

“Moving Forward”: Arts and Indigenous Reciprocal Leadership in a Neehithuw (Woodland Cree) School Arts Project

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Abstract

This article discusses an arts-based program carried out in a Neehithuw (Woodland Cree) school in northern Saskatchewan. Using historical photographs, students wrote a poem and then performed the poem for various audiences. The teaching/learning relationship based on Neehithuw language concepts and values allowed student leadership to develop so that students were comfortable bringing their lived culture into the curriculum. Thus, the project illustrates the effectiveness of the arts as well as a pedagogical approach that uses Indigenous reciprocal leadership to enact Neehithuw¹ concepts and values to achieve educational decolonisation and cultural affirmation.

Keywords: Arts, reciprocal leadership, culture, decolonisation, Indigenous leadership, Indigenous wellbeing

Introduction

Indigenous children have different educational needs that often put them at odds with the Euro-Canadian mainstream educational practices. These needs are further exacerbated by racism and poverty (Patteson, Restoule, Margolin, & de Leon, 2010). Patteson et al. indicated that 95% of their Aboriginal participants identified the need for traditional teaching practices that included learning models that were collaborative, hands on, experiential, and holistic. Indigenous students who engaged in arts-based learning activities exhibited improvements to their personal and cultural identity along with greater engagement, success, and enjoyment in learning activities that further contributed to their educational perseverance (Patteson et al., 2010). This article will elaborate on an arts project in a First Nations high school in northern Saskatchewan. The project illustrates the effectiveness of the arts as well as a pedagogical approach using Indigenous reciprocal leadership that incorporate Indigenous concepts of leadership that draw upon the Nehinuw (Cree) concepts of teaching and learning: *kikinaumagehin* (teaching others), *kiskenaumasowin* (teaching oneself) and *kiskinaumatowin* (teaching each other) (Goulet & Goulet, 2014).

¹ In this article, the concepts of the Cree language are used since it is the language of the community in which the research took place. There are different dialects and spellings of Cree terms that are used in the writing of this paper since different sources of Cree language come from different dialect communities, for example the Neehithuw community where the research took place (TH dialect) and the Nehinuw community of Cumberland House (N dialect).

Arts-based educational activities become decolonizing practices when they empower students to choose and engage in projects with which they closely identify, thus validating their cultural identities and lived experiences (Riecken, Conibear, Michel, Lyall, Scott, Tanaka, & Strong-Wilson, 2006). When facilitated using reciprocal leadership, the arts have the potential to provide a venue for youth to identify the issues important to them in their own voices. The arts enable students to take leadership in generating stories of their lived experiences, which represents an alternative form of literacy through the discovery of knowledge in ways not limited to reading and writing. Once their voices are heard, the teacher can respond, sharing her expertise to assist the student or students' ideas or expression to move forward. This reciprocal leadership of the students and the teacher taking turns in learning leadership decolonizes the normalized colonizing hierarchical methods of teaching in our education systems.

Indigenous leadership

Research on Indigenous leadership informed by Indigenous research methods is a recent area of study, thus making Indigenous leadership from an Indigenous perspective an emerging area of research (Voyageur, Calliou & Brearley, 2015). In her research with Indigenous leaders, Pinay-Schindler (2011) identified four main aspects of Indigenous leadership: language, relationships, values, and place. These four forms are interrelated and interact with each other in the implementation of the process of leadership. Leaders are seen as guardians of the language, fostering healthy decolonizing relationships based on traditional values while facilitating interactions in the physical, social, intellectual and spiritual spaces.

In terms of language, Cree has several terms for leadership because leadership is more distributed throughout the community (Keith Goulet², personal communication). Decision making is not as hierarchical as more rigid forms of Western leadership. For example, the term *Ogimaw* is what the chief was traditionally called but other people who took leadership in other areas such as trapping or fishing may also be called *Ogimaw*. *Ogeechitaw* is a highly respected leader in the community who usually exemplifies the spiritual values of the community such as generosity and kindness. *Oneeganeew* is the general term for leader and literally means "one who is out front".³ *Neeganeewin* is leadership, however in Cree, leadership does not necessarily rest with one person because there is a greater reciprocal flexibility. For example *meskocheestumatowin* is taking turns leading. In an educational context, leadership terms are implied in three forms of teaching that reflect a shifting in the hierarchical manner of power distribution in decision making: *kiskinaumagehin* (teaching others), *kiskinaumasowin* (teaching oneself), and *kiskinaumatowin* (teaching each other) (Goulet & Goulet, 2014). *Kiskinaumagehin* occurs when the teacher takes the position of leadership while in *kiskinaumatowin* the students (and maybe the teacher) are taking

² Keith Goulet is a fluent Cree speaker, born and raised in the Nehinuw community of Cumberland House, Saskatchewan. When he was growing up, the community was an isolated Cree speaking community living off the land, with very few people, like the RCMP or the teachers, speaking English.

³ This term *ogneeganeew* is not restricted to humans but is also used for other beings; for example, *oneeganootewustim* is the word for the lead dog in a dog team.

turns in the position of leadership interacting in a reciprocal manner, learning from the expertise and experience of each other. *Kiskinaumasowin* is when the self takes the lead in learning.

Developing healthy, decolonized relationships is key to Indigenous leadership. Green (1992) identified Indigenous leadership as related to the historical struggle for sovereignty and self-determination. Leaders act as collaborators, who through their caring work create a sense of belonging, reciprocity, trust, inclusion, and which builds a sense of community (Brearley, 2015). They facilitate interactions of the self (mind, body, heart, and spirit) and the collective, the land or place of engagement and people (Arden, Wall, & Horn, 2006). As storytellers they create an individual and collective identity and pass on Indigenous Wisdom.

Indigenous leaders base their actions on traditional values. Young (2006) makes the connection between traditional values and relationships when she states “[c]ulture informs leadership by providing values about how to interact in relationships, both with humans and non-humans” (p. 46). Leadership is seen more as an opportunity to serve the community that engenders the value of reciprocity. Leaders take the time to respectfully listen and develop a relationship, involving “every sense and every part of our being” in the process (Brearley, 2015, p. 91). In Cree, *pehegemmisowin* (excessive individualism) and *ispahgeninisowin* (the attitude of being superior to others) is frowned upon in any person, but especially in those in leadership positions. This view is apparent as one of Martell’s (2016) participants shared his view of “an essential quality of a leader” (p. 137).

[W]hen one realized that their competencies were as much or more owned by the community as by the individual, it put things into perspective. It helped to know where to direct one’s energy. When humility taught that we were not as important as we thought we were, we stopped trying to provide all the answers and started to listen for them. There was richness in the community’s will. It took many skills to draw out that rich direction but the most useful skill of all was humility. (p. 137)

Reciprocity and listening to the views of those affected by the decision making is a key in effective Indigenous leadership.

Place is a significant aspect of Indigenous leadership in that leaders situate themselves and their life journeys in the collective and in relation to others, both physically and metaphysically (Pinay-Schindler, 2011; Martell, 2016) so place is not just a physical space but an embedded view of being relationship with the physical, social, and spiritual aspects of life located in the present, the past and the future. As stated by Pinay-Schindler (2011), connection to land, the ancestors and place was “vital to being a strong leader” (p. i). Place is the context in which leaders are situated. Leadership is seen as a tool to be used in context to draw upon and further Indigenous knowledge and understandings to achieve the goals and aspirations of the community and nation as they strive for self-determination (Gladstone & Pepion, 2016).

The Context

This research took place in a Neehithuw (Woodland Cree) community located in northern Saskatchewan on the shores of a large lake at the edge of the Pre-Cambrian shield. It is one of the largest First Nations in Canada with a population of over 10,000 members. Although the youth we worked with live in the community and primarily speak English, their grandparents would have attended the Anglican residential school and speak Woodland Cree as their first language. Many grandparents would have spent a good part of their life living on the land, hunting, trapping, fishing and carrying out seasonal gathering activities such as berry picking and gathering medicinal plants. Many families continue to participate in these activities and the Woodland Cree language continues to be the predominant language of the older generation in homes and the community.

The Arts Program

The arts program referred to in this article was part of a collaborative research partnership of Indigenous and Settler scholars with the Indigenous Peoples' Health Research Centre (IPHRC) and various First Nation communities in northern and southern Saskatchewan. The purpose of the larger research project was to offer theatre and arts-based programs to help First Nations youth examine and reflect on their lives with the goal of promoting wellness (for example, Goulet, Linds, Episknew & Schmidt, 2011; Ranahan, Yuen & Linds, 2017; Hyslop, Linds, Goulet & Schmidt, 2018). For the research project referred to in this article, our research agreement was with Board of Education of the First Nation and our research was conducted from 2013 to 2016 in the First Nations' controlled grade 5 to 12 school that had a population of approximately 280 students, consisting primarily of members from the Neehithuw Nation. The extracurricular drama program was facilitated by the project's research assistant, Lacey Eninew, who also taught high school drama classes for the project. Lacey is a member of this First Nation so played a key role in community relationships and ethical considerations that were also approved by the University. A postdoctoral researcher with IPHRC, Janice Victor, visited the community once a week to work with Lacey and assist with the research process.

In early March of 2015, Lacey organized a group of girls between the ages of 12 and 14 for a lunchtime Drama Club. Boys were invited to be part of the club as well but none displayed any interest in participating. Initially, the group played trust building and theatre games. Lacey asked them if they wanted to work toward creating a small performance for the Tribal Council's Aboriginal arts festival in April. The group agreed so Lacey facilitated the achievement of this goal by coming up with a framework to help students generate ideas using brainstorming recorded on a flipchart. To her question, "What do you guys want to make?" the students responded, "Something about being Native." Further brainstorming elicited a wide variety of responses including: Neehithuw words for grandparents, different forms of traditional arts such as beading and dancing, activities like fishing and hunting, and so on. To narrow down the possibilities, Lacey used the next flipchart to get students to consider if they wanted to focus on what it means to be

Native in the “Past, Present, or Future.” With those presented as their options, they came up with two ideas under the “Past” before deciding to focus on residential school and the fur trade. The next flipchart, “Research” was developed as Lacey had students come up with different ways that they could do research about the past for their project. “Creative options” was used to list the different options students had to choose from based upon the kinds of activities that students wanted to do and that Lacey felt comfortable leading, one of which was creating a poem to act out. It is important to note that as teacher, Lacey, in her leadership position, ensured that she was part of the decision making of the students at this point to ensure that the students’ choice was one that she thought they all could accomplish. Lacey then revisited the different ways that the students could do research on their topic. The students’ initial idea was to interview older family members about their experiences in residential schools. Students were provided with computer tablets to record the interviews and were also provided some advice on how to ask people about their experiences in the form of stories. Lacey developed a letter to explain the activity and purpose of the interviews to the students’ parents and guardians. The youth did not end up doing these interviews because the process did not seem natural for them, or they were embarrassed about approaching their family members, so a new approach was needed.

As a member of the community, Lacey knew there were historical photos in the local library so she took the students to visit the location and had the archivist present the collection to the group. The archived photographs depicted the community’s residential school, its students and teachers, and a wide variety of cultural activities of the community from the early part of the 20th century including fishing, hide preparation, food preparation, trapline cabins, and snowshoe making, among others. Lacey asked students to pick one photo that appealed to them in some way and provided each student with a copy of their chosen photo. Lacey guided students to think about their chosen archival photos by getting them to fill out six sections on a paper that had headings to encourage descriptions of their photo in those areas in preparation for writing the poem. The headings were: Image, Sound, Feeling, Light, Questions, and Repeating Words. The purpose of this activity was to get the students reflecting on the artistic elements of each photograph that added to their visual and emotional impact. Lacey then had the students vote on a single photo to write a collective poem about and they chose Marina’s fishing image.⁴

⁴ While real names are used for the role in this research for the authors of this paper and for the Elder, all student names are pseudonyms.



Figure 1: Fishing with hands (Northern Saskatchewan Archives, photograph by Florence McKay)

This was an archival photo of boys and girls from the residential school in their community during the spring sucker run⁵ at the shallows of the river that flows into the lake, where to this day, children and community members continue to catch suckers using just their hands. Lacey then asked the students to each write a stanza of poetry about the fishing picture. She collected those stanzas and then, as a group, they created a poem by rearranging the students' lines into a much larger poem. The choices of where to place each line was made based upon chronology and theme, as determined largely by the students. With students' permission, Lacey made minor changes to some of the words to improve flow or readability. The final poem is as follows:

Moving Forward

Catching fish
Surrounded by trees
Eating from Mother Nature's dish
The children were free.

Fishing with nets
Catching with our hands

⁵ The sucker run occurs over the course of a few days in April or May when the White Sucker fish (*Catostomus commersoni*) and Longnose or "Red" Sucker fish (*Catostomus catostomus*) are spawning. The fish migrate from the lake into the local stream and are easily hand caught in the shallow rapids at that time.

Getting our feet wet
Proud is how we stand.

Many Native people
A lot of fresh waters
A newly built steeple
Beautiful sons and beautiful daughters.

They took the kids in boats and planes
To the Mission School with a priest
When they got there it started to rain
Many would starve while few would feast.

The kids were filled with fear
They were crying
They shed many tears
Cause it felt like they were dying.

Today we know that the residential school was wrong
But we still have our pride
And we know that our people are strong
Because our language and culture is still alive. (Grade 6 Drama Club, April, 2015)

Then, in Lacey's words:

When the poem was done, I asked them who should read it and they agreed that I read while they perform. We began with the first stanza and they spontaneously began acting it out. I guided them only on an aesthetic level and when sensitive topics arose, like during the line "cause it felt like they were dying". I had a conversation with them about how there would most likely be former residential school students watching their performance. How many are still healing and we don't want to open old wounds. It was this conversation that led to the importance of moving on. Yes, this terrible thing happened. Yes, it was wrong. Yes, we must acknowledge it. But we cannot be stuck there. We have to move forward. It was this conversation that gave the title of the poem "Moving Forward". I encouraged them to think about the positive aspects. Is our culture still alive? Yes! Can you still hear our language being spoken? Yes! What does this tell us about our people? That we are strong! So with this idea, we wrote the last stanza together. I guided them in this way because I knew it was of paramount importance to end on a positive note, no matter how grim the subject was. (Field notes, April 27, 2015)

Influenced by a conversation she had with a community elder, Bill Ballantyne, Lacey also talked to the students about the power of art to create the future. Her intention with this part of the activity was to enable the youth think about how we can move forward, which thus became the title of the poem. After they had created movements to animate the poem, they practiced and then performed it on three occasions. They first performed at the regional Fine Arts Festival hosted by the Grand Council and then did so a second time at a day activity centre for adults with developmental disabilities. Their final performance was done during an assembly of all the students at their own school.

Indigenous Reciprocal Leadership and the Arts

We contend that Indigenous, reciprocal leadership and the arts foster the development of curricula that is decolonizing and culturally appropriate for the students. With their focus on creativity and imagination, the arts have the potential for student reflection and cultural expression that can develop and reaffirm the students' Indigenous identities. In this drama project, Lacey's leadership is reciprocal as she incorporates the Cree concepts of the three forms of Nehinuw teaching and learning: *kiskinaumagehin* (teaching others), *kiskinaumasowin* (teaching oneself) and *kiskinaumatowin* (teaching each other). Through use of these three forms the four aspects of Indigenous leadership emerge: language, values, relationship and place.

In her interaction with the youth, Lacey enacts the concepts of teaching/learning of the Cree language. All three forms (as above) are evident in her teaching interactions with the youth. For example, *kiskinaumagehin* (teaching others) is used when Lacey's creates frameworks to guide students in their creative processes and help them think through how they can bring to fruition their creative ideas. It is also evident when she talks to them about how art can create a future. *Kiskinaumasowin* (teaching oneself) occurs when students choose a photo, come up with descriptions of the photo and write a line of poetry on their own whereas *kiskinaumatowin* (teaching each other) takes place as students write the poem collectively and work together as group to create the actions that illustrate the lines of poetry they had written. One other key Neethinuw term evident in Lacey's interactions with students is that of *tipenimisowin* (coming to have authority over oneself). *Tipenimisowin* is developed by Lacey's turn taking in leadership. By sharing leadership with students, she is developing their decision-making ability and thus their sense of self authority. In addition to utilizing Indigenous language concepts, Cree language terms are used in the students' responses in the brainstorming. We also see Cree language referred to as a sense of pride in the last line of the students' poem.

Many Neehithuw values are evident in Lacey's leadership. She uses these values to decolonize her interactions with her students. By decolonizing, we refer to the transformation of the conventional classroom that is hierarchical, teacher-driven, and task centered into one where Indigenous pedagogies and values are at the centre of the relationships between teacher and student. Here space is made for Indigenous ways of knowing and being, thereby shifting perceptions of culture

and power relationships (Smith, 1999). Interactivity is a key concept in the Cree world view reflected in the grammatical structures of the language itself (Goulet & Goulet, 2014). Cree educator Verna Kirkness identified reciprocity as a key value in Indigenous education (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991). When reciprocity is brought to educational leadership it is one method of sharing power in the teaching-learning relationship, where the teacher creates space for students' self and group expression, then responds to that creation and, in her response, creates another space for student thought and leadership.

Lacey's use of reciprocal leadership fosters student choice as students made the group decision to create an entry for the Fine Arts Festival. They brainstormed and chose the topic "Being Native", a topic that reflected their interest in exploring their cultural identity. Rather than defining for students what 'Being Native' was, Lacey responded to that choice by providing a structure through which the students could explore what 'being Native' was to them and how they could represent that understanding to others. In reciprocal leadership, the responses and ideas of either the teacher or the students do not always work out. In this particular case, it was the idea to interview adults about their experience in residential schools. Although Lacey and Janice talked about how to do interviews with the students, in hindsight, Lacey thought that the students did not have enough training in doing interviews especially concerning a sensitive topic like experiences of residential schooling. When asked a few days later why they did not do the interviews, students responded with "I don't know", "I fell asleep", "I forgot", or more telling, "I was going to ask that old man but I didn't want to because I thought it would be too creepy to call him and invite him to my house and ask him questions." Lacey thought perhaps the interview structure felt too contrived and superficial so students were uncomfortable communicating with adults in this way.

Additionally, time constraints meant that students only had one weekend to do an interview. However, one student did talk to her dad about residential school, and he told her about the day he was taken from the trapline. So even though these interviews did not happen in a predictable and controlled way, for one student, the idea was able to foster dialogue between two generations when done in a more natural and authentic manner. When the idea of the interviews did not work out, Lacey was able to draw on her local community knowledge of archival photos and flexibly adapt the activity to students' responses. By drawing upon her skills, knowledge and creativity as a teacher, she supported students' creative imaginations and needs while circumventing an obstacle. Her use of *otootemitowin* (openness) (Goulet & Goulet, 2014) to students and their ideas facilitated reciprocal leadership as with her students, she constructed a creative space where contributions were valued and boundaries were respected. This approach appeared to enhance students' experiences and contributed to the group's creative process.

Reciprocal leadership does not mean the role of the teacher and the students are the same. Lacey continues in her role as teacher by providing some structure for new learning or providing information that would help students think creatively and generate ideas. Although she remains open and shares power with students, she does not give up her authority as the teacher. As she

stated, when students were brainstorming the activities they wanted to do, she responded by keeping in mind her own limits to the student suggestions:

Before we even began to create any product, the students came in with all kinds of ideas of what they wanted to do. One said, “I want to dance pow wow” and “I want to be a mean nun”. Another wanted to make a human pyramid. So, as a facilitator, I kept these ideas at the back of my head not knowing exactly how they were going to fit into whatever we were going to create. I began by listing options of what they could do. Writing a group poem and acting it out was one option that was called out, and one that I had confidence in my own ability to facilitate. (Fieldnotes, May 7, 2015)

At the same time, remaining open to all ideas from students prevented them from feeling “shut down” and thus encouraged ongoing active participation. Decisions as to how to proceed with the project were made collectively as Lacey guided students to consider their various suggestions. In this project, Lacey also achieves reciprocity by implementing the Cree value of *kistenimitowin* (respect)(Goulet & Goulet, 2014; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991). She respects students’ expertise in knowing what they want to learn and how they want to learn when she has them determine the topics they want to investigate. She also does not require them to do interviews when they express discomfort with the process which, in addition to respect, is an example of reciprocal leadership as she takes direction for the process from the lead of the students.

During the project, leadership shifts from herself to individual students to groups of students and to the group as a whole. This reciprocity reflects the importance in Nehinuw thought of relationships and interactivity (Goulet & Goulet 2014) and the concept of *kiskinaumatowin* (teaching each other). When teaching each other, all parties come together to share what they have to offer to others in order to support and enhance the learning process. This can only happen in a relationship of mutual trust, power sharing, caring and respect, which Lacey made evident in her field notes:

I made it a necessity to not censor their voices, and I think because of this they were very generous and comfortable sharing their ideas. I tried to incorporate as many of their original ideas as possible. For example, during the building of the steeple [to represent the church] they were able to do the human pyramid. Other ideas fell to the side, but I think that initially accepting *all* ideas was important. Also, having trust in them was huge. If I didn’t trust that they could do it, I probably would have told the Fine Arts Committee that we were not going to go. Even though there was a moment of panic when the Festival was four days away and we still had nothing, I made it a priority to trust them. In the end, they created a beautiful representation of our people’s history, learned some of the facts, and had fun with the creative process (Field notes, May 7, 2015).

This representation was made possible by a combination of arts and Indigenous forms of leadership including the second aspect of Indigenous leadership as identified by Pinay-Schindler (2011): relationships.

In the story of the Fine Arts performance, Lacey used the arts, specifically initially theatre games, to develop close, personal relationships between herself and the students and among the students as she started the process by playing theatre games with students. Brendtro, Brokenleg, Martin and Van Bockern (1998) assert that colonisation ‘fractured’ relationships within First Nations communities. Creating a culturally safe space that enables trust to emerge is of the utmost importance in the restoration of positive relationships. Theatre games are one way to construct this safe space (Goulet, Linds, Episkenew & Schmidt , 2011; Yuen et al., 2013; Victor et al., 2016). Theatre games are creative and playful opportunities that lead to collaboration and embodiment that engages the body, mind and spirit (Kangas, 2010). As Marjanovic-Shane (2010) underlines, “participants in play are seen as the collaborators in creating and directing their relationships, judgements, values and even rules” (p. 43).

In the drama project, the students participate in trust, group-building, and theatre games. For example, ‘Blind’ games help develop trust as participants close their eyes and, led by a partner, move around the space. These games encourage participants to pay attention to the senses we often ignore like touch and hearing. The games are introduced in order of complexity from simple to more complex which helps youth express their ideas and feelings. Through their participation, students practice self-determination and agency in making decisions and taking action in order to participate in games (Martin & Sugarman, 2003). For example, in *Circle Dash* (Rohd, 1998), everyone stands in a circle, with one person in the middle. The goal of the game is for any two people standing in the circle to silently signal with a head nod or a blink of the eye or another form of visual contact, and then switch places. The person in the middle’s task is to get to an open spot before the people switching do. More than one pair can also switch at a time. “The key point here is that by just being in the circle, they are participants. Because they are making a choice one way or the other, they are involved” (p. 11), and disputes are regulated by the participants, not the teacher. Because games like these are artificial situations, there is less risk involved than ‘real life’ decisions and actions. At the same time, games are fun so as actions are taken in an enjoyable setting, trust is built and group cohesion develops. As Marjanovic-Shane (2010) points out, playful acts have a potential to change relationships between the players, giving them new points of reference and enabling them to experience themselves and others as co-authors of the situations. More importantly, these changes facilitate a change in roles, as players become co-constructors of the meaning of the situation and their relationship (p. 41).

Theatre games also help students overcome shyness as participation in the games requires students to make decisions and take action in a public way, practicing the skills of *tipenimisowin* (coming to have authority over oneself). Decision making is embodied and done in conjunction with other participants so all decisions and actions are visible to others. In this way, games help students

practice thinking for themselves and acting upon their ideas that lays the foundation for their participation in Indigenous reciprocal leadership and student willingness to share ideas used in the creation of the Fine Arts performance. When Lacey joins the theatre games, she becomes one of the group that flattens the hierarchical relationship between teacher and students. As the participants engage in games, it develops the trust and caring amongst the members of the group including the teacher. As the teacher participates in the games with the students, it builds teacher-student relationships, student-student relationships and flattens power relationships; all of these are key ideas in effective teaching practices for Indigenous students (Goulet & Goulet 2014).

Finally, Indigenous leadership considers the place or the context of holistic relationships in which the leadership takes place. Blodgett, Coholic, Schinke, McGannon, Peltier and Pheasant (2013) write that arts-based methods which emphasize creative expression “support holistic Indigenous ways of knowing and being that emphasize the interconnectedness of the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions within an individual as well as with the life around an individual” (p. 314). The teaching/learning relationship based on Neehithuw language concepts and values allowed student leadership to develop so that students were comfortable bringing their lived culture into the curriculum. Students’ sense of place, of connection to the land and waters were evident in their choice of historical photograph. The community’s location beside a large lake means that the people have always been fishers, relying on fish for their livelihood. It is important to note that the historical photo selected by the students was one of fishing in a place in their community, doing an activity so familiar to all of them.

Using the archival photographs from the community connected students to their cultural past to engender pride in their people. Making connections to the past is foundational to the current era of Indigenous education because it helps to restore what was destroyed during the cultural genocide of the residential school and “60s scoop” era: cultural knowledge, identity, and pride (Sinclair, 2007; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). In the National Indian Brotherhood’s⁶ (1972) policy paper, “Indian Control of Indian Education”, the authors stated:

Unless a child learns about the forces which shape him: the history of his people, their values and customs, their languages, he will never really know himself or his potential as a human being. Indian culture and values have a unique place in the history of mankind. The Indian child who learns about his heritage will be proud of it. The lessons he learns in school, his whole school experience, should reinforce and contribute to the image he has of himself as an Indian (p. 9).

Strengthening cultural ties is important for Indigenous students. For example, Navajo elder Bruce Yazzie said, “there are many good things about being Navajo. The Navajo culture and being Navajo has sustained us for many years. It is who we are, and the culture has helped us survive all these years through many hardships” (Bruce Yazzie, 1970, quoted in E. Yazzie, 2013, p. 140).

⁶ The National Indian Brotherhood is now the Assembly of First Nations (AFN).

Cultural ties foster resilience in Indigenous youth to overcome adversity and resist negative social influences (Ulturgasheva, Rasmus, Wexler, Nystad, & Kral, 2014). Cultural continuity, which involves the restoration and maintenance of culturally-based practices and values, is associated with decreased risk for youth suicide (Chandler & Lalonde, 2008). Drawing upon local knowledge is an important aspect of bringing culturally appropriate curriculum to schooling. When a teacher is not from the community in which they teach, it is harder to help students make connections to the local ‘funds of knowledge’. For outsiders, it is important to develop relationships with those who are knowledgeable about the community such as Elders or community leaders so that they are willing to share their community expertise when needed by the teacher (Goulet & Goulet, 2014).

Concluding comments

Indigenous reciprocal leadership builds on Indigenous concepts and ways of thinking about and doing culturally appropriate, decolonizing education. As Cree educator and scholar, Angelina Weenie (2009) states, “We build a community of learners and establish alliances and partnerships to facilitate this process [of curriculum development]. The content emanates from that visioning process and using that imaginative realm of being, to come up with solutions, much like our ancestors did” (p. 68). The use of the arts to access that ‘imaginative realm of being’ combined with Indigenous reciprocal leadership illustrates the importance of both in a wholistic approach to Indigenous education. The arts develop students’ self and group expression giving them the confidence and self-determining skills to be leaders in a reciprocal relationship with their teacher and each other: relationships developed through Indigenous leadership that incorporated Cree language concepts and values which in turn foster the students’ expression of place, context, and identity.

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