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Okiskinwahamâkew: Reflecting on teaching, learning and assessment

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This paper looks at assessment views held by Alberta Education in regards to teaching and learning for educators in Alberta. The standardization model of teaching and assessment excludes Indigenous thought systems articulated through rigorous thought processes in the nehiyaw mâmitoneyihcikan – the Cree mind and intelligences. Infusion, integration, indigenization models that privilege the dominant educational design continue to perpetuate an invisible colliding space that impacts the Indigenous thinker and learner. Privileging Indigenous language thought systems that are rich in multidimensional processes are presented to address current notions of teaching and assessment. Looking through the lens of the Indigenous language system and addressing the politics of literacy uncovers nehiyaw mâmitoneyihcikan – the Cree mind. This rich thought system reveals a sophisticated system that operates omni and multidimensionally from and within a compassionate mind – a value based way of seeing and engaging. Honoring nehiyaw thought systems, processes of coming to know and respecting Indigenous understandings of teaching and learning, lead to considering the rigorous nehiyaw understanding of okiskinwahamâkew – Indigenous informed teaching guide.

KEYWORDS

Indigenous education, Indigenous knowledge thought, okiskinwahamâkewin, nehiyaw thought systems, Indigenous pedagogy, Indigenous assessment

Tansi! Hello! I was raised in my First Nation community of Oniskwapowina (Saddle Lake Cree Nation #125, located in Treaty 6 Territory in Northeastern Alberta, Canada). I am the middle child of five siblings, who include three sisters and one brother. I am also the mother of a daughter and a son. My parents are Genevieve and the late Walter Steinhauer. My maternal grandparents are Madeline and Maurice Quinn, and my paternal grandparents are Sarah and August Steinhauer, formerly the Chief of Oniskwapowina. On my mother's side, I am a direct descendant of Chief Papastew, a leader of the Papaschase Indian Band #136 in the territory now known as Alberta, and, on my father's side, of Henry B. Steinhauer, an early educator in our territory.

I want to honor Kise Manitou (Great Spirit), our spiritual ancestors, my ancestors, nitsanak and my descendants, and ask for their support. Our courageous spiritual ancestors and the great leaders in my lineage gifted me the living blood and memory

that inform and guide my walk as a human being. With deep and heartfelt gratitude and humility, I thank them.

Assessment in teaching and learning

Any discussion of assessment in teaching and learning takes me back to my early years as an educator, working as an elementary and junior high school teacher in Oniskwapowina. I recall feeling tremendous pressure and tension when I prepared my students' report cards. As required by the standards that guide and direct our practice, I had to assign each student, as a measure of their ability and skill, a numeric grade. This was the most unrewarding aspect of my teaching career. I understood the need for results and reporting, but I also questioned how the end result of an assessment process that should take into consideration all of a student's being was something as slight as a number – and one that wordlessly told my students their worth. This practice undermined my hope for learners, particularly those who failed.

Assessment is a requirement that educators must constantly negotiate. In current pedagogical approaches, assessment practices create a game in which students gradually learn to become outcome-based thinkers, needing to see the rubric so that they can be successful or, at minimum, "good enough" students. In spite of always feeling uncomfortable assigning percentage scores to students and knowing that any number attached to my students' grades would not accurately reflect their abilities and skills, I still felt forced to create assessment tools that produced percentage scores.

I remain concerned about the poor fit between assessment and standardization and my students and their learning. Reflecting on Nêhiyaw (Cree) knowledge that has been shared with me and on my own teaching experiences, I want to invite other educators to reconsider assessment. Rather than present a "how to" guide for student assessments, I will share some of the ways in which I, as an Indigenous person and educator, look at and think about assessment.

As noted earlier, my first experiences as an educator were in Alberta's K-12 system. I am now a professor in the University of Alberta's Faculty of Education, where I focus on preparing teacher candidates to work with Indigenous students. My starting place for our reconsideration of assessment is the section on that topic included in the provincial government's *Guide to Education: ECS to Grade 12* (Alberta Education, 2020a).

The guide describes the assessment of individual students' level of achievement as "essential for planning learning activities to meet the student's learning needs." Ideally, assessment should be useful to both students and their teachers. It should be an ongoing process, embedded in instruction, and students should have a clear understanding of what they will be assessed on. Other characteristics of "useful" classroom assessment include a "focus on a broad range of outcomes, reflecting multiple dimensions of competency development" and "on what a student can do, clearly identifying both strengths and areas of difficulty." It uses measures that are "appropriate to the student's development and cultural background," and "involve[s] students in their own assessment . . . giv[ing] them responsibility for their own learning and foster[ing] lifelong learning" (Alberta Education, 2020a, p. 103).

As an Indigenous educator, I appreciate the aspirational tone of this description of assessment, that it acknowledges that students learn in many different ways and that their culturally distinct identities should be taken into consideration in the assessment process. At the same time, I know that, in Alberta (and throughout Canada), within the Indigenous population, high school completion rates are significantly lower than they are within the non-Indigenous population (Indigenous Services Canada, 2020). This tells me that, in Alberta (and Canada), mainstream or western education systems are not meeting the "learning needs" of many Indigenous students.

I am not alone in this recognition. In Alberta and elsewhere in Canada, many educators have acknowledged the historic and present-day impacts on Indigenous children, families and communities of the settlement and colonization of Canada and, in particular, the Canadian Indian [*sic*] Residential School system.[1] Many K-12 schools and post-secondary institutions have started initiatives that focus on reconciliation Alberta Education (2020b) has defined reconciliation as "the process and goal of creating societal change through a fundamental shift in thinking and attitudes, increasing intercultural understanding to build a better society through learning about First Nations, Métis and Inuit perspectives and experiences, including residential schools and treaties" (p. 2). As I understand it, reconciliation must include taking action to support the reestablishment of relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals, organizations and governments and ensuring that mutual empowerment, respect, and accountability are centered in those relationships. The University of Alberta (2021), where I teach, has presented decolonization ("deconstruct[ing] colonial ideologies of the superiority and privilege of Western thought and approaches") and Indigenization ["a collaborative process of naturalizing Indigenous intent, interactions, and processes and making

1 The Indian [*sic*] Residential School (IRS) system was established and funded by the Canadian government. Between the late 1800s and 1996, over 150,000 Indigenous children were removed from their families and communities, and forced to attend church-run schools that, for some, were hundreds of kilometers from their homes. In 2007, as part of a class-action settlement for survivors of the IRS, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), charged with gathering the stories and experiences of survivors, was established. The TRC's reports and other IRS-related resources can be downloaded from the website of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (https://nctr.ca/records/reports/).

them evident to transform spaces, places, and hearts") as first step in reconciliation process. The university has also developed a range of supports for faculty seeking to decolonize and Indigenize their curriculum and practice. At a provincial level, Alberta's ministry of education has revised the list of competencies comprising its standards of practice both for teachers and principals and for other leaders in the K-12 system to include the expectation that they support the development and application of "foundational knowledge about First Nations, Métis and Inuit for the benefit of all students" (Alberta Education, 2020b, p. 4). The ministry also provides indicators that can be used to gauge whether a teacher or leader has "achieved" this competency. These refer primarily to school leaders, teachers or their students developing a more informed understanding of Indigenous peoples' historic and present-day political and social contexts, experiences, and perspectives but each also include an indicator that refers to supporting First Nations, Métis, and Inuit student achievement.

I appreciate the efforts to create change described above and in other similar Indigenous education initiatives and, at the same time, recognize there are some significant pieces missing. For example, Alberta Education's standards place considerable emphasis on learning *about* Indigenous peoples but do not actually refer to learning *with* or *from* First Nations, Métis, or Inuit peoples. I also know that mainstream education systems are frequently sites where Western and Indigenous ideologies collide. This is the elephant in the room. Unacknowledged and ignored, it creates an impasse, one in which the integrity of Indigenous ways of teaching, learning, and knowing will continue to be undermined, in which educators will be able only to scratch the surface of the changes that are needed, and in which the infamous gap between educational outcomes for Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada almost certainly will not be resolved.

We are at a juncture where can no longer simply tweak or twist existing practices. In Canada, we have more than 150 years of proof that colonial or Western approaches to education (ranging from Indian [*sic*] residential schools through present-day mainstream education systems) do not meet the learning needs of many Indigenous students. In the context of the commitments to Indigenous education made by the Alberta government and by many other educational institutions and stakeholders, there is no better time to acknowledge some truths about the space of mainstream education.

The anarchic, colliding space of mainstream education

The term anarchy describes "a state of lawlessness" or the "absence or denial of any authority or established order."[2] It also describes the critical and practical reality of experiences that many Indigenous students have had in mainstream education systems, sites where the authority of Nêhiyaw montinecikan (Cree ways of thinking) and Indigenous knowledge systems are denied.

For example, my cousin, Dr. Evelyn Steinhauer, Director of the Aboriginal Teacher Education Program at the University of Alberta related that, in a ATEP physical education curriculum class offered to preservice teachers in an Indigenous community, the instructor required participants to somersault. Somersaulting or flipping, however, would be a violation of the traditional cultural practices and conduct of some of the women in the class. They refused to complete that component of the lesson and, as a result, were failed.

A good friend of mine, the late Elder and scholar Karen Rabbitskin, shared another example with me. In one of her university science classes, she had been required to dissect a frog. Karen had a deep understanding of the natural laws of balance and harmony, and the consequences that may follow from any disruption of that balance. To dissect a frog is to harm a spirit entity, which breaches Nêhiyaw (Cree) laws. Rather than do this, she also accepted a failing grade.

My daughter has also had experiences at school in which the authority of Nêhiyaw montinecikan was denied. One weekend, when she was a junior high student, she said, grinning, "Mom, my teacher thinks rocks are non-living." In our culture and worldview, rocks are recognized as important living entities, so I responded, "Oh really?" In that moment, she was amused by the science teacher's assertion, but the following Monday, when I picked her up after school, she was very upset. She related that, as an exercise in her science class, students had been given actual items to sort into "living" and "non-living" categories. When she placed a rock in the living category, her teacher came to correct her and abruptly moved it back to the non-living category. When the teacher walked away, my daughter returned it to the living category. This further annoyed her teacher, who "corrected" her a second time. In the final order and against her teacher's insistence, my daughter again placed the rock in the living category. She was very hurt by this experience. "How can the teacher think that?" she asked me. "That is who I am. That rock is me. It's in my name. She is denying who I am." I wanted my daughter to find a way to claim her space. I told her that, if and when she felt ready, she could talk about this experience with her teacher. By the end of that week, this had happened. I know that my daughter took great risk in doing this, and, looking back, had more courage than I might have had in my own junior high school days.

Each of the examples above describes an instance in which an Indigenous student's action was guided by

2 *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. "anarchy", accessed October 12, 2021, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anarchy.

their own culturally distinct knowledge, and by their understanding of and respect for fundamental natural laws. In the context of the mainstream education system, their knowledge was dismissed, and their adherence to ethics that follow from natural laws was penalized. For these and other Indigenous students, their classroom became an anarchic space and the site of cultural violence. We need to be truthful. In education systems structured to conform to western education standards, our orientations in teaching and learning are informed by colonial logics and dominance. It is critical that we understand and acknowledge this.

Assessment – Looking into meaning and Nêhiyaw thought

In my graduate courses, my late Uncle Lionel Kinunwa observed that Indigenous words and phrases contain and carry conditions, instructions, and concepts. When they are translated into English, their meaning is lost. There seem to be no rules in the meaning of English words. For example, "Indian" is used as a catch-all term to describe any or all Indigenous peoples in the Americas, obscuring the diverse cultures, languages, and ways of being of the many distinct groups that make up this population. This usage was coined by early European explorers, who, when they ran into islands off the Americas, thought they were about to reach India, their planned destination.

The colonial roots of the term are also revealed in the Canadian government's use and definition of the term in the Indian Act, R.S.C. c. I-5 (1985).[3] The Indian Act (passed in 1876 and amended several times since then) was developed to enable the federal government to regulate the daily lives of First Nations people. The Act acknowledges the historical and constitutional relationship between Canada and the Indigenous peoples whose traditional territories it now occupies and lays out some of the unique responsibilities and obligations Canada has within that relationship. It defines an "Indian" as someone who is "registered as an Indian or is entitled to be registered as an Indian" by the federal government, empowering the government to decide, in a legal sense, who was or was not fully recognized as a First Nation person (Hanson and Crey, 2009). Uncle Lionel Kinunwa warned us not to define or describe ourselves as "Indian" because it is an identity that was assigned to us, and one that anybody can assume. It is not an identity we gave ourselves. We are Nêhiyaw (Cree people), a word we were gifted that precisely describes our identity and our connection to a large and sophisticated thought system.

3 R.S.C. 1985, c. I-5.

As noted earlier, Alberta Education, in its discussion of student assessment, refers to "multiple dimensions of competency development," teaching to a student's "cultural background," and "lifelong learning" (2020a, 103). What do these terms mean? Their use in this context suggests that, in Alberta's publicly funded classrooms, Indigenous students' knowledge and ways of thinking, learning, and knowing will be respected, welcomed, and valued. This was not the case for the students whose stories were shared above – but what might have happened if those students' Nêhiyaw montinecikan (Cree ways of thinking) had been honored?

As a Nêhiyaw educator, the appearance of these aspirational terms in a discussion of assessment feels somewhat encouraging or promising. At the same time, I know that it can be challenging for an educator to teach to a student's "cultural background" if that student's cultural background is different than their own and unfamiliar to them. In these conditions, an educator may fall back on cultural assumptions and stereotypes that can make the process more harmful than helpful to students. In Canada, a settler colonial state where many non-Indigenous people have remained socially and spatially isolated from Indigenous people, cultural assumptions and stereotypes about Indigenous people often take the form of what Francis (1992) named "the Imaginary Indian," a construction that can be anything that non-Indigenous people want or need Indigenous people to be, and one that is "bound up with myth, prejudice and ideology" (p. 6). This leaves little or no room for cultural knowing or reality and dislocates and displaces Indigenous peoples' multidimensional and sophisticated knowledge systems to fit comfortably with and conform to western and mainstream standards and constructs.

My intent is not to critique the good intentions of any educator or of Alberta Education, but rather to extend and broaden how we think about and how we conduct assessments. My many Indigenous mentors have taught me that when a Nêhiyaw thought is taken and filtered through a Western lens and thought pattern, it is no longer Indigenous. It becomes western with an Indigenous spin, the conceptual equivalent of a magician's *hide the bean under one of many covers* trick, moving things around, repositioning or "playing" with a thought system as though that process could create an Indigenous idea. It doesn't.

A colleague once asked me to identify and create a list of ten behaviors of Indigenous students. The list, they explained, would be circulated to provincial educators to help them more effectively manage their classrooms. Of course, I declined. Similarly, many "how to make something Indigenous" are now floating around in the world of education, designed as guides to 'infusing,' 'decolonizing,' 'Indigenizing' or the silver bullet that will resolve the Indian problem. These finite vision of how we

can bridge the gap and generously bring Indigenous learners to where they 'need' to be is problematic. I think a better starting place for any effort to create change is to look at Indigenous thought.

Nêhiyaw mâmitoneyihcikan – The Cree mind

Anishinabe Elder Jim Dumont (2005, p. 3) describes six concepts that are fundamental in the consciousness and thought orientation of the Indigenous thinker. These include

1. "Indigenous centeredness" (to be centered in an Indigenous worldview, perspective, and way of life),
2. "Indigenous consciousness" (to be conscious and aware of Indigenous thought, knowledge, and ways of being in all that you see, feel, know and do),
3. "Indigenous capacity for total responsiveness" (to function from the multiple levels of being – the heart, spirit, mind, and body),
4. "responsiveness and connectedness to the collective whole" (to recognize that the most valuable knowledge, creations, or achievements are those that benefit us collectively),
5. "responsiveness and connectedness to the total environment" (to be personally responsible and accountable in our relationship to the environment), and
6. "Indigenous value-based seeing, relating, knowing and doing" (to be guided by the values of "kindness, honesty, sharing, strength, respect, wisdom and harmony" in our thoughts and actions).

This responsive connection between our mind and our physical body, spirit, and heart informs our expression of language and enables us to intelligently articulate our thoughts. Ermine (1995) described this as mamatowisowin, a sophisticated, complex and an undefinable intelligent space, linking our interiority to dimensional capacities far beyond our human knowing. Our "inwardness" and our faculties are continually engaged in rigorous, multi-realmed, multi-dimensional, multi-spatial and timeless processes (Kawagley, 1995; Cajete, 2000; Little Bear, 2000; Meyer, 2003; Steinhauer, 2008). An awareness of and respect for the spirit inside each person means that an individual's mind or thought processes cannot easily be minimized or dismissed as subjective or unproven. In western contexts or mainstream education systems, Indigenous knowledge, ideas, and pedagogy are often described as part of "oral tradition" or "oral history." As my Nêhiyaw knowledge mentors have helped me understand, Nêhiyaw mâmitoneyihcikan (Cree mind) and ekwa Nêhiyawêwin (Cree language and thought system) involve larger portals of expression.

Politics of literacy – Issues of written word

In her work on Cree orality, Weber-Pillwax (2001) identified the effects of the "politics of literacy" on orality-based cultures and societies. Nêhiyaw knowledge holders and mentors have shared with me their discomfort with the absence of any reference to spirituality in most formal definitions or discussion of terms such as oral tradition, oral history, and orality. In a recent conversation, knowledge holder Ralph Morin explained to me that it is inappropriate to designate the Cree language, Nehiyawewin, as part of an oral culture, oral tradition, or oral history because those designations place it outside of our knowledge systems into a western frame that collapses knowing into the static and confining form of text.

As Aluli-Meyer (2013) observed, written text cannot replace the rich experiential context of what we learn in our interactions with each other. Similarly, Webster (2006), commenting on a story in which the Tewa people had forbidden the recording of a ceremonial chant, noted that "Written Arizona Tewa must be mediated from its situated, context-dependent usage to a reporting of that usage in order for it to be inscribed. In a way, it must already be decontextualized (detached) and artifacted in order for it to be written down. This is a literacy distinct from Western conventions" (p. 304). For Battiste (2002), disregarding the ideological collision between Indigenous consciousness and thought and English discourse patterns and, instead, forcing Indigenous thinkers to assimilate and conform to "Western conventions" is a form of cognitive imperialism.

Dickinson suggested that rather than "(re)producing imperialist patriarchal discourse" (1994, p.331) when Indigenous people speak, non-Indigenous people should practice responsive listening. This requires a willingness to listen and attend to the Indigenous speaker's meaning and intention, rather than impose their own.

Thought and context: Frozen into two dimensional spaces

When discussing teachings on oral understandings, the knowledge holder Ralph Morin shared that an older relative had pointed out to him that a picture freezes a moment or experience into two dimensions, with a specific form and time. Ralph explained that a similar process occurs when Nêhiyaw words are translated into English. The multi-layered meanings and spirit of the Nêhiyaw word collapse. Decontextualized, the word's meaning becomes only what can be understood and articulated in the limited vocabulary and meaning making of the English language. This is especially evident in Nêhiyaw humor. Our humorous stories cannot be retold in English because the nuanced, complex meanings and context of our words are not

translatable. Similarly, as Weber-Pillwax (2001) reminded us, the Nêhiyaw terms used to talk about what, in English, would be described as ceremonial or spiritual practices or teachings, are, in translation, ascribed meanings that significantly differ from meanings ascribed by Cree people.

Many of the historic and present-day efforts to preserve Indigenous languages include the development of dictionaries and other written documentation of specific languages and dialects. As Webster (2006) pointed out, this, ironically, may jeopardize the vitality of these living languages: "The implications of writing down words in a specific way tends to freeze the words in that form. Dictionaries, by their nature, tend to give the illusion of authority. In this way the act of language preservation – the act of writing down words – creates a stratification within languages, distinguishing a 'standard' and a 'non-standard' form" (p. 314).

The concept and practice of standardizing languages are important considerations in Indigenous language preservation. My late Uncle Lionel described dialects as historical indicators that mark when members of a language community began to pronounce words differently than neighboring communities that, before that time, spoke the same language group and dialect. When a new dialect becomes the living language of a people and their homelands, it also become part of their identity and should be respected. The structure, vocabulary, sounds, gestures, and organization of an Indigenous language or dialect both are shaped by and continually shape the culturally distinct collective identities, ways of being, experiences, memories and consciousness of the people who speak it. An attempt to standardize them "lends legitimacy to one group of people and excludes or marginalizes another group or groups. Linguists are thus, in the process of artifacting the word, complicit in the act of prescription that so many of them decry" (Webster, 2006, p. 314). Standardization processes contribute to the erosion and erasure of culturally distinct indigenous consciousnesses – the linguistic equivalent of actions that generate climate change and the erosion of livable environments on our planet.

Standardization: Fitting into foreign places

Weber-Pillwax's (2001) made a convincing argument that Cree and other Indigenous cultures in Canada and elsewhere are "cultures of primary orality" (p. 149), in which spoken language is more important and central to the shared life of group members than the written word is. Even while Indigenous peoples have assumed literacy in English, they retain a "consciousness of orality" (153), one that preserves Indigenous epistemologies and cosmologies. In public education systems, where standards are vetted and regulated by provincial governments[4] and reflect the educational goals of a culture of literacy, this can become problematic for Indigenous learners. Patriarchal discourses and thought patterns are normalized in classrooms and in provincially approved curricular resources. In the public education system, literacy is political, establishing the authority of the English language, discourse, and understandings of concepts such as assessment, success or citizenship and positioning them as mechanisms of an ongoing effort to assimilate the identity and consciousness of Indigenous learners.

Several years ago, at a meeting where Treaty Six Chiefs had gathered to vote on a memorandum of understanding with the provincial and federal governments on First Nations education, my late Uncle Vince Steinhauer taught me an important lesson. While voting was in progress, he approached the Chiefs' table and spoke: "I have one question to ask you. In that curriculum, it states that it is preparing a citizen. I want to ask you – a citizen of where?" This is an important question. In Indigenous education, we must be intentional about the kind of citizens we are preparing. We need to ask ourselves, "What do our children need to know to become citizens of a First Nation? To become citizens who are party to a Treaty?"

An answer to these questions can be found in the Indigenous philosophy of education presented by the National Indian Brotherhood (1972) (NIB)[5] in its 1972 policy paper, *Indian Control of Indian Education*. The paper was developed in response to the clear failure, on the part of both federally controlled schools on reserve and provincial and territorial schools off reserve, to meet the needs of Indigenous learners. NIB declared in its statement of Indian Philosophy of Education, which opens the paper, that, as adults, we are responsible to see that each child "learns all he needs to know in order to live a good life. As our fathers had a clear idea of what made a good man and a good life in their society, so we modern Indians, want our children to learn that happiness and satisfaction come from: pride in oneself, understanding one's fellowmen, and living in harmony with nature" (p. 1). The paper presented a detailed proposal to devolve control of First Nations education from the federal government (which, as established in the Treaties,

4 In Canada, the K-12 education system is funded and overseen by each provincial or territorial government. The exception to this rule is on First Nations, where the federal government is responsible for funding K-12 education but schools typically follow the provincial or territorial government's curriculum guidelines. As touched on earlier in this article, the federal government has the legal authority to determine who is (or is not) a 'First Nations person with Indian [*sic*] status' and therefore party to treaties and agreements between the federal government and First Nations). Under these treaties, the federal government holds fiduciary responsibility for the education of First Nations people with "Indian [*sic*] status". Disappointingly, this has left First Nations schools chronically underfunded, with some receiving anywhere from 20 to 50% less funding than their provincially funded counterparts do (Drummond and Rosenbluth, 2013).

5 The National Indian Brotherhood was a political organization formed in 1970 by Indigenous leaders from provinces and territories across Canada to fight for Indigenous sovereignty.

would continue to be responsible for funding education) to First Nations, centering the principles of parental responsibility and local control in their model.

While the Canadian government affirmed *Indian Control of Indian Education* in 1973, it has not yet fully honored the spirit and intent of the policy. Inadequate resourcing, inadequate facilities, inadequately prepared teachers, and limited engagement of parents in their children's education have continued to be a problem. First Nations still have not been able to exercise true local control and continue to be held to provincial standards and curricular hours (Kirkness, 1984). These conditions limit opportunities for First Nation children to learn what they need to know to become citizens of their Nation – including, as NIB noted, to learn about "the forces that shape [them]: the history of [their] people, their values and customs, their language" and their own "potential as a human being" (p. 9). Provincial standards and curriculum, however, structure learning environments in which Indigenous students learn "to mimic the 'literate' dialect of the White majority" (Dickinson, 1994, p. 324), speaking words that are audibly hollow. Uncle Lionel called this the "dead words of the living."

"Residential Schools Took the Indian out of the Child. Now, with the TRC, They Want to Put it Back" – Elder Jimmy O'Chiese.

In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), which formed in 2008 with a mandate to document the history and impacts of the Indian Residential School system on Indigenous students, their families, and their communities, issued a multi-volume report on its findings, along with 94 calls to action. These include seven calls to action directly related to education, which focus on closing education and employment gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples; increasing funding for K-12 and post-secondary education; curriculum that is culturally appropriate, including Indigenous language instruction; and (echoing the calls to action presented in NIB's now nearly 50-year old policy paper) increased parental and community control of and responsibility for their children's education (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

Many education policy makers, institutions, and educators are currently making changes in response to the *Calls to Action*. For example, Alberta Education's *Teaching Quality Standard* now includes the competency "Applying Foundational Knowledge About First Nations, Métis and Inuit"(2020c, p.5), as demonstrated by a teacher's understanding of "the historical, social, economic and political implications" of treaties and agreements with Indigenous peoples, legislation affecting Indigenous peoples; and the history and impacts of the residential school system; their support for student achievement by contributing to "capacity building in First Nations, Métis and Inuit education"; their provision of "opportunities for all students to develop a knowledge and understanding of, and respect for, the histories, cultures, languages, contributions, perspectives, experiences and contemporary contexts of First Nations, Métis and Inuit"; and their use of "resources that accurately reflect and demonstrate the strength and diversity of First Nations, Métis and Inuit." Indicators associated with two other competencies also refer to Indigenous peoples. "Fostering Effective Relationships" identifies "inviting First Nations, Métis and Inuit parents/guardians, Elders/knowledge keepers, cultural advisors, and local community members into the school and classroom" as an indicator and "Engaging in Career-Long Learning" identifies "enhancing understanding of First Nations, Métis and Inuit worldviews, cultural beliefs, languages and values" as an indicator (p. 3).

What we need to ask ourselves now is whether the TRC's calls to action and, more critically, current institutional responses to these calls will generate meaningful change for Indigenous learners. The TRC's calls emphasize the need to make meaningful investments of funding and other resources into Indigenous education, and to return control over and responsibility for Indigenous education to Indigenous people. Alberta Education's new standard emphasizes gathering knowledge about (rather than knowledge creation with) "First Nations, Métis and Inuit."[6] What seems to be missing in the standard(s) is any commitment to (or even an awareness of the need to) protect Nehiyawewin and other Indigenous peoples' distinct orality-based cultures and their sacred and spiritual consciousnesses of orality.

If education systems made such a commitment, what would need to change in teacher education? We could begin by moving away from the easy out of adding "content on or about Indigenous peoples" to curriculum, a practice that that too often reduces Indigenous knowledge to notions that tidily fit into dominant boxes of thought; that too often misappropriates, decontextualizes, or collapses spiritual knowledge for presentation as simple "community truths"; and that too often assumes that all Indigenous peoples are intertribal, flattening the distinct cultures, practices, and spiritualities of each First Nation, each group within the Métis Nation, or each Inuit community. We could also stop assuming that textbooks and other written documents or publications are more authoritative than what we might learn from local First Nations, Métis, or Inuit people. Webster's caution that when spoken words are written down, they become artifacts, captured, decontextualized, and detached from the moment of experience in which they appeared, bears repeating. The act of artifacting, he noted, has "social, political, religious, and linguistic consequences (both intended and unintended)" (2006, p.312).

In this discussion of the TRC's *Calls to Action* and the new competency added to Alberta Education's (2020c) Teaching Quality Standards, I want to also acknowledge a contextual

6 Ironically, the term "people" does not appear in the description of either the competency or the indicators that demonstrate that competency.

factor that has persisted since well before the confederation of Canada: settler Canadians' ongoing fixation on "fixing the Indian problem." To be clear, and as a long history of failed policy and practice interventions has shown, in reality, there is no actual "Indian problem." The real problem has been and continues to be that many governmental, institutional, and organizational actors and other people in Canada believe that the "problem" (in whatever form they have given it) exists, seem unwilling or unable to shift from that position, and want it to be either "fixed" or captured and contained.

In the classroom, the perceived "problem" can be Indigenous students' consciousness or mind. As educators, responsible to Indigenous students, their families, and their peoples, we can choose not to capture and lock up this imaginary "problem." We hold the key, and we can choose to throw it away. My Indigenous colleagues and I have discussed the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action and the process of reconciliation. What is the meaning and intent of reconciliation? If we continue to work with externally imposed standards, will there be room for our Indigenous consciousnesses? Can reconciliation take place if Indigenous consciousnesses are not present? True reconciliation requires a shift to what our ancestors negotiated in their nation-to-nation treaties with the Crown – to live side by side, not in a one-sided world. As Indigenous scholars, we are accountable to truth telling and will not be complicit in the continued marginalization of Indigenous consciousness or Indigenous students. I can hear the words of my late Uncle Lionel: "Truth is surrounded by a bodyguard of total destruction."

The compassionate mind

As I have learned in visits with Nêhiyaw mentors, Nêhiyaw Mâmitoneyihcikan ekwa Nêhiyawêwin (Cree consciousness and the Cree language) are portals in a multi- and omni-relational system that link us to the lands of our ancestors. Every Nêhiyaw word contains "original instructions" that are embedded in the land and expressed in the sounds, vibrations, and silent syllables of our language. For as long as I can remember, I have been told our Nêhiyaw language system is truly ancient and gifted to Nêhiyawak (the Cree) with exact instructions on how to be and live as a Nêhiyaw person. Because of this, it is critical that we continue to speak our languages and dialects in all their distinctness, maintaining specific enunciations that carry embedded wisdoms, retelling a story using the same distinct sounds and patterns that had been used by the person who shared that story with us. In this way, we remain relationally accountable both to our ancestors, the mitisiy (lineage[7]) that ties us back to the first Nêhiyaw people, and to our descendants to come. We are the in-between beings, the link responsible for holding and lifting up the language and its philosophical and structural realities, and our language similarly positions us in-between. Our language is an interface between multi-dimensional, omni-dimensional, and spiritual realms of thought, expression and understanding. Once understood, a Nêhiyaw word can carry levels of meaning that cannot be articulated in or translated into English.

The Nêhiyaw scholars Willie Ermine and Walter Lightning have explored the influence of our language on our consciousness, knowledge systems and epistemology. Their observations suggest that Indigenous knowledge-seeking is an unmapped journey of self and spirit, navigating unknown territory with no certain destination.

> "[O]ur languages suggest inwardness, where real power lies… There was explicit recognition of the individual's right in the collective to experience his or her own life. No one could dictate the path that must be followed. There was the recognition that every individual had the capacity to make headway into knowledge through the inner world… Aboriginal epistemology is grounded in the self, the spirit, the unknown. Understanding the universe must be grounded in the spirit. Knowledge must be sought through the stream of the inner space in unison with all instruments of knowing and conditions that make individuals receptive to knowing… It was in the self that the richest source of information could be found by delving into the metaphysical and the nature and origin of knowledge. Aboriginal epistemology speaks of pondering great mysteries that lie no further than the self (Ermine, 1995, p. 108).
>
> Minds engage in mutual discourse; one of the structural ways this effected is not to attempt to state everything categorically or specifically, but to state things in such a way that there is a continuing unfolding of meaning, as the learner follows the implicates of a statement, and then checks it for "internal coherence" to see if the[y are] "putting it together" properly… Its meaning depends upon the cognitive act of grasping the meaning, realization, insight. It has this implication for learning and teaching; learning is a product of creation and re-creation, in a mutual relationship of personal interaction, of information. It is not just a cognitive (mental) act, but an emotional – thus physical – act. Learning is felt. It is a sensation that is something that involves emotions…learning is ideally a spiritual thing, because the compassionate mind is one that is spiritually centered (Lightning, 1992, p. 21).

Ermine and Lightning understand Indigenous learning as an ongoing, lifelong practice, guided by spirit, animating us emotionally and physically, and nurturing our consciousness. Reflecting to Elder Dumont's description (discussed earlier in

7 The Cree term mitisiy can also mean bellybutton or umbilical cord.

this paper) of "kindness, honesty, sharing, strength, respect, wisdom and harmony" (2005, p. 3) as fundamental values in Indigenous thought and consciousness, it makes perfect sense that the Indigenous mind, spiritually centered and governed by natural law, is a compassionate mind.

Okiskinwahamâkew – Teacher

The Cree knowledge holder Jeff Brightnose (2014) also saw Indigenous languages and thought systems as critical to Indigenous peoples' identity. Referring to an old prophecy that our ways would become dormant for seven generations, he asks, "When that seventh generation arises, what tools are they going to need? Our elders have [told us that] in order for their spirit to understand they are going to need their language. You see the movement happening out there, of our people arising and demanding what they've been denied – their identity."

As educators, we too need our language. Brightnose (2014) explained that the Cree word for teachers, okisinwahmâkek, points to our responsibilities in this role. Those instructions, however, are lost in its translation into English. Okisinwahmâkek shares its roots with the terms ekiskisk (to remember) and nawahmâkewin (spiritual foot tracks), and, when they come together in the term okisinwahmâkek, we are being asked, "What is the spiritual trail you are trying to follow?"

> I was here last year in the summertime... on the reserve. I had to go pick up an elder over here and I saw this this dog walking with ten little puppies. You know everything that this dog would do these little ones would do. Onawahmatowehcik ohki (they are being taught), eh? This is what happened a long time ago. This is the way the teachings happen. Even the ducklings that we saw here crossing the road –onawahmatowehcik ana iyiniw siysiypak (who is teaching the ducks)? This is what we talk about enawahmaken (you follow the spiritual path). What tends to happen is that they had a Cree gathering here... The high school students were still in school at the time and I was telling [my friend] you see this [non-Indigenous] teacher coming and along behind him he had this string of students this is what we're talking about. Who are they following now? Awina enawahmatowehahcik (who are they related to)?

Brightnose's question about who is teaching our children is important because some of the most critical responsibilities and competencies that educators working with Cree children, youth and families must have relate specifically to culture:

> Teaching in the iniyiw (Cree) way is to demonstrate by modeling, guiding and pointing out. Someone who takes this role is called a kiskinohtahiwew (cultural teacher)... As for the role, the kiskinohtahiwew needed direct knowledge of iniyiw communities, strong relationships with fellow Elders and ceremony keepers, fluency in nehiyawewin, and the ability to lead ceremonies...someone who practices Creator's Laws daily. They also needed extensive knowledge of kinship to help us reconnect children, youth and families to their iniyiw heritage and communities (Kopp et al., 2020, p. 174).

A similar sense of educators' role and responsibilities is expressed in the philosophy of education that guides pedagogy the Kihew Asinîy Education Centre in my First Nation community of Oniskwapowina:

> We the people of Saddle Lake First Nation have a firm belief in the Natural Law (Kindness, Honesty, Sharing and Determination) which guides and maintains our distinct way of life. We are committed to kiskinohamâkosowin (the act of teaching], ekwa kiskinohamâsowin (teaching oneself), ekwa mina kiskinohamâtowin (teaching one another) as a lifelong learning process that involves the cooperation of Elders, Parents, Children, Teachers and Chief and Council of the Saddle Lake First Nation. We believe that kiskinohamâkosowin, ekwa kiskinohamâsowin, ekwa mina kiskinohamâtowin guided by Natural Law will ensure esohkahk Nêhiyaw mâmitoneyihcikan (a strong Cree mind] (Kihew Asinîy Education Centre, 2021).

The pedagogical principles expressed in this philosophy of education focus on nurturing wholeness in students and are at the heart of Nêhiyaw (Cree) pedagogy. They are also at the heart of my own practice as an educator. As an okiskinwahamâkew (teacher), my responsibilities extend well beyond the government standards used to assess my competency as a teacher or my students' accomplishments as learners. My most important responsibilities are to be caring, responsible and accountable in my relationships with my students, to nurture esohkahk Nêhiyaw mâmitoneyihcikan amongst them, and to center my practice in wahkohtowin, our sense of interconnection with and kinship to all living things, including our ancients and descendants.

Nêhiyaw educator and Elder Keith Goulet has explained that the word mooskateneetumowin, which means to feel alone or abandoned, has, as its root words, the terms mooska (to cry out or show outward emotion) and *tenetum* (thinking and cognition; Goulet and Goulet, 2014, p. 67). This condition – to feel so alone and isolated that one's thinking and cognition are impacted – is the antithesis of wahkohtowin. When survivors of the residential school system share their experiences in those

schools, they often describe a constant feeling of loneliness, the state of mooskateneetumowin. As educators, we need we need to break this intergenerational cycle of physical, emotional, spiritual, and epistemic violence and trauma. I encourage all of us to bring the Nêhiyaw pedagogical principles described in this section into their own practice, to come to know Nêhiyaw words as sites of truth-telling and truth-doing, and to replace critical feedback, isolation of students and time outs with a focus on inclusiveness, relational accountability, and nurturing students' feeling of belonging, their healthy cognitive growth, and their development of strong and compassionate minds.

Attending to good intentions

Reflecting on my teaching career, I notice that, with increasing frequency over the last few years, I am simultaneously positioned as a Nêhiyaw knowledge carrier and as an academic. This is an uncomfortable position. In our communities, there are knowledge carriers or holders who have deep and long-held commitments to gather, share and live sacred knowledge, accruing wisdom to match that gathered in any Ph.D. program. I live in and with our knowledge system and have some understanding, but I am not a knowledge carrier. As an educator, I feel like an Indigenous knowledge technician who must find ways and frameworks to translate between two worlds – Indigenous and Western or mainstream – and their sophisticated knowledge systems. It is a complex terrain to navigate.

About 20 years ago, at a think tank in Hawaii that I attended with my graduate supervisors, Drs. Peggy and Stan Wilson, host Elder Emil Wolfgram, commented that we have the cultural hardware, and now we need to develop the cultural software. Since then, I have often thought about his statement and its meaning deepens over time. Initially, I saw our "cultural hardware" as a stand-alone system operating with its own Indigenous language. Over the years, however, my vision has expanded to include interconnection with a larger sophisticated multidimensional network – a cultural interconnection and high context knowledge system that operates in my own First Nation community and the networked web of Indigenous knowledge I was nurtured in had been transposed to the virtual world. It is a fascinating idea. What I still recognize today is Elder Wolfgram's teaching that, as educators we are technicians, cultural software engineers so to speak, working to navigate the natural cultural architecture – not to control it but to understand it. This is my work – not to gather content for institutional reasoning to reteach as Indigenous knowledge. It is much more than that. It is awakening to our own Indigenous constructs and consciousness, operating in an intelligent and sophisticated Indigenous language system. Our Indigenous languages are the true operational system. They articulate multidimensional and spiritual inclusiveness in a compassionate loving way. My work remains dedicated to philosophical frameworks that cannot be recontextualized as content, and that holistically and synchronously engage all our ways of knowing, bringing mind, body, spirit, and heart to every experience. As educators, we must realize recognize that we cannot remain narrowly focused on the intellect. There is much more to nurture in ourselves and others.

There have been moments in my teaching career when colleagues have asked me for help incorporating Indigenous ideas or topics into their curriculum. These have included, for example, Treaties, why ceremonial pipes are important, why protocols are necessary, and a plethora of how to address some Indigenous-related topic. Their understanding of these topics was often decontextualized, and what they learned would be packaged up as information that comfortably aligned with mainstream or western curriculum and ways of thinking about Indigenous peoples.

I really appreciate my colleagues when they reach out for this kind of help. It is a first step to awakening to the rich knowledge systems of Indigenous peoples. What can be difficult is convincing them to take the next steps – to ask them to start their own journey toward understanding Indigenous knowledge networks and architectures. This will be a long journey, one that will require a significant investment of time and effort before they develop the skills and approaches needed to understand our knowledge systems. Many do not want to make the journey. Some might think it is not worthwhile or not necessary. It is. This is not something that can be learned from a textbook. As nohkom Mary Moonias says, "You have to come here and be with us to know." This is the work. It involves building relationships and comes to life as one sits with people who know and nurture a sense of deep and ongoing interconnection and spiritual knowing. Eventually, this can become a way of living, driven by a relational, reciprocal, and responsive duty of service to students, humanity, the earth, universe, and cosmos.

I have non-Indigenous colleagues who want and are willing to take this journey, but, at the same time, fear that they might make a mistake that will offend Indigenous people, and so disqualify themselves. I understand this. I also know that this is a learning process, and, like learning to walk, swim or ride a bike, includes the risk of mistakes or failures. It's personal and difficult work, and one must begin building relationships with community acknowledged cultural mentors who know and are willing to help guide others toward truth.

Circling back to ideas of assessment and uncovering okiskinwahamâkewin

In my own journey as an okiskinwahamâkew, I too have made many mistakes, and the struggle to find ways to honor Nêhiyaw knowledge in student assessment that began in my early years continues. To navigate this challenging

terrain, I draw on ethics shared with me by my cultural mentors, such as the ethic of non-interference, honoring spirit first, and many more.

I also reflect on something Elder Wolfgram said over and over during our Hawaii think tank. Pounding his clenched fist on the table each time he repeated this, he told me that once I got my teaching degree, I would become a "certified colonized." This statement woke me up, reminding me that I must remain committed to honor my role as an okiskinwahamâkew, to embody it as best I can, and continue to learn from others and from myself what it means to be an okiskinwahamâkew.

"We have to stop minimizing our languages," my uncle Lionel Kinuwna told me. Indigenous language systems, with their multi-dimensional translations and conceptual frameworks for knowing, are our operating systems. We cannot diminish them to make them fit into or conform to western or mainstream paradigms. As Elder Jimmy O'Chiese reminds us, this is also true for our ways of teaching and learning:

> "[T]o "Indigenize education" is to put our native education into a box and teach from a European interpretation. It's another way of Europeans describing to us who we are according to their education. We shouldn't be trying to "Indigenize education." We should be recognizing our own Native education as it is, as it always has been, which is our own law – Creator's Law; some call it natural law (Cook, 2017, p. 22).

I hope this discussion has been helpful and I give thanks to the editors who courageously take on this work. Ay hiy niskohmtinawawow kaki yaw. Thank you all.

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The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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