

**INFUSING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND EPISTEMOLOGIES:  
LEARNING FROM TEACHERS IN NORTHERN ABORIGINAL  
HEAD START CLASSROOMS**

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AUTOCHTONES : APPRENDRE DES ENSEIGNANTS DANS LES  
SALLES DE CLASSE DU PROGRAMME D'AIDE PRÉSCOLAIRE  
DES AUTOCHTONES DU NORD**

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Volume 53, Number 1, Winter 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1056281ar>  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1056281ar>

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Publisher(s)

Faculty of Education, McGill University

ISSN

1916-0666 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Peterson, S. S., Jang, S. Y., San Miguel, J., Styres, S. & Madsen, A. (2018).  
INFUSING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND EPISTEMOLOGIES: LEARNING  
FROM TEACHERS IN NORTHERN ABORIGINAL HEAD START CLASSROOMS.  
*McGill Journal of Education / Revue des sciences de l'éducation de McGill*, 53(1),  
26–46. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1056281ar>

Article abstract

Five Aboriginal Head Start early childhood educators from a northern Canadian community participated in interviews for the purpose of informing non-Indigenous teachers' classroom teaching. Their observations and experiences highlight the importance of learning from and on the land alongside family members, and of family stability and showing acceptance of all children. Additionally, participants talked of the impact of residential schools on their families in terms of loss of their Indigenous language, and their attempts to learn and to teach the children in their classrooms the Indigenous languages and teachings.

# INFUSING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND EPISTEMOLOGIES: LEARNING FROM TEACHERS IN NORTHERN ABORIGINAL HEAD START CLASSROOMS

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**ABSTRACT.** Five Aboriginal Head Start early childhood educators from a northern Canadian community participated in interviews for the purpose of informing non-Indigenous teachers' classroom teaching. Their observations and experiences highlight the importance of learning from and on the land alongside family members, and of family stability and showing acceptance of all children. Additionally, participants talked of the impact of residential schools on their families in terms of loss of their Indigenous language, and their attempts to learn and to teach the children in their classrooms the Indigenous languages and teachings.

**INFUSER LES CONNAISSANCES ET LES ÉPISTÉMOLOGIES AUTOCHTONES :  
APPRENDRE DES ENSEIGNANTS DANS LES SALLES DE CLASSE DU PROGRAMME  
D'AIDE PRÉSCOLAIRE DES AUTOCHTONES DU NORD**

**RÉSUMÉ.** Cinq éducateurs de la petite enfance autochtones d'une communauté du Nord canadien ont participé à des entrevues dans le but d'informer les enseignants non-autochtones de l'enseignement en classe. Leurs observations et leurs expériences soulignent l'importance d'apprendre de la terre et sur la terre aux côtés des membres de la famille, de la stabilité de la famille et de l'acceptation de tous les enfants. De plus, les participants ont parlé de l'impact des pensionnats sur leurs familles en termes de perte de leur langue indigène et de leurs tentatives d'apprendre et d'enseigner aux enfants dans leurs classes les langues et les enseignements indigènes.

**P**articipating educators, teaching in a northern Canadian Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) program, are part of a six-year collaborative action research study involving teachers and children in northern rural and Indigenous communities across four provinces.<sup>1</sup> The five participants' interview responses, initially intended to support the non-Indigenous teachers participating in the six-year

project in Indigenizing their teaching, help to address a widely recognized “general lack of awareness among Canadian educational stakeholders concerning the particularized pedagogy and learning styles of Aboriginal students” (Preston, Cottrell, Pelletier, & Pearce, 2011, p. 7).

These conversations arise from research showing that Indigenous children are not being well served by Eurocentric curricula and teaching practices that are carried out by teachers with little to no understanding of Indigenous cultures, epistemologies, and beliefs (Nardozi, Restoule, Broad, Steele, & James, 2014; Styres, 2017). Schools have a long history of failing to support Indigenous children’s learning and overall well-being. Of greatest impact were the federal government-sponsored church-administered residential schools in operation from 1880 to the latter part of the twentieth century (the last school closed in 1996). In a great many cases, Indigenous children were violently torn from their families and forced to attend residential schools and as such did not experience adult-child nurturing or the intergenerational transmission of key cultural teachings (Hare, 2005; Hare & Anderson, 2010). Family members in the same school were separated according to gender and were forbidden from interacting with one another. They were also not permitted to speak their own language and were severely punished for doing so (Ball & Lewis, 2011). Within schools and in broader society, residential schools and other assimilationist and genocidal policies and practices have led to the marginalization, and in many cases the erasure, of Indigenous knowledge, values, and ways of teaching children. Assimilationist educational practices, such as teaching Indigenous children in the dominant language, have led to world-wide loss of Indigenous languages. When languages are lost, world views and cultures are also lost (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2008). Within Indigenous communities, these losses have created “widespread social and psychological upheaval” (Battiste, 2008, p. viii). Support for language revitalization through the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (International Working Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2007) has been provided only recently. Article 15.1 states that “Indigenous peoples have the right to the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations which shall be appropriately reflected in education and public information” (International Working Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2007, p. 10 ). In Canada, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada calls upon the federal government to recognize the need for Indigenous management of the “preservation, revitalization, and strengthening of Aboriginal languages and cultures” through an Aboriginal Languages Act (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, p. 2).

Indigenous leaders, Elders, and scholars have initiated programs to restore traditional belief systems and inherent ways of life (Battiste & McLean, 2005) with support from government-created institutions and task forces (e.g., Canadian Council on Learning, 2009; Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures, 2005). One vehicle for creating a sense of pride in Indigenous

epistemologies, culture and language is the AHS program. AHS programs support family / community relationships, as parents and other family and community members together design curriculum and administer the programs (Nguyen, 2011). Enhancing First Nations children's academic success, their cultural awareness, and a positive sense of identity and belonging are primary goals of the program. The AHS is also meant to provide opportunities for communication between educational institutions and parents / guardians / community members and for their involvement in their children's formal education (Gunn, Pomahac, Good Striker, & Tailfeathers, 2011). Research examining five AHS sites in rural and urban British Columbia communities showed that these goals are being met, as Indigenous children learned "ways of knowing and being specific to their communities and Nations, drawing on the repositories of indigenous knowledge that include land, ceremony, oral tradition and elders, families, and community members" (Hare, 2011, p. 408).

In addition to the creation of AHS programs for young children, a number of Canadian provincial ministries of education have responded to the need for integrating Indigenous perspectives into elementary and secondary curricula. These teaching resources are geared toward developing "understanding of and respect for the diversities of Aboriginal cultures, languages, histories and worldviews" (Alberta Education. Aboriginal Services Branch and Learning and Teaching Resources Branch, 2005, p. v) as well as "informed opinions on matters relating to Aboriginal peoples" (Manitoba Education and Youth, 2003, p. 2) and "understand[ing], and appreciat[ion of] the contributions of Ontario's Aboriginal communities to the social and cultural fabric of our province" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 4). These resources provide answers to questions about content, but are not as helpful in addressing questions about epistemologies; about ways of learning and coming to know (Battiste, 2002).

The research reported in this paper presents teaching and learning stories of educators teaching in a northern Ontario AHS program. It attempts to respond to issues around Indigenous epistemologies in classroom interactions, addressing the following research questions:

1. How do participating AHS educators describe informal learning experiences and the role of adults in their home and community learning?
2. In reflections on their teaching, how do participating educators feel that they are influenced by the Indigenous teachings and the family experiences of their childhood?

Styres (2017) wrote that

locating oneself in relation to everything one does is one of the key foundational principles in Indigenous research contexts. The only place from which any of us can write or speak with any degree of certainty is from the position of who we are in relation to what we know (p. 7).

Before we introduce the theoretical framework and literature review informing our research, we position ourselves as researchers with the following backgrounds: two female elementary teachers of northern European-ancestry with rural life experiences; a female teacher of Korean ancestry, and a male teacher of Pilipino ancestry, both with urban life experiences; and a female educator of Indigenous (Kanien'kehá:ka), English, and French ancestry, having both a First Nations community and urban-centered life experiences.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

Our research, framed by sociocultural theory (Smagorinsky, 2011; Vygotsky, 1978), is based on an assumption that children learn through participation in everyday activities with others in their homes, schools, and communities. As children learn and communicate with others, what they say and do “echoes with the human relationships and daily experiences that give their lives meaning” (Genishi & Dyson, 2009, p. 18). Even in contexts where children appear to be imitating adult behaviour, the learning process involves individual agency, as children observe and experiment in order to carry out social intentions (Smagorinsky, 2011).

We explore what participants' stories and reflections on experiences show us about how adults and children “use and transform cultural tools...[through their] participation in the social, discursive, and cultural practices of their families and communities” (Smagorinsky, 2011, p. 57). We are interested in the ways in which Indigenous ways of teaching and learning have been and continue to be communicated and constructed through adult-child interactions in participating teachers' and early childhood educators' everyday family and community social contexts and in their AHS classroom contexts. Accordingly, our literature review focuses on research examining Indigenous ways of supporting children's learning.

### ***Indigenous knowledge, teaching, and learning***

Recognizing that Indigenous communities are not homogeneous across Canada, we caution against regarding our synthesis of the literature and participants' views and experiences as universal descriptions. We present perspectives that have informed our framing of this study and analysis of the data.

Battiste (2008) described Indigenous knowledge as comprising

the complex set of languages, teachings, and technologies developed and sustained by Indigenous civilizations. Often oral and symbolic, it is transmitted through performance and the structure of Indigenous languages and passed on to the next generation through oral tradition in modeling, ceremonies, problem-solving, and animation, rather than through the written word. Indigenous Knowledge is typically embedded in the cumulative experiences and teachings of Indigenous peoples rather than in a library or in journals of applied research (p. 87).

Indigenous pedagogies can be characterized as global, simultaneous, and relational. Meanings are constructed by seeking relationships within whole contexts; often through stories and through observation (Ball & Simpkins, 2004; Hare, 2011). Storying is

a crucial component of understanding one's place in the past in order to be in the present...land informs pedagogy through storied relationships that are etched into the essence of every rock, tree, seed, animal, pathway and waterway in relation to the Aboriginal people who have existed on the land since time immemorial (Styres, 2011, pp. 718-721).

The land "holds all knowledge of life and death and is a constant teacher" (Armstrong, 1998, p. 178).

AHS classrooms, which are sites promoting Indigenous cultures and languages, provide a suitable context for examining how Indigenous cultural practices play a role in adult-child interactions in classrooms.

### ***Aboriginal Head Start***

AHS is a federally-funded Canadian early childhood program initiated in 1995. The federal government, provincial governments, and non-profit Aboriginal organizations all came together to support the AHS program (Nguyen, 2011; Public Health Agency of Canada, 1998). It was first offered to urban and northern communities and then expanded to on-reserve communities in 1998 (Public Health Agency of Canada, 1998). Cross-Canada consultations and child development studies, including research showing that early childhood is a foundation for building positive self-esteem and intellectual strength, and the success of children's educational trajectories, and evaluations of the American Indian Head Start Program (Ontario Aboriginal Head Start Association, 2018) informed the program initiators.

AHS Initiative Principles and Guidelines were developed to meet provincial and territorial early childhood program standards and regulations, and to ensure program quality and consistency (Public Health Agency of Canada, 1998). With the goal of providing children with an opportunity to develop positive self-worth and an aspiration for lifelong-learning that will help them to develop to their full potential, AHS created six mandatory program components for Aboriginal children and their families. These components encompass parental

involvement; culture and language; education and school readiness, health promotion; nutrition, and social support (Barrieau & Ireland, 2003; Ontario Aboriginal Head Start Association, 2018).

AHS programs are mostly preschool programs, focusing on the physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual growth of children (Preston, 2008). They generally run from September to June, four days per week and provide services to 3- to 5-year-olds on a half-day basis. With the goal of reflecting local child-rearing practices and cultures in the programs, parents, caregivers, and local community members are encouraged to participate in developing, planning, operating, and evaluating programs (Preston, 2008).

In a study that involved 24 Aboriginal communities and about 400 parents, ECEs, administrators, and community members, Barrieau and Ireland (2003) found that children who took part in AHS demonstrated increased independence self-esteem, had a greater knowledge of health and nutrition and were better practiced in their Aboriginal language. In addition, AHS children become familiar with school settings during these preschool years and had a smoother transition to kindergarten (Preston, 2014). A later study (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2012) showed a stability of outcomes for participating children and a growing need for the program.

**METHODS**

*Participants and AHS context*

In order for us to understand what and how teachers and children interact in play situations, we interviewed five early childhood educators and teachers in the Big Lake AHS (all names are pseudonyms). Information about each participant is found in Table 1.

**TABLE 1. Participating early childhood educators**

Teacher / ECE	Languages Spoken	Teacher / ECE Education	Years of AHS Experience	Ages of Children Taught
Gisele	English Bit of Ojibwe-Cree	ECE at Confederation College and BEd at Lakehead University	2	18 months to 5 years
Rose	English	ECE at Confederation College	6	2.5 to 5 years
Icema	English Some German	ECE at Mohawk College	11	18 months to 6 years
Louise	English Some Ojibwe	ECE at Confederation College	16	Preschool
Nenookaasi	English; some Ojibwe	ECE at Anishinabek Educational Institute, Cambrian College	9	2.5 to 5 years

Big Lake AHS program is in a northern urban area in a central Canadian province. The 80 Indigenous children in the program attend classes for 2-4 days per week, depending on their ages. The Seven Grandfather Teachings are central to teaching within and beyond the classroom walls at the participating Big Lake AHS program. These teachings, which include wisdom, love, respect, bravery, honesty, humility, and truth, are considered to be gifts from the Seven Grandfathers to the Ojibway people (Benton-Banai, 2010).

### *Data collection and analysis*

Interview questions are the primary data sources. Three graduate students, all of whom have experience teaching young children, flew to the community of Big Lake in January, 2017. They met with the six participants on a Friday afternoon that had been designated as a professional development day. Two of the graduate students had accompanied the principal investigator on 2-3 collaborative action research meetings during the 2015-2016 school year. The third graduate student had met participating teachers during a cross-provincial, all-participant meeting that takes place each year. Each graduate student conducted interviews with one or two teacher / early childhood educator participants using the following protocol:

1. Please tell me about the programs and training that you've been involved in to prepare you for your role here. How many years have you been teaching in AHS programs?
2. Please tell me about your home community and what it was like growing up there. What's your current connection with your home community?
3. How many of your relatives lived in your community when you were growing up? What kind of activities did you and your family do with relatives? Do you remember things that you learned while you were doing these activities?
4. Please tell me about influential adults in your life (parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles, other community members). Why are they important to you? Please tell stories about their teachings.
5. What have you learned from these influential adults about ways to interact with children?
6. What language did your family use when you were growing up? How did you learn Ojibwe or Oji-Cree?
7. How do your decisions about intervening / scaffolding children's language and play reflect your culture and your own past play experiences?

We analyzed Indigenous teachers' responses to the interviews in terms of what we can learn to bring to other participating NOW Play classrooms where non-Indigenous teachers are teaching Indigenous children. We brought a draft of



our synthesis to the teachers to request their input and verification that we are representing their views and experiences accurately and in ways in which they are comfortable.

## FINDINGS

Educators' responses to interview questions often took the form of stories with themes delicately interwoven. We organize our report of these themes using the research questions as a framework: participants' childhood experiences and influence of childhood experiences on classroom practice.

### *Participants' childhood experiences*

Experiences with family members on the land figured prominently in participating educators' talk about their childhood experiences. Common to all educators was a valuing of close family relationships and a stable home environment where adults are accepting of children. The Indigenous teachers had at least one person in their lives who communicated with them in their family's Indigenous language, but were not fluent in the language, themselves.

*Learning from and on the land alongside family members.* Many of the childhood activities described in participating educators' stories involved being outside in nature (e.g., going to the creek and swimming, climbing trees, and playing lacrosse, skating or playing hockey). Nenookaasi, for example, said "Fireflies ...I used to love catching them and rubbing them all over my body so I was glowing. That's my favourite childhood memory." Rose explained: "I just learned the importance of nature, and having imagination, and being able to explore."

Many of participants' remembered learning activities involved family and community gatherings, and storytelling while on the land. Nenookaasi explained, "I grew up walking the Red Road. We attended ceremonies, powwows, and Native Elders Conferences [on weekends]." She, her parents, and five siblings spent time together, traveling to other First Nations communities to attend Indigenous cultural events. She, Louise, and Gisele remember camping in the bush for days with family members in order to pick blueberries or pine cones, to harvest wild rice, or to hunt or trap, and later dry the meat and skins of moose and other animals. Through these activities, they learned traditional skills and knowledge, by watching and doing alongside family members. They learned traditional values, as well. Louise, for example, said:

So, we'd go blueberry picking. Half the blueberries would be for our food, you know, pies and bannock and blueberries...But the other portion would be for money; we'd sell it. And that would be my school money, like for clothes and stuff. So, it was blueberry picking, then it was cone picking ... so that's how we were instilled that we needed to work.

Experiential learning was built into daily family life, as parents and grandparents cooked, sewed, and beaded, among many other activities, with their children. Nenookaasi, for example, explained: “family did everything together, we ate together, we hunted together, we travelled together.... We would go to rice camp, we’d go through the sugar bush, and we’d all take turns and the elders would teach us.... And that’s how traditions are passed on, that’s how things are passed on.” Similarly, in reference to her grandmother, Louise noted, “She taught me how to make cinnamon bannock...and duck soup. So, she was the one who taught me more of the cooking.” For participants, watching and doing were the primary ways to acquire skills and knowledge that was needed for each activity. Teaching and learning took place while different generations involved in traditional activities, sometimes at home and sometimes on the land.

Participating educators talked about the importance of storytelling to their childhood learning, especially learning about the Seven Grandfather Teachings. Nenookaasi’s father, for example, taught “patience and to be humble and to be kind. Like the Seven Grandfather Teachings.” Going out on the land to camps meant that evenings were spent around campfires sharing stories. At the rice camp set up by Louise’s family, for example, “there’d be stories and my grandfather would tell stories. And we’d learn about all the animals.” Louise also talked about her mother’s stories told while she was picking cones with her children. Louise explained, “My mom would show me all the medicines;” the plants that could be used for medicinal purposes. Storytelling provided a forum for sharing community values such as respect. Nenookaasi explained that “we were taught to listen to the Elders” when stories were being told in her family. Louise also said, “So growing up, you were taught to respect Elders. And when you’re taught to respect Elders, you listen. And basically that’s where the storytelling comes because they’re always telling you things, sharing, teaching.” Louise talked about continuing a storytelling tradition within her family. She said of her father:

I still try to get him to do all these storytellings...all these things, so that I can pass that on to my daughter.... That’s what I got from my Dad, is the story telling. And my dad got that from his dad. So that’s what I’m carrying on, too, is the story telling. And that’s very strong in our culture.

**Influential family values: Stability and acceptance.** While describing influential adults from their childhood, participating educators explained why those adults were (and still are) important to them, and how the interactions they had with them affected their values, sense of identity, and aspiration towards further learning. The importance of having a stable family life and being accepted and encouraged by older family members were identified as being important contributors to their academic achievements and their work with children in their classrooms.

Growing up watching many Indigenous people suffer the intergenerational repercussions of a colonial history, particularly residential schools, participating educators underlined the significance of a stable and safe home life. For them, it was most important for children to have a caregiver or caregivers who provided consistent, loving, and stable care. Nenookaasi explained that her mother became an alcoholic because of her experiences as a child within the residential school system and was not able to take care of her children. However, Nenookaasi's father, as a single parent, took care of his children, travelling together on the weekend, attending ceremonies and pow wows. She explained: "It was a single-parent home, alcohol and drug free...a lot of our children are affected by the alcoholism and the drug addictions and the abuse...and that's one of the saddest parts. That's why I'm fortunate I grew up in a good home, with my dad." Similarly, Louise stressed the quality time she had with her parents. For example, after long hours of work, her father would come home being completely tired, but still make time to practice pitching with her, to teach her to ride a bike, or to sit by a pond and watch beavers building dams with Louise. She recalled, "with my parents, there was a lot of quality [time]." The most influential person in Rose's childhood was her older sister, who provided her with a sense of security. Rose explained, "my sister protected me if anybody ever tried to bully me. She would always be my person and always stick up for me."

These influential adults taught participating educators to accept themselves just the way they are; to pursue passions through education; as well as the importance of hard work, inclusion, patience, humility, and kindness. For instance, Gisele said that the influential people in her life showed that they supported "who I was...they didn't expect me to be this or that." Similarly, Icema remembered that her aunt told her: "You know what? You're your own person...You can do stuff with your life. You don't have to be like everybody else." Icema also recounted how her aunt encouraged her to pursue further education. Rose's older sister "taught me to never give up and to never put yourself on the back burner" and her close friend's mother also showed how much she valued Rose by "always include[ing] me. She always took me out to dinner, and brought me on family outings, going swimming...I think that's just what really was so important to me."

*Some contact with and great desire to learn Indigenous language.* Participating Indigenous educators had some exposure to their Indigenous languages while growing up; however, the primary language spoken in their homes was English. Their grandparents and parents, forced to attend residential schools, had lost their Indigenous languages, so they were unable to speak their language at home with their children. Their experiences result from "the combined effects, past and present, of federal educational policy, monolingual English educational systems, dependence on provincial schools and curricula, and modern media culture" (Battiste, 2002, p. 17). Nenookaasi explained, "because of the resi-

dential school system, my parents lost [their Indigenous language]...They could understand it, but they couldn't speak it to teach us." Louise's grandparents spoke Ojibwe in their home. When Louise visited them, she learned the Ojibwe words for natural things, such as berries when she went berry picking with her grandmother. Louise said: "I'm not as fluent as I hoped I would be. But when I have an Ojibwe person talking, I know what they're saying." Rose said that because her father's family was of Scandinavian origin, her Anishnaabe mother spoke English at home. Rose described her own knowledge and use of Ojibwe in this way: "I still don't grasp it today. It's just that they talk so quickly. I do know some Ojibwe words."

All participants shared a concern about the loss of their Indigenous languages and talked about their and their family members' actions to learn and use the language and then teach the children in their classrooms. Louise told a story about her 82-year-old father saying to her: "Daanis [daughter], you need to remember...Do you remember your Indian name?...Say it." Educators also gave evidence of family members who were making efforts to ensure that younger generations learn and use their language. Gisele's 72-year-old grandmother continues to teach kindergarten in the Oji-Cree portion of the Oji-Cree / English dual immersion program in her First Nations community. After studying the Ojibwe language at university, Louise's brother currently teaches Ojibwe in a public high school.

### *Influence of childhood experiences on classroom practice in AHS*

Although each of the educators had very different journeys to arrive at their place in the AHS program, their passion for engaging with the children in their classroom and creating a positive learning environment for children brought them together. As participants told personal stories, they reflected on how their training and their childhood experiences have affected the way they plan and enact their lessons, set up their classrooms, and develop strong relationships with their children.

*Passing on teachings of the land.* Participating Indigenous educators talked about growing up learning from the land. A prominent theme was passing on the cultural traditions of caring, understanding, and being involved with nature and the outdoors. They hope to inspire and instill in their students the same joy in nature that they found when they were children. Rose described some of the ways the AHS teachers foster a passion for the outdoors in the children in their classrooms: "wintertime, a lot of us, we go out with the Family Support Cultural Coordinator. We set rabbit snares with the children and we go check them on a daily basis to see if we have caught any rabbits. We do a lot of sliding in the front of our building, shoveling, making snowmen." Louise mirrored these sentiments, saying that she often asked questions about the children's summer, so she could share her own joy and experiences for nature with them.

Recognizing that their own upbringing is different from what children today experience, participants shared their concerns about the ways technology is negatively affecting children's appreciation for some traditional cultural values. Rose used the term, *nature deficit*, explaining:

They almost forget how to play outside. And when we do get outside, if it's a little bit cold, it's always 'I'm cold, I'm cold.' Well, when we were kids, it was like you never worried about the cold. So yeah, I think that just the most important thing I learned is the importance of exploring and just knowing your surroundings. And that's pretty much what I learned from them as well.

In agreement, Louise said, "[like] language, everything is getting lost...you know how life is, with technology and stuff."

Participating AHS educators provide children with the opportunities to explore and reconnect with nature. Nenookaasi explained that she and Louise create contexts for children to learn by observing and doing:

That's how we were brought up. Same as here, I just started doing some cooking with the children and that's how I do it. I get the children to help and to taste and to smell, and just get their hands on. Because that's what we did. With ricing, we'd take turns with the rice. We wouldn't go in the canoes because we needed room for the rice to go in, but we would wait on the shore. When we got to the shore, we'd all help prepare. Or we'd all help and prepare the maple syrup. Or if we had a kill, we'd all chip in and help prepare the kill. And that's how traditions are passed on.

Louise and Nenookaasi also brought in wolf fur for children to touch and see. They told stories about times when they had hunted with their families as children, and about the area's history of hunting and trade.

Educators recognized they were role models for the Indigenous children in their classrooms; role models who passed on the Indigenous stories and teachings that they had learned as children, and as well-educated Indigenous women who had navigated the mainstream education system while creating strong Indigenous identities. Three participating educators told stories of being inspired by family members who were also educators. Gisele comes from a family of teachers, with three uncles and her grandmother all teaching. Louise's brother is a high school Ojibwe teacher and two of Nenookaasi's brothers are teachers in their First Nations community.

***Creating stability and acceptance in the classroom.*** Participating educators' valuing of a stable and accepting community and home environment frames their relationships with children and creation of learning environments in their classrooms. Nenookaasi talked about the "holistic approach [looking at the] spiritual, cultural, emotional, social" well-being of the child. Icema, reflecting on her own experiences with her parents, said that she supports children's self-esteem by celebrating all achievements. She explained that "any small, little thing that they do, make a big deal of it...because it may not be a big deal to

us, but it can be to them.” Teachers reflected on their own or their siblings’ experiences being bullied in school and talked about going to great lengths to ensure that children were not bullied by peers. Louise said:

I mean, children learn bullying so young. Even in this class. And then I find even in the kindergarten class, they tend to – I don’t know if they’re learning it in school, because here they’re so young. They’re not learning colours of skin, nothing like that. Or you know, like we have families that come from, more poor families. But they’re not, children don’t judge. So, if a child comes in and I see that starting, I’ll intervene and just try to teach them that we’re all the same. And maybe so-and-so is not so clean, maybe they can go wash her face. Just trying to teach that.

Creating an accepting environment also means showing trust in children’s ability to resolve conflicts. Drawing on their childhood experiences, participating educators demonstrated how to resolve problems and then observed children as they worked out conflicts with each other, intervening when necessary, but assuming that children would not always need adult intervention. Gisele explained that she models a conflict-resolution approach and then allows children to navigate through an issue. She described an approach taken by all participating educators:

Sometimes I don’t [intervene] if there’s a problem, like if two children are having a disagreement. Sometimes at the beginning, I will intervene and kind of help them model the words, how to say it. But sometimes I’ll just sit back and see if they can work it out their problem by themselves. I think that’s the only time I won’t really intervene. They won’t learn how to figure stuff out if you don’t let them.

An aspect of creating an accepting environment where all children feel they belong involves instilling the value of sharing. Louise said that in her family’s blueberry camp, everything was shared and “our food was your food” and the familial feeling was always “just so loving and giving.” As Icema stated, the children “are still learning to share, and they should be, actually, able to share.” The eventual goal is to guide the children into the family-like environment of loving and giving of educators’ childhoods.

Many of the decisions made by the educators come from a place of care and are rooted in issues and experiences of their and their family members’ experiences. Nenookaasi described an understanding about important values that guide her relationships with children:

Once children have trust, they know you respect them, and they know that you love them, they learn to calm down. They learn to have patience. They learn to be nice to their friends. And you can tell from a child’s eyes that they know that they’re loved, the way they smile at you, the way they look at you. Because some of the children we work with don’t get that at home. And for them to be able to come here to feel safe and loved and wanted... it’s the best feeling ever. And any parent, any educator to be able to give a

child love and understanding and to be patient with them. Being a parent or educator, you need to have patience and you need to have love for the children. And that's one thing I do with everyone I work with.

These observations and understandings about adult-child relationships underpinning teaching and learning were echoed in various ways by all participating educators.

*Teaching Indigenous languages with limited language knowledge.* Participating Indigenous educators explained that because their knowledge of their Indigenous language is limited to names of animals and everyday expressions, these are the words and expressions that they use in interactions with children in their classrooms. Rose focuses on language that children might hear at home, like “milk, bear, rabbit, sit down, eat, and come here.” Gisele uses “simple commands like eating and sitting and ‘thank you,’” often interjected with English. Nenookaasi uses directives and she would alternate Ojibwe words with English words and ask the students to repeat them back. Icema has a welcome song that she sings with the children.

They have been making every possible effort to learn Ojibwe. Rose and Icema, for example, picked up some Ojibwe phrases from fellow AHS educators and the Family Cultural Support Coordinator. Nenookaasi had taken Ojibwe classes, but was disappointed in the level of language fluency that was possible because of the approach employed by the language teacher. She explained:

Every class I take has always started out with animals. I don't know why they start out with animals, I don't know if it's because it's the easiest thing, or if it's because we have a connection with the animals, but it seems like every single class I take starts with animals. And then, after that, it's like...I get kind of bored and I don't attend anymore. But I have learned some language and a few expressions that I do share with the children, and the children understand.

The intergenerational loss of Indigenous languages described in reports (e.g., Battiste, 2002; Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures, 2005) is in evidence in participating educators' lives. Indigenous parents of children in the AHS program are generally not fluent in the language and educators are unable to find someone to teach them and the children in their classrooms. Icema explained, “We do not have staff who speak Ojibway or Oji-cree fluently to teach us.... So we do the best that we can to be able to keep the culture and at least a few words.”

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Participating educators join Indigenous scholars (e.g., Hermes, Bang, & Marin, 2012; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2008; Wurm, 2001) and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) in saying that language and culture are inter-related and in calling for language revitalization to be a priority in schools and

communities. As Battiste (2002) wrote, language “is by far the most significant factor in the survival of Indigenous knowledge. Indigenous languages and their symbolic, verbal, and unconscious orders structure Indigenous knowledge; therefore, educators cannot stand outside of Indigenous languages to understand Indigenous knowledge” (p. 17). Indigenous teachers’ identity is inextricably intertwined with language use and cultural practices that help them to understand sacred roles and responsibilities in relationship to daily social, political, and ceremonial life. Participants recognize these important understandings, as they have lived with the devastating effects of nearly two centuries of suppression of Indigenous languages within Canadian schools. Growing up with English in their homes, educators take every available opportunity to learn their Indigenous languages. They bring what they know of their languages to their teaching whenever they are able to contribute. Stories of language loss have been told by other early childhood educators. In Hare and Anderson’s (2010) study, Indigenous parents, family members and caregivers in a western urban community talked about the generational loss of their Indigenous languages. Their children were learning the language in AHS contexts but were going home to family members who were not able to speak the language with their children. The need for programs to involve parents / caregivers in their children’s Indigenous language learning in the AHS contexts is indicated.

Participating teachers talk about the contextualized and relational nature of Indigenous education (Styres, 2017), as they tell stories about the family and community members who have been important to their learning of Indigenous knowledge. Recalling the contexts for their own learning of Indigenous knowledge, participants provide many opportunities for experiential learning in the classroom and in the nearby bush. They also bring children to Indigenous ceremonies of nearby First Nations communities.

Participants believe that Indigenous children’s cultural learning is supported in contexts where there is a sense of family that goes beyond the nuclear family. Their views have been voiced by other Indigenous educators and parents: in interviews with policy-makers, administrators, service providers, and parents in Indigenous communities in three Canadian provinces (Greenwood & Shawana, 1999), as well as with First Nations early childhood development graduates, childcare administrators, parents and community Elders from British Columbia communities (Ball & Simpkins, 2004), and in images of early childhood designed by Alaskan Inuit early childhood educators (Hughes, 2007). Across these Indigenous communities, participants highlighted the importance of extended family members to children’s education and care; identifying an important implication for programs, such as AHS, for young Indigenous children.



In agreement with Styres (2017) that “children are gifts to be honoured and nurtured” (p. 186), teacher participants also expressed the need to focus on what children can do to celebrate who they are in relation to their world and to the world at large. Their views regarding the development of self-esteem and a concept of self are consistent with Indigenous knowledge: “Self-knowledge and transmitted teachings are equally important, and people cannot effectively learn their purpose and actualize that purpose unless they receive both” (Battiste, 2002, p. 15). Self-knowledge includes understandings of who the children are as Indigenous young people and of the hope that they offer for the future of their Nations within global contexts.

Participating teachers’ experiences and observations have implications for non-Indigenous children’s schooling, as well. The transmitted teachings of participating educators’ childhoods and their AHS classroom practices come from a relationship to the land as the source of all experiential and theoretical knowledge (Styres, 2011, 2017). Participating educators emphasize the need to engage children with the “important lessons [that] lie beneath our feet, in the air around us, and in the waters of our lakes and rivers” (Styres, Haig-Brown & Blimkie, 2013, p. 60). Their responses to interview questions indicate that, in valuing Indigenous knowledge, we may come to see that Indigenous and non-Indigenous children, especially those in urban and suburban communities, are in need of a decolonizing education that centres and engages learning with the land in deep, respectful, and meaningful ways. As did Inuit early childhood educators in Hughes’ (2007) study, participants emphasized the need to support children’s relationship with the land. Children in participating AHS educators’ classrooms learn about medicines of the land, learn respect for the land, and open their sense of being to the teachings of the land. More than simply a “getting back to nature” initiative in schooling, infusing Indigenous perspectives, teachings, and values involve a valuing of the social and cultural dimensions of land-based pedagogies. Through land-based approaches, such as those taken up in critical place inquiry, children can come to understand the dynamic interrelationships between place, social practices, and social meanings (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). Indeed, introducing Indigenous-oriented curricula to all Canadian children “will help broaden all peoples’ understandings of interconnected relationships with the earth, human and non-human animals, and living and non-living entities in the environment and beyond. (Sutherland & Swayze, 2012, p. 81).

The need for a decolonizing education is also indicated in participating educators’ stories of the limited spaces in their childhood for learning their Indigenous languages and knowledges and the dominating spaces of Eurocentric ways and the pervasiveness of English language use. Hare (2005) provides an example where the literacy curriculum might be opened to include Indigenous knowledge, suggesting that meaning-making takes place while in relationship with the land, just as it does while engaging with print text. Decolonizing

education must take place in classrooms across the country. It is important for all educators and children to be “engaging decolonized minds and hearts” (Battiste, 2002, p. 22). The roots of Indigenous children, and those of many children of European origin whose families have lived for generations in Canada, lie in particular attachments to the land. Styres et al. (2013) argued that, “reminding all students of this heritage and educating them in Indigenous thought within urban contexts bodes well for transformative education that includes respectfully acknowledging and caring for Land” (p. 44). Classrooms across the country may be transformed through the creation of new stories that draw on and celebrate this heritage.

## NOTES

1. We wish to acknowledge that this research has been carried out on Indigenous land in the Nishnawbe Aski Nation Territory. We are grateful to participating Indigenous community members for welcoming us to work and learn within their ancestral lands. We thank participating AHS educators for their participation and the administration and board of the AHS for allowing us to conduct this research. We are grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for funding this research through a Partnership Grant.

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