The Present and Future of Land-based Education in Treaty #3

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Abstract

In this paper, we examine the current state of land-based education within Treaty #3 and look to potential models for strengthening and building upon current practices. This paper is organized around four central questions: 1. Where are we now? 2. What characterizes Anishinaabe land-based education? 3. Why is land-based education important now? 4. Where do we want to go? By reflecting on and responding to these questions, we hope to begin a discussion about how land-based pedagogies rooted in Anishinaabe knowledge can improve and strengthen the educational outcomes for all students within Treaty #3.

Keywords: Land-based education, land-based pedagogies, Anishinaabe, educational outcomes, cultural identity, cultural pride

Introduction

In a recent editorial for a special edition of the journal *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, & Society* devoted to Indigenous land-based education, Matthew Wildcat, Mandee McDonald, Stephanie Irlbacher-Fox, and Glen Coulthard assert, "Land-based education, in resurging and sustaining Indigenous life and knowledge, acts in direct contestation to settler colonialism and its drive to eliminate Indigenous life and Indigenous claims to land" (2014, p. iii). In this paper, Donna, an Anishinaabe educator from Wabigoon Lake Ojibway Nation, and Brendan, a non-Native educator working in Treaty #3 territory, will examine the current state of land-based education within Treaty #3 and look to potential models for strengthening and building upon current practices.

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Where are we now?

At the outset, it is important to set the stage in terms of the present state of affairs of land-based education in Treaty #3 territory specifically. Treaty #3 encompasses 55,000 square miles in northwestern Ontario and a small part of eastern Manitoba. Twenty-six Treaty #3 First Nation communities are located within the province of Ontario, and two are located in Manitoba. Treaty #3 was home to several Residential Schools, including St. Margaret's in Fort Frances, Cecilia

Jeffrey and St Mary's in Kenora, Pelican Lake near Sioux Lookout, and McIntosh near Vermilion Bay. Survivors and researchers have described how students at the Cecilia Jeffrey and St. Mary's schools in Kenora were subjected to nutritional and medical experiments without their consent and with the support of the Department of Indian Affairs and Indian Health Services (Mosby, 2013, p. 161). The legacy of the residential school system continues to affect Treaty #3 communities.

On June 2, 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) released an Executive Summary of their final report, containing ninety-four Calls to Action. Many of the Calls to Action target education, and make specific reference to the need for "age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools, Treaties, and Aboriginal peoples' historical and contemporary contributions to Canada," and funding First Nations schools "to utilize Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods in classrooms" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, p. 7). The TRC's recommendations echo many of the proposals put forth in 1996 by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) (Erasmus & Dussault, 1996). Among its many recommendations, the RCAP calls for cooperation between educators and governments "to develop or continue developing innovative curricula that reflect Aboriginal cultures and community realities" (1996, p. 431). For the purposes of this paper, we will be looking at ways to specifically address the development and implementation of an Anishibaabe land-based pedagogy that seeks to respond to these calls for curricula that reflect and emerge from Anishinaabe knowledge and traditions.

The recommendations of both of these national commissions align with the educational goals of the Grand Council of Treaty #3. In 2009, Grand Council of Treaty #3 released a report on an educational needs assessment for the communities of Treaty #3 entitled *Mino Kakendaasowin: Fulfilling Sakatcheway's Vision*. According to this report, of the twenty-six Ontario-based Treaty #3 communities, twelve have elementary schools ranging from K-6 or K-8, and five communities have their own high school (2009). Many elementary and high school students from the First Nation communities have to commute 1-3 hours each day in order to attend the local provincial school, and some high school students live in boarding homes in local municipalities in order to attend provincial schools (2009). Currently, Seven Generations Education Institute offers high school through adult and continuing education in thirteen First Nation communities, and Bimose Tribal Council offers high school opportunities through e-learning and independent learning in five communities.

In addition, the report found that the curriculum content being delivered to students both on and off reserve "is limited to mainstream content with little to no First Nation specific content on First Nation world view" (2009, p. 8). To address this deficiency, one of the report's recommendations was that a Treaty #3 curriculum "grounded in First Nation philosophies, language, and traditions" be developed (2009, p. 50). The report indicated that "[t]he

implementation of a Treaty #3 curriculum would help in the development of strong identities and possibly increase the retention and graduation rate of Treaty #3 students" (2009, p. 50).

Land-based pedagogies should play a foundational role in any discussion of a Treaty #3 curriculum. Indigenous land-based education has been around for many years, and currently takes place in Treaty #3 in a variety of ways including:

- parents and grandparents teaching their children how to fish, hunt, and harvest manoomin;
- families spending time out at blueberry camps;
- elders and other experts being invited into classrooms to share their knowledge;
- schools (such as Whitefish Bay school) partnering with Treaty #3 Police so students can learn about setting traps and maintaining a trapline;
- many communities hold annual Fall Harvest celebrations, where students from First Nation schools and local school boards can participate in traditional activities;
- First Nation schools (and some public schools) hold powwows.

In addition, local school boards offer outdoor education programs for students to participate in. However, these programs are not always explicitly grounded in Anishinaabe worldviews and philosophies.

What characterizes Anishinaabe land-based education?

When it comes to Anishinaabe pedagogies, Yerxa (2014) makes a connection between the importance of land-based cultural practices for maintaining a strong sense of identity. She states, "Our land based practices carry the very essence of who we are as Anishinaabeg. They are alive within the land as well as in our elders and community members that hold strong relationships with the land" (p. 161). For Simpson (2014), an Anishinaabe pedagogy,

> [T]akes place in the context of family, community and relations. […] The land, aki, is both context and process. The process of coming to know is learner-led and profoundly spiritual in nature. Coming to know is the pursuit of whole body intelligence practiced in the context of freedom, and when realized collectively it generates generations of loving, creative, innovative, self-determining, inter-dependent and self-regulating community minded individuals. (p. 7)

Similarly, Chartrand (2012) writes that Anishinaabe pedagogy "is learner-centred, subjective, and relies on relational management [...]. It has a humanistic focus and is aimed at exploring the interrelationships between all things within a critically reflective paradigm" (p. 152).

Drawing upon these three descriptions, we assert that any Anishinaabe land-based education program must be founded on the principles of *mino-bimaadiziwin*, generally understood as "a

good and balanced life with all of Creation; the way to a good and balanced life" (Acoose, 2011, p. 233), and must empower students to see clearly the multitude of relationships that connect us to the land and water, to each other, to animals, to the spirit world, and to past and future generations. Land-based learning enables students to become critical and creative participants in their own educational journeys, and can connect them to a strong sense of identity and community.

Here at Seven Generations Education Institute, and across Treaty #3, it is important to remember that many of our students go on to work in trades, in mining, forestry, and hospitality industries. The education and training provided in the First Nations and municipalities is an integral part of preparing students for these careers. If we think about how principles of Anishinaabe land-based pedagogy apply to this context, then we must be aware that any land-based education means that training/learning cannot be separated from a critical examination of the possible positive and negative impacts that different careers might have upon students and their communities. For example, education about work in the mining sector cannot be separated from considerations regarding Indigenous sovereignty over territory and resources and possible environmental impacts these operations could have on local communities. In other words, Anishinaabe land-based pedagogy demands that education not only train students to contribute to the economic well-being of their communities, but must also challenge learners to think about the wider implications for local and global communities and environments. In this way, students can become empowered to make informed and conscientious decisions about the ways in which they will use their education and training.

Another important element of Anishinaabe land-based education is the role of story and narrative. Nelson (2013), writes, "stories can guide people in how to care for places" (p. 215). Stories, in other words, deepen our relationships to place by revealing the complex ways that those places have marked people's lives and imaginations. For Anishinaabe peoples, landscapes are full of stories. When Donna was a child, her grandfather Jeff Chief would tell stories to her and her sisters when they lived in a little trapping cabin where Dinorwic Lake meets Rock Lake near Wabigoon Lake Ojibway Nation. One of the stories was about four villages who were being tormented by a large dog. Elders from the villages got together and decided to put a curse on the dog. They got their hand drums, started to sing, and they successfully put a curse on the dog that made it fall asleep. When Donna's grandfather told the children the story, he would describe how the enormous dog fell into the water, and how if the children were able to look at the land from above, they would see that the dog was still there, with one ear close to the trapping shack.

Peacock (2013) explains that lessons contained in stories were not to be imposed on the listeners, but rather, that listeners would draw their own conclusions. Whether the story of the dog was to teach about the shape of the landscape, the value of cooperating with other

communities, the necessity of being quiet so as not to wake the dog, or something else, was left up to each of the listeners. As Peacock writes, “Seemingly simple teachings, such as stories about why birch trees have black marks, or when rabbit ate all the roses, contained deeper meanings as well--about ridiculing, and the responsibility of human kind to protect our elder brothers, the plant beings” (p. 105). These deeper meanings gleaned from stories might change for listeners as they age and their circumstances change. Returning to these stories many times can offer listeners the opportunity to hear them resonate in new ways.

Jeff Chief would also use the land to teach about relationships and getting along with others. When the children were fighting amongst themselves, Donna’s grandfather would sit them down and ask, “Why can’t you get along just like those trees?” Embedded in that question is an understanding of conflict resolution grounded in the reality of having multiple species of trees coexisting harmoniously in the same space, the big crowns of the trembling Aspen, or a white pine tree towering over younger trees underneath. These lessons about conflict resolution emerge from lived experience on the land and knowledge of the relationships between the various organisms that share space and coexist. Nelson asserts that “just as stories reveal imagined landscapes, natural landscapes comprise actual “text” and the language to be translated, studied, and respected” (2013, p. 215). The question Jeff Chief posed to his grandchildren invites them read the landscape and apply its lessons to their own lives.

A land-based pedagogy must acknowledge and use the storied nature of the landscape in order to enable students to critically examine their connections to the land, water, animals, and each other. Nelson argues that “place, memory, identity, and imagination as interwoven elements in the fabric of Indigenous story and cultural health” (2013, p. 216). The use of narrative can allow students to articulate their own understandings of place, identity, and survivance in the face of ongoing colonial pressures.

Why is land-based education important now?

As Simpson reminds us, “Indigenous Peoples often find themselves challenging government-supported multinational corporations who exploit their territories for profit with no acknowledgment that their operations are on Indigenous lands, or that the industrial waste products they produce negatively impact local Aboriginal communities” (2002, p. 15). Indigenous communities in Treaty #3 are no exception, as local economies are primarily resource based, with forestry, mining, and tourism playing significant roles across the territory. In addition, there are ongoing consultations with respect to TransCanada’s proposed Energy East pipeline as well as the Nuclear Waste Management Organization’s ongoing assessment of Ignace, Ontario, Canada as a potential storage site for spent uranium pellets. This context points to the urgency of implementing land-based curricula that strengthen our students’ relationships to the land and enable our students to make informed, critical decisions about land use that will

affect them for generations to come. Simpson explains, "Our continuance as peoples will be dependent upon the ability of our youth to protect traditional lands; reclaim, revitalize, and nurture our traditional systems of knowledge and language; and build sustainable local economies" (2002, p. 15).

Another urgent need for land-based pedagogies comes from the need to improve not only educational outcomes, but a sense of cultural identity, pride, and overall well-being. Summarizing the state of current research around cultural connections and health for Indigenous youth in Canada, Big-Canoe and Richmond (2014) argue that "health disparities are linked in significant ways to detachment from land, including reduced opportunities for the preservation of culture" (p. 128). Among the negative consequences of broken connections to the land and culture, Big-Canoe and Richmond list "ruptured social and cultural systems and intergenerational trauma" and posit that this disconnection can be a contributing factor in youth suicides (2014, p. 128). Implementing land-based programming across Treaty Three can be a positive step towards strengthening social and cultural ties.

Where do we want to go?

Article 14 of the United Nations Declaration on the rights of Indigenous Peoples asserts that "Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning" (United Nations, 2007, p. 7). Taking this statement as a guide, we want to outline one possible vision for the future of land-based education in Treaty #3. Although land-based education is happening at many levels across Treaty #3, we are asking: how can these practices be supported and strengthened? To answer that question, it is helpful to look to the past. In 1972, the National Indian Brotherhood released a paper titled *Indian Control of Indian Education*, in which they advocated for the creation of Cultural Education Centres that would enable students to learn ways "to apply traditional beliefs, values and skills to survival .in modern society … and to make up for deficiencies in other educational programs" (p. 16).

What would a Cultural Education Centre (or multiple Cultural Education Centres) in Treaty #3 look like? We argue that offering hands-on learning opportunities for students from kindergarten to adulthood would be an essential component of such a centre. Such a centre would also be connected explicitly to the land, with opportunities to learn about various traditional practices, including harvesting and preparing food and medicines, travelling across the land and water in different seasons, creating different buildings and shelters, and making different crafts. Such a centre would also offer learning opportunities in a wholistic way, foregrounding relationships and engaging students physically, spiritually, intellectually, and emotionally. Finally, it is essential that elders, language speakers, and knowledge keepers be

active participants in both designing programs and instructing students. Simpson (2002) asserts, "'Being out on the land' is the place where Elders are often most comfortable teaching and interacting with students" (p. 19). Thus, having multiple opportunities for elders and students to be together on the land would be a primary goal of a land-based education centre. As well, land-based learning offers multiple opportunities to learn from the skills and values embedded in *Anishinaabemowin* (the language).

As we consider how to implement such a centre, we draw upon the words of past Treaty #3 leaders to guide us. According to the account of treaty commissioner Alexander Morris, during the negotiations for Treaty #3 in 1873, the Lac Seul Chief said, "If you give what I ask, the time may come when I will ask you to lend me one of your daughters and one of your sons to live with us; and in return I will lend you one of my daughters and one of my sons for you to teach what is good, and after they have learned, to teach us" (1880, p. 63). The vision expressed here is one of reciprocity – where settlers and Anishinaabe people share knowledge in a mutually beneficial way. It is this vision that guides our thoughts on how to conceive of a land-based education centre.

In addition, there are many models of Indigenous land-based education across Canada that we would seek to learn from. For example, Alfred (2014) outlines a cultural apprenticeship program in the Mohawk community of Akwesasne that he describes as,

> a land-based and language-infused cultural apprenticeship program that gives learners the opportunity to apprentice with master knowledge-holders to learn traditional, land-based, cultural practices, including hunting and trapping, medicinal plants and healing, fishing and water use, and horticulture and black ash basket making. (p. 135)

This program could serve as a useful guide for some of the activities that we would like to see in a land based education program in Treaty #3.

The land-based healing program developed by the Cree Nation of Chisasibi also provides a promising model. Established in 2012, this program "recognizes the healing power of nature and the 'return to the land' as a way of connecting individuals to Cree culture and language; as promoting intergenerational knowledge transfer; and offering a safe space in which individuals can share personal experiences and detoxify (when necessary)" (Radu, House & Pashagumskum, 2014, p. 93). Delivered by two elders, the Chisasibi land-based healing program emphasizes the relationships between land, language, culture, and knowledge, and promotes individual and community healing through the strengthening of these relationships. The Chisasibi model invites us to foreground the role of land-based pedagogies in language learning and revitalization. Being out on the land gives teachers and students opportunities for learning the skills, values, and knowledge embedded in the language.

Conclusion

Given the 2009 Grand Council of Treaty #3 report's finding that there continues to be a limited inclusion of First Nation content within education programs both on and off reserve in Treaty #3, it seems an opportune time to implement land-based pedagogy across the region, with the potential for a cultural education center. In the twenty-first century, Indigenous peoples across Canada face increasing pressures due to unprecedented ecological changes, the intensifying activities of extractive industries, and ongoing colonial relationships with multiple levels of government. In this environmental, social, and political context, educators need to ask: How do we best prepare students and ourselves to look thoughtfully, critically, and creatively at these realities in a way that empowers them to engage in the world as agents of change?

Land-based pedagogies foreground Indigenous knowledges, languages, epistemologies, traditions, spiritual beliefs, and relationships with human and non-human others. Land-based education can contest ongoing colonization in education and privilege Indigenous worldviews and pedagogies. We contend that strengthening land-based educational opportunities for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students can lead to a better understanding of Indigenous culture, sovereignty, and relationships, and responsibilities to the land.

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