; Battiste & Henderson, 2009; Makokis, 2010; Sam, 2019). The outcome has been “intergenerational trauma and stress compounded by poverty, low cultural continuity, and lack of adequate education” (Sam, 2019, p. 12). Many Indigenous parents and ECEs of today are not confident in their knowledge of their communities’ culture, traditions, values, and languages. They feel ill-prepared to pass on traditional knowledge to children and be part of language and culture revitalization initiatives (Hare, 2011; Hare & Anderson, 2010; Peterson et al., 2019). ECEs and parents look to Elders for guidance to reconnect with their identities and develop trust. Elders draw on Indigenous knowledges to support family and community members in healing and undoing the harm caused by church-administered residential schools.

Some efforts have been made to respond to calls for action on the provision of culturally appropriate postsecondary programs for Indigenous students. For example, the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (2018) instituted and then updated vocational learning outcome (VLO) #11 of the Early Childhood Education Program. The goal of VLO #11 is that postsecondary students will “plan, implement and evaluate Aboriginal early learning curriculum, programs and environments that promote children’s, families’ and communities’ knowledge of and respect for Aboriginal peoples and their cultures.” Yet, the CCEYA (Government of Ontario, 2014) does not include a requirement that ECE diploma programs offered in the province fulfill this standard, and minimal attention is paid to VLO #11 in non-Indigenous postsecondary institutions offering ECE diploma programs.

Indigenous postsecondary institutes do integrate VLO #11 into their ECE diploma programs. At this time, however, these programs are offered in partnership with non-Indigenous postsecondary institutions, such as the Binoojiingyag Kinooaadwin Early Childhood Education Program offered at the Anishinabek Education Institute (AEI) in partnership with St. Clair College. The same is true of the AEI ECE diploma program, which offers courses on Indigenous cultures and practices such as Introduction to Native Studies and Native Cultural Expression, and which addresses VLO #11 (Anishinabek Educational Institute, 2018). Similarly, Anishinaabemowin ECE is offered at Kenjgewin Teg Education Institute (KTEI), an Indigenous institute, in partnership with Canadore College. Developed in 2016, this program infuses ECE fundamentals with Anishinaabe teachings, values, and world views. It is designed “to prepare proficient Ojibwe language speakers as early childhood educators in this highly specialized Anishinaabe immersion early childhood education program” (Kenjgewin Teg, 2019, p. 1). Both Indigenous ECE diploma programs mentioned above have embedded Indigenous community-generated curriculum with local and cultural knowledge, values, and practices. The core accredited program of Canadore College in North Bay, Ontario, is also offered at Indigenous postsecondary institutions through a partnership arrangement. These institutions include First Nation Technical Institute (FNTI), located in Parry Sound, with a branch campus in Cochrane; and Seven Generations Education Institute, located in Kenora, with a branch campus in Fort Frances. Although Canadore College’s program does not include Indigenous content, the Indigenous institutions’ programs include Indigenous Elders and educators in the programming and offer an environment that is responsive to students’ Indigenous cultures.

In 2017, in response to long-standing calls by Indigenous postsecondary institutions for greater autonomy to provide programs that are more inclusive of Indigenous cultures, languages, and worldviews, the Ontario government passed the Indigenous Institute Act (IIA) (Government of Ontario, 2017) to create core funding support for the nine Indigenous postsecondary institutes in Ontario. Over time, the goal is to build a robust sector that can offer a suite of new programs designed by and for Indigenous communities. This legislation created the Indigenous Advanced Education and Skills Council (IAESC), which oversees Indigenous institutions as they create their own diplomas, certificates, and degrees. The IAESC is working toward releasing program review handbooks and submission guidelines for Indigenous Institutes that are ready to deliver ECE programs in their communities. These handbooks will reflect the program-level standards that the IAESC is developing to ensure that ECE programs respond to Indigenous communities’ needs and result in transferable credentials across Ontario’s postsecondary education and training system. Within this structure, the Indigenous Institute Quality Assessment Board (IIQAB) sets standards, reviews proposed programs, and makes recommendations for accreditation. The IIQAB operates within the Ontario Indigenous postsecondary accreditation body, the IAESC.

Canadore College recognizes the need for this autonomy. Mary Wabano, director of Canadore College's First Peoples' Centre and associate dean of Indigenous Studies at the time, described Indigenous postsecondary institutions as equal and complementary pillars to the colleges and the Ministry of Advanced Education and Training / Ministry of Colleges and Universities in Ontario. Wabano has promised support for Indigenous institutions' transition to independent ECE diploma programs (Charette, 2019).

In the following sections, we review literature on Indigenous pedagogies and knowledge (Battiste, 2008; Styres, 2017; Toulouse, 2016), report on our research methods and findings, and discuss implications for ECE diploma programs that aim to respond to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (2015) Calls to Action.

## INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND PEDAGOGIES

Indigenous knowledge is a knowledge system that is distinct from Eurocentric knowledge. Closely tied to place, Indigenous knowledge varies across Indigenous peoples, as each nation or community embodies their own ways of being and relationships with the land and other living things within their local environment (Ball & Simpkins, 2004). Relationality with the natural environment and land is understood in terms of humans and the natural world being "cohabitants of a shared realm, reflecting an ethic of care and respect for the more-than-human world as something to which humans are privileged to be in relation with" (Ritchie, 2012, p. 86), rather than as a binary and hierarchical relationship that positions humans as dominant over nature. Land and community are knowledge sources (Styres, 2017). Indigenous language and cultural knowledge are also inseparable, as each language provides "a unique world-view and culture complex, mirroring the manner in which a speech community has resolved its problems in dealing with the world, and has formulated its thinking, its system of philosophy and understanding of the world around it" (Wurm, 2001, p. 13). Language "gives structure to Indigenous knowledge" (Hare, 2011, p. 392). Symbolic and coming from an oral tradition, Indigenous knowledge is "typically embedded in the cumulative experiences and teachings of Indigenous peoples rather than in a library or in journals of applied research" (Battiste, 2008, p. 87).

Elders and Knowledge Keepers, whose many years of living position them to be educators, have a responsibility for ensuring that the knowledge of their communities is passed on to new generations (Makokis, 2010). Additionally, parents and extended family are important sources of Indigenous knowledge. Pedagogies associated with Indigenous knowledge include direct experience with natural phenomena and intergenerational sharing of knowledge through story, performance, and demonstration (Hare, 2011). Teaching and learning processes are holistic and narrative-based, as stories are a primary medium for



conveying Indigenous knowledge (Castellano, 2000; Hare, 2011). Toulouse's (2016) understanding of Indigenous education guides our research:

What matters to Indigenous peoples in education is that children, youth, adults, and Elders have the opportunity to develop their gifts in a respectful space ... It is about fostering identity, facilitating well-being, connecting to the land, honouring language, infusing with teachings and recognizing the inherent right to self-determination. Living a good life is what matters. (p. 2)

## **METHODS**

Before we begin our description of the methods, we wish to acknowledge that our knowledge gathering and sharing is taking place on the ancestral land of First Nations who have signed treaties in good faith, expecting that all Canadians would honour our responsibilities regarding the education of Indigenous children in ways that allow them to flourish in Indigenous and non-Indigenous settings. We hope that our research contributes to the fulfillment of these responsibilities.

In the following paragraphs, we provide contextual information about Oshki-Wenjack's ECE diploma program and participating ECE students in the program before outlining our data collection and analysis methods.

### **OSHKI-WENJACK'S EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION DIPLOMA PROGRAM**

Approximately 100 Indigenous ECEs currently employed in early learning centres in their First Nation communities across northwestern Ontario have received their ECE diplomas from Oshki-Wenjack since the first offering of the ECE diploma program in 2008. The ECE student cohorts consist of 15 to 20 students on average. ECE faculty are subject experts, many with Indigenous heritage, and they also have a background in ECE.

In each of five semesters, the program uses a "blended model" of two on-campus, face-to-face sessions for two weeks at a time, with 11 weeks of synchronous e-learning evening classes, which allows ECEs to return to their communities and continue to work at their early learning centres while completing their course work for the semester. Students take face-to-face classes for two weeks at the beginning (weeks 1-2) and mid-point (weeks 8-9) of each 15-week semester. Classes start on a Saturday and run from 8:30 a.m. until 8:30 p.m. for 14 days in a row without a day off. The retention record for ECE students to date is high, which is a direct outcome of the blended delivery model to accommodate the communities' and learners' needs.

The ECE diploma program follows the accrediting partner college's curriculum, which aligns with the 10 ECE program vocational learning outcomes mandated by provincial statutes:

- Students take 29 courses over 20 months (five semesters) of study.
- Most courses teach core early childhood subjects.

Four courses meet field placement requirements (e.g., 500 hours with nine weeks in urban early learning settings and five weeks in students' Indigenous communities' early learning settings). Since its inception, and in partnership with a non-Indigenous postsecondary institution with an Aboriginal ECE program that did include VOC #11, Oshki-Wenjack's ECE diploma program goals have included heightening and expanding on the Indigenous cultural knowledge that ECEs bring from their homes and communities. To fulfill this goal, Oshki-Wenjack instructors encourage ECEs to integrate their Indigenous cultural knowledge, teachings, and practices at every opportunity in their interactions with young children in early learning centres. They also attempt to incorporate land-based knowledge in all courses. In the outdoor education course, for example, students explore the bush in a natural area close to the Oshki-Wenjack campus and then reflect on what they feel connected to while outdoors. Students gather rocks, plants, and other natural items for an assignment that involves creating a land-based cultural activity for young children.

Oshki-Wenjack has a campus Indigenous Elder, Brenda. Students' relationship with her is critical to their Indigenous cultural learning. She acknowledges where each student is in their journey, preparing a safe environment for their learning. In the cultural room, Elder Brenda ensures that students have access to all four Indigenous medicines: Sage, Sweetgrass, Tobacco, and Cedar. The cultural room is also a safe and quiet place for reflection and rest. On Monday mornings and Friday afternoons, Elder Brenda conducts a smudging ceremony for students to begin and end the week. A cleaning ceremony of purification smudging involves the four common medicines, Sage, Sweetgrass, Tobacco, and Cedar, which are burned together to create smoke that supports emotional wellbeing. Students and faculty can request one-on-one time with Elder Brenda or ask her to facilitate a sharing circle to help work through issues with others. She uses sharing circles, ceremonies, and shared stories to support students' discoveries of Indigenous knowledge and pedagogies, and to support their creation of strong, positive Indigenous identities. She works with instructors to provide teachings for students during regularly scheduled classes and while students are on field trips.

Field placements are in urban early learning centres in Thunder Bay. Staff setting up the placements are aware of cultural differences between expectations and practices of urban non-Indigenous centres and those in small, remote Indigenous communities. They are also aware of the challenges of urban life, such as navigating city transit, which ECEs experience when moving from their remote rural communities to Thunder Bay. Knowing that the ECE field placement supervisors who work in the urban centres may be unaware of life and cultural perspectives of ECE diploma students, Oshki-Wenjack staff members

provide guidance in interpreting the Indigenous ECE students' interactions in the placement centres. Non-Indigenous mentor ECEs in urban early learning placements have been known to form evaluative impressions of the Indigenous ECE students as not engaging sufficiently with children, for example. Mentor ECEs also talk about expectations that they will learn about Indigenous ways of interacting with children from the ECE students they mentor.

Recognizing the social and cultural differences between life in the ECEs' northern Indigenous communities and in the urban centres as well as the challenges of being separated from extended family, Oshki-Wenjack instructors work with students with difficulties to create plans that promote student success. Regular faculty meetings and ongoing email and phone communication amongst instructors are meant to ensure that students have support across the program. Oshki-Wenjack's ECE diploma program staff recognize that northwestern Ontario is a vast region where every Indigenous community has its own cultural teachings and ways of teaching children. Some communities have been able to pass their language and traditional practices from one generation to another, but many others have been unable to do so because of assimilative government practices. As a result, ECEs come to the program with a range of knowledge and experience of their culture and language.

In 2016, due to funding cuts, Oshki-Wenjack was forced to change its college affiliation to Canadore College, which does not share Oshki-Wenjack's emphasis on VOC #11. Although Oshki-Wenjack instructors continue to try to incorporate Indigenous teachings and use land-based pedagogy throughout the program, most of the teachings and activities are now incorporated outside class time; for instance, Oshki-Wenjack's Elder Brenda, staff, and instructors host potluck seasonal feasts with traditional Indigenous food for students and their families. Additionally, ECE students do regular outings onto the land with Elder Brenda and receive teachings.

## RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS, DATA COLLECTION, AND ANALYSIS

Between classes in the final week of the on-site phase of the program, four of the ECE students in Oshki-Wenjack's diploma program participated in a one-hour focus group discussion. All participants are female. Three live in their Anishnaabek First Nation communities in northwestern Ontario. Two communities are accessible by road, and one is accessible only by air transportation or on winter roads when lakes freeze over. The population of the three participants' communities ranges from approximately 200 to 700 people. The communities all have a local elementary school and either a licenced childcare centre or an Aboriginal Head Start Program. The fourth participant is Métis and resides in a northern non-Indigenous urban community. All four participants speak English as their mother tongue. They have 5–15 years of experience as ECEs.

Shelley facilitated the conversation to avoid a conflict of interest between students and their instructors, Eugema and Lori. Only she knows the identities of participants, as the ECEs chose pseudonyms at the beginning of the focus group discussion that were then used in the transcripts.

The focus group discussion was audio-recorded with participants' permission and transcribed by an external transcriber who works with Shelley. Four questions framed the discussion:

1. How do you integrate your community's Indigenous culture and language in your Aboriginal Head Start's or early learning centre's program?
2. How have your Oshki-Wenjack ECE diploma program's classroom and other experiences supported you in integrating Indigenous culture and language in your program?
3. What other supports have you received to be able to do this?
4. What other kinds of support would be helpful to you to integrate Indigenous culture and language in your programs?

Eugema, Lori, and Shelley used inductive methods (Patton, 2015) to analyze the focus group transcript. In the process, we asked questions such as "What does this tell me about participants' experiences integrating Indigenous knowledge and language in their early childhood contexts?" in our "search for meaning" (Patton, 2015, p. 570) in the ECEs' responses to the questions. We first identified meaningful units in the transcripts, which we define as phrases or sentences that describe experiences, perspectives, and practices related to the research questions. Each of us then analyzed each meaningful unit in the transcripts individually.

We met virtually via Zoom to talk about the themes that emerged from our initial analysis and generated an initial set of five themes. Further discussion about overlaps among the themes resulted in our agreement on two overarching themes: (1) Indigenous knowledge is being awakened through ECE involvement in the Oshki-Wenjack ECE diploma program, and (2) participating ECEs feel they have an inadequate knowledge of land-based understandings and their Indigenous community's language. These feelings are amplified when in practicum placements because non-Indigenous supervisors are unaware of the outcome of a long history of assimilative practices that have led to loss of Indigenous language and culture. Each theme addresses one of our research questions and is used to organize our findings.

## FINDINGS

Participating ECEs talked about an awakening of their Indigenous knowledge through their experiences in the Oshki-Wenjack ECE diploma program. They highlighted their Indigenous cultural learning as the biggest contribution of the program to their professional and personal growth. It seemed that the

more the ECE students learned, the more they became aware of the huge gaps in their formal schooling, in terms of providing knowledge about the historical relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada. Elder Brenda observed that participants were experiencing a loss and finding themselves in a grieving process. Additionally, the ECE students felt frustrated that their parents' experiences in residential schools and with other assimilationist practices had robbed them of intergenerational teachings that are an integral part of Indigenous pedagogies. We discuss these themes further in the following sections.

#### **OSHKI-WENJACK PROGRAM CONTRIBUTIONS: INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE IS BEING AWAKENED**

As explained previously, Elder Brenda is on campus to offer cultural teachings, to lead in traditional ceremonies, and to provide guidance throughout the program. Participating ECEs talked about their experiences with Elder Brenda as being fundamental to their learning and transformational in their work with children during field experiences. For some, sitting with Elder Brenda in a traditional ceremony marked their first experience of learning from an Indigenous Elder. Dora, for example, explained that her first experience with smudging ceremonies and sharing circles was at Oshki-Wenjack: "I never saw that growing up and I never saw my parents doing that either ... so it was a powerful learning experience for me." She said that she would take "those teachings to my classroom when I go back to my community."

For other students, being in the presence of Elder Brenda often evoked recollections of childhood experiences or provided a deeper understanding of family practices connected to their cultural ways of knowing. Sarah recalled being out on the land as a child, but she had not realized how this experience could be a valuable learning experience for children in her early childhood setting: "It was eye-opening—something that you wouldn't even think of. We could bring the children outside to learn with us too." Morning Star explained the important learning from the experience of being outdoors in the bush with Elder Brenda: "That connection to Mother Earth. I remember Brenda picking up some stones, and then saying, 'Even just holding something like this from the ground, Mother Earth, there's a connection.'" She went on to say that she had learned that it was important when picking up "something from the Mother Earth, then you give it back by using tobacco." Morning Star continued her thought process of relating her customs to what Elder Brenda had told her: "We do that every Christmas. That was so neat when I learned that. During Christmas we'll put down some tobacco. It's like an offering of thanks." Princess Jewel also gained a deeper understanding of her family's practices: "I'm finally learning now and I've always wanted to know. I've been to pow wows with my dad growing up, but I've never known about the seven teachings. So, I'm still learning." In the Indigenous communities whose ECEs attend the Oshki-Wenjack program, the

seven teachings are the seven Grandfather teachings used to support a good life: Love, Respect, Courage, Honesty, Wisdom, Humility, and Truth (Benton-Benai, 2010). It was clear to Elder Brenda that participants were connecting to who they are as Indigenous people.

Participants talked about coming to understand, through conversations in class with peers and instructors as well as through their time with Elder Brenda, that they had actually learned a great deal of traditional knowledge while growing up—more than they knew. They had learned from parents, as well as from extended family members and others in their northern communities through activities such as going fishing with family members. They recalled teachings and experiences on the land with older community and family members and annual events in their communities. Princess Jewel started the conversation: “We have culture weeks at times, where they go, where other people take them, like, ice fishing, net fishing, on the boat, like, hunting and fishing, with parents’ consent, of course.” Morning Star continued by describing what happens during Traditional Week in her community: “[It] is in the fall and at the end of the year. Whether you’re an employee or a child, you’re exempted from school for a full week; taking time off to go hunting. Normally, there are big groups at a certain place that go out hunting or camping.” She talked about the integration of community Traditional / Culture weeks into formal school programs as one of her community’s initiatives to reverse the generations of loss of Indigenous culture due to mainstream assimilationist educational policies.

Participants talked about the Indigenous cultural practices that children learned while going on the land with family members and with the teacher of a cultural class that was part of the kindergarten program in their community. Morning Star, for example, said:

In my school, we have a native language teacher. So, when she’s in the classroom, I work alongside with her, and I help her especially with getting the kids encouraged with doing stuff. I learn a lot from the native language teacher. We also have cultural class where the kids and I learn a lot through snaring, having fires, being able to bring animals in, to teach about like hunting, like that.

Princess Jewel also included cultural learning in the natural environment in her early childhood program. She explained: “We take the kids outside and the teachers or ECEs will set up the snares, for example, rabbit snares.”

Participating ECEs reflected on how they had learned from each other about the different cultural practices and traditional stories of Indigenous communities across northwestern Ontario, either informally through conversation, or more formally through class presentations. Morning Star stated, “I noticed that being in class, and people would share their stories and I would think, ‘Oh I heard that in my community.’” Many of the participants explained that some of the stories from other communities were very familiar, as they were variations of stories

from their own communities. Participants said that experiencing the variations firsthand emphasized how important it was for them to “teach about different Indigenous cultures,” as Morning Star explained.

Participating ECEs talked about the pride they felt in their knowledge of Indigenous practices in their practicum placements in the final term of the ECE diploma program. Lori knows that there is a recent emphasis in the early learning centres participating in the placement program to infuse Indigenous knowledge into mainstream curricula. In their focus group conversation, participating ECEs described the Indigenous practices, such as cooking bannock, that they had been asked to facilitate in their placement settings. They were happy to share their Indigenous knowledge with non-Indigenous students and placement supervisors. Sarah described her experiences as she led a sharing circle using a talking stick:

Nobody talked when others were talking. The students showed respect and all that—like if somebody’s speaking, you don’t say anything. Like, you listen to your grandparents. And the students all got it. Their teacher couldn’t even believe it, like afterwards when she talked to me. I almost had tears in my eyes. It was touching.

Participating ECEs said that the awakening of their funds of knowledge (Moll & Gonzalez, 2004) and the authorization of their Indigenous knowledge as official knowledge in their ECE diploma program was the most valuable part of their ECE diploma experience. As described in the next section, the awakening through traditional pedagogies of intergenerational sharing was critical to their overcoming feelings of frustration at being deprived of access to their communities’ Indigenous knowledge.

#### FEELINGS OF FRUSTRATION: LIMITED KNOWLEDGE OF INDIGENOUS CULTURE AND LANGUAGE, AND OF CANADIAN HISTORY OF RELATIONSHIPS WITH INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Participating ECEs talked about having limited knowledge of their community’s Indigenous language and world views because of the influence of Christianity and mainstream cultural and spiritual practices that marginalized Indigenous spirituality and knowledge within their communities. Princess Jewel explained that she did not experience traditional spiritual practices, such as pow wows, while growing up, and she did not learn about the Seven Grandfather Teachings (Benton-Benai, 2010) because “they were frowned upon” in her First Nation community. Dora explained that although she did learn the Teachings, they were not identified as coming from her Indigenous community’s culture, but rather as coming from the Christian Bible. Elder Brenda reminds us that it is good to know where knowledge comes from, as we can use the knowledge to compare. We support the learning of Indigenous knowledges and must ensure that we allow space for the systems and teachings alongside western knowledges.

Sarah talked about loss of the Indigenous language that her mother had spoken in her home. She explained, “After I left home, I went with an English man and never spoke it. And it’s awful that I lost it. I want to get it back. I’ve been getting some of it back.” Dora grew up speaking Oji-Cree, but having lived in the English-dominant environment of an urban centre for 20 years, she is now in a position where she says, “I’m forgetting my language. I have to think about it.” She explained:

At first when I go visit my parents [who speak her Indigenous language], I have a hard time. When I say things in a different way, my mom smiles at me [Dora laughs]. That’s how I know I’m not saying it in the right way. But eventually, when I’m staying there for about two weeks, I pick up the words ... When I go to the Reserve, I don’t want to get embarrassed that I don’t understand my language. Because there are times they would laugh at how I say things, like I say it backwards [using English language syntax].”

Princess Jewel also talked of losing the Indigenous language that she had spoken at home until she went to daycare. She explained, “That’s where we would talk English. Until I went to daycare, we only spoke my Indigenous language at home. But we lost our language in school.”

Their own limited knowledge, particularly of their Indigenous languages, put constraints on what participating ECEs could teach. The content tended to be limited to naming animals and colours in the community’s Indigenous language. They often used mainstream teaching approaches, such as putting up posters with the labels next to pictures, providing pictures for children to colour, using puppets, or reading books that include the Indigenous words for the animals or other concepts. Princess Jewel also described one of the morning routines that she carried out in her classroom: “Every morning you count to 10 in English and in our native language. And you have [the Indigenous and English language words and numbers] displayed in your classroom, too.” Some of the classroom activities, however, did include traditional Indigenous practices, such as sharing circles and doing beadwork, as in Princess Jewel’s classroom, for example.

Participants were also frustrated that they had not learned about the history of assimilation and colonization of Indigenous peoples. Morning Star said, “the effects of what happened in residential schools; the intergenerational trauma. That is an important thing of the past that should be passed on to our future, our youth.” She said that the knowledge she gained about the impact of residential schools “makes me want to break the cycle” by teaching children she works with about their Indigenous culture, whether they are in their Indigenous communities or in urban centres.

Participating ECEs observed that, although they have made the connections, many Indigenous children in their early years centres “need to know about their culture” because they are not experiencing Indigenous ways at home. Participants explained that they were determined to draw upon the Indigenous knowledge



that had been awakened and their experiences in the Oshki-Wenjack diploma program to ensure that early childhood learning centres provided abundant opportunities for young Indigenous children to learn their communities' traditional culture and language.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The requirement for ECEs working in early learning centres in Ontario to have completed an accredited ECE diploma program, legislated in The Child Care and Early Years Act (Government of Ontario, 2014), has a robust research foundation (Manning et al., 2019). Researchers have found that higher levels of formal postsecondary education of teachers and ECEs are often associated with high-quality early learning programs in mainstream early childhood contexts (Vu et al., 2008). Sociocultural factors add a layer of complexity that needs to be taken into consideration when legislators make changes that have an impact on communities and early years centres and their staff across such a vast and diverse province such as Ontario. As Indigenous ECEs participating in our focus group study have observed, completing the mandatory training has been a valuable learning experience. They explained that the most important benefits, however, have not been from the mainstream early childhood curriculum, but rather from the Indigenous cultural knowledge awakening and learning that they experienced. Participants' assessment of the value of their ECE diploma experiences are relevant to conversations about potential relationships between higher educational attainment and quality of early learning environments (Manning et al., 2019). ECEs who share children's cultural and linguistic backgrounds are often more effective in supporting the children's learning than those more highly qualified ECEs who are unfamiliar with the community's culture.

Participating ECEs experienced a cultural awakening in the Oshki-Wenjack ECE diploma program despite its core curriculum being based on a program from an affiliated mainstream college where VOC #11 is absent. Oshki-Wenjack ECE diploma faculty have had to be creative in creating spaces for ECEs to access Indigenous cultural practices outside the accredited program. Faculty have honoured the ECEs' lived experiences and the holistic, land-based pedagogies of their Indigenous communities by creating space for them as part of the unofficial curriculum. Participating ECEs identified this unofficial curriculum as being most significant to their learning.

Participating ECEs highlighted Elder Brenda's knowledge, wisdom, and experience as being particularly important to their learning. Their experiences underscore what Sutherland and Swayze (2012) have asserted regarding the critical role played by Elders in the next generation's learning: Elders provide the knowledge that was lost due to generations of children attending residential schools rather than learning alongside extended family and community members. The Elders are critical to "strengthening Aboriginal pride and kinship" (p. 90).

As Elder Brenda explains, “Wisdom is already in us. An awakening can occur in our growth and development when education is driven by authentic and spiritual values. This learning can intersect with more formally acquired knowledge.”

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR ECE DIPLOMA PROGRAMS FOR INDIGENOUS ECES

Recognizing that our sample size is small and warrants caution in making broad calls for changes to postsecondary education in Ontario, we propose that our research underscores the need to make VOC #11 mandatory for all postsecondary programs in Ontario, especially for programs within Indigenous educational institutions. We suggest that, in keeping with the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015), Indigenous knowledge, culture, and stories of historical relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, including the generational outcomes from assimilative practices such as residential schools and Eurocentric school curricula, should be infused in ECE diploma programs offered to Indigenous ECEs.

Indigenous postsecondary institutions offering the diploma program should have greater autonomy over their programs. As long as they are beholden to partner with non-Indigenous institutions for use of accredited program structures and curriculum, they will be restricted in creating inclusive, community-generated curriculum that embodies local Indigenous cultural knowledge, values, and practices. Such a curriculum will prepare ECEs to serve the needs and interests of the children and families in their communities now and in the future. Our research findings support realigning the Ontario Qualifications Framework to include policies, procedures, and learning outcomes that are consistent with local Indigenous community practices.

Concretizing the intentions of the Indigenous Institutes Act will depend on supporting the professional and financial capacities of Indigenous postsecondary institutions. It will require conversations with Indigenous Elders, leaders, and Knowledge Keepers, as well as ECEs and community members, about creating culturally responsive programs. These voices, seldom heard in policy and program deliberations, are needed to understand the complicated past and to bring about transformation for a more equitable future (Sam, 2019). As the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) makes clear, reconciliation in Canada cannot take place without these voices.

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