

# Living the Good Life: A Conversation about Well-being, Education, and Culture

Trudy Cardinal, Louise Lambert and Sandra Lamouche

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Article abstract

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# *Living the Good Life: A Conversation about Well-being, Education, and Culture*

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T. CARDINAL

University of Alberta, Canada

L. LAMBERT

Canadian University of Dubai, United Arab Emirates

S. LAMOUCHE

Trent University, Canada

*ABSTRACT: In this paper we engage in a conversation speaking from three different perspectives and discuss the ways literature and our personal life experiences can inform policy and practice in relation to the concepts of well-being, education, and culture. We gathered around a metaphorical kitchen table, bringing to it our life experiences, as well as the literature that informed our individual research programs (positive psychology, Indigenous world view, and narrative inquiry), and we began to unpack the questions: “What role does culture play in understanding and educating for well-being and why should an education system be concerned about it?”*

## **Introduction**

In this paper we engage in a conversation from three different perspectives to answer the question: “What role does culture play in understanding and educating for well-being and why should an education system be concerned about it?” We gathered around a metaphorical kitchen table, bringing to it our life experiences and the literature that informed our understanding. This paper begins with Louise’s experience as a Caucasian woman of Francophone heritage and her incorporation of positive psychology (Boehm & Lyubomirsky, 2009; Linley, Joseph, Harrington, & Wood, 2006; Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006) and positive education (Green, Oades, & Robinson, 2011). Sandra speaks from her knowing as an Indigenous woman and her knowledge of an Indigenous<sup>1</sup> worldview (Absolon, 2010; Hart, 2002, 2010; Little Bear, 2000; Simpson, 2011). Trudy responds from her perspective as a Cree/Métis scholar drawing on narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Caine, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and her doctoral research experience. We discuss the difficulties and importance of attending to well-being and culture in educational research and policy creation.

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<sup>1</sup> The terms Indigenous, Aboriginal and Native are used interchangeably throughout this article, depending on the context and the particular author speaking. Indigenous will be used when drawing on the work of particular scholars. Aboriginal is a term used by Alberta Education and refers to First Nations, Métis and Inuit. Native is another term Sandra uses to denote First Nations People; however many of the youth in Trudy’s research used it to speak in general of youth and families of Aboriginal ancestry whether they be First Nations, Métis or Inuit.

## ***Methodology***

As our goal was to share our storied experiences and consider how these stories shaped the views we, and others, held of ourselves, we drew on narrative inquiry methodology as a good option through which to understand and make sense of our topic (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). By sharing stories and conversing about and into our respective narratives, we attended to individual experiences, but also acknowledged that the bodies that lived through them were “always in relation, always in a social context” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 2); narrative inquiry thus reflects an ontological commitment to relationships (Clandinin & Murphy, 2009), helping us to pay attention to each other, honouring our diverse voices, and reminding us of our long-term relational responsibilities (Clandinin & Huber, 2002).

## ***Negotiating Entry into Conversation***

Trudy received the call for papers and saw an avenue for group collaboration with Sandra and Louise. Acknowledging that this would be a difficult task due to our diverse life and research experiences, there was nonetheless potential for greater understanding in attending to the tensions and bumps of our unfolding conversation. While Louise and Sandra were strangers, Trudy knew each and trusted that all could navigate the tensions in thoughtful and caring ways. Trudy knew Louise for about 7 years, through a relationship formed in a running group that carried on as they moved away and began their academic journeys. Trudy and Sandra are maternal cousins and, while they did not spend much time together as children, they followed each other’s graduate studies and worked together on an Aboriginal Young Women’s leadership program more recently, promising to co-write on important work like this.

The conversation began in July 2014 and continued over 5 months through email conversations and in the margins of our shared writing. As this was something new for us, the directions taken were constantly in a state of cooperational flux. We negotiated the abstract and clarified the question to which we wanted to respond, then moved into compiling the literature review from our separate perspectives while weaving in personal experience. In this way, we initiated the conversation and continued it across emails, swapping narratives and seeking feedback, responses, wonders, and comments to further the conversation and draw out each other’s understandings. This was not tension-free, as we needed to negotiate personal experience and differing worldviews, as well as work and family responsibilities. We also had to negotiate how to attend to the requirement of a traditional academic paper in a way that illustrated our living conversation.

## ***Conversational Travel***

As we gathered around a metaphorical kitchen table, we attempted, in response to each other’s writing, to travel to each other’s worlds with loving perception (Lugones, 1987); this, in contrast to arrogant perception, is the ability to identify, understand, and appreciate the worlds of others. The loving perception was critical to this work as it was this attribute that helped us to understand what it might be to be the other and what it might be to be ourselves in each other’s eyes. As noted earlier, Louise and Sandra were unknown to one another, while Sandra and Trudy shared an established relationship. In hindsight, bumping into one another’s narratives in this manner was perhaps not the best way to meet for the first time! Tensions and misunderstandings arose as each reacted and responded to the other, as well as to the other’s constructions of reality. Nonetheless, the understanding that emerged from this type of “‘world’-travelling”<sup>2</sup> (Lugones, 1987, p. 17) allowed us

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of world that Lugones speaks of may be a construction of a tiny portion of a particular society, inhabited by just a few people, in which some worlds are bigger than others. She further states that, “In a ‘world’ some of the inhabitants may not understand or hold the particular construction of them that

to construct ourselves and be constructed by others. This was particularly important for those of us who were at once within, in between, and outside mainstream culture. Thus, travelling to each other's worlds was necessary to attend to our personal stories and share them, as well as think about how this same complexity is lived out in schools.

### ***Louise: Positive Psychology***

Positive psychology is the study of what positively contributes to the human experience, fulfilling, in part, psychology's original mission of curing mental illness, identifying talent, and making the lives of people more satisfying (Boehm & Lyubomirsky, 2009; Linley, Joseph, Harrington, & Wood, 2006; Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006). An alternative to problem-focused psychology (Bolier et al., 2013), positive psychology redirects its inquiry towards an exploration of well-being and considers the ways in which individuals and communities can improve their quality of life (Della Fave, 2013; Rusk & Waters, 2013). How well-being is understood and expressed is also greatly influenced by culture (Joshnloo, 2013; Lambert D'raven & Pasha-Zaidi, 2014; Veenhoven, 2012), although it is often overlooked.

Positive education (Green, Oades, & Robinson, 2011) is an extension of positive psychology and focuses on the delivery of academics along with the application of skills to promote well-being in youth. In theory, schools are proposed as ideal environments to teach, practise, and develop social, emotional, moral, and intellectual skills (Norrish, Williams, O'Connor, & Robinson, 2013), although in reality, practice may well fall short of this ideal. The teaching of culture falls within this domain as it provides for the understandings, norms, and accepted behaviours through which to interpret and make meaning of the world (Guiso, Sapienza, & Zingales, 2006). It is only recently that, in my experience as a positive psychology researcher, I have begun to explore the influence of culture throughout my educational years and consider its impact on well-being.

The Francophone town where I grew up had French stop signs, rare in an Anglophone province, and I benefitted from attending a dual-track Francophone school where Anglophones had separate recesses, separate lunch hours, and separate classes. We had little contact and this created a cultural enclave around "them" and solidified our position as the majority. It was in this environment that I built an identity nurtured through historical and contemporary political figures, authors, singers, poets, and actors. The curriculum reflected this collective identity. Language arts were where I took pleasure in mastering my language, with its complex grammar and intricate verb tenses; its difficulty and need for diligence distinguished me from those who spoke English. We frequently benefitted from cultural exchange programs to Quebec. But, by high school, the language streams were merged. I felt different around Anglophones; they felt culturally diffused, part of the norm, and seemed to lack uniqueness. I delineated myself from others and made a point of speaking French, taking my place in the historical lineup where I felt entitled to my self-worth.

Achieving this positive cultural identity is considered, in youth and adulthood, a developmental milestone that spells adjustment and resilience (Neblett, Rivas-Drake, & Umaña-Taylor, 2012; Syed & Azmitia, 2010). Through the process of enculturation (Zimmerman, Ramirez, Washienko, Walter, & Dyer, 1994), I learned about, identified with, and affirmed my culture that included developing competencies in my language, learning about my history, participating in cultural activities, and developing community relationships. As participation in these activities was collective, immediate relationships, including those with past historical figures, promoted belonging, a fact that instilled greater significance when the existence, legitimacy, and dignity of a culture have been threatened. Given the political tensions between Quebec and the rest of Canada, the legitimacy of

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constructs them in that 'world.' So there may be 'worlds' that construct me in ways that I do not even understand. Or it may be that I understand the construction, but do not hold it of myself. I may not accept it as an account of myself, a construction of myself. And yet, I may be animating such a construction" (Lugones, 1987, p. 10).

Francophone communities and monies spent on their rights to language and education has, at times, provoked tensions that have only served to reinforce my sense of self.

Yet, years later, I watch family members reject the language and I feel a sense of loss given my belief that culture can only survive with people to live it; it is not a museum artefact. By birth, a place is reserved for us in the frame of culture and has its most important influence during the period of identity formation where ideas, stories, worldviews, habits, and standards against which to decide, act, and feel, are absorbed. A language is not just a functional collection of words, but imparts an understanding of the world not easily translated in the absence of experience. Culture must be lived (versus only taught) as it is an identity to experience and not a skill. In my view, arriving at one's own culture late in life can relegate individuals to the museum version of culture, one that poses difficulties in belonging and where ownership and identity are more difficult to achieve as one comes to it with another group's identity, the "I" already someone else, the worldview already formed. Educational systems that are in a privileged position to offer a living cultural and linguistic experience must embody the opportunity.

### ***Travelling to Louise's Francophone World***

As Sandra and Trudy listened to Louise's narrative and considered who they might be in her eyes, there were moments of tension. The first moment came when Louise proposed that schools could be "ideal places to teach social, emotional, moral, and intellectual skills, schools as stable, sustainable environments" (Norrish et al., 2013); for many youth and families, particularly Aboriginal youth and families, schooling has not been lived in those ways (Clandinin et al., 2010; Pless, 2014). The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) states that, consistent with Aboriginal traditions, education must:

develop the whole child, intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically . . . [T]he destiny of a people is intricately bound to the ways its children are educated. Education is the transmission of cultural DNA from one generation to the next [and] shapes the language and pathways of thinking, the contours of character and values, the social skills and creative potential of the individual . . . [Yet], rather than nurturing the individual, schooling experiences typically erode identity and self-worth. (pp. 433–434)

In a Francophone school, Louise identified with the culture that was taught, providing an understanding of norms, values, and accepted behaviours through which to make meaning of her world. The experience of being part of a cultural majority contrasted with Trudy and Sandra's educational experiences of being in the minority. For Sandra, although cultural traditions, foods, language, stories, and practices were present at home, a disconnection was evident in school where her culture was negligible. It was only when she started to learn the hoop dance that her teachings were explained and modeled, leading her to question why this was not the case in her formal education. The norms of schooling did not resonate with Trudy and Sandra's Cree/Métis worldviews (Ermine, 1995), nor did it attend to their Indigenous knowledge (Absolon & Willet, 2004; Bishop, 1999; Thomas, 2005).

As Louise articulated her sense of entitlement derived from being in a school that honoured and celebrated the culture of her family and community, Sandra experienced tension with the word "entitled," as the teachings of her Native ancestry view humility as critical to a healthy self-esteem and attitude. It reminded her of the sense of entitlement expressed by the cultural majority (non-Native students) throughout her years of education; an education that would often suppress any similar sense of entitlement felt by the cultural minority (Native students). In response, Louise could find no substitute, feeling that the word "entitled" reflected a natural ownership over one's identity and possession of birth space. As we negotiated our tensions, we imagined how similar tensions also exist in schools where multiple perspectives converge in the lives of students, families, and teachers, and how they create various lived realities. We wondered how safe conversational spaces (Huber,

Murphy, & Clandinin, 2003) might be created which would allow stories of experience to be shared and honoured; spaces where words and all of the tensions might be negotiated and discussed.

Early on we realized that even cultural understanding is negotiated based on personal experience. Louise understood the privilege of attending a Francophone school where the culture of her home was celebrated, and felt anxiety when confronted with a family member who didn't experience that same early landscape. Sandra had the experience of learning aspects of her traditional Native culture later in life; not the museum version but a living, breathing one. Sandra understood that the beauty of Native culture is based on human emotions and experiences, seen in the lessons and values established through trickster stories (McLeod, 2007), and the inclusion and acceptance of others seen in the symbol of the circle in Native ceremony and culture (sweat lodge, sun dance, round dance, powwow, drum, etc.). She has known many Native people who describe an experience of learning their culture in their later years as a return home; a return that is often in resistance or response to the intergenerational reverberations of residential school attempts to assimilate Aboriginal people (Young, 2005). In Louise's cultural negotiations, a family member voluntarily turns away from an available cultural narrative, whereas in Sandra's and Trudy's cultural negotiations, loss of culture was a consequence of the violent and oppressive acts of colonization and assimilation (Battiste, 2013; Battiste & Barman 1995; Hart, 2002). In the experience of writing this paper and negotiating these tensions, we understand the need for spaces in which we can attend to and engage in conversations from our differing perspectives, and we understand how relational ethics need to remain at the heart of all we do lest we fall into an arrogant perception and become unable or unwilling to "world"-travel (Lugones, 1987).

### ***Sandra's Narrative: We Belong to the Drum***

Cultural representations determine our sense of group belonging and individual confidence, which affect well-being and success in educational settings (Assembly of First Nations, 2010; Battiste, 2002; Brown, 2008). This was demonstrated by an experience my son, Matthew, had when he was 14 months old. Leaving him at daycare was always a struggle until I saw a mother sharing her child's favorite music with the group. Matthew has listened to the drum since he was in my womb, having a father who sings and a mother who dances. I brought our powwow music to share and his teachers began to explore different drum music from around the world. Matthew's attention was captured when they played his powwow music, able to recognize and distinguish it from the other types. He moved to the CD player and waved his friends over. His teacher brought out a large bongo drum and my son was the only one to approach and hit it, obviously knowing it intimately. He brought craft feathers to the drum and placed them on top, then tickled his face with them, a game we play when I am in my dance regalia. His teacher then showed a video of powwow dance from the internet to which he pointed and said "Mommy, Daddy;" the first time his teachers ever heard him talk. That day in his journal they wrote a letter about everything that happened. I was so proud he remembered who he was and demonstrated leadership and pride in his culture. Over the following weeks he grew more confident, showing excitement and taking initiative to attend daycare. Having his identity and culture reinforced allowed him to feel safe and be himself. It further taught the adults involved an important lesson about cultural representation and belonging.

### ***From Survival to Resurgence***

This moment in Matthew and Sandra's life is an example of how cultural resurgence can impact us on an individual level. Cultural resurgence is a long process which has been occurring in Indigenous communities since their cultural identity began to be threatened. In describing the Seven Fires Prophecy of the Nishnaabe (Ojibway), Dr. Leanne Simpson explains that this resurgence should be our foremost concern today, as "resistance and resurgence are not only our response to colonialism, they are our only responsibility in the face of colonialism" (Simpson, 2011, p. 66). For Nishnaabe peoples, "[r]esurgence is our original instruction" and many believe we are in the time of the Seventh

Fire and it is our responsibility “to pick up the pieces of our lifeways, collectivize them and build a political and cultural renaissance and resurgence” (p. 66). Simpson’s analysis of the Seven Fires Prophecy suggests a cyclical pattern that begins with creation, followed by destruction, which is then responded to with re-creation or resurgence. Here, there is no singular vision, but many in which all individuals are called upon to re-create the good life (Hart, 2002) in whatever forms they imagine, envision, and live in contemporary times.

The gravest period of destruction faced by Indigenous peoples occurred during colonization and assimilation in Canada and the US from the sixteenth century into the twentieth century. In 1857, Canada passed the Gradual Civilization Act which intended to assimilate “Indians” into mainstream society. Several methods were employed to prevent and even outlaw the practice of Native culture and traditions. One of these methods included residential schools that were intended to “assimilate Aboriginal children into mainstream Canadian society by disconnecting them from their families and communities and severing all ties with languages, customs and beliefs” (Chansonneuve, 2005, p. 5). Yet oppression was not always met with obedience; dance and other traditions were used to cope with numerous assaults on culture. The need for cultural resurgence has been emphasized by various social movements amongst Native peoples throughout history, such as the Ghost Dance (1869), The American Indian Movement (AIM, 1969), and Idle No More (2012); they have all emphasized the importance of upholding cultural values and beliefs, traditional laws, elder teachings, language and oral traditions, ceremony, song, and dance. The Idle No More Story states that the stimulus for their efforts was found in centuries’ old resistance to the invasion, exploration, and colonization of Indigenous nations and lands and a desire to affirm rights to sovereignty and reinstitute traditional laws and Nation-to-Nation treaties (IdleNoMore.ca/story, 2012).

These movements towards resurgence have focused on the need for survival and adaptation. Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) posits that the very survival of peoples came from the need to use the environment and surrounding contexts, such that people had to develop ways of knowing, predicting, learning, and reflecting. Further, they devised ways of persevering, protecting, defending, and attacking, all the while being mobile and integrated within social systems that enabled these tasks. She suggests these needs have not changed and while Native peoples no longer face direct institutional efforts to colonize and assimilate them as in the past, they realize how these efforts led to a breakdown in well-being. Looking to the old ways, cultural knowledge and practices used to restore health and balance are also used to rebuild a sense of wellbeing that existed in traditional Indigenous life and suggest that the ways in which we engage in discussion and action must move beyond survival and towards a full, thriving resurgence. Educational institutions have the potential to be leaders in this endeavor.

### ***Sandra’s healing journey***

My first experience with the healing power of dance came at the age of 10 when my mother put me in tap dance lessons. I was pigeon-toed and dance helped correct this. I fell in love with dance and continued lessons for many years, expanding my repertoire to include ballet, lyrical, modern, and jazz dance, eventually becoming a soloist. Dance, for me, was its own world—an escape. Yet, it wasn’t long before the tension between dance and the rest of my life became too much. I was the only Native girl in almost all of my classes and, although I spent many years with the same group of girls both in dance and school, I never became friends with them. I was also from a lower income family, obvious from my secondhand ballet slippers and dance clothing. I stopped dancing as a teenager and when I told my dance teacher, she replied, “You are going to miss it!” I didn’t know at the time how right she was and how it had become a part of who I was. Without dance to keep me occupied and focused, my spiritual, physical, emotional, and mental health declined.

After high school my mother again directed me to a path of healing when she brought home a university application. This was where I learned about Native history and, as an extracurricular

activity, the hoop dance and its teachings. The opportunity to practice my culture transformed my life. In terms of my identity (spiritual), I became more confident and proud. I took better care of myself through diet and exercise, and abstained from drugs and alcohol (physical). This influenced my friends and family and gave me a purpose in life (emotional), leading me to a greater understanding of the benefits of culture and creating a healthy way of thinking (mental). This experience demonstrated the potential of culture as a way to restore health and well-being to First Nations groups.

### ***Seeking a Good Life***

What I have described are the elements of the Nehiyawak (Cree) Medicine Wheel (see Figure 1). Elder Mary Lee explains that, “Cree people . . . were given the gift of being named for the four parts of human beings. *Nehiyawak* . . . It means being balanced in the four parts that are found in the four directions of the Medicine Wheel” (2006, p. 2). In this model, the Spiritual consists of culture and identity; the Physical includes diet, fitness, environment; the Emotional involves relationships and emotions; the Mental is knowledge, learning, and understanding (J. Short, personal communication, 2008). These aspects of the self are always evolving, but need to be balanced for a purposeful, focused, and efficient human being to emerge (Hart, 2002; Lee, 2006). Thus, the concept of the *good life* is a journey, a continual process of seeking balance between the four domains of the Medicine Wheel, posited as the principles of wholeness, balance, harmony, and growth (Hart, 2002).

Almost every aspect of Native cultures, including dance, ceremony and oral stories, provide insight into living a healthy and balanced life and participation in any of these aspects can increase well-being. In my cultural and ceremonial experiences I have seen that if a family is living according to traditional teachings and these have been successfully adapted and merged with their contemporary lifestyles, well-being and success within their spiritual, physical, emotional, and mental life is secured. Although, in the Native perspective there is no final destination of well-being, we strive to find balance within the chaos of life and acknowledge that challenge and change are inherent to life. Living with our culture helps us to make healthy choices to restore balance in our lives (Bell, 2006; Hart, 2002).

### ***Travelling to Sandra’s World of the Drum***

As Louise and Trudy listened to Sandra’s story, it was clear that Matthew’s early educational experiences resonated in the same ways Louise’s early experiences had for her. Their culture was given space and value in ways that made sense to them; both were given room to thrive and feel a sense of belonging. Their voice and way of understanding the world was honoured. When Sandra felt disconnected from her cultural dance and spiritual understanding throughout her teen years and saw none of these cultural aspects in her school landscapes, her well-being suffered. This sense of disconnection also resonated with Louise’s experience of loss as she considered her family’s negotiation with members who rejected the language. As Trudy lived with Louise and Sandra’s stories she found herself resonating with neither Sandra’s experience nor Louise’s but drawn to the concept of liminality, “a state of necessary in betweenness” (Heilbrun, 1999, p. 98) as not a deficit as some might think, but as a strength. In her journey thus far, she has not found one specific cultural narrative that creates the same sense of entitlement or belonging expressed by either Louise or Sandra. However, from her experiences alongside youth, Trudy has found that seeing possibility in liminality, she was better able to attend to the stories youth shared about who they were and were becoming and how they negotiated their *stories to live by* (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999) in response to the stories told to, by, and about them as Aboriginal youth. It is this same “betwixt and between” liminal space (Heilbrun, 1999, p. 8) that made the writing of this paper possible, where Trudy could attend to the stories in ways that a sense of entitlement or resistance might otherwise silence.

### ***Trudy's Narrative: Negotiating Cultural Narratives***

I am contributing to this paper from a narrative inquiry perspective (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000). Narrative inquiry, with its emphasis on experience, allows me to attend in liminal ways to the complexities of relationality. In my doctoral work alongside three Aboriginal youth and their families, it was important to choose a research methodology that recognized “the centrality of relationship among participants and researchers studied through, and over time and in unique places and multilayered contexts” (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p. 166). I invite readers of this paper to continue to engage with the three different narratives as we did, with loving perception (Lugones, 1987), while considering the potential in liminality (Heilbrun, 1999).

Liminality informs my relationship with culture and cultural narratives as I think about the ways I negotiate who I am as a Cree/Métis person. I feel that cultural narratives “live in our skin and bodies” (Steeves, Clandinin, & Caine, 2013, p. 230) and are often intergenerational. They “are not only embedded in the geographic places we are born into, or in the color of skin, but they come alive in the tensions on [diverse] landscapes [that can be] in contradiction with . . . stories to live by” (p. 230). Alongside Aboriginal youth and families in the research project, we inquired into the stories they told of who they were and were becoming. Together we wondered about how other narratives (cultural, familial, community, and school), especially those of the *Indian in mind* (King, 2003), influenced or shaped their stories of becoming.

The concept of *Indian in mind* comes from Thomas King whose book, *The Truth About Stories* (2003), tells a story of his journey on a German crew ship sailing for New Zealand. The crew was unsure of King’s origins, so he told them he was Cherokee, or “to keep matters simple, a North American Indian” (p. 48). Intrigued and suspicious, the German cook relayed that he had “read all of Karl May’s novels [a German author who wrote about Indians], and he had a faint idea of what Indians were supposed to look like and that [King] wasn’t what he had imagined” (p. 48). Looking at King, he added, “You’re not the Indian I had in mind” (p. 48). It is these sorts of cultural narratives being told to, by, and about Aboriginal youth and families, in which they must negotiate their stories to live by, in response or in resistance to, that frames my contribution to this conversation.

In my graduate studies, I awakened to the understanding that throughout my life, as part of my cultural negotiations, I have lived as though on a quest for the “narrative coherence of a life story” (Carr, 1986, p. 96). As I look at my early stories, I note how I had to negotiate, both internally and externally, the narrative of the *Indian in mind* in similar ways as the youth in my research. As we bumped up against stereotypical understandings of Aboriginal culture we negotiated what the narratives meant and whether we would live out or up to those stories or seek ways to “construct or choose [other] narrative[s]” (Carr, 1986, p. 96).

I think about one participant, Drew, and the stories she told about how she would “world”-travel (Lugones, 1987) from her biological Aboriginal family, where the larger cultural narrative was embodied (kinship and familial relationship<sup>3</sup>) more than performed (as in traditional dress, dancing and food), to a Mormon foster family, whose cultural narratives would contradict what Drew embodied, and eventually to her final non-Aboriginal adopted family where Drew would “world”-travel (Lugones, 1987) once again. These liminal spaces were navigated and negotiated in multiple and complex ways. They shaped the stories she told of who she was and was becoming. As we consider the role of culture and well-being, we must think about the ways the narratives we tell to and about Aboriginal youth and families are experienced and shape their stories to live by (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999).

I think of Barbara, another participant, and the collage of Google images she found to illustrate what came to mind for her in response to the words Cree, Aboriginal, Native, and Indian,

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<sup>3</sup> Kinship and familial relationships can be considered to Cree people the cornerstone, “the backbone, the foundation of our culture. We are given substance, nurtured, and sustained by family. Kinship goes beyond family and is the connection we feel to the world at large and everything in it” (Marshall, 2001, p. 210 as cited in Steinhauer, 2007, p. 8).

and the description she included for each. She chose images that included a canoe, a tipi, moccasins, a traditional drum, and some beadwork. When I asked her to explain her selection, she said “because they remind me of the Natives from the olden days” or “I saw them in a movie about Natives.” She articulated an Indian gleaned from textbooks and movie images, yet I understood that the images did not resonate with what she thought she was about (Carr, 1986) and who she was becoming. I also knew from her stories that these were cultural narratives she was negotiating. She spoke of many summers spent with her paternal grandparents in the First Nations community where her dad grew up. She also spent a lot of time in an urban setting with her maternal *Kokom* (Cree word for grandmother). From these stories of her early landscape, I knew that the images and concepts she chose were not unfamiliar to her, but in the present context of our conversation, they did not resonate with her lived experience in any way that she was willing to discuss that day. As we consider the role of culture in education, we cannot presume to understand what culture means to youth or how it is they might want to articulate the ways they are negotiating the cultural narratives that we are asking of them.

Jayanna, the final Aboriginal youth participant in my research, given the same task to tell me what came to their mind when I said the words Cree, Aboriginal, Native, and Indian, drew on words that had once made sense to her and how she and her family constructed themselves. She wrote *a feather, powwow dancing, moccasins, and a drum*. As I observed the slow and intense process it was for her to think about and write the words, I realized they were likely coherent with the Indian she had in mind of a family who participates in the traditions of powwow dance, drumming, and traditional ceremonies. She understood the significance of each word in her familial stories but on that day, when she was not dancing and had not participated in ceremony in a long time, they may not have resonated. Even as she was writing the words down, she was in the midst of negotiating who she was and was becoming in relation to those words, and the narratives that they brought to mind. I wondered how the significance of her words might shift over time and continue to be negotiated. While liminal spaces haven’t always felt comfortable to me, I came to understand their possibilities when I allowed myself to embrace the uncertainty and come alongside Aboriginal youth, and imagine new possibilities and new stories to live by (Huber et al, 2003).

I had not understood how much the *Indian* that I or Aboriginal youth and families *had in mind* would shape all of the research conversation and the ways we would live alongside each other. I think about the ways the Indian we have in mind also shapes educators and policymakers who attend to culture and well-being in educational settings. I wonder how we attend to the ways educators and policymakers are also negotiating who they are in relation to Indian-in-mind narratives. From my research experience, I began to move from a mind seeking understanding to a whole body understanding (Young et al., 2012), and to “listen with three ears: two on the sides of [my] head and the one that is in [my] heart” (Archibald, 2008, p. 8). This shift was only possible as I began to understand the potential that exists in liminal spaces for safe conversations and negotiations of cultural narratives.

### ***Travelling to Trudy’s world***

Trudy’s narrative resonated with Louise, currently living in the Middle East and teaching in a university with students of more than 90 nationalities in a city with more than 120 nationalities where no single majority exists. The national population itself accounts for a mere 10% of the total population. From this outsider position, she sees how culture is a story we, and the groups to which we belong, tell ourselves. Her students are minorities themselves, often the only representatives of their countries within a larger majority of minorities; her own individual cultural story is lost in the diverse landscape. The resulting anonymous “expatriate” stories are so vast and diverse to be owned by anyone, as 85% (UAE Interact, 2013) of residents are expatriates in passing, only rejoining their stories during visits back home and constructing disjointed ones while there. The normalized lack of representation is shared; expatriates are not home and have no such expectations of their hosts. Yet, considering Trudy’s personal narrative and her participants’ narratives, Louise wonders what it is like,

given that they are not expatriates in passing but Indigenous peoples who belong, to have their lives and stories shaped by the *Indian in mind*. Louise's story was written as a child through her educational, familial, and cultural experiences and gave her a foundation from which to experience life today, but when a narrative is imposed, does the search for narrative coherence (Carr, 1986) become more pressing?

For Sandra, these narratives of liminality, cultural negotiation, and identity are an important aspect of well-being and education, but lack the necessary connection with larger stories of Native culture and history. This lack of congruence creates disconnection and displacement with isolated experiences that exist separately from formal schooling. This sense of disconnection and isolation reaffirms Sandra's insistence on the importance of embedding Indigenous cultural teachings into education as a way to help connect individual narratives to school and community. She feels that this embedding of Indigenous culture into education will also create an intergenerational connection between the past, present, and future. In one study, *cultural continuity* was found to be central in lowering youth suicide, with the authors stating that “[c]ommunities that have taken active steps to preserve and rehabilitate their own cultures are shown to be those in which youth suicide rates are dramatically lower” (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998, p. 1). Creation Stories, Simpson (2011) explains,

set the “theoretical framework,” or give us the ontological context from within which we can interpret other stories, teachings and experiences . . . Our Elders tell us that everything we need to know is encoded in the structure, content and context of these stories and the relationships, ethics and responsibilities required to *be* our own Creation Story. (pp. 32–33)

## **Conclusion**

Recent research in positive psychology has shown that simply thinking about one's ancestors (called the ancestor effect) helps to convert distress to optimism, invigorate strengths, and improve academic performance (Fischer, Sauer, Vogrincic, & Weiseiler, 2010), as well as create meaning from the past and move into the future with confidence. Thus, for Louise, the incorporation of culture contributes to youth resilience and well-being. Yet not all cultures (due to numbers, budget, or other factors) can offer cultural instruction and experiences within educational settings. Her majority French experience was unique and raises the question: Whose culture is represented when there is no majority? Everyone needs stories in which to see themselves, but surface efforts and those that do not acknowledge the tensions inherent to cultural negotiations do little to inform identity or join individuals to their communities; thus an experiential integration of culture into curriculum remains problematic in practice. Perhaps the story itself is not so important, but in Louise's view, the presence of available, functional, fitting, and positive stories by which all can live is the more worthy goal.

For Sandra, having Indigenous culture embedded in formal education or schooling creates a place of grounding where people like her and Matthew can belong, be confident, self-assured, and welcomed. This can also help guide youth who are beginning to search for their place in the world, teaching them that they belong in educational institutions as well as within their communities and with their peers. Aboriginal culture teaches inclusion and acceptance as well as holistic well-being, something not often seen in educational settings. She has met many Aboriginal and Indigenous people around the world who have been learning from Elders and practicing culture for many years. These cultural experts are frequently under-utilized and face barriers within educational institutions that do not include, acknowledge, or support cultural knowledge in its traditional forms or on a regular basis. Aboriginal culture is also beneficial for non-Aboriginal students as it is based on human experience and emotion; it can create cross-cultural understanding and acceptance, and healthy relationships across cultures. Sandra believes that these teachings, these aspects of her Native culture, belong in educational settings as they inform and facilitate a healthy and balanced lifestyle that includes spiritual, physical, emotional, and mental health.

Lessard, Caine, and Clandinin (2014) speak to the familial curriculum-making worlds of

Aboriginal youth and families in this way:

Only by attending closely to the multiple worlds of youth will we, as researchers, as professionals, as people, be able to understand the experiences of youth, in and out of school. This close attention to life making is slow, patient work where we come to understand not only more about the youth but also more about ourselves and the dominant narratives that structure schools and communities. (p. 16)

Trudy thinks about the need for educators to do this same kind of slow, patient work to create liminal spaces where youth might share stories of who they are and are becoming, stories that include their understanding of the intergenerational cultural narratives that live in their skin and bodies and is embedded in the geographic places they were born (Steeves, Clandinin, & Caine, 2013). Attending in this way also leaves room for the complexities of “world”-travelling (Lugones, 1987) and cultural negotiations.

Regarding the role of culture in understanding and educating for well-being, Trudy considers again Carr’s (1986) concept of narrative coherence and how we might come alongside youth and families in educational institutions in a way that allows for a deeper heart and whole body understanding of who we are in relation to each other; a way that might leave more room for humility and uncertainty inherent to liminality.

In our discussions before and during the writing of this paper, we shared personal narratives and scholarly perspectives on the role of cultural identity relative to formal systems of education. The sharing of these stories, along with the subsequent sharing of our responses to each other’s experiences and perspectives, invited us to reflect on our own processes of identity formation and to meet each other in a liminal space of cultural negotiation. Coming from a French-Canadian background and as a researcher in positive psychology, Louise continues to believe that positive engagement with, and reinforcement of, cultural identity is a vital part of one’s educational experience. Yet she came to realize that implementing such culturally-grounded curricula could be problematic. From her experiences as a Cree woman and mother as well as Indigenous scholar, Sandra makes room for the importance of attending to individual narratives and experience relative to the formation of identity, but offers a strong case for the inclusion of Indigenous cultural tradition into formal systems of education on the basis that its holistic attentiveness to the spiritual, physical, emotional, and mental well-being of each would benefit Indigenous and Non-Indigenous students alike. While sensitive to the many benefits of strong cultural traditions as shared in this paper, Trudy, as Cree/Métis woman, mother, *kokom*, teacher educator, and scholar, remains concerned that the formal inclusion of specific cultural practices into schooling might be problematic without attention to the likely influence of the *Indian we have in mind* narratives. Imposition of cultural narratives in ways that do not resonate with the youths’ stories to live by might possibly become tension-filled for some students and their families. She hopes that the ways schools might take up culture and well-being, in relation to identity, remain attentive to the liminality and “becoming” within processes of cultural negotiation. For all of these similarities and differences of perspective, each of us found tremendous value in the space created by this paper to share in what we all feel is an important conversation about the role of culture and well-being in our formal systems of education. We hope that others might view our narratives, sharing, and productive tensions as its own vital and scholarly ways to continue and deepen that very conversation.

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## About the Authors

**Dr. Trudy Cardinal** is an assistant professor at the University of Alberta in the department of Elementary Education. Before entering graduate school she taught 13 years in an Elementary classroom serving a high population of Aboriginal students. Her master's thesis, *For All My Relations: An Autobiographical Narrative Inquiry into the Lived Experiences of One Aboriginal Graduate Student* and her doctoral work, *Composing Lives: A Narrative Inquiry into Aboriginal Youth and Families' Stories to Live By* inform her current interest in narrative concepts of identity and the role of cultural narratives in the negotiation of identity. She brings her experiences as an Indigenous scholar, elementary school teacher, and teacher educator to the conversation.

**Dr. Louise Lambert, PhD.**, is an assistant professor at the Canadian University of Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. She is currently developing a national life and work skills program grounded in positive psychology for young adults in Saudi Arabia and is also a registered psychologist and founder of the Middle East Journal of Positive Psychology.

**Sandra Lamouche** is a member of the Bigstone Cree Nation, mother of two, and wife, married into the Piikani nation to her husband Lowell Yellowhorn. As a family they participate in Blackfoot

ceremonial life regularly. Sandra is a member of the International Dance Council (CID) in Paris, France, nominated by the president of CID, Dr. Alkis Raftis. She has studied at Canada's two oldest Native studies departments obtaining a Bachelor's Degree in Native American Studies at the University of Lethbridge, Alberta in 2008. Also, she is working towards completion of a Master's Degree at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario. Currently she works as a Child and Youth Care Worker in Fort Macleod, Alberta which includes teaching Blackfoot culture and language, First Nations history, mentorship, and other supportive roles. Sandra is also a professional hoop dancer, Indigenous contemporary dancer, and an emerging choreographer. She shares her experiences from travelling and performing through her blog.