

## Culturally Responsive Indigeneity of Relations

### SPARK Conference 2019 Sharing Circle: Embracing the Needs of First Nation Children Through the Voices of First Nation Early Childhood Educators

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*This paper draws on the traditional sharing circle at the SPARK conference held at the University of British Columbia in 2019. The sharing circle was led by an Elder and two early childhood educators sharing knowledge from their perspectives and experiences of the Anishininiwi Awaashishiiw Kihkinohamaakewi Niikaanihtamaakew Indigenous Early Childhood Education Leadership Program (IECELP). The sharing circle at SPARK was delivered in the Indigenous research method of a wildfire circle consistent with the summative research conducted across four First Nation child care centres to measure the impact of the IECELP. We propose alternative ways of transferring knowledge in Indigenous culturally responsive ways to be welcomed and encouraged in academia and in early childhood education.*

**Key words:** *Indigenous early childhood educator (IECE); culturally responsive; wildfire circle; leadership*

This paper reflects the binary of Indigenous education and Western education. The Western way of knowing is through theories, while the Indigenous way is through stories. The wildfire circle is a traditional sharing circle led by an Elder with traditional protocols in place. The wildfire circle was the Indigenous research method used in the Indigenous early childhood education (IECE) leadership program and the method used to implement knowledge transfer at the 2019 SPARK conference.

### Culturally responsive indigeneity of relations

Dr. John Hodson (2013) the lead researcher of the Anishininiwi Awaashishiiw Kihkinohamaakewi Niikaanihtamaakew Indigenous Early Childhood Education Leadership Program (IECELP), defines "culturally responsive" as it relates to Indigeneity of relations, that is, "from our experiences and perspectives as building relationships with oneself and others" as "not a linear process but rather

interwoven with resistance to what is connected to expanding and deepening all the relationships through a lifelong pursuit of healing and wellness" (p. 350). Our paper, as a written narrative, is organized and unfolds as a process. In truth, it was much more a natural and transformational experience. The presentation at SPARK was not planned in a sense of PowerPoint or speaking notes. We, as presenters, were open to letting our stories

unfold in the wildfire circle and were open to the participants sharing and unfolding their stories in a natural way, which led to a transformational experience of reconciliation. The Indigenous wildfire circle at SPARK was an interwoven connection through a web of experiences and stories shared. Our experiences embody Hodson's definition as interwoven, resistant, connected, deep, and in pursuit of healing and wellness. We recognize that culturally responsive Indigenous relationships in Western education settings are becoming part of the discussions. We were honoured to share the story of Indigenous education innovation from an Indigenous postsecondary institute perspective as we believe the time is now to be bridging knowledges and have Indigenous voices heard. In this paper, by highlighting the transfer of knowledge at the SPARK conference, we identify how Indigenous education is embedded in relationships and is core to understanding how learning occurs in an Indigenous context. The knowledge was shared at the conference through a traditional Indigenous research method, the wildfire circle, led by Elder Brenda Mason. We demonstrated how culturally responsive Indigeneity of relations is embedded in ways of knowing and practices of Indigenous education and research.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the wildfire circle conducted at the SPARK conference by describing the culturally responsive and relational knowledge transfer process and by giving details of our experience and perspectives within our individual roles as presenters. We provide a brief overview of the IECELP and describe how we made connections to our commitment to truth and reconciliation in Canada<sup>1</sup> through the wildfire circle at SPARK. Then we outline the culturally responsive research method of relations and share our individual experiences. In addition, we include a discussion of some of the findings of the IECELP. We conclude with recommendations for alternative ways of transferring knowledge in an Indigenous culturally responsive way that may be welcomed in academia, as well as bridging Indigenous research methods and knowledge in ECE.

As we begin a discussion that explores Indigenous culturally responsive research and knowledge transfer, it is necessary to be responsive to the cultural norms of Indigenous traditions. When Elder Brenda opened the wildfire circle at SPARK, she shared the protocol call of sharing in a circle and provided an understanding of the value of an eagle feather in the Indigenous culture. An eagle feather is held and passed to everyone within a wildfire circle. Once you receive the eagle feather, you start by introducing yourself and then share from your experiences. The eagle feather symbolizes wisdom and the eagle can fly high close to the Creator, delivering our prayers and questions. We begin this article with a sacred eagle feather, which is known to hold the space of everyone's personal sharing and to connect everyone to the Creator that will provide guidance to the knowing within each of us. Often our answers may come to us while sharing within others' stories.

## Introductions

Boozhoo<sup>2</sup>, my name is Brenda Mason, and my Anishinabe<sup>3</sup> name is Imprint Hanging Standing Woman; I'm Oji/Cree<sup>4</sup> and I speak my language. I belong to a fish clan, Red Sucker, and I was raised in Sandy Lake First Nation, a remote community located in northwestern Ontario. My aunty mom and uncle dad raised me, along with other children. I have a son who has blessed me with grandchildren. So, yes, I am a grandmother and loving it. Today, I reside in Thunder Bay, and it is my home for 38 years. I graduated from Confederation College in 1990 with a social services worker diploma. I am registered with the College of Social Workers and Social Services Workers. Today, I work within St. Joseph's Care Group, Mental Health Outpatient Program. I have provided cultural and spiritual services, including traditional therapy and traditional healing, for 28 years. I walked with the Elders for several years before they sent me out to do my traditional Indigenous work in our community. It's the community members that started coming to me and referring to me as an Elder. I have also provided Elder support with the students and staff at Oshki-Wenjack Education Institute for about 11 years. I also teach one of the classes in the Aboriginal Wellness and Addictions Prevention Program every year.

Hello, Boozhoo, my name is Lori Huston, registered early childhood educator (RECE) and I am the former IECE program coordinator with Oshki-Wenjack Education and Training Institute, as well as the associate researcher in the IECELP. I am the daughter of a first-generation English Canadian mother born to a second world war bride. On my father's side, we trace back five generations of Canadians with Scottish, Irish, and Indigenous heritage. I am 41 years old in the second half of my life. I have two young sons, both of whom I parent solely on my own. I currently live in Thunder Bay, Ontario, and was raised in Red Lake, a small northwestern Ontario town. Red Lake was the site of a Hudson's Bay Company fur-trading post in the late 1800s, and its modern way of life originates from gold mining. It has a significant Indigenous population and is a hub to surrounding remote, fly-in First Nations.

Boozhoo, my name is Roxanne Loon and I am an RECE. I am from Grassy Narrows First Nation located in northwestern Ontario, Grand Council Treaty #3. Grassy Narrows is 80 kilometres north of Kenora, along the English-Wabigoon River system, near the Manitoba border. I've been an educator for 10 years. I am currently the supervisor at Migizi Wazason Child Care Centre in Grassy Narrows. I completed my ECE diploma at Oshki-Wenjack and the IECE Leadership Program. I am married and a mother to our four children. My parents both speak Ojibway. My mother is a residential school survivor. She worked for many years in child care and completed the ECE diploma program along with me at Oshki-Wenjack. My father did not go to residential school. He was hidden on his parents' trapline.

### **In the spirit of truth and reconciliation: Wildfire circle at SPARK**

We (Elder Brenda, Lori, and Roxanne) arrived at SPARK together knowing we would be sharing from the heart in the truth of our experiences, allowing for participants at the conference to learn and experience the Indigenous research method of the wildfire circle and possibly inspiring the participants' own innovations in the early years. Leading up to the presentation, we visited the Truth and Reconciliation totem pole on the campus of the University of British Columbia (Figure 1). We were all aware that the wildfire circle we would be conducting would be intertwined with stories of colonization and injustice. It was important to share the lived experiences of Indigenous educators connected to their communities. Michele Sam (2019) explains, "Indigenous Peoples' local experiences of colonialism are unique to place and time and continue to influence our actions and inactions, attitudes and beliefs even in our current time of relative freedom" (p. 2). We felt emotional and deeply connected to the residential school children represented on the totem pole. We all have extremely personal experiences with Indigenous adults and children who have been impacted by abuse, neglect, and intergenerational trauma as a result of the experiences in residential schools.



Figure 1. Haida master carver and hereditary chief James Hart and his apprentices carved a totem pole as a tribute to residential school survivors. The pole was raised on the Vancouver UBC campus, situated on the territory best regarded as shared by the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples. Photo credit: Lori Huston, 2019.

According to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015), “in the spirit of truth and reconciliation, professional learning should involve relationship building, valuing perspectives of local Indigenous community members in creating understandings of Canadian history, of appropriate teaching practices and roles of schools, teachers, and educators in Indigenous communities” (p. 239). As we anticipated sharing in the wildfire circle, we were mindful that the participants we would be sharing with represented all four colours of the medicine wheel. The medicine wheel<sup>5</sup> has been used for healing for many years by Indigenous people (Bell, 2014). A teaching of the medicine wheel is that colours represent the global ethnicities. We felt honoured to have a full representation of the medicine wheel in the wildfire circle, knowing we would be crossing all nations with our stories. The wildfire circle at SPARK opened with Elder Brenda and then Lori shared the culturally responsive and relational innovation process of the IECELP and the research related to it. Roxanne shared as an alumna of the Oshki-Wenjack ECE diploma program and IECELP. The eagle father was then passed to each participant for them to introduce themselves and provide feedback on their experience of participating in the wildfire circle.

### The Indigenous educators' leadership journey

For almost a decade Oshki-Wenjack has offered an early childhood education program that has accredited 89 Indigenous early childhood educators (IECEs), many of whom are currently employed in a First Nation context. The program responds to research conducted in 2004 which found that “93 percent of ... Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) ... children of Ontario's far north lag[ged] at least two grades behind in school” (Brown, 2004). This education gap literally sets up Indigenous children for failure as they proceed in their education, and it is a major contributing factor for the 60 to 80 percent dropout rate prior to completing grade 12 (Calver, 2015; Hodson & Kitchen, 2015). Recognizing that addressing that gap would require innovative approaches to professional development (PD), the IECE leadership program (IECELP) was based on a needs assessment of the 2017 graduating IECE class and program alumni. That needs assessment resulted in a comprehensive PD strategy that included two institutes, as well as a related formative and summative research study to measure change (Huston, 2018, p. 50).

The development of the IECELP was focused on the leadership qualities of the IECEs and long-standing

relationships with Lori, the former ECE program coordinator at Oshki-Wenjack and a fellow ECE alumna. In addition, the program forged a strong partnership between the Shkoday Abinojiiwak Obimiwedoan Thunder Bay Aboriginal Headstart Program and Maamaawisiiwin Education Research Centre, as well as receiving financial support from Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada.

The findings of the needs assessment highlighted that IECE students wanted culturally relevant teachings; this would include teaching in their languages, special needs training, culturally responsive assessment tools, and culturally specific teachings such as the medicine wheel as a planning tool (Huston, 2018, p. 48). The vision while developing the IECELP was in the spirit that all of the teachings received by the participants would travel back to the communities to effect change. The role of the IECES in their communities is significant and unique to each community (Huston, 2018, p. 53). The IECELP included a three-month online preparatory course, two one-week institutes, and a related summative research study.

### **Research in partnership with Maamaawisiiwin Education Research Centre**

The qualitative study was shaped by the format of talking circles used by Kompf and Hodson (2000); they named their sessions Wildfire I and Wildfire II in their research conducted within the development of a bachelor of education in Aboriginal adult education program at Brock University. Their culturally responsive relational research design allowed for authentic and meaningful inquiry with the intent of improving practices that are relevant for participants. The wildfire circles created a common and often sacred research environment that was respectful of the traditions and cultural beliefs of the Indigenous participants (Huston, 2018, p. 49). Participation was completely voluntary, and participants could decline to answer questions and choose to withdraw at any time. In the second year, the research included a summative analysis to assess the impact of the IECELP at the community level. The inclusion of Indigenous knowledge and practices and the presence of Oshki-Wenjack's campus Elder Brenda Mason for the wildfire circle recognized the respectful relationships (Huston, 2018, p. 48).

### **Embracing the needs of Indigenous children through the voices of Indigenous early childhood educators**

The IECE alumni took on the role of researcher during the program; they were learning research skills as well as learning about cultural protocols and about their peoples' Indigenous knowledges, which led to building theories and enhancing their program capacities. The lead researcher on the project, Dr. Hodson (2013), believes that "Indigenous research must purposely abandon the myth of objectivity that dominates western forms of research" (p. 357); he "encourages Indigenous people to embrace their subjectivity in research" (p. 357). The IECES are mothers, grandmothers, and community educators. They are passionate about making a positive change for children and families. They are trained professionals connected to the identity of their people and children by which they share and live Indigenous pedagogy in the community and programs. As well, they are trained in child development and know that nurturing positive social interactions and supporting healthy attachments are essential to promoting self-esteem, positive cultural identity, and language development during infancy and early childhood. In Indigenous contexts, child development is centered around living experiences that are secured in family attachments within a comprehensive community base of supports (Ball & Pence, 2006).

Teaching Indigenous students starts with relationships. Elder Brenda describes Euro-Western education as follows: "It teaches us to lead with our minds intellectually but often leaves out the holistic approaches to learning." She then compares this to an Indigenous approach in which "wisdom is already in you. It's your heart that enhances our understandings, confirming what we know, and the work we do reflects our truth as we walk with our values."

This relates to human potential and the awakening that can occur in our growth and development. It emphasizes the value of informal education when driven by authentic and spiritual values that intersect with more formally acquired knowledge.

Their lived experiences, knowledge, and commitment further inspire the IECES in the IECERP to take on leadership roles and create opportunities for transformational changes to early learning programs connected to Indigenous education. The IECES' lived experiences include the loss of culture and language. They are the children of residential school survivors or are survivors themselves, and have also been affected by the "Sixties Scoop," another negative product of colonization that affects Indigenous peoples. In the 1960s, in addition to residential schools, it was a time when "child welfare authorities removed Aboriginal children from their homes in record numbers" (Long & Dickason, 2011, p. 61). Understanding and engaging in hearing the lived experiences of IECES allows for culturally responsive relationships to be fostered and grow in truth and reconciliation. The Indigenous population is also in distress from ongoing and inescapable influences of government policies and variations in access to supports and services. Centuries of attempted cultural genocide and ongoing colonization mean that 37.9% of First Nations children live in poverty (Campaign 2000, 2018, p. 2). Many of the IECES themselves are the sole income earners in their household and struggle with the lower wages in the child care sector.

## Knowledge mobilization

### *A culturally responsive research method of relations*

The value of respecting IECES' stories and experiences was critical to mobilizing the knowledge revealed through this study. We recognize that research has not addressed Indigenous peoples in meaningful and sustainable ways. The IECERP values from the beginning were grounded in Indigenous peoples' knowledge systems, guided by Elder Brenda and Dr. Hodson. Respect at all levels informed transparent and open relationships throughout the IECERP. Hodson (2013) explains that in Indigenous culturally responsive research methods, "there is no space between the researched and the researcher. It is the relationships that creates a more in-depth conversation to allow for a complete understanding" (p. 355). This is further supported in the Tri-Council Policy Statement, Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2014) position on Indigenous research. The four primary principles are "respect for human dignity—respect for persons, concern for welfare, and justice" (p. 113). The research relationships within the IECERP could not have expanded without a foundation that already existed through Oshki-Wenjack's decade of service to early childhood education in the territory, operationalized by then program coordinator, Lori Huston, a research associate in this study, and Elder-in-Residence Brenda Mason (Hodson, Hedican, Huston, Mason, et al., 2020, p. 54).

### *Multiple expressions of respect*

Respect was woven throughout the two years of the study, which emphasized the experiences of the IECES. The inclusion of Indigenous spiritual practices, orchestrated through the consistent presence of Elder Brenda in each wildfire circle, was primary, and the insight gained through those discourses determined what was included in the PD (Hodson et al., 2020, p. 14). The first wildfire circle took place in 2017 as a means of assessing the needs of IECES, and this created the supporting framework for the entire project.

In reality, Oshki-Wenjack took the position that the IECES could not only delineate the problems they faced day to day in their educational practice, but they also had the solutions to resolve those issues. Oshki-Wenjack then became the facilitators of the PD, bringing together experts that aligned with the expressed needs, caring

for a myriad of logistical issues, and responding to the ongoing realities of a dynamic educational environment (Hodson et al., 2020, p. 22).

A closing wildfire circle was held at the end of Institutes 1 and 2 to understand the participating IECES' experiences and to direct the program's development. The wildfire circles continued into the four communities in an effort to reveal the local impact of the project. In a final act of full inclusion in those chosen communities, the wildfire circles were open to all IECES, staff, parents, and community Elders (Hodson et al., 2020, p. 22).

#### *An Indigenous conception of knowledge mobilization at the SPARK conference*

The wildfire circle at the SPARK conference provided a comprehensive review of a culturally responsive and relational innovation framework that was used throughout the IECELP: the vision medicine wheel teaching (see Figure 2). This particular teaching contends that for every vision to become a reality requires certain relationships and specific knowledge which dictate a related series of actions. We shared an image of the vision medicine wheel teaching with the participants at the SPARK conference as a visual.

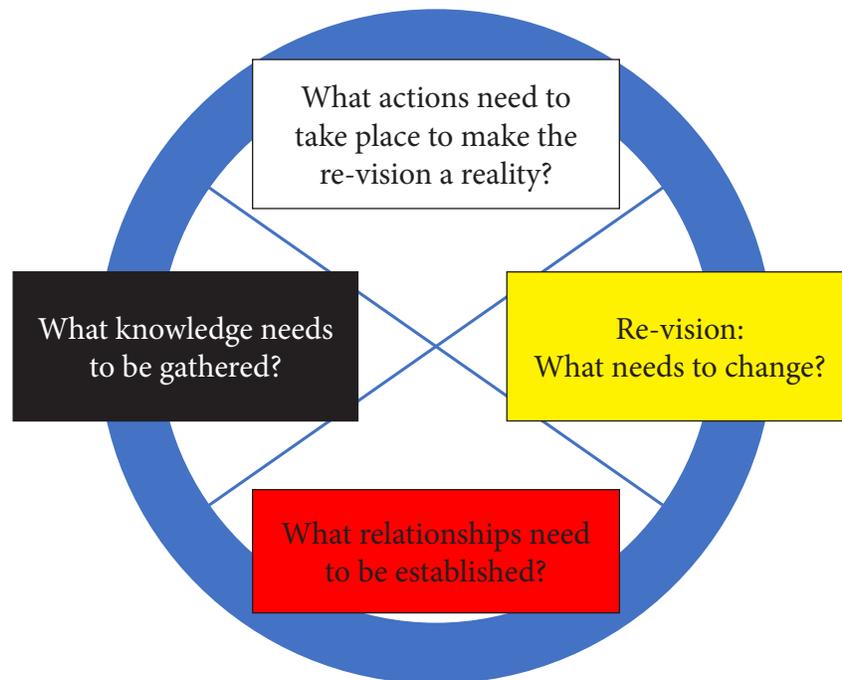


Figure 2. The vision medicine wheel teaching.

We also shared:

- The current *vision* of the education reality in First Nation communities in northern Ontario. Lori spoke to the current landscape of early learning in the northern communities.
- A presentation of the *re-visioning* process. Lori spoke to this piece and shared how IECELP came to be, as well as IECE narratives and needs assessment findings.
- A presentation of the *relationships* necessary to bring that re-vision into reality. Elder Brenda shared the roles of the IECELP committee members and the IECE alumni students coming together to expand, grow, and learn in collaboration.

- A presentation of the *knowledge* necessary to bring the re-vision into reality. We shared with the SPARK participants the themes that emerged and the teachings that were implemented during the IECELP.
- A presentation of the *actions* necessary to bring the re-vision into reality. Roxanne shared her experience of how she has completed a successful proposal and taken the action to bring about change. Lori highlighted that the IECES are very much still in the vision, relationships, and knowledge phases and are just tapping into action with the completion of some successful proposals. The IECES in the First Nation communities will need continued support in their leadership journey to facilitate change.

After sharing the framework we then moved into passing the eagle feather to invite participants to share their own visions and innovation.

An experiential wildfire circle that resulted in participants' own early years innovation with regards to truth and reconciliation in Canada, the wildfire circle at SPARK was about the *voices* we heard and how those voices have impacted us, and encouraging others to address the educational gap in their own way and self-determine a better future.

We have touched on the current reality of education in First Nation communities. The re-visioning process was the development of the IECELP and the relationships necessary were held within Oshki-Wenjack and community partners. The knowledge necessary to bring the vision forward was the IECES' ways of knowing and doing within their Indigenous culture. IECES hold an understanding of child development that starts with relationships first and then considers the interrelationships among a child's physical, emotional, intellectual, social, and spiritual realms. The holistic approach to child development considers the context of the child's family experiences and community relationships.

In First Nation communities the early childhood (birth to 12 years old) programs and services have different policies and funding approaches that are managed by both provincial and federal governments. In recent years there has been more focus on the importance of the early years in First Nation communities. For example, the emphasis on integrated services from the provincial government's Journey Together program is to expand child and family programs on reserve and, through Indigenous and federal partners, to make supports available in more communities (Ontario Ministry of Indigenous Affairs, 2016). And, in response to Jordan's Principle, new federal funding will ensure that all First Nations children can access products (e.g., wheelchair ramps, school supplies), services, and supports they need when they need them. The program can help with a wide range of health, social, and educational needs (Government of Canada, 2019). Many of the IECES from the IECELP have completed successful proposals for Journey Together and are in the process of writing proposals for Jordan's Principle funding.

The leadership skill set that the IECES have demonstrated often goes unrecognized in their communities. The role of IECE is often viewed in their communities as "babysitters," and the leadership role is overlooked. The data drawn from the IECELP identifies many strengths of the participants where they are engaging in professional learning, sharing responsibilities, writing proposals, and advocating for the children and families in their communities. This evidence opens up future opportunities for professional learning about leadership with Indigenous early childhood educators.

#### *ECE innovation, visioning, relations, knowledge, and action planning*

Through the narratives of the participants' experiences during Institutes 1 and 2, it has been determined that Indigenous children and Indigenous educators need a different approach to learning and teaching. From the first wildfire circle to the last held during the summative research, it has been demonstrated how such an approach

can be developed and implemented with a deep commitment to Indigenous ways of learning and knowing. Each wildfire circle ran for approximately sixty minutes and was digitally recorded. The recordings were then transcribed and underwent analysis, including coding and categorizing into key idea units. The themes reflect the collective experience of the participants in each wildfire circle (Hodson et al., 2020, p. 22). The wildfire circle allows the participants to start with a vision provided by guided open-ended questions, which at the same time further supports and builds the relationships. The next two stages are knowledge and action, which take place after a firm foundation of vision and relationships (Kompf & Hodson, 2000).

The known facts are that “Ontario children living in First Nations communities are living in poverty with many inequalities, and the work of the IECE educators can have life-changing impacts on the young” (Huston, 2018, p. 53). First Nations communities lack services needed, especially for young people, who account for about one-third of First Nations people; according to Statistics Canada (2017), 29.2% of First Nations people in Canada were 14 years of age or younger in 2016. A Senate committee discussing the federal legislation known as Bill C-61 heard from Kelly Crawford, director of Anishinabek Education System, who said, “We have an opportunity to use education as a tool to rebuild and strengthen our nation, our language, our culture, and our traditions” (Francis, 2017).

IECELP participants shared their vision to build relationships with community members and band leadership, as well as with the governments of Canada, both provincially and federally.

Transformational change is not easily achieved. Taking issue with the concept of silenced discourses, Peter Moss (2017) holds the view that “alternative discourses in early childhood are varied, vibrant and vocal, readily heard by those who listen” (p. 12). An area of noticeable change with the IECEs was their ability to share their stories for change in both Institutes 1 and 2. With a total of four days training with “Build Skills for Change,” the participants became very clear from a place that holds core beliefs and values. Other research supports this noticeable change in the use of story to guide Indigenous people; for example, scholars from New Zealand and China describe “heart pedagogy” as a double-edged form of education that claims to be inherently embedded in Indigenous practice (Gong & Kahu, 2017). From the beginning of the IECELP program until the last wildfire circle held at SPARK 2019, IECE stories informed the innovation, visioning, relations, knowledge, and action planning. Areta Kahu (personal communication, January 19, 2020) beautifully explained that “stories are filled with philosophies, makes us think about what is right and what is wrong. Indigenous stories really get to the heart of issues.” The heart pedagogy, defined as connected to our highest self—spiritual being—informs the mind, the way one communicates within a spiritual realm to do our work and is the way the heart works (Gong & Kahu, 2017). In Institute 2 the students connected to heart pedagogy as Elder Brenda also supports this theory of learning that was inspired by the students while connecting to their own identities as Indigenous people with the traditional spiritual practices. As Gong and Kahu (2017) further explain, in the implementation of heart pedagogy shifts were made in the service mode; they give the example of “information vs. transformation” with “every opportunity to forge relationships” (p. 5). This speaks to the transfer of knowledge and relationships formed over the entirety of the IECELP.

### *The voices we heard at the SPARK conference and how those voices have impacted us*

Elder Brenda shares her experience:

Attending the SPARK: The Early Years Conference in Vancouver, BC, was very inspirational and educational. The people at the University of British Columbia were friendly and accommodating. The location was beautiful. Maybe one day, I will have a chance to go back and explore further. By sharing our work and knowledge we provided the participants an opportunity to gain some knowledge about who we are and where we come from. Using one of our traditional formats was intentional; wildfire circle

creates an environment where everyone is included and equal. The protocol and teachings shared were to be passed so people know and experience. As I observed and listened to the participants' feedback and questions in the sharing circle, I felt touched and felt moved to share a song, the Anishinabe Kwe song. It's a healing song for women and songs about women receiving a gift of a clan and inviting others to come and dance to celebrate. It seemed to me the people there were wanting to know more about us as Indigenous people, our culture and traditional teachings, our way of life. I believe we gained some allies.

Lori shares her experience:

I witnessed Indigenous inequalities and the settlers' contributions to the position Indigenous people now occupy all of my life. My deep interest in the population living in risk situations has aligned me with my biggest passion: working to effect change for the First Nation children. I have walked with the Indigenous early childhood educators for over a decade, observing the reality of inequities and their barriers with limited access to resources and supports. The IECE Leadership Program was many years in the making with the educators. My experience of co-writing the proposal, teaching, and as a research associate allowed me to walk side by side with the educators in a co-learning relationship. The IECEs have inspired me to work harder at bridging cultures and [bringing] their voices forward. The SPARK conference provided the opportunity for IECEs' voices to be heard. Callaghan, Hale, Taylor-Leonhardi, and Lavallee (2018) state that "we must start learning to listen respectfully and without judgments ... not only with our ears but our hearts" and "act in ways to contribute to reconciliation" (p. 18). The wildfire circle provides a safe place to listen without judgment. The story of the IECELP is deeply connected to Elder Brenda and the IECEs and having them both with me was indeed a heart-opening experience. I listened to the participants and respected how so many stopped and gave thanks to Elder Brenda for the opportunity to hold the eagle feather. That was beautiful as the eagle feather connects everyone to the spirits that provide guidance for the knowledge within each of us. The participants shared how they are going to move forward in reconciliation with Indigenous peoples in Canada and how they want to engage and support Indigenous people. When the SPARK conference ended, Elder Brenda and I reflected. I was feeling very overwhelmed and tearful with the support and feedback received from the participants in the wildfire circle. We talked about how my program advisor, Dr. Mari Pighini, mentioned that I consider a PhD program. Elder Brenda looked at me and said, "You know all the Elders I walked with and received teachings from—all had more than PhD." She is so right. The knowledge that Elder Brenda herself carries and shares with us all is transformational. I have witnessed it and experienced it first-hand. We have to engage with Elders and embrace with care and respect their knowledge offerings.

Roxanne shared her experience:

I decided to speak at the conference to educate about the importance of early learning through the eyes of indigenous ECEs. [I wanted to] Share the work and experience and impacts of the IECELP on my community and me. I also wanted to inform people how my community was poisoned with mercury through the waters, our river system. The community members and educators see how the poisoning is still affecting the younger generation to this day. I am a strong advocate for the health and well-being of the children in my community.

I had a vision before the format of our presentation was even told to me [and I was] not aware that we would be presenting through a sharing circle. I had a dream. I dreamt of us (Lori, Brenda, and I) presenting in a sharing circle. So, the next morning, I emailed Lori and I told her right away. Once I found out that we would be presenting in this style, I felt a sense of relief because I was foretold this in my dream. The importance of dreams and visions was described by Virgil Bullshoe: "Dreams are

telling you something.” He considers dreams a part of the learning process related to participation in ceremonies as it provides a way of remembering (as cited in Little Bear, 2009, p. 12). I appreciated the SPARK committee and everyone involved that they acknowledged Indigenous culture and traditions. Our experiences were rich in knowing we were welcomed and we have deep responsibility within all of us to have our time and place in early learning.

## **Bridging cultures and knowledge in ECE**

We propose that alternative ways of transferring knowledge in Indigenous culturally responsive ways be welcomed and encouraged in academia and the early childhood field. Indigenous Elders are catalysts for institutional change; there is a rippling impact of Elders’ teachings across all races, geographical areas, and generations of students. Elder Brenda shares,

I have desired to find a way to reconnect our children back to who we are and reconnect to our traditions and land. As adults, we needed to heal first from our history, and many have. We are finding our voices, which will benefit our children. The voices need to be Indigenous in all areas of life, such as in education. We need Indigenous teachers to share our traditions through storytelling and other traditional methods that will provide knowledge and assist the students to reconnect to who we are as Indigenous people. We need our own people to provide education that will inspire healing and regaining our culture.

We asked Dr. Hodson to provide a recommendation regarding alternative ways of transferring knowledge that are culturally responsive to Indigenous people in academia.

His response to our question:

When I consider the issue of Indigenous research and education in the academy I think back over the proceeding decades in this country and consider what has been achieved.

Let me limit that reflection just to the Ontario reality and then I ask why? Why don’t we have a critical mass of Indigenous professorate in this province in higher education? Why don’t we see Indigenous research methods, funded, taught or the outcome of Indigenous research propelling Indigenous communities past the legacy of colonialism? Why don’t we see more Indigenous people graduating with advanced degrees?

After thirty years of work in this area I have come to the conclusion that it is the institution of education that is the metaphoric logjam that stops the river of change from flowing in this country. Let me explain ... many of our people speak of systemic barriers that contribute to a lack of inclusion, success, change, etc., etc., etc. Those in power often respond, “Show me those systems” or they point to the myriad of policies/procedures designed to eliminate those institutional barriers. What they never see is how their unconscious way of knowing, values, and beliefs are the logjam. The outcome is oppression of Indigenous children learning in the education system. I do believe that they do not know who they are. They only believe that they are the way forward, in spite of all the evidence piled up that speaks to the contrary. They will ignore that evidence, and ignore it at their peril. There is an epistemic arrogance in this province that creates that logjam, but all logjams have a tipping point, a point in time where the power to resist the flow of change is overcome by an unstoppable force that bursts forward and washes away everything before it. I believe that tipping point is close at hand.

Today, we know there are 13 Faculties of Education in Ontario and there is no Indigenous Faculty of Education (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020). There are two Indigenous teacher education programs: Brock University

currently in partnership with Oshki-Wenjack and the second at Lakehead University that is not operational. Ontario is making systemwide changes to include “professional development and integration of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit perspectives into the curriculum” (Ontario Ministry of Education, Indigenous Education, 2020). Nonetheless, education training is overwhelmingly dominated by non-Indigenous Canadians.

The final IECELP report outlined calls to act that are purposefully developed to increase Indigenous education innovation that began with Anishininiwi Awaashishiiw Kihkinohamaakewi Niikaanihtamaakew across all levels of education in northwestern Ontario (Hodson et al., 2019, p. 61). More qualified IECs across Canada will result in quality programs for Indigenous children. It is very important to think about all calls to action as we highlight TRC Call #12, which is very clear on ECE where it calls on all governments to develop culturally appropriate ECE programs for Aboriginal families. By including IECs in every early learning program in the future, we will be tackling several TRC calls to action: increasing equity, diversity, inclusion, and access to Indigenous leadership and teaching for everyone (Maracle, 2018, p. 16). We have to also recognize that Indigenous educators are one person performing many roles—activist, researcher, family member, community leader—plus their day job. The Indigenous educators have the story right and can tell the story of the children and family’s needs in the community.

The IECELP was about embracing and acknowledging the gifts that shared knowledge and wisdom. Elder Brenda, as part of the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (AECEO) Guiding Committee on Truth and Reconciliation, shared in a recent piece titled “Walking Together in Reconciliation” which was published in *eceLINK* earlier this year:

We need Indigenous instructors to share and teach our traditional knowledge, traditions, values, customs, practices, identity, culture, our way of life, teachings, science, math, language, and everything that is in the education system but teaching it all from our way of understanding, our way of seeing the world, our knowledge about the land, spirituality and stories. We need the grandparents to be part of educating our children from the start to completion. We as Indigenous people are responsible to respond to the TRC calls to action but invite non-indigenous people to be part of the “work.” We are on the healing journey, yes, but we need the other races to join us in healing so we can leave a path of respect, love, wisdom, bravery, honesty, humility and the truth for ALL CHILDREN. (AECEO Guiding Committee on Truth and Reconciliation, 2020, p. 6).

Meegwetch. To All Our Relations.

## Acknowledgments

We gratefully acknowledge the support of, and thank, Indigenous Services of Canada.

<sup>1</sup> The Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s work is a holistic response to the Indian residential school legacy. We align with specific calls to action under education that speak to the early learning sector in Canada. Our work acknowledges the injustices and need for continued healing.

<sup>2</sup> Boozhoo is greetings in the Ojibway language.

<sup>3</sup> Anishinabe is Indigenous in the Ojibway language.

<sup>4</sup> Oji-Cree is its own dialect in Northern Ontario, a combination of the Cree and Ojibway languages.

<sup>5</sup> The term medicine wheel was established when stone constructions in the shape of wheels were found on Medicine Mountain.

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