Exploring Innovation within Anishinaabek Early Learning Contexts: Stories of Hope, Belonging, Meaning, and Purpose

by

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Abstract

Drawing on Indigenous Storywork (ISW), this research shares stories of hope, belonging, meaning, and purpose that expand understanding of innovation within Anishinaabek early childhood educational contexts. As the research process unfolds across the chapters, I liken this process to the designing of a quill box, a comparison inspired by the creation and re-creation of porcupine quill boxes designed by my Grandmother (and a long line of ancestors before her). Participants included seven Indigenous educators, one Knowledge Keeper, and one Elder. Data gathering began with conversations and the sharing of innovative teaching tools and included a researcher journal with letter writing. Threading the findings from educator stories with the literature, I present key principles of Anishinaabek Innovation in Education. I also include a definition of what Anishinaabek Innovation has come to mean to me at this time and space as an educator and researcher. This research places Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing at the center. Innovation as Anishinaabe biskaabiiyang brings well-being and mino-bimaadiziwin (living a good life). This research is of benefit to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the areas of early childhood education planning and to academics seeking to understand Anishinaabe innovation and its application in Indigenous education.

Key Words: Innovation; Anishinaabe; Indigenous Knowledge; Indigenous Pedagogy; Decolonizing

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Forward

In the chapters to come, I share the unfolding of my doctoral journey that explored innovation with fellow Indigenous experts in the field of Indigenous Early Childhood Education. This research takes a strengths-based approach that values story and lived experiences and is guided by the methodology of Indigenous Storywork. From design to writing, I was guided by traditional Anishinaabe teachings, principles, and analogies that I have gathered over time. I highlight here three key organizational pieces for readers as you join me along this learning journey.

Firstly, the chapters are organized in four parts that reflect a teaching I learned from Jim Dumont (2022) as he shared his knowledge of the Anishinaabek Creation Story. Dumont also shared this teaching in print with the Thunderbird Foundation (2015). The four parts include:

- Part One: Hope (Vision)
- Part Two: Belonging (Relationship)
- Part Three: Meaning (Knowledge)
- Part Four: Purpose (Action)

I open each part with a visual reminder (Figure 1) and a personal story that speaks to the ways I came to embody the meaning behind each word.

Secondly, I thread a quill box analogy across the chapters. This analogy is reflected in the chapter titles to highlight the process of making a porcupine quill box, a land-based art that I learned informally from my grandparents. This analogy was guided by Indigenous storywork principles and central to my meaning-making within an Indigenous paradigm.

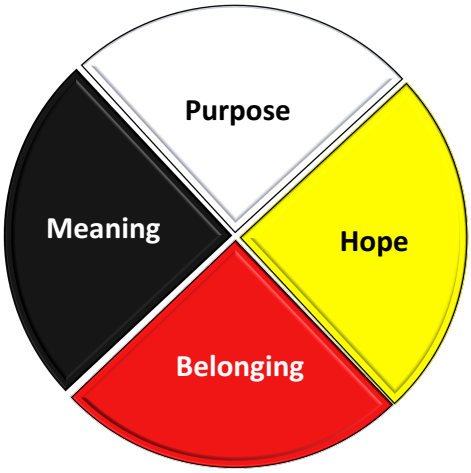
Thirdly, some chapters bring in the United Chiefs and Council of Mnidoo-Mnissing (2011) Chi-Naakinigewin preamble to exemplify the power this governance model has towards promoting

mino-bimaadzwin as we move forward towards being a self-governing people. This teaching is expanded in the prologue to further situate Indigenous knowledge at the onset of this work.

As an Anishinaabe kwe, it is important for me to reclaim and revitalize traditional knowledge as a way forward through the resurgence of our traditional values. As I began to write, these three organizational pieces felt right and contributed to my learning bundle. My learning bundle holds the teaching tools I have gathered along the way, allowing me to acknowledge that Anishinaabek and Western ways can work together to create meaning throughout all life stages.

Figure 1

Visualizing The Moving Parts of My Dissertation (Manitowabi, 2022)



Note: Medicine Wheel image reproduced by author

Part 1: Hope (Vision)

I remember always being interested in working with children as a young girl. I was mesmerized by babies. In high school, unsure of what I wanted to take in post-secondary studies, a career survey tool that I filled out indicated early childhood studies as a possibility. At that time, in my young teen life, I did not take the career match seriously and I remember thinking I did not want to be a babysitter all my life. I was also told the pay was not great. I decided to take tourism studies instead, but I quickly discovered that this career was not for me. I joined the workforce to give me time to figure out my next steps. As life happened, I started a family. After some time being home and raising my two girls, I began to think about what I wanted to do next with my life. I also began to think about what I hoped for my children and envisioned for our future lives. I thought about my hope and vision for all children. From these hopes, I realized that I wanted to pursue a post-secondary

degree in early childhood education. I wanted all children to have an opportunity to feel cared for and to have their identity nurtured. That began my hope and my vision for education for all children today and seven generations ahead. The work shared in this dissertation begins with hope.

Prologue

Aanii, boozhoo (Hello). Waabshkaa-goonigaakwe n'dizhnikaz (White Winter Woman-shortened version of Anishinaabe name), Waawaashkesh n'doodem (I am from the deer clan), Waawaaskiniga minwaa Wikwemkoong n'donjiba (My families are from Birch Island and Wikwemikoong), Anishnaabe-ndow (I am an Anishinaabe). This introduction shares a part of who I am and where I come from. This form of introduction is important to Indigenous peoples and speaks to relationality (Wilson, 2008). This is part of my ongoing work in decolonizing from the colonial patriarchal ideology that exists today. It moves toward a much greater spiritual sense of knowing who I am and where I come from as an Anishinaabe kwe (Kovach, 2009).

My story begins with a memory of my grandmother, a master crafter who spent her time designing multiple textile crafts at her home. One craft was porcupine quill boxes, which I remember her making most of my early life until she could no longer continue. To make a birchbark quill box, one must have four key materials: birchbark, porcupine quills, sweetgrass, and sinew or thread. All the pieces alone are potential ideas for crafting a project. Sinew is the only manufactured item. Originally, spruce roots and or sinew made from a piece of tough fibrous tissue uniting muscle to bone (a tendon or ligament of a deer) were used to connect the pieces. Today, thread has often been the preferred choice by my grandmother and many crafters within my region.

My grandmother's knowledge of quill box design was passed on to me through informal education and has held a special place within my academic and personal life journey. As I move through life's stages and continue learning the craft, I rely on memory and stories passed on to me by family and cousins, Knowledge Keepers and Elders. I heard stories about my grandmother venturing down the old railway tracks near her summer camp to harvest sweetgrass in undisclosed locations, often gone all day until she had what she needed. Today, I followed those trails where my grandmother walked to gather the materials I needed, for she left behind markings and pieces of her

work for me to learn. I also reach out to others to help me learn more techniques I do not remember and add to my learning bundle, which one day will be passed on to others, directly or indirectly. I am the granddaughter who is picking up the pieces of Anishinaabe kendaasowin (which refers to specific knowledge of Anishinaabe and the synthesis of personal teachings) along my journey of coming to know who I am as Anishinaabe and who I want to be.

The art of quill box design inspired the inquiry that unfolds in the following chapters. As I ventured out with Marley, my dog and trusty sidekick, on these same trails walked by my grandmother, I thought about the stories I heard from my participants. As part of making meaning with participants, I crafted birch bark medallions with the land-based materials I had gathered before starting this research project. This learning journey began long before I brought these teachings to formal schooling. I now set out on the trails symbolically as I retell the journey of coming to understand what Indigenous innovation means in an Anishinaabek early childhood context as I put the pieces together that I have gathered along the way.

The personal story with which I begin brings attention to how Indigenous Storywork can happen. As I share the story of connection with family, land, and memory, I pay respect to Indigenous ways of being and doing that may not be directly apparent. Meaning comes from listening, observing, and doing with a purposeful connection to one's life. For me, this dissertation is like going out on the land and gathering the key pieces of material I needed to put my own quill box together in the form of a research project. In my journey, I physically followed my grandmother’s tracks and was reminded that she was in a particular place harvesting birch bark from the scars left on the birch tree where she or my grandfather cut pieces of bark. I also recalled memories of my grandfather pulling over to the side of the road and picking up porcupine roadkill as I did the same

with my partner. Sometimes it is not the porcupine I gather but the connections I make while I drive down those familiar roads once travelled by my grandparents.

During the time I spent on this project, I listened to Elder Roberta Oshkabwisens and Knowledge Keeper Rhonda Hopkins share their teachings and lived experiences in Anishinaabe early childhood education. These voices guided my work. Both knowledge holders reflect the history that birch bark holds. Within my culture, we have history that has been inscribed on birch bark scrolls, a living document which continues to share Anishinaabe knowledge (Benton-Benai, 1998). Elders and Knowledge Keepers hold these teachings like the scrolls hold knowledge. The birch bark used in the design of the quilled medallions within this project represents the important conversations I needed when bringing my ideas together as I listened to their lived experiences in life and the field of early childhood education.

This work is guided by the Anishinaabe Chi-Naakinigewin (see Figure 2). I first heard this preamble from Rhonda during an opening circle at my previous workplace. I was very curious about the meaning behind the opening and words. As I began to ask questions to Rhonda about the meaning behind the Anishinaabemowin words, I learned that this was an essential concept in the Anishinaabek governance model for the Anishinaabek Nation (also known as the Union of Ontario Indians). Figure 2 includes a description below each line of text to identify each corresponding symbol in the visual. English translation is provided.

The colour purple in Figure 2 is significant as it is the colour of wampum used in the Gchi-Miigisaabiigan (Great Wampum Belt). The white border represents lodges to represent Anishinaabe communities that create the circle of Anishinaabe territory, world view, and belonging as “Ngo Dwe Waangizid (One Anishinaabe Family)” (Preamble UCCMM Elders Council, 2011).

Figure 2

The Anishinaabe Chi-Naaknigewin Anishinabek Nation, 2018)

Note: Image used with author's permission

Mii Maanda Enweyiing
This is our language and who we are

Ngo Dwe Waangizid Anishinaabe
One Anishinaabe Family

Debenjiged gii'saan anishinaaben akiing giibi dgwon gaadeni mnidoo waadiziwin.
Creator placed the Anishinaabe on the earth. Along with the gift of spirituality
[single image of person on land at top of Figure 1]

Shkode, nibi, aki, noodin, giibi dgosdoonan wii naagdowendmang maanpii shkagmigaang. Here on mother earth, there were gifts given to the Anishinaabe to look after, fire, water, earth and wind.
[second image, in clockwise direction, showing the elements]

Debenjiged gii miinaan gechtwaa wendaagog Anishinaaben waa naagdoonjin ninda niizhwaaswi kino maadwinan.
The creator also gave the Anishinaabe seven sacred gifts to guide them. They are,

Zaagidwin, *Debwewin, Mnaadendmowin, Nbwaakaawin, Dbaadendiziwin, Gwekwaadziwin miinwa Aakedhewin.*
Love, Truth, Respect, Wisdom, Humility, Honesty and Bravery
[represented by the third image, in clockwise direction, depicting a seven-point star].

Debenjiged kiimiingona dedbinwe wi naagdowendiwin.
Creator gave us sovereignty to govern ourselves.
[fourth image in clockwise direction, showing multiple people to represent family]

Ka mnaadendanaa gaabi zhiwebag miinwaa nango megwaa ezhwebag, miinwa geyaabi waa ni zhiwebag.
We respect and honour the past, present and future.
[represented by the circle divided into three equal parts, the final image in Figure 2]

The above Anishinaabe Chi-Naaknigewin is founded on Ngo Dwe Waangizid Anishinaabe. The symbols in Figure 2 form the Traditional Government of the Anishinabek Nation. The term Anishinaabek is used throughout the dissertation interchangeably with Indigenous to reflect my localized community within the broader Indigenous community that encompasses First Nation, Metis, and Inuit (FNMI). These Anishinaabemowin words were written by Elders within Mnidoo-Mnising (Spirit Island) on Mishiiken Mnising (Turtle Island), which are the lands on which my ancestors of the Three Fires Confederacy (Odawa, Potawatomi, and Ojibwa) have lived since time immemorial. This place is now known as Manitoulin Island, Canada. The Ngo Dwe Waangizid Anishinaabe has become necessary for opening Anishinaabek public presentations within Manitoulin and the North Shore regions. This preamble acknowledges all our relations, including with people, the environment/land, and the cosmos (Battiste, 2002; UCCMM Elders Council, 2011; Wilson, 2008).

The Anishinaabe Chi-Naaknigewin is written from an Anishinaabek lens and centres on Indigenous Knowledge (IK). This lens provides space for Indigenous stories, language, land, oral histories, natural laws, and relationality. Indigenous Knowledge has sustained Anishinaabek throughout history, and these teachings continue to be shared by our Elders and Knowledge Keepers

today (Battiste, 2000; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). This form of acknowledgment also reminded me, as an Anishinaabe kwe (woman), to continue my journey with integrity and respect. Like the Elders who took the time to capture the essence of who we are as Anishinaabek (good humans), I used this preamble to guide me through the writing of this dissertation.

Chapter One: Searching for Sweetgrass, Birch Bark, and Quills

Within the field of Indigenous Early Childhood Education (IECE), I have served many roles: from being a mother and attending IECE programs to teaching in the IECE program and then becoming a Supervisor of the Early Learning Centre within my community in Whitefish River First Nation. My focus has taken many directions with the work I have been doing in Early Childhood education. It continues to evolve as I live and breathe my work. In this chapter, I set the stage for studying innovation in IECE.

In my previous role as an Early Childhood Education Supervisor, I was responsible for keeping informed about the day-to-day operations of our Early Learning (EL) centre and the community's priorities in EL. This role extended beyond my local governing body's priorities, as it included working with regional and national levels as well. Locally, I sat on our supervisory network team within Mnidoo-Mnising. This team was composed of representatives from four communities who shared insights about the current and future plight of EL within our communities and nations. We provided feedback to these levels of government and shared our perspectives on what we envisioned for Indigenous early learning and childcare. Through my ongoing involvement, I have networked with multiple Indigenous Supervisors and learned more about where IECE programs have been, where they are today, and where they would like IECE go.

More recently, Indigenous early childcare centres have received financial support to enhance the quality of EL from the federal government. The federal government has invested funding that aligns with the Indigenous Early Learning Child Care Framework (IELCCF) developed through various consultations within Indigenous communities. This framework was designed to support, enhance, and shape the priorities, goals, and future of Indigenous (Inuit, Metis and First Nation) Early Child Care. The framework includes seven principles and fifteen objectives. Below is the vision for Indigenous Early Childhood Care:

> This Framework envisions First Nations, Inuit and Métis children and families as happy and safe, imbued with a strong cultural identity. It sees children and families supported by a comprehensive and coordinated system of ELCC policies, programs and services that are led by Indigenous peoples, rooted in Indigenous knowledges, cultures and languages, and supported by strong partnerships of holistic, accessible and flexible programming that is inclusive of the needs and aspirations of Indigenous children and families. (Government of Canada, 2018, p. 3)

My research focuses on goal fourteen: to "establish reciprocal accountability, research and evaluation frameworks to support promising practice and innovations in First Nations ELCC policies, programs and services" (Government of Canada, 2018, p. 13). As I reflected on this goal, I questioned what *innovation* means within an Indigenous Early Learning context and what examples of innovation are on Turtle Island, especially in northern Ontario, to support this framework and our communities.

For my research study, I looked more deeply at innovation pedagogies and practices through an Indigenous Knowledge (IK) paradigm to gain insight into these practices and to understand what these practices look like and feel like from an educator's perspective. I utilized the methodology of Indigenous Storywork (ISW) to gather these stories and, in the end, crafted learning portraits (quilled medallions) as portraits of innovation within an IECE program. Through this research, I sought to place Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing at the center and not in the margins (Huaman, 2015). This study builds on Battiste's (2013) call to decolonize education through innovative ways and meet Indigenous peoples' needs by embedding their knowledge and pedagogies in education. Heeding this call, I sought an understanding of the question: What does innovation mean within the context of an Indigenous childcare/early learning centre? Chapter Two provides a review of my theoretical framework that situates the study, exploring the meaning of innovation within an IECE context.

Chapter Two: Gathering Sweetgrass, Birch Bark, and Quills

This chapter situates my study within the current context of Indigenous childcare and early learning. Gathering sweetgrass, birch bark, and quills involves walking the path once taken by those who have walked before me. The process of exploring the research literature took on the same goals. In this chapter, I review the relevant research literature focused on innovation practices in early childhood education, beginning with definitions of innovation. I then turn to the literature informing my theoretical framework. I outline and discuss four intersecting traditions that became central to my study: Indigenous Knowledge (IK), Indigenous Pedagogy (IP), Decolonizing Education (DE), and Two-Eyed Seeing (TES).

The Context of Indigenous Childcare and Early Learning

Indigenous childcare and early learning are highly politicized and contested subjects. There are many assumptions and ideas about meeting the needs of the very young, enabling them to be successful later in life, especially children from marginalized and oppressed backgrounds (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009; Greenwood & Shawana, 2000; Hare, 2010; Moss, 2017; Sim, 2017). Researchers focusing on Indigenous children have problematized academic achievement due to colonialism (Ball et al., 2002; Battiste, 2013; Cajete, 2000; Greenwood 2006; Greenwood; 2016; Hare and Anderson, 2011; Hare, 2012; Hare; 2016; Henderson, 2000; Little Bear, 2000). These researchers situate how colonialism and assimilation were cultivated in ways that removed decision making and freedom from Indigenous people and allowed for euro-western control over the land and peoples who were original peoples to the land. Hare (2011) explained:

> Indigenous peoples came to be viewed as a threat to the plans of the government of Canada, they were construed as a problem and a hindrance to the formation of the Canadian state and the settlement for a new European founded nation. (p. 209)

From this colonial rule also came with its own written laws. One particular law enacted was the Indian Act of 1876, which was designed to gradually assimilate Indigenous people into the Euro-western thought. This act made it illegal for Indigenous peoples and communities to express their identities through governance and culture. This law created further cultural dissonance with their ways of being and doing as Indigenous people (Cherubini, 2008). For example, one way to expedite assimilation was the removal of children from their families and communities. Children were forcibly placed within Indian Residential Schools (some as young as four years old) and remained there until they aged out. Further legislation followed once Residential Schools were no longer mandatory to attend, this is known as the Sixties Scoop, a time when Child Welfare Systems removed children from their family and communities. Most children were removed at birth and adopted out to non-Indigenous families (RCAP, 1996; TRC, 2015). These legacies are still felt today, and some would argue continue to occur in various ways (Anderson, 2012; Anderson & Ball, 2020; Greenwood, 2016; Greenwood, & Jones, 2018; Hare & Anderson, 2010; Hare & Davidson, 2020).

The history of Indigenous Early Childhood Education first began within community with extended family and grandparents (Anderson & Ball, 2020; Greenwood & Shawana, 2000). Children learned informally and formally from family. This form of education was natural and imparted cultural knowledge, pedagogy, language, values, and beliefs (Greenwood & Shawana, 2000). These intergeneration practices of passing on traditions and values continues today despite the historical trauma caused by generations of families who attended residential school systems (Greenwood, 2006; Greenwood & Shawana, 2000; Hare, 2016). As a result of the negative impacts that colonialism has had on Indigenous families and communities, and the shifts in family dynamics, there has been an uptick in childcare services needed within communities (Greenwood & Shawana, 2000). From this ongoing need, the Federal Government began funding childcare initiatives specific

to Indigenous people (Greenwood, 2006; Greenwood and Shawana, 2000; Hare, 2016).

In 1994, childcare services for Indigenous people across Canada began to open with the announcement of the First Nations/Inuit Child Care Initiative (FINICCI) and the Urban and Northern Head Start Programs led by the Federal Liberal Government. These innovative childcare services, such as the Headstart program, were also needed within communities and had been advocated for some time by Indigenous leadership (Greenwood & Shawana, 2000). These recommendations were reiterated in the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Greenwood and Shawana, 2000; Greenwood, 2006; Greenwood, 2016). As a result, a second Head Start program began within First Nation communities in 1997.

In 1998, another initiative, titled the *National Children's Agenda, A Share Vision* (1998) was initiated. Multiple Indigenous sites began to open within communities with partnerships being created with the provincial, national, and territorial governments. Over a short span of four years, 16,000 new Indigenous childcare spaces opened. However, because of this short timeframe, many First Nation communities were unable to take the time to form their own ideas of what or how their service delivery would take shape. Greenwood and Shawana (2000) brought forward a concern from an Elder who asked in the early stages of FINICCI, "Are we developing residential schools in the heart of our communities for our little ones?" (p. 3). The Elder's words share the uneasiness often felt when learning spaces are not designed in conjunction with Indigenous values and norms of the people in which they serve.

In the past, educational spaces were designed to assimilate and were a constant threat to Indigenous people when they were not consulted about their vision for education (Ball et al., 2002; Greenwood & Shawana, 2000: Hare and Davidson, 2020. The establishment of Indigenous Early Childhood Education as its own specific early childhood program and services in Canada has been

ongoing. The pursuit of providing culturally relevant spaces and frameworks for Indigenous children is always at the forefront of discussion of what these spaces and places should represent within the field of IECE (Greenwood, 2016).

Recent studies situated within Indigenous Early Childhood Education (IECE) emphasize *quality of care* while parents/caregivers work; other studies focus on IECE as a means to enhance children's *school readiness* skills for success in school and life. Some studies view IECE as a place that seeks to develop the whole child. They push for more culturally relevant spaces and places where children can learn about their culturally specific identities in a positive environment, using innovative pedagogical approaches to holistic learning (Anderson & Ball; Gerlach, 2008; Greenwood, 2016; Hare & Davidson, 2018; James et al., 2019; Moss, 2017).

Greenwood and Jones (2018) argued structural and systemic changes are needed to improve children's health and well-being today. From an Indigenous perspective, "this fundamental need pushes on normative understanding of early childhood development as a determinant of health by focusing on dimensions of 'well-being' not often considered, including children's roles within the collective and their relationship to the collective" (Greenwood & Jones, 2018, p. 112).

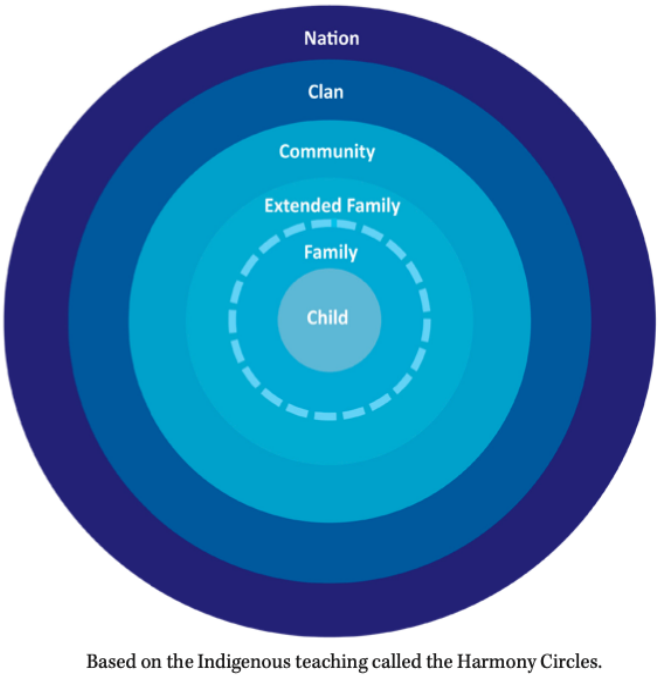
Gerlach et al. (2018) suggested that when providing early childhood intervention programs, it is vital to begin from a relational approach to foster health equity for Indigenous children and families. Further they share, being in relationship with and accountable to Indigenous families moves beyond a one-size-fits-all approach to providing adequate health and well-being service for families and children. Being in relation is a meaningful way to meet families where they are in their journey and is being responsive to the health realities of each family. This way of providing programming builds trust between practitioners and families, and allows for deeper understanding of the historical

and social factors that relate to health and well-being. This form of care can contribute to a reconceptualizing the nature and scope of ECD programs in fostering child health equity.

The Harmony Circle (see Figure 3) demonstrates the interconnectedness and importance of the relationship of the family, extended family, community, clan, and nation within the collective. This model has been used in child welfare. Riggs (n.d.) explained how each ring is balanced with the other:

Figure 3

Harmony Circle (Riggs, n.d.)



Note: Image used with author's permission

> The Harmony Circles concept describes how each circle strives to be in balance . . . In Aboriginal families, the child is in the middle of the circle. All the other circles around the child represent the relationships that the child can have and the people who can have a positive or negative influence on the child. The first circle around the child is the family. An

> Indigenous worldview often does not distinguish the nuclear family unit from the extended family, so a dotted line is used to reflect the interconnection (Riggs, n.d., p. 20).

The circular rings demonstrate the importance that the collective has with respect to the well-being of children. The second line in the Chi-Naakinigewin Preamble (see Figure 2) echoes this sentiment, where Ngo Dwe Waangizid Anishinaabe translates to "one Anishinaabe family," meaning we are all here to support and take care of each other. The Preamble connects to the goals for change noted by Greenwood and Jones (2018) and Gerlach et al. (2018).

In the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation (2015), there has been a conscious effort in IECE to shift pedagogical practices to push the boundaries of neoliberal imaginations of childcare (e.g., preparing children for school readiness) to decolonizing education. This approach takes a critical lens toward the taken-for-granted practices in IECE centres today, a goal that aligns with the notion of reconceptualizing mainstream ECE discourse (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2015). Decolonizing IECE spaces, therefore, centers the child's worldview to support their identity, fosters belonging, and resists the status quo of power and privilege by destabilizing hierarchies (Anderson & Ball, 2018; Battiste, 2013; Greenwood, 2016; Hare, 2011/2020; Tuck and Yang, 2019).

Having served many roles within the IECE sector, I noticed that the term "innovation" had become the new buzzword for early childhood educators. It has been used as a verb and a noun, written in slogans, and even embedded in the name of Indigenous organizations. The overarching theme behind innovation in the education field appears to involve changing the learning environment to improve student learning (Kirkland & Sutch, 2009; Pearson & Degotardi, 2016). How IECE educators understand this is not always shared, which led me to explore innovation further to learn how IECE educators' experiences may compare with other definitions within the literature. Next, I turn to the definitions and examples of innovation.

Definitions of Innovation

As I started to review the literature on definitions of innovation, I was inundated with words drawn from business and entrepreneurs looking for new ideas for problems they face today or to make a certain product or initiative better. This focus is not a stretch from what the literature on innovation and education suggests. Kirkland and Sutch (2009) noted barriers towards innovation within education; however, like me, they wanted to focus on well-documented innovative practices, asking about how educational spaces move towards using innovative pedagogies and practices. As I continued to delve into the various definitions and examples of what *innovation* means from an Indigenous perspective, I felt excited to join in this work. The following statement by Senator Murray Sinclair stood out to me: "Innovation isn't always about creating new things or creating new ways of doing. Rather, it sometimes involves looking back at our old ways and bringing them forward to this new situation" (National Association of Friendship Centres, 2015, p. 5). Battiste (2002) would agree, as she stated, "Indigenous Knowledge is a growing field of inquiry, both nationally and internationally, particularly for those interested in educational innovation" (p. 3). A definition shared by University of Waterloo (2021) suggested that "Indigenous innovations are a unique type of social innovation continually informed by the application of indigenous knowledge to promote the resurgence of indigenous knowledge and practices, as guided by the wisdom of the ancestors" (para 2). Lastly, Huaman (2015) defined Indigenous Innovation as:

> Distinctive, *already at the center*, as theory, process, and practice that is; a) driven by Indigenous people (i.e., who are accountable to the local community); b) seeks to restore, reclaim, protect, maintain, and revitalize local IK linked with Indigenous cultural practices and languages; and c) draws from local IK systems; d) is equipped to conscientiously respond to imperialisms and their strategies, including colonization and capitalism; e) creates spaces

> where metanarratives are problematized, approaches evaluated and reevaluated, and tensions appropriately addressed; f) opens, expands, and rebuilds dialogue within and between Indigenous communities; g) explores and builds connections with other knowledge systems (i.e., western modern science); h) is concerned with how Indigenous people benefit and for how long. (p.5).

To me, these definitions are powerful within an Indigenous perspective because I am often reminded of the negative impacts colonization had on IK and belief systems via *innovative* educational practices within residential schools, day schools, and current educational institutions. These were and are the hubs and centres designed to forcefully assimilate Indigenous children into the Euro-western consciousness, and, some would argue, continue to do so (Battiste, 2013). However, in my life experiences and studies, I also see how the *old ways* were never forgotten; rather, they were being protected by Knowledge Keepers and Elders until it was safe to share them openly (Battiste, 2000). Today, IK is being shared with others as a way forward towards healing a legacy of hurt and shame and is becoming sought out by many people in various fields such as health, science, and education (Battiste, 2002).

Innovation Within Early Learning Settings

A study conducted in Norway looked at innovation with a focus on preventative practices within care centres. The Being Together (BT) innovation practice is part of a new childcare framework for Early Childhood Education that seeks new ways of increasing teacher capacity within the learning environment that supports intervention practices with a focus on special needs. BT innovation is further defined as preparing the participating institutions to become learning organizations capable of phasing in new innovations, such as the new Norwegian ECEC Framework Plan (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2017).

The study investigated building a learning organization and mastering future innovations by focusing on core components, implementation drivers, leadership, and collective collaborative systems. Participants included ten ECEC leaders from different geographical areas in Norway who were a part of the Being Together (BT) innovation. One key BT issue focused on preventing social and emotional problems and building social competence in children aged 1–5 years using an authoritative adult style in the ECEC institution. One area of concern noted was the sustainability of their innovative plans and strategies (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017).

Through this study, a conceptual framework was used that focused on conditions that can affect sustainable change. These concepts included (a) Implementation and Sustainability, (b) Transformational Leadership, and (c) Professional Learning Communities. The study shared the success and challenges of continuing a new practice such as staff turnover, the continuity of an innovative practice that does not initially work, and, in turn, is no longer pursued, and overall consistency within the vision and goals for each centre with all staff. I felt this study was helpful to learn what other ECE centres are working towards in their work and to compare and contrast the definitions from an Indigenous lens.

The Indigenous Centre for Excellence in Early Learning (ICOE) (2018) was developed with a set agenda of providing a platform for Indigenous early learning centres to support professional learning (PL) that embedded Anishinaabek knowledge systems such as land-based education, Anishinaabemowin language, and ceremony. Although this project was short lived in its goals of providing learning opportunities for educators, the work proved to be invaluable. Some of these innovative approaches to learning were geared to meet the needs of each community; therefore, it was imperative to build relationships within the community. Once this was established, the programs and services available to educators were nurtured and supported. Many of the program's goals were focused on land-based learning, holistic child development

practices, and family and community involvement. What was key to the services provided was the concerted effort that these programs aligned within Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy. Examples included the inclusion of Elders and Knowledge Keepers, ceremony and relationships with the land, and honouring the critical roles of Indigenous culture, and language in the restoration of well-being (ICOE, 2018).

Pearson and Degotardi (2016) took up the challenge to highlight innovative pedagogical practices in the Asia-Pacific region. They are redefining the definition of innovation as "innovative pedagogy" in terms of its effectiveness in challenging or at least adapting dominant approaches to produce experiences for participants that empower, equip, and support within a particular set of everyday lived experiences (p. 7). This is important because, as I have experienced in my previous work, First Nation communities are not always supported externally. Often, I found myself developing programs and services based on needs even though funding was limited, as the above programs in the study highlight.

Pearson and Degotardi's (2016) study went on to share eight stories of communities in the Asia-Pacifica region demonstrating innovative pedagogical approaches in early childhood care and education within their culturally-specific communities. The document is very informative because it highlights examples of utilizing the resources they have to support ECE and how they make the most of them. In one story, an urban Maori ECE setting demonstrated the goal of teaching and living the traditional Maori ways of their culture while using their Indigenous language as a link to revitalizing their culture and language. In Te Köhanga Reo, the Maori language nests, the pedagogical approach weaves Indigenous knowledge into their day-to-day programming. This approach builds reciprocal relationships between people, spiritual beings, and the earth, which creates a sense of identity and community and sustainable practices with the land.

DeRiviere (2016) highlighted the work of a Head Start program that she defined as being innovative in its approach. This innovative approach included culture and identity embedded within the program to ensure that children were nurtured and their identity was strengthened. Although most Head Start programs have the primary goal of school readiness, DeRiviere explained that there are six components to these programs that must be embedded within programming, including: parental involvement, health promotion, culture and language, nutrition, education, and social services support. All six program components are to be developed in consultation with the families and the community, per the funding terms and conditions.

As a parent of a child who participated in this program, I remember feeling pleased with what my child learned and noticed the inclusion of cultural identity was significant. I recall when my daughter naturally started smudging (the ceremony of cleansing oneself with traditional medicines) after I blew out a candle. We smiled at each other, and then she just walked away. From this moment, I learned from her that her spirit was happy. As I reflect, almost 20 years later, this educational experience for my daughter was quite an innovative approach to a mainstream school setting. Growing up in a rural setting, I was never exposed to this in school; however, that experience would be the start of my growth in learning more about my own culture and identity as Anishinaabe kwe.

The work that I have been involved in within the IECE sector towards the resurgence of culture and identity within IECE programs is not universal in early learning centres due to many challenges. Some centres are making a concerted effort towards the inclusion of land-based learning, the use of Indigenous language, and spirituality within their programming. Some see the integration of Indigenous worldviews as being innovative because educators are bringing IK into an educational setting in various ways that were not typically done. For example, a Head Start program in Sault Ste.

Marie, ON, has incorporated traditional food such as venison and moose meat as a stance toward Indigenous food sovereignty. This required changing their food safety policy. This is thus one way of being innovative with menu planning while being responsive and inclusive of traditional foods that are healthy and culturally adapted to meet the needs of Indigenous people.

Battiste et al. (2016) highlighted a partnership with the Government of Saskatchewan to provide more culturally relevant tools to improve learning for First Nations and Metis in Saskatchewan. Partners realized the tools they were using were inappropriate for assessing how or what children were learning in early learning. They began implementing Holistic Lifelong Learning Models (HLLM) to ensure that any new assessments would be culturally relevant and appropriate. Over several years of working with First Nations organizations, school divisions, the Ministry of Education, and a digital strategy company put what they learned together and designed two assessments. The Help Me Tell My Story is a holistic, community-based, culturally rooted assessment tool that measures Saskatchewan's oral language development among pre-kindergarten and kindergarten children. The tools have shared promise and continue to be used in their programs as they build learning opportunities based on the assessments. The implications of working with Indigenous-led models to create new learning tools support the well-being of children, families, and communities and honour their voice when using co-developed learning models that come with and from Indigenous communities.

In the literature, I noticed that many studies about First Nations people are based on what is not working. These studies attributed the ill health and well-being of First Nations children to many factors, such as poverty, obesity, and lack of higher levels of education in communities (Halseth & Greenwood; 2019; Ball, 2012; First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2016). Understanding these concerns, I took a strengths-based approach to learn more about the innovative approaches working well in Indigenous early learning centres. I explored how these

places of learning transform IECE and support the health and well-being of children, families, and communities within their programs and services.

FNIGC (2016) states that:

> Supporting families and communities to be culturally, spiritually, economically, and socially whole and healthy is a key element in supporting the healthy development of First Nations children. This broader, holistic approach to early childhood development and learning is resonant with an Indigenous worldview that recognizes the interconnection of all things and the integral role of language, culture, and Indigenous knowledge in the health and well-being of Indigenous individuals, families, communities, and broader collectives. (p. 28)

Some studies use the term *innovation* within an educational context, both as a social practice and a pedagogical one (Kirkland & Sutch, 2009; Leseaux & Jones, 2018; Pearson & Degotardi, 2016). In this study, I sought to learn more about Indigenous pedagogical practices to help understand what Indigenous innovation looks like and feels like within Indigenous early learning centres. I invited Indigenous Early Learning experts in the field who were open to sharing what innovation means to them, why innovation practices are important, and how they incorporate them into their programs or organization. My study contributes to the literature by showcasing these innovative approaches to IECE and their significance to the overall health and well-being of Indigenous children and families that seek to nurture the cultural, social and political vision of IECE as a collective.

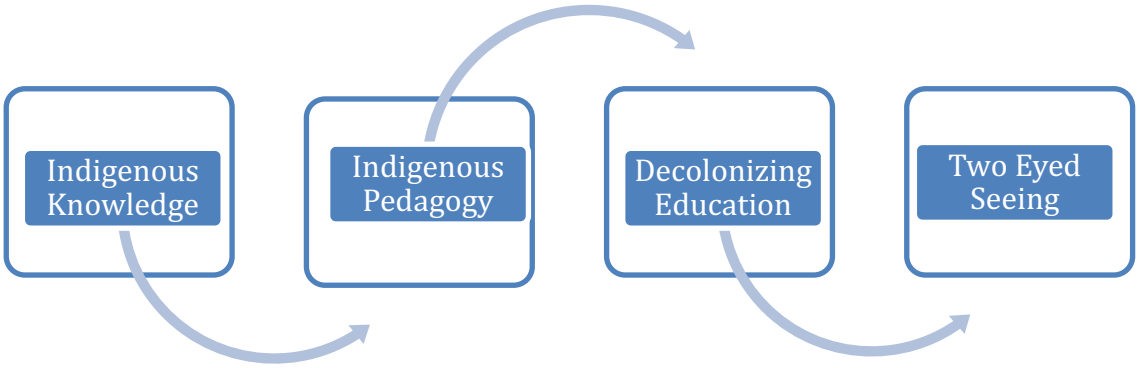
Theoretical Framework

My inquiry has been informed by four theoretical traditions: Indigenous Knowledge (IK), Indigenous Pedagogy (IP), and Decolonizing Education (DE). These traditions also inform my understanding of educational sustainability in my area of IECE. I elaborate on each of these

theoretical underpinnings in greater detail. Please see Figure 4 below followed by an elaboration of each theoretical tradition.

Figure 4

Theoretical Framework for the Study Utilizing Indigenous Knowledge System (Manitowabi, 2022)



Note: image designed by author

Indigenous Knowledge (IK) Theory

Indigenous Knowledge is localized knowledge and refers to the original knowledge of Indigenous peoples (Henderson, 2000). This includes but is not limited to Indigenous stories, language, land, oral histories, and natural laws as a way of knowing, being, and doing. This form of knowledge has sustained Anishinaabek throughout history, and these teachings continue to be shared by our Elders and Knowledge Keepers today (Battiste, 2000; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). The following section builds upon the knowledge gathered from various Indigenous scholars and practitioners who have shared their scholarly work towards understanding what defines Indigenous Knowledge theory and its many characteristics.

Characteristics of Indigenous Knowledge

Chilisa (2020) stated that the characteristics of IK are cumulative and include

intergenerational knowledge. IK is dynamic, adding new knowledge and adapting external knowledge to suit local situations. All community members have IK; those with more experience based on lived experiences are sought after, such as Knowledge Keepers and Elders. IK is stored within memories and activities expressed in multiple ways, and much of what is shared is communicated orally and through specific cultural practices. In her seminal work, Chilisa (2020) argued the need to decolonize and look towards indigenizing Euro-Western research as a way forward in academia. This is a relatively recent, much-needed phenomenon within academia as it supports Indigenous people in their movement forward in reclaiming their voice and autonomy. Chilisa added that different knowledge represents how people perceive the world and act.

Linking IK to Critical Theory, Constructivism a Postcolonial Indigenous Research

When I return and reflect upon the preamble, it embeds IK theories and pedagogy throughout and is based on a worldview that supports Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing, and has been sustained through Indigenous languages, stories, land, oral histories, and natural laws (Archibald, 2009; Battiste; Chilisa, 2002; 2012; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). The incorporation of Indigenous theory and pedagogy is aligned with critical theory in the sense that its notions of critique, resistance, struggle, and emancipation are what drive Indigenous researchers to take a stand against hegemonic powers of colonization by becoming critically conscious of the world around them (Chilisa, 2020; Smith, 2012).

Wilson (2008) stated that relationality is key to an Indigenous ontology and epistemology within an Indigenous paradigm. He further related the constructivism paradigm to Indigenous ontology because they both believe that many realities are external; he argued that “reality is in the relationship that one has with the truth” (p. 73). Further, Wilson (2008) noted that relations are beyond ourselves and with things; they are with relationships we build with others. An example of this is asking where someone is from during a general conversation, followed by asking if you know

this person, etc. This form of communication builds a deeper relationship and connection as the conversations continue. It is also important within a research context as it situates the person's link to the community and their connection. Therefore, for my voice to be represented as an Indigenous woman, I have become more engaged with Indigenous academics and settler allies, who work towards having more representation of Indigenous voices heard in academia (Castellano, 2014; McGregor, 2018; Peltier, 2018; Tanaka, 2016; Wilson, 2009).

Lastly, to conceptualize IK theory, many academics weave in personal stories, metaphors, Indigenous languages, connections, and reflections of their life journey that often becomes embedded within the research (Kovach, 2010; McGregor et al., 2018; Simpson, 2011; Wilson, 2008). Finding a specific definition of IK is complicated and is not the aim of this paper; however, I weave critical aspects of IK into my research, such as the importance of Indigenous language, stories, and land, to get a richer understanding of Indigenous education (Battiste, 2000). I also choose to write in this format as it helps to expand my understanding of IK theory and practice. I turn to this discussion next.

Indigenous Language, Relationships, and Land within IK

One key aspect of IK is the understanding and knowledge of the importance of Indigenous languages. As I have learned from language teachers, knowledge holders, and Elders, it is well known that the English translation of the language does not carry much of the same meaning or essence. Deloria (2006) stated that Indigenous language gifted to a people is wholistic, interconnected, and interrelated to all beings and the cosmos. Gross (2012) argued that studying American Indian Languages is critical to understanding the American Indian worldview.

Simpson (2011) spoke in depth about this link between the meaning of words and the breadth and depth the meaning holds; there is not a word-for-word match, as one Anishinaabemowin word

could be a paragraph when translated into English. Corbiere (2000) noted that Anishnaabemowin is essential in fostering a whole child's intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being that will promote a healthy sense of identity. Indigenous Epistemologies is the theory of knowledge that is based on Indigenous perspectives, such as relationality, the interconnection of sacred and secular, and holism. (Cajete, 1994; Deloria & Wildcat, 2001; Hampton, 1993; Henderson, 2002; Wilson, 2008). Therefore, the inclusion of the language within education is essential in building children's sense of pride. Geniusz (2009) described language "as a way of life" (p. 202), and she provided a detailed list of Anishinaabemowin words in the work she does, a format I also take up within my dissertation.

Wilson (2008) stated that relations with the environment and land are important for IK as it is the connection that one has to space and place. Land holds specific traditional and ecological knowledge passed down to the next generation, such as medicine, food, and weather patterns, as well as an inherent Indigenous right to protect, as mentioned in the preamble above. Land within an Indigenous context is often referred to as *land as teacher* and *land as medicine.* Within my literature review, I also noticed a resurgence of land-based education within childcare centres and schools as a way forward. Many of these models refer to IK as the critical foundation for ecological sustainability (Mitchell, 2018; McGregor, 2009; Simpson, 2011).

To summarize, Indigenous Knowledge is based on Indigenous perspectives, such as relationality, the interconnection of sacred and secular, and holism. The emotional, spiritual, cognitive, and physical dimensions of knowledge are common in Indigenous epistemologies and are very much the essence of a philosophical belief about the world and knowledge nested within the social relations of knowledge production. I feel it is essential to know and understand this when conducting research in Indigenous communities; otherwise, we may not fully conceptualize the overall stories being told (Cajete, 1994; Kovach, 2010; Wilson, 2008). The following section

presents Indigenous Pedagogy (IP) and why this is a good fit within the lens of Indigenous education.

Indigenous Pedagogy (IP)

Indigenous Pedagogy is known as the method and practice of teaching that focuses on the development of a human being as a whole person, learning through experience, and recognizing the vital role that Elders have in passing on wisdom and knowledge (Battiste, 2002; Cajete, 1994; Little Bear, 2009; Styres, 2019; Toulouse, 2016). Graveline (1998) stated that Aboriginal pedagogy (AP) is anti-colonial and makes us critically conscious of the power we hold as educators. To know AP is to provide various ways of teaching others that are meaningful to the people's cultural knowledge, such as the use of storytelling, which can be a healing teaching tool. Further, "storytelling is an excellent method of giving speakers an opportunity for uninterrupted voice for the listener in a manner culturally conditioned for many diverse groups and rich in learning for the listener" (Graveline, 1998, p. 168).

Little Bear (2009) argued IP is needed when re-defining and re-imagining education models. He urged educators to think in terms of uni-cultural rather than multicultural. This type of thinking creates a shift in practice through learning a new pedagogy based on the specific community and their philosophy and design. Unlearning and letting go of preconceived notions of teaching and relearning by creating new understanding is a powerful step in establishing a new direction in the teaching practice (Tanaka, 2016).

Simpson (2014) brought IP to life with her use of storytelling, sharing her connections and lessons learned from the stories she has come to know and demonstrating their effectiveness within her learning journey. Simpson (2014) explained:

Storytelling is at its core decolonizing because it is a process of remembering, visioning and

> creating a just reality where Nishnaabeg live as Nishnaabeg and peoples. Storytelling becomes a lens through which we can envision our way out of cognitive imperialism, where we can create models and mirrors where none existed, and where we can experience the spaces of freedom and justice. (p. 33)

Simpson (2011) argued, “To return to our ways of knowing does not necessarily include returning to the past. Rather, it means a powerful regeneration of our ancestral ways of knowing being applied in our current lives" **(**p. 51).

Therefore, considering past knowledge is helpful because, as an educator, it is essential to note that there are many ways a person comes to know and learn. Using stories to share in knowledge production is a way of honouring Indigenous ways of knowing and is suitable in this context of my research project because you never know what stories may be shared. It is up to the researcher to understand, listen, and share the teaching and learning that has come from sharing a story (Archibald, 2008; Battiste, 2002).

Decolonizing Education

Decolonizing Education (DE) weaves together the above theoretical traditions of IK and IP. Decolonization involves valuing and revitalizing IK and approaches and rethinking Western biases or assumptions that have impacted Indigenous ways of being (Archibald; 2008; Archibald, 2019; Battiste, 2013; Bell, 2013; Geniusz, 2009; Graveline, 1998; Smith, 2012; Styres, 2017; Toulouse, 2016, Tuck & Yang, 2019). Decolonizing Education deconstructs colonial ideologies of the superiority and privilege of Western thought and approaches.

Many Indigenous and Settler academics are weaving their own paradigms together to inform Indigenous education. Smith et al. (2019) lean towards post-critical pedagogies that are concerned with challenging and deconstructing the patriarchal tendencies of critical pedagogy,

especially tendencies that instill barriers for everyday people to speak for themselves. Individuals can challenge taken-for-granted practices within educational institutions and bring forward stories of new approaches to learning that are innovative and work for Indigenous children and families and not against them (Smith, 2012). These shifts in thinking speak to the notions of resistance in critical theory: educators can then be the link to innovation and change, resisting the status quo of education and fostering empowerment of educators and students (Friere,1970; Giroux, 2001; Kim, 2016).

Two-Eyed Seeing

Two-Eyed Seeing (TES) is becoming its own theory and methodology within research models today (Peltier, 2018; Greenwood & Jones, 2018). This term was coined by Albert Marshall an Elder of the Mi'kmaw'ki territory. Marshall et al. (2018) elaborated on this approach to research:

> Two-Eyed Seeing refers to learning to see from one eye with the strengths of (or best in) Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing and learning to see from the other eye with the strengths of (or best in) Western knowledges and ways of knowing . . . and, most importantly, using both of these eyes together for the benefit of all. (p. 46)

Peltier (2018) provided an example of Two-Eyed Seeing as an Indigenous Research Method with Participatory Action Research as a way to "reconcile the use of Western method and theory with Indigenous knowledge" (p. 2). Within IECE programs and services, a Two-Eyed Seeing approach has been a way forward in working with the best principles of Indigenous ECE philosophy and with multiple mainstream ECE philosophies. Greenwood and Jones (2018) highlighted how Two-Eyed Seeing has brought together the best of both worlds in order to provide a wholistic program for Indigenous children and their families to grow from. Albert et

al. (2018) shared an example of how this works in practice by choosing words wisely and that resonate within traditional ways of knowing:

> Rather than talking about "positive psychosocial outcomes" for child development, we could talk about how storytelling can nurture a child's spirit of interconnectivity . . . one that is well prepared for lifelong learning, seeks to be in harmony with all of his or her relations, and work towards balance within his or her experiences over the entire life journey. (p. 47)

It is also strongly suggested that IECEs begin with their own traditional knowledge by revitalizing our languages and spirituality and reconnecting with their spirits by reclaiming who they are as a people (Albert et al., 2018).

Connecting IK, IP, DE, and TES to Educational Sustainability

The preamble in Figure 2 captures ecological knowledge, the protection of Shkagamik-kwe (Mother Earth), and the responsibilities and instructions that the creator has given Anishinaabek. A line in the preamble states, "here on mother earth, there were gifts given to the Anishinaabe to look after, fire, water, earth and wind." In much of the theory underpinning IK, IP, DE and TES, educational sustainability lives and breathes action and transformation. This sense of action is often realized in demonstrations from Indigenous peoples standing up against environmental destruction, such as anti-pipeline demonstrations and advocacy for clean water. For example, elders from Wikwemikong, ON, held a water walk to bring attention to the mistreatment of water. As a result, water ceremonies have resurfaced locally to bring awareness about our roles as Anishinaabek to honour and protect our natural resources (McGregor, 2018). From an IECE perspective, there is a movement to include IK and IP in the learning environments and a focus on land-based learning, embedding IK and IP as the foundation. These

early learning centres are also bringing ceremonies such as the water walk and notions of *land as teacher* to the forefront to revitalize IK and IP as critical foundations for learning, which to me is decolonizing education and at the same time approaching learning through the lens of TES (James et al., 2019; Greenwood and Jones, 2018; Hare, 2011/2020; Marshall et al., 2018; Peltier, 2018). Revitalizing Indigenous traditions into educational spaces therefore requires innovative approaches within its design for our young children and families.

Educational sustainability is embedded in Indigenous stories. Johnston (2003) expanded these concepts to include oral histories and stories of the Anishinaabek. Through oral histories and stories, we learn about the innovative practices that shaped Anishinaabek from time immemorial. Johnston (2003) shared how Indigenous people respect the lands in which we live and are not concerned only with economic prosperity. A powerful quote by Crowfoot of the Seneca Nations stated: "Our land is more valuable than your money. It will last forever. It will not even perish by the flames of fire. As long as the sun shines and the waters flow, this land will be here to give life to men and animals; therefore, we cannot sell this land …." (as cited in Johnston, 2003, p. xiii).

Educational sustainability is woven throughout IK and IP. As already mentioned, the preamble from the UCCMM Elder's Council (2011) centres and consciously demonstrates respect for the land, language, oral history, stories, and natural law. McGregor (2009) stated, "The Anishinaabe Creation and Re-Creation stories inform us of our beginnings and provide the conceptual frameworks for an Indigenous understanding of our relationships to Creation and its many beings" (p. 31). The preamble also emphasizes collectivity and relationships rather than our current capitalistic values, which strengthens the movement towards innovation within the early years that supports bringing old ways to a new situation, as shared by Sinclair ((National Association of Friendship Centres, 2015, 2015).

IK is found in the philosophies, histories, ceremonies, and stories as ways of knowing. IP is

experienced through talking or sharing circles and dialogues, participant observations, experiential learning, modelling, meditation, prayer, ceremonies, and storytelling as ways of knowing (Battiste, 2002; Greenwood & Jones, 2018; Hare, 2016; McGregor 2009). The distinctive features of IK and IP are learning by observation and doing, learning through authentic experiences and individualized instruction, and learning through enjoyment. In my role as a researcher, I am constantly reflecting on the ways I have learned and come to know things in life.

Some of these ways were learned by making mistakes, and some were learned by questioning the circumstances in which things have happened and asking how I would have done things differently. However, it is usually years later that I come to understand. I think that goes for many situations within the field of education. It is also understood within an Indigenous paradigm that most of what we learn is by observing consciously and or unconsciously how the world works, and this can have both positive and negative impacts on our learning journey. The hope for this inquiry is to share the educators' stories of innovation and the *how* and *why* that can promote shifts in practice in an Indigenous context. I turn to these stories shortly, but first expand on the methodology used to gather these stories.

Chapter Three: Threading a Story

In this chapter, I continue the quill box analogy that is woven through my dissertation as a guiding structure. Here, I relate the making of a quill box to my choice and use of Indigenous Storywork as methodology. I begin with the image of a quill box in Figure 5 as I recall time spent with my grandparents. I recently discovered Smith et al. (2019) also applied a Sweet Grass Porcupine analogy to their use of Indigenous methodology. I return to Smith's work in the Epilogue to draw conclusions and next steps about my work.

Figure 5

The Making of a Quill Box

Note: Image designed by author and photo produced by author

> *I learned how to make a quill box from my grandparents through informal teachings. They worked together - my grandfather helping with gathering and harvesting the materials, and my grandmother gathering, cleaning, preparing, and assembling her designs. To me, this craft is based on innovation within its design, although land-based knowledge has been passed down many generations. The materials utilized have many stories to tell, but for me,*

this piece shares my story and that of my grandparents, which drives me to explore my research inquiry deeper. [Researcher Journal]

I learned so much from my family formally and informally by observation, which is why I felt compelled to draw on the analogy of crafting a quill box to think about doing Indigenous research. Indigenous Knowledge (IK) comprises a specific way of knowing based upon the oral tradition of sharing knowledge. The act of making the quill box is embedded with historical and traditional values and stories. The experience of making a quill box has come to my mind often as I have been reading, writing, and planning to do Indigenous research. First, a great deal of planning goes into putting together the quill box, as there is so much to know and consider before you begin crafting.

When I made my own quill box, I had to stop, rethink, take apart, ask for help, and reassemble parts of my quill box to get the pieces together and move on to the next stage. This process is similar to the one I have been going through in designing this study. After reading, planning, and putting ideas together, I thought it would be easy to begin writing about what I wanted to do and learn. But just as I was going, I was met with uncertainty, frustrations, roadblocks, writer's block, and a global pandemic. I recall needing to step away and go for a walk, sit by the water, go for a visit, or just have a good cry.

All of these emotions are also how I felt when making a quill box, and then just when I felt like giving up, both with the quill box and my study, I remembered why I started. I wanted to learn something new that supported my learning spirit and that I could share with others. In keeping within Indigenous research methodology, I needed to remember why I started this journey and that when something is not coming together, it is okay to regroup, reconnect and bring in a teaching I have learned in my life experiences to get me through to the next stage.

To me, all these skills have been embedded by my family, as I received informal teaching

from watching my grandparents working together towards completing their quill boxes. They always finished what they started, not in one session. I used these teachings from designing a quill box to craft the research design with my participants, gathering our stories, cleaning, preparing, and assembling a shared story of what innovation meant to us.

Initially, I was drawn to Narrative Inquiry (NI). NI is a way of understanding and exploring experiences through "collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus" (Clandinin, 2007; Creswell, 2018, p. 67). These stories are then situated within participants' experiences (their jobs, their home), their culture (racial or ethnic), and their historical contexts (time and place). Being context-sensitive is essential to NI (Czarniawska, 2004, as cited in Creswell, 2018; Wilson, 2008). However, I did not choose this as the primary methodology because I felt in my heart that choosing an Indigenous methodology of ISW was a better fit. Though similar, ISW is central to the Indigenous paradigm; storytelling, learning from lived experiences, and expressing how stories share experiences with others are considered relational within an Indigenous context and are respectful to the participants (Archibald 2008, 2019; Brayboy, 2005; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). Next, I expand on ISW and how this methodology supported me in gathering knowledge from others.

What is Indigenous Storywork and Why This Methodology?

Indigenous Storywork originated with Archibald (2008), a methodology that uses qualitative methods through the lens of an Indigenous paradigm. Archibald (2008) described that Indigenous story and work signal the value and importance of undertaking educational research work and making meaning through stories and traditional or lived experiences. Archibald (2008) explained that there are seven foundational principles in Indigenous Storywork: respect, responsibility, reverence, reciprocity, wholism, interrelatedness, and synergy. The four Rs (respect, responsibility, reverence,

and reciprocity) are traditional values and teachings demonstrated toward the story, storyteller, and listener. The other three principles (wholism, interrelatedness, and synergy) shape the quality of the learning process. Indigenous wholism refers to human development's spiritual, emotional, physical, and intellectual domains and the "relationships among the self, family, community, wider world, and the environment" (Archibald, 2008, p. 6). According to Archibald (2008), "Effective Indigenous Storywork grows out of the actions of interrelatedness and synergy formed by the storyteller, the story, the listener, and the context in which the story is used" (p. 6). Combining all seven principles in action can create a transformative learning experience (Archibald, 2008). Archibald (2008) compared the research process of Storywork to the art of basket weaving in the Sto:lo culture. Within the making, each Sto:lo crafter has their own unique design. Archibald (2008) explained this process as follows:

> The pieces of cedar sometimes stand alone and sometimes they lose their distinctiveness and form a design. Similarly, the processes of research and learning to make story meaning are distinguishable as separate entities and sometimes they seem bound together, losing their distinctiveness. The basket designs that relate to research are the four Rs of respect, reverence, responsibility, and reciprocity. (p. 6)

Similarly, the making of a porcupine quill box allowed me to think about my research process and piece together my research design in a responsible way. I considered and applied the principles shared by Archibald in the research design. Archibald's work involved Elders and Knowledge Keepers who shared their teachings of Indigenous traditional ecological and cultural knowledge learned over time. Along with the wisdom of Elders, Archibald was supported by the stories she had learned. The Trickster character Coyote helped Archibald appreciate each of the Storywork principles as an experiential learning approach, including feeling, thinking, and doing (Archibald, 2008).

Archibald (2008) compared the story of *Coyote Searching for Bone Needle* to the process of

decolonizing Indigenous research. In this story, Coyote faces challenges while searching for the needle dropped by the campfire, circling the campfire to look for it. Archibald parallels this to researchers who attempt to apply methodologies that may not be suitable nor beneficial for Indigenous peoples. Archibald concludes that Coyote will need to stop going in circles and begin using Indigenous methodologies that might not be as well-known to the larger academic world but are a much better fit for Indigenous research. To Archibald, this is the act of taking on a decolonizing methodology and going outside of our comfort zone by doing research that benefits Indigenous peoples, which is done with Indigenous peoples and not on them (Smith, 2012).

Like the story of Coyote, I, too, ventured into the not-so-well-known area of Indigenous methodologies. Storywork often includes stories of Creation, teachings, dreams, animals and the metaphysical (such as Nanaboozho, the Ojibway trickster), and participants' lived experiences, including Knowledge Keepers and Elders. For my research, I connected to Nanaboozho's stories, though not focusing on Nanabozho per se. Still, I was connected and drawn to Nanaboozho's Nookomis (grandmother) and the guidance, support, and teachings she had lovingly given Nanaboozho. The key message I took with me as I began to engage in the Storywork methodology was being present with each participant and their story, being an active listener, and respecting what is being shared by participants. This act of listening includes being open to other ways of knowing, being, and doing. For example, Martin (2018) highlighted how ISW does not have a set storyline; instead, "the stories are interpreted through the lenses of both the teller and the listener" (p. 189). Martin (2018) also shared that the non-prescriptive nature of a story is to generate one's meaning from it, and there is no plot to follow. What is important to note is that the meaning also may not show up to the person until years later. Martin (2018) decided upon this method as it was aligned with participants' worldviews.

In ISW, researchers pose questions to explore their inquiry further. Huaman (2015) offered five broad research questions for colleagues/researchers to think about when exploring innovation:

1. What is our vision for self-determination today—meaning, how can we rebuild ourselves (personal sovereignty) and our communities (Indigenous community sovereignty)?
2. How do we identify, heal, resist, and negotiate our present lives with imperialist forces and a continuous colonial presence?
3. How do we recognize and honour our past, drawing from local Indigenous and other resources?
4. What do we recognize and honour from our past, and why?
5. Who benefits from innovation? (p. 7)

The above questions offered a lens to navigate Indigenous innovation's meaning within Indigenous early childhood education.

Research Design

Participants

My participants included nine Indigenous Early Childhood Experts (IECEs) from Manitoulin and the North Shore. This is where I live, and I felt this supported the goal of learning about innovative practices within place. Participants included seven educators working in the field of IECE, one Knowledge Keeper (KK), and one Elder. All nine participants had many years of experience in the field of IECE, ranging from 10-30 years. Participants ranged in age from 40-70 years. Eight participants identified as female and one as male.

Recruitment

Through the work I have been engaged in within IECE, I have had the opportunity to build

relationships with various communities on different levels and learn about their programs and services. Recruitment extended to communities elsewhere in Ontario, including Sudbury, Sault Ste. Marie, and Hamilton. I applied a snowball sampling where invited participants had the opportunity to pass along an invitation to other IECEs they knew. During the recruitment process, I sent out an email to potential participants in the field of IECE. I also used a messenging app to connect with potential participants and shared an invite to participate. Once participants agreed to learn more about the study, I gave them the consent form to participate and the questions for the research study. I followed up with telephone conversations with participants to speak to them personally and to share the purpose of my research and the commitment involved. As participants agreed to participate, we set dates to meet via Zoom.

Advisory Group

Throughout the research design process, I was supported by a local Indigenous Community Advisory group who reviewed the proposal and provided feedback on the work ahead. I also reached out to the local Aboriginal Advisory Committee of Mnidoo-Mnising, composed of childcare supervisors and child and health advocates. In addition, I reached out for the support and guidance of an Elder and Knowledge Keeper from Manitoulin to share what they felt was integral to being innovative within an Indigenous context. The Elder and Knowledge Keeper contributed to the overall story with their traditional and spiritual knowledge and their own lifelong experiences within IECE.

Research Methods for Data Collection and Building Trust

I drew upon three interconnected research methods for this study. Each is elaborated upon in this section.

Conversational Interviews with Focus Educator(s). Embedded within ISW, I took a conversational methods approach. Kovach (2009) used the conversational method (CM) within Indigenous communities. This form of data gathering is similar to other Indigenous methods such as storytelling, yarning, talk story, re-storying, and re-membering (Absolon & Willet, 2004). The conversational method is a means of gathering knowledge found within Indigenous research. The conversational method is significant to Indigenous methodologies because it gathers knowledge based on an oral storytelling tradition congruent with an Indigenous paradigm (Kovach, 2010). Chilisa (2020) stated, "All stories have a function. They fill the gaps and provide the missing literature, theories, conceptual frameworks, and research methods in a postcolonial indigenous research paradigm" (p. 194). Chilisa (2020) indicated that stories are a form of data collection, analysis, and interpretation that gives another side of the story. Stories:

- are triangulated within values, belief systems, and community and family histories
- provide data to debate postcolonial Indigenous perspectives on many issues such as gender relations
- speak freely about all their relationship including spirituality
- bring experience alive through vignettes
- support the learner and listener to gain understanding, to build self-reflection, and to move forward in decision making in their programs and interventions. (Chilisa, 2020)

I drew on these goals to bring all voices and perspectives to life.

Open-ended conversations (Kovach, 2009; Kim, 2016) took place virtually as ethics protocols did not allow for in-person interviews due to Covid-19. Each participant's conversation was divided into two sessions. In Session One, we explored their stories of journeys into early childhood education and how they explored various changes in their lives and their work, along with key principles required within IECE and their hope for IECE. Session Two was completed 1-2 weeks

after our first session. We first visited and shared about our daily lives. I asked if they wanted to add any new thoughts or ideas from the first session. We then explored the artifacts they brought and what innovation meant to them.

Artifacts. Participants were invited to bring an item that brought them inspiration within their teaching and would support our conversation of innovation. The items included: Indigenous teachings such as the turtle teaching and the history of treaties, cedar basket, birch bark canoe, teaching feather, talking stick, an inspirational quote, puppet, eagle wood chip painting, bear figurines, and beaded leather jacket (Kim, 2016). Like Pearson and Degotardi's (2016) study, I was interested in how many of the teaching practices overlapped at the Macro (policy) level, Meso (intermediate environment) level, and Micro (personal) level but from an Indigenous perspective. Within an Indigenous discourse, the comparative term for macro is nation, meso is community/land/clan, and micro is family/self (Riggs, 2006). For this study, it was helpful to gain further knowledge about what the educators had designed, gathered, and developed that supported the what and how of innovation.

Researcher Journal. My research journal was a place to write, reflect, and record field notes from my observations. Using Zoom technology, I reviewed videos and record observations that occurred. This was also a place where I could be creative with story, be self-reflective, and include dreams, ceremony, and connections from life lessons inclusive of Indigenous ways of knowing and being (Kovach, 2009; Chilisa, 2020). As a researcher, this was a helpful tool, and I referred back to the journal frequently to add to the dissertation. Another helpful writing method was letter writing. I used the letter writing to share my reflections, for analysis of conversations, to make connections to the literature, and as a form of discussion. This method was a recursive process that allowed me to be creative in my writing and think through what I had been learning from the participants and literature. This process is similar to Wilson (2018), who wrote letters to his children. However, my

letters were to my participants and myself as I explored what I had been learning throughout this process. Below is the first reflection letter from my researcher journal where I pondered how I was inspired to use letter-writing. Further letters are embedded into Chapter 4 as I write to each participant.

I wonder as I begin to write my first letter if this is its own section or if I should write out their whole story? I am inspired by Kovach's (2006) dissertation, where she did a back-and-forth interview as one chapter with all seven of her participants. I am also inspired by Horn-Miller's (2009) dissertation. Horn-Miller wrote each interview as a narrative of each of her participants stories. Both have their own reflective pieces at the end of each conversation, where they contribute their meanings that come from what has been shared with them.

I am thinking of doing a blend of the two, which is a form of co-constructing story yet keeping the voice present, while still ending each participant's story with final thoughts. Then the analysis/discussion would be its own chapter of what themes came through. As I began to write, it felt like I was sharing our conversation in a condensed manner. This way of analysis is much aligned with the methodologies and methods I chose.

I have also relooked at Shawn Wilson's (2008) work, and he too writes in this manner, which is aligned with an Indigenous worldview/paradigm. He has also written letters to his sons (sort of what I am doing here, with me sharing with you, as I think through my work) which is much aligned with Scheffel's (2011) work on Negotiating a Researcher Identity. *Lastly, Greenwood (2014) also writes personal letters to her sons as a way to share the work she is doing and her reasons why she has taken on the work she is doing today, which also inspires my writing of letters within my own work. I find I go through these stages when I reread and listen to the transcripts.*

I have also thought about the teachings that were shared with me and how they affect me as a learner and a researcher. One in particular is the meaning behind the seven stages of life. This

teaching is about living, learning, and relearning through our life experiences. The teaching has shown me the importance of knowing that both the positive and the negative experiences are a natural part of our own life journey.

Although some of these experiences were hard to go through, they shape who we become, and through those seven stages of life we become who we are meant to be. For example, in our conversations this might mean facing the trauma, hurt, or uncertainty that has impacted our growth, but by being able to heal and come to terms with these experiences, we're able to want to change and do things differently. Then we can begin to make our way back to a more positive and meaningful journey and this will set us on our path to support others in our continued roles and our collective responsibility to community.

Through the stories shared, I sensed and learned that mostly everyone had some form of experience in their life that caused them to reflect and learn, as they had to face something that was hindering their growth. Once they were able to come to know - which is known in the language as kaandossiwin - they were able to move their learning forward, and then support others on their learning journey more deeply and effectively (Absolon, 2011).

I also sense that those who grew up both in a First Nations community and those who grew up in urban/rural communities all faced their own battles. As I have been reflecting on that area, I think this is where my story intertwines and that I could be the additional person who shares their story as an EL educator and share my journey growing up rural and then also returning home to live and work and reconnect. This reflects the researcher/learner/educator identity through the unfolding of the 7 stages of life (Absolon, 2011; Kovach, 2009/2010; Scheffel, 2011; Wilson, 2008).

I read Dunn & Morris's (1992) Narrative Quilts and Quilted Narratives: The Art of Faith Ringgold and Alice Walker *and can get a sense of how the author uses the quilts to tell their story. I*

use teachings to tell the story that is pieced together with the making of my grandmother's quill box. Interesting!

To be continued,
Melanie

This form of written expression in my writing allowed me to create a meaningful relationship with myself, participants, family, community, land, and nation. As I wrote, I remembered the seven principles of Storywork (Archibald, 2008) and relationality (Wilson, 2008) to guide me on my learning journey. Next, I share the ethical considerations for conducting qualitative research in a good way.

Ethical Considerations

This study followed ethical practices within an Indigenous paradigm of the 5Rs: respect, responsibility, reciprocity, relevance, and reverence (Archibald, 2008; Kirkness & Barhardt, 1991; Wilson, 2009). The first four were established by Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) in their work of transforming higher education to be more responsive to Indigenous learners. Archibald (2008) added reverence, the fifth R. By demonstrating these ethical values, the researcher is then enacting research in a good way aligned with an Indigenous Research paradigm and respects Indigenous ways of being and doing by learning from and with participants (Archibald, 2009). This way of conducting research is now widely accepted within academia (Kovach, 2009; McGregor et al. 2018; Kim, 2016; Wilson, 2011). Archibald (2019) explained that these principles are congruent with an Indigenous paradigm and allow for a deeper meaning to the research/researcher/researched. Archibald (2019) shared:

> . . . decolonizing research aspires to re-cover, re-cognize, re-create, re-present, and *re-search back* by using our own ontological and epistemological constructs. However, further to that . . . decolonizing research methodologies approaches do not totally dismiss Western methodological approaches; they encourage us as Indigenous researchers to connect research

> to our own worldviews and to theorize based on our own cultural notions in order to engage in more meaningful and useful research for our people. (p. 6)

These considerations guided how I conducted myself and used ISW and CM throughout the study.

Establishing Routines that Honour Participant Choices

Communicating the researcher's intent at the beginning of the first meeting is imperative. There is a long history of research being done within Indigenous communities that is commonly referred to as "smash and grab or helicopter research," where the researcher comes in and gets what they need and never returns to share the results. Therefore, establishing routines and the awareness that participants have the right to withdraw and decide what they want to be included or taken out altogether (e.g. member checking) allows participants to confirm their stories, honouring participant voices (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). This demonstrates reciprocity, relationality, and relational accountability by confirming their stories to reduce bias in reconstructing their stories (Kovach, 2009, Wilson, 2008). Garvis (2015) and Kim (2016) also shared the importance of research credibility within the community for the relationship to begin.

Initial engagement includes offering a tobacco tie to build relationships, as this is a widely used and accepted way to approach the community when asking for help or guidance. For me, this also relates to Archibald's (2019) three principles of wholism, interrelatedness, and synergy that shape the quality of the learning process.

At the onset of the study, I provided participants with a list of support services if anything they shared may have impacted them negatively and potentially triggered negative emotions. I also provided a $25 gift card for food as an honorarium to show appreciation for participants' time. I mailed the gift cards to participants and included the completed quilled medallion I had personally made as a miigwetch (thank you) for supporting my research journey.

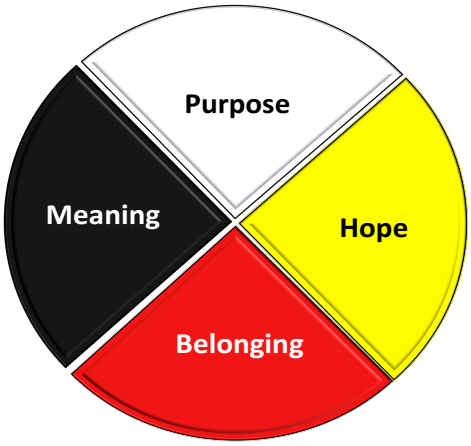
Confidentiality and Privacy

This study was voluntary, and participants were given a choice to use their name and their community's name or a pseudonym. I gained consent from educators before the conversational interviews and for using their artifacts and documents. It was made clear that there would be no detrimental effects from not choosing to participate, including no pressure to participate. I sought community ethics protocol from both Nipissing University and the Manitoulin Anishinaabek Research Review Committee (MARRC), a community-based ethics board. I followed the guidelines of TCPS2 and ensured no harm.

To ensure privacy, transcripts were locked in a cabinet along with journal entries, and the computer had a secured passcode. Transcripts will be destroyed based on university protocols (Archibald, 2019; Kovack, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I followed the Ownership, Control, Access Principles (OCAP) because my research included Indigenous Knowledge. The research data belongs to participants if they want a copy of their work (FNIGC, 2007).

Summary

There are well-established methodologies that work for various projects throughout academia. Storywork principles using conversational methods felt like the right fit for me at the onset of this work, not only for the project but, most importantly, for the participants. This choice of methodology aligned with my theoretical framework's underpinnings and reflected Kovach's (2010) argument: "So long as both paradigm and the method are front and centre (and congruent), the research will be effective in serving the research and the research community, which includes Indigenous peoples" (p. 4). I sought positive solutions to challenging situations through a decolonizing lens, in which Indigenous Knowledge and Indigenous Pedagogy were the foundations for supporting positive learning journeys for each child.



Note: Repeated visual (Figure 1) to return to the structural parts of the dissertation

Part 2: Belonging (Relationship)

I begin Part Two with a glimpse into my teaching career. My first teaching opportunity was in my community school, and I was both excited and nervous. I was excited because I could bring my hopes to life and nervous because now I was responsible for putting what I had learned into practice. As I prepared, I remembered what one of my professors shared in class about building relationships with our students in the first week of school and ensuring that our students felt that they belonged. That sage advice did not disappoint and still rings true today in my work.

This part of my research journey focused on building relationships with my participants, as I wanted to ensure that I was respectful to who they were and the overall work they have contributed as Indigenous early childhood educators. It was important for me to allow their voices to be heard throughout the conversation and to share who they are and where they come from.

Chapter Four: Quills as Protection and Beauty

Mii Maanda Enweyiing
This is our language and who we are

Ngo Dwe Waangizid Anishinaabe
One Anishinaabe Family. (UCCMM, 2010)

Conversations with the participants spanned over four months, beginning in July, through a hot summer, and ending amid a very warm October. As per my approved NUREB Nipissing University ethics protocol and Indigenous Initiatives Community and Engagement plan, along with the Manitoulin Anishinabek Research and Review Ethics Committee, I met all the participants online using Zoom technology as we were in the midst of a global pandemic. Following Indigenous protocol, I shared a tobacco tie to signify that I was requesting their help and to show respect for their time and support. I reviewed the participant information letter of intent that had been shared before our meeting to ensure that each participant understood that at any time they could choose not to continue the conversation without any consequences. I shared why I chose this study and what I hoped to learn and explore with them. I also reviewed the questions shared with participants before the meeting. Several participants indicated this advanced sharing helped to think about the questions more deeply.

After consent was confirmed with each participant, I began to share who I was and what had led me to my exploration. This form of sharing my journey honours Indigenous ways of being and doing, known as relationality (Wilson, 2008). I invited participants to share their lived experiences in the field of Indigenous Early Childhood Education. Figure 6 is a visual representation of the conversational interviews that contributed to this chapter. The tobacco ties on the outer circles of birch bark represent each participant and the tobacco ties that were presented and accepted at the outset of this work. Like a talking circle, our conversations were in relation to one another. Though

my participants did not meet together, this chapter will connect their stories of experience. I am represented in the center as the bear medallion, not because I am the center of the study, but to reflect that the conversations flowed through me. At this moment, the birch bark underneath each tobacco tie was intentionally left in its natural state to represent that I entered each conversation without knowing what would come from each participant. The birch bark pieces became quilled medallions inspired by each participant's conversation, akin to the quill box I shared in Chapter Three. Once completed, the medallions were given to the participants as a gift as a form of appreciation. I return to the completed medallions in Chapter Six, where I share my overall understanding of what was said through the whole talking circle format represented here.

Figure 6

Representation of Conversational Methods as a Talking Circle (Manitowabi, 2022)

Note*:* Image designed and photo produced by author

In this chapter, I present the conversations that unfolded. Four questions guided each conversational interview:

1. Please share with me some of your own life experiences within the field of Indigenous Early Childhood Education. What drew you to the field of Early Childhood Education?

2. Please share any moments in your career that caused you to shift the way you thought about Indigenous ECE. Why this shift, and what was happening at that time in the field of ECE?
3. What are some key principles that give life to Indigenous Early Childhood Education?
4. What do you hope for Indigenous Early Childhood Education in the future? What would be different?

These questions also informed the flow of the conversations as presented in this chapter. I begin with an overview of each participant's lived experiences, followed by (a) Moments Causing Shifts in Thinking; (b) Key Principles that Give Life to Indigenous Early Childhood Education; and (c) Hopes for Indigenous Early Childhood Education. I embed direct quotes throughout to capture the natural voice of participants. In keeping with Storywork methodology and principles, I add my dialogue through researcher reflections. These reflections take the form of personalized written letters where I documented my reflective process while engaging with each person's shared responses. Letter writing aided my reflections as a researcher, educator, mother, community member, and extended family member. The following is a portrait of participants through their shared teachings.

For each participant, I also briefly introduce how I have come to know them before expanding their stories. I begin with Ramona. I have known Ramona, both professionally and personally, for several years. I initially heard about her work through various co-workers and educational workshops I attended. I connected with her by text initially and then by phone. She agreed to share her story and ideas with me. Following Ramona's story, we will hear from Kevin, Opii (Sophie), Shannon, Elaine, Jill, and Marie.

A Conversation with Ramona

The way we carry ourselves and treat
each other is how we embed the teachings
within the learning and [is] expressed
in the way we contribute to the

community and each other's well-being. (Ramona)

Ramona is Anishinaabe from Wikwemkoong, Ontario, and has lived in her community and Sudbury, Ontario, over her lifetime. She has been in Indigenous Early Childhood Education for the past 30 years. Ramona has always loved children and finds them fascinating. She is in awe of how much they know and how real they are. "They tell it like it is," she said.

Ramona has carried many roles within Indigenous urban and rural communities, from her early beginnings as a practitioner within her home community of Wikwemikong and the surrounding area. As a consultant, she provided speech and language support in childcare and school settings. She then began a new opportunity with an Early Learning Kindergarten (ELK) program, which was in draft form when she was hired eleven years ago.

Moments Causing Shifts in Thinking

Ramona's new role in ELK contributed to a significant shift in her educational journey. She began to ask big questions, and through these questions she revisited her role as an Indigenous educator within the urban space she now occupies. This journey led Ramona to reclaim her Anishinaabe ways of being and doing (culture) within an urban educational space meaningful to her and her students. With her exploration came more questions about the role of education while "narrowing in on buzzwords that had no deep meaning or understanding." Words like inquiry, Reggio, and play-based learning attributed to her re-examination. She pondered where these words originated, why they came to be, and why they were getting such attention. Digging more deeply into the Reggio Amelia approach offered her the following 'aha' moment:

> I looked at my growth over the first three years. I think it wasn't until my third year that I started to have the confidence in what I was doing, and it was really when I began to understand that this was about culture. This wasn't about Reggio; this wasn't about doing

> Reggio, this wasn't about [well-known school], this wasn't about inquiry, necessarily, this wasn't about play-based, it was about culture.

Ramona further explained a moment when the switch flicked on for her:

> What do we believe as a people? Because if you look at the Reggio programs, they're successful because it's rooted in their own cultural ways of knowing and being. And that's really when that switch flicked [on] for me. It was a whole other ballgame. For me, I had to start thinking about who I am as an educator, as an Indigenous educator? What does that mean? What do I believe? Am I allowed to believe something different than what's in the provincial system and what they believe? So I went through this whole process of, do I fit? . . . Does this space welcome me and what I actually want to bring to this space? And thankfully, my superintendent quite loved this. She really encouraged me to think about what it would mean then if I was going to bring culture into the classroom. And that's kind of where it started for me. . . . I did a lot of teacher inquiry, for myself, for my own practice. I developed my own questions that would drive my own professional learning. That doesn't mean I didn't engage in inquiry with the kids because I still did, but in addition to that, I was engaging in my own inquiry about some of these questions I had about culture, questions I had about language. And so that's kind of how I started on that pathway.

Ramona often asked deep questions about what Indigenous ways of being and doing meant to her and what she believed as an Indigenous educator. She recalled one example of exploring Anishinaabe oral language learning and teaching methods within her ELK program. The question she asked was, "How do children acquire language?" As she began using oral storytelling, Ramona noticed:

> Children would take away their thinking about the characters, and the educators revisited the concept of time. Giving children time to sit with the content and to think about it. We

> embarked on this in a very open-ended way, in a storytelling way, leaving it open for interpretation. That's what children did with it, and they thought about it for long periods of time afterward about, you know, a couple of times the kids would say, you know, [name of child] and I went home last night, and I was thinking about Nanaboozhoo. I think he's a pretty tricky guy. You know I've been thinking about the stuff he does; he's really tricky. So they started to formulate these ideas of what the characters do. The more that we read about Nanaboozhoo and Nanabush, they started to develop their own theories and thinking about him as a person and what people were learning from his actions.

Ramona also noticed her relationships and connections with the children began to shift as she changed the schedule to one that worked for the children. This new routine included large blocks of outdoor play to reconnect to the land by taking the learning outdoors and vice versa. Ramona came to see the importance of connecting with space and place and instilling the teaching that we are all stewards of the land. She also ensures that she provides deeper and more meaningful relationships with herself, children, families, educators, and the land. For Ramona, “The way we carry ourselves and treat each other is how we embed the teachings within the learning and [is] expressed in the way we contribute to the community and each other’s well-being.”

Key Principles that Give Life to Indigenous Early Childhood Education

Ramona believes that children are a gift and deserve the best care and learning environment she can provide, including learning each other's cultural understanding and ways of being. Her beliefs are grounded in Anishinabek teachings, where children are a gift from the Creator, who come into this world with instructions and gifts that make them who they are. Caregivers must nurture these gifts. In Ramona’s words: "My job is to nurture that child, so we can help utilize their gifts, which is

a strength-based approach." She also feels that developing positive identities and self-esteem is important.

Ramona teaches Anishinaabemowin (Ojibway language) and Anishinaabe culture in the learning environment. One example includes "beginning the day with a talking and sharing circle that is purposeful, meaningful and [used] with intention." In her ELK program, she makes a concerted effort to connect the children with the land. She described finding a space with a more natural landscape than the school playground and negotiating with the administration for its use. Going outside the traditional schoolyard had never been done before. With the administration's support, the educators and children are using this space to learn more about Mother Earth and take responsibility for ensuring the land is cared for and respected.

For Ramona, allowing children to reconnect to the land (space) gives them a deeper understanding of how the land they use is home to animals, plants, and visitors. She teaches children to be ambassadors to the land and about the shared roles and responsibilities to the land as caretakers. Most importantly, Ramona believes it is essential to allow children to be themselves and honour the teachings they bring with them from their homes. Being inclusive of others builds a sense of community in an ELK environment.

Hopes for Indigenous Early Childhood Education

Ramona values children and their voices. She feels it is imperative as a practitioner to be reflective, ask questions, and explore what is important as an educator when assuming roles and responsibilities in educating children. Always at the forefront for Ramona are ways to nurture the learning spirit of children. She recognizes educators as the special link between school learning and home environments. Most importantly, Ramona ensures that the child’s N’dow (identity) is embedded within the learning process. Building and maintaining strong relationships and connections

with the child's family and extended family are her hopes for a strong IECE program.

Researcher Reflections

Dear Ramona,

As you shared about learning who you were and who you wanted to be as an Indigenous educator, I began to sense how this personal self-reflection journey reignited your own fire as an Indigenous educator. What I hear from you is that your role and responsibility as an educator was to ensure that the N'dow of the child is nurtured, as are their gifts. And the examples you shared bring these values and principles forward for all children and give life to Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy within an urban classroom setting, which brings life to Anishinaabe ways of being.

I connected with your struggle of what it means to be an Indigenous educator and how to bring ourselves (our culture and perspective) confidently within a multicultural setting. The words you shared from your mentor resonated with me: "sometimes it's easier to explore who we are as a person, as an educator, when we're brushed up against something different." I often felt this way when I began teaching within a community school. I taught the curriculum without thinking about bringing my own values, culture, and beliefs as something that should be core.

My thinking shifted when a principal asked me, "Are you teaching culture in your classroom?" I then asked myself, "What does teaching culture mean from an Indigenous perspective? And what does culture mean within a community?" I explored these questions further in my Master's degree, where I began to transform the way I took my ways of being and doing for granted. As you have highlighted, there is a perspective that we need to bring that is much more relevant to how Anishinaabe culture sees the world.

Miigwetch Nwiijkewen (friend),

Melanie

Next, let's sit with Kevin and listen as he shares his hope and vision for IECE in an urban educational setting. A co-worker suggested Kevin would be a great addition to my study. I reached out by email, and Kevin agreed to share his story with me.

A Conversation with Kevin

You belong, everyone belongs in the circle.
We are all family and extended family and have the feeling like you are not so far away from home, always feel that you are family. (Kevin)

Kevin is Anishinaabe (Ojibway) from Garden River First Nation, Ontario, and has lived both in his community of Garden River and Sault Ste. Marie over his lifetime. He has been in the Indigenous Early Childhood Education (ECE) field for the past 30 years. In his words, "Our children are a gift from our Creator. Children are resilient, smart, and know a lot."

Before becoming an early childhood educator, Kevin was in construction. To receive Employment Insurance (EI) following being laid off, he needed to take some form of upgrading. He enrolled in a post-secondary Social Work program but later switched to ECE. During this time, he was also elected as a council member in his community. He became aware that his community was investing in a childcare centre through this opportunity. He was excited about this venture and took an accelerated ECE program to ensure he could secure employment once it opened. He was hired. Before applying, he never gave much thought to gender inequality and violence against males in the childcare sector. However, it did not take long before a negative backlash arose from hiring males in this profession. For a brief time, he experienced bullying and lateral violence. For Kevin, all that mattered was that his family was proud of him for his new career path.

Over the years, Kevin carried many roles within Indigenous urban and First Nations communities. Out of seven others from Canada, he was the only one with an ECE background. Twenty years ago, he began a new opportunity as the Ontario Aboriginal Head Start Association

(OAHSA) Program Supervisor. At the time, Kevin was familiar with OAHSA as the Chiefs of Ontario had selected him as a representative to sit on the National Committee for the Ontario National Headstart. This committee developed the guidelines and principles for OAHSA. The committee's key question was, “What is culture?” After much discussion, the overall consensus was that the program “wanted children to know who we [as Anishinaabe] are and what we wanted people to know about who we [Anishinaabe] are.”

Following this committee work, OHASA approached Kevin about needing a supervisor. Although this new opportunity was exciting, it was a hard decision for Kevin and a sensitive area to speak about because he loved his work in the community, despite challenges.

Moments Causing Shifts in Thinking

Kevin felt the most significant shift in his educational journey was during his new role with OAHSA. Through his work, he began to reflect on the struggles faced by urban Indigenous families, particularly children in care with Child Protective Services. This experience sparked his journey of reclaiming his Anishinabek ways of being and doing within an urban educational space, which was meaningful to him and the families. Although he had always supported bringing more culture into his practice within previous centres, he felt it was the OAHSA program initiatives that supported culture and language as critical foundational practices. Kevin's program provided a wholistic curriculum, with an impetus for positive growth and development of Aboriginal identity in children and families as the main focus, not an add-on.

Kevin wanted to learn more about how he could better support Aboriginal families and their culture and identity in relation to the historical and intergenerational traumas that many Indigenous peoples have and still experience today. Kevin continued his learning journey. He enrolled in a Social Work degree and later pursued a Master's degree in Social Work.

Kevin contributed what he has come to know and understand:

> The most significant similarity is the struggle. For Indigenous people, it's a struggle around this world. We're struggling, you know, to try to keep our life. And so when I look at our children that are in care, and I look at our families. . . . For me, it was shifting from children to parents. Our children come into the program, and if they have difficulties, it's mainly because their parents are experiencing difficulties.

Kevin has advocated for better support services to keep families together and to become independent, healthy, and whole. Kevin hopes that one day families will no longer need his organization's services because they come to a place of healing and independence. Kevin shared his ultimate goal:

> But for the most part, I think everybody here [OAHSA organization] understands what you're doing here. And the bigger goal is how do we get our families to where they need to be? How do we get our families not to need us? We want to work towards where the children don't need us so that the families don't need us; that's what we want to do. We don't want to be needed. So that's kind of the goal.

For Kevin, the opportunity to work with a new organization and his continual professional and personal development contributed to his passion for supporting families and children in new ways. From these lived experiences, Kevin found his purpose in the field of IECE.

Key Principles that Give Life to Indigenous Early Childhood Education

Kevin used his advocacy position to ensure that every child and family felt they belonged. He accomplished this by building deep relationships and connections that supported and honoured each family's situation. Kevin, like Ramona, believes that children are a gift and deserve the best learning environment and circle of care that he and his staff can provide.

Creating meaningful relationships is important to Kevin and a point of constant reflection. He believes it is crucial to develop relationships with children, families, grandparents, and extended family by knowing their history and needs. He shared that his role and responsibilities are to "Support families, as they are the foundation in their child's lives!" and to “have the power to shift their child’s life.”

It is also important to provide a safe and trusting environment for families to come in and be themselves and share their stories, while at the same time being open, honest, and truthful to the families about the way their children feel. Kevin suggests “setting an example by living a life of respect in all that you do 24/7.” He seeks to “provide opportunities to bond with children, spiritually, physically, mentally, and emotionally.” It is also important for Kevin to “work with allies who support the work that we are doing and as well recognize their effort.” He suggested, “reach out to the child’s family and extended family and build relationships from the start!”

In Anishinabek teachings, building relationships and connections with families from the beginning is essential, as is understanding each family's story (Wilson, 2008). Kevin noticed the link to the children's family was minimal, partly due to children arriving at OHASA by the bus system. The only formal meeting was during registration. Kevin made an effort to have families come in more often. He made personal connections in various ongoing ways so parents could be more involved with what their children were learning within the program.

Hopes for Indigenous Early Childhood Education

Kevin values children, the family, and the extended family's voice. Like Ramona, Kevin nurtures children's N'dow (identity) and sees Anishinaabe Aadzawin (ways of being and knowing) as very important. He hopes that IECE programs lay the foundation for raising strong children. This belief starts by ensuring that children and families are continually supported and can receive

advocacy, if desired, in all areas of their lives. For example, he provides opportunities for practitioners in all fields to learn about Indigenous historical trauma and the impact this has had on Indigenous families and communities. For Kevin, it is imperative to incorporate traditional Indigenous healing techniques that support children based on each stage of life. He recommends: "take them back to where their needs were not being met and walk them through the stages of development."

Researcher Reflections

Dear Kevin,

Throughout your journey, I noticed how you began to learn more about yourself as an Indigenous educator, community member, and advocate. I noticed that having the opportunity to learn from others, such as Elders and Knowledge Keepers, greatly influenced who you are today. As you shared, "this has changed my life."

What I also began to think about was the OAHSA's mandate and how you made the extra effort to reach out and seek out families who were struggling to support them to achieve greater health and well-being. As you shared, the ongoing relationship building does not end there. It is also about developing and making deep connections with families to advocate for what they need. When onboarding staff, you ensure they are a good fit and are aware of the program goals and that the staff support families at a much deeper level.

While listening to your ideas, the importance of educating others on what families need became apparent – where they come from and how we can support them towards a better future. Your words about how we can "use education to educate and be the voice that everyone needs to hear, speak louder and advocate at the table" resonated. You shared what I have also thought about my practice in education, which is to provide all the services you can (circle of care) and be ready to

adapt at all times. For example, during challenging times such as the pandemic, your program had to do things differently and continue to support families, whether that was by bringing food, gift cards, or play materials to engage families throughout. Part of community work is to ensure that families are looked after in any way possible. The pandemic reawakened this role in me and had me thinking and doing things differently in my own practice so we could continue to support families as safe as possible.

Miigwetch Nwiijkewen (friend),

Melanie

Next, let us sit with Sophie and listen as she shares her experience in IECE. Sophie also goes by the name Opii, which she prefers to use when sharing her story. I have known Opii for quite some time as she has been an active community member in Mnidoo-Mnising (Spirit Island). Most recently, we crossed paths as she had supported a variety of Indigenous-led child and family workshops within my community. When I began to recruit participants, I thought of her right away. I shared with her the project scope, and she agreed to participate.

A Conversation with Opii

The birth of the child: They were the gift and had all the gifts
with them when they arrived.
Ensure that children are confident and secure
in who they are, know that they belong,
know that they have a place on this earth and purpose,
whatever their interests are. (Opii)

.

Opii is Anishinaabe from Wikwemkoong, Ontario, and has lived in many places throughout her lifetime. Having worked in Indigenous Early Childhood Education for over ten years, Opii has carried many roles within urban and rural communities. From her early beginnings as a Family Resource Educator, she moved into Child Welfare within her home community of Wikwemikoong

and the surrounding area. Then, she was an Early Learning Educator, providing professional learning to urban early childhood educators, children, and families in Anishinaabe Aadzawin (Ojibway teachings). With each new experience, she began to ask big questions (examples shared below) that led her to revisit her role as an Indigenous educator and how she would contribute to improving child, family, and community wellness.

Moments Causing Shifts in Thinking

Opii found her experience working in child welfare did not fit well with her goals of helping children and their families. She often reflected on her career and felt she was not helping as much as possible. She thought about the colonial underpinning of the Child Welfare Act, and to her it felt that the system focused on a deficit approach. She decided that this first career was no longer for her and that she wanted to work in a career that worked from a strength-based approach. She wanted to explore ways to improve the situations in Indigenous communities. She asked, "How am I contributing to the community or society?"

Opii realized that all that she had learned up until this point contributed to her understanding of the stages of life teaching. She considered her role as an Anishinaabe educator, which led her to confidently take up a new phase of life focused on doing. She expanded:

> Like you, you find yourself in a place. And we evolve and grow as we age. We find ourselves in a new place, and then we've already put it out there that we're looking for our purpose, to contribute to the community. We've already been young adults and parents, and then what's next? And that would be in alignment with some of our stages of life teachings, when you enter the doing years. So I feel like I'm at that stage where I need to; I need to be doing and contributing to the community in the best way that I can, based on my own gifts. And so, my entry or experience with early childhood education is a relationship between myself and

> educators more. I found myself being an educator. And then I found that that tied it all back into my clanship and part of my identity.

Opii began to recognize her purpose as an educator within the field of ECE:

> So my name is actually Niigaanii Bneshiinh. Niigaanii Bneshiinh, which is the leading bird, and our clans let our clan lead other birds. We might know that as mgize or the eagle clan as a leader, but my family doesn't say eagle clan; they say Bneshiinh doodem. So, in that capacity, we're always learning over time. I started learning more about clanship roles, identity characteristics, and one of the expectations or obligations under that clanship is being an educator. Listening to my family, my Auntie used to say, "you should be a teacher; you'd be a great teacher." But I couldn't imagine myself in that classroom, like in a conventional way of thinking of being an educator. I didn't really pay much attention to . . . [I'd] . . . shake my head and say, Yeah, no, no, no, I'm not a teacher. I couldn't be in a classroom. She [my aunt] is an elementary school teacher; she just retired. But she saw something in me that did say that I'm a teacher.

Within the field of education, Opii's purpose turned into action:

> And so you know, just moving along in life, in my journey, I find myself in situations or opportunities to educate and on a variety of topics all having to do with Anishinaabe Aadzawin or Anishinaabe N'dow. I need to be able to share those back.

Opii often asked questions about how she would incorporate Indigenous learning in a meaningful way:

> How do I want to be able to influence educators who will influence children? And secondly, how do I want to best equip or share information and stories around Anishinaabe aadzawin (Ojibway teachings), or ways of being and doing and living that will influence children and

> hopefully give them a better understanding in their journey? It's like, how is this all apart? How are my daily actions? I say this to my own children, and I say this if I'm in a program with other young children. And you know, I've been able to witness and experience that – how is this all a part and how are my daily actions.

Below is an example of when Opii brought these questions to fruition in the Early Years programs that she led:

> For example, the child I was working with used the word "karma," but it was a really interesting situation of playing. And we all shared about being safe, considerate of others; we went through all these rules. . . . So we're making wands. And I was talking about how we should have good thoughts and good wishes. But this one boy, he's kind of a jokester, and he's like, "Oh, I'm going to cast spells." He's being kind of hurtful. And I said, "Oh, the Creator, the universe is always watching and talking about, you know, our energy and our actions."

As the children played with their magic wands during the day:

> ... he came up, and he's like, “Sophie Pheasant, Sophie Pheasant,” calls me my full name. . . . “My wand broke.” . . . He's real concerned. . . . He must have seen my face right away. Then he starts shaking. He's like, “No, no, no,” because he knew I was referring to what we talked about; he was the only one running around wanting to cast bad spells. . . . From a young age, if you start to understand or experience that, whatever your actions and thoughts that you put out, these are what come back. I'm hoping he learned from that day. But you never know. Maybe it takes a few lessons.

The example Opii offered is a non-threatening way for children to think about how their actions can affect others and themselves. It is up to the child to reflect on and learn from their actions. The student then comes away with their lessons learned. As Opii mentioned, this may take several times,

and that's okay within Anishinaabe aadzawin.

Key Principles that Give Life to Indigenous Early Childhood Education

Opii lives by and imparts in her work the principles of Kina Gegoo Bimmadzigak. In her words:

> Kina Gegoo Bimmadzigak is about all of creation . . . a fundamental principle is how do we give life to that? How do we receive life from that? How do we honour the concept of all of creation? And how do we have our children influenced and have that understanding about all of creation? And knowing about the interconnectedness between every element around us; sky, earth, water, minerals, animals, insects, everything?
>
> ... how do we have a harmonious relationship among all of that? And once we have this big picture, or for me, once I have this big picture and understanding, how do I start finding little ways to incorporate that into daily living or my interactions with my children or with children in the community? How do I bring that understanding if it's just a simple passing of me and maybe a couple of young children somewhere? How do I always honour and acknowledge Kina Gegoo Bimaadzigak [all of creation]? and how we contribute to that, how we exist in that? I feel through oppressive measures and policies and such, we've been minimized; we've been reduced to our little plot of land. Everything has been shrunk or decompartmentalized. But if we start to reactivate that understanding of oneness, the vastness?

Through Opii's self-reflection about learning, she described Anishinaabe aadzawin as being *in relation* with all of creation. She demonstrated this throughout her life teachings and experiences as she discovered who she was and wanted to be as an Indigenous educator. For Opii, interconnectedness is a key principle to live by as an IECE.

Hopes for Indigenous Early Childhood Education

Opii, too, shared Anishinaabe Aadzawin and how she upholds these teachings in her life. Her hopes for children in IECE programming include honouring N'dow (identity) and bringing in stories of Indigenous history. For Opii, building strong relationships and connections with children, families, community, and within Creation is important. Opii hopes that IECE programs provide opportunities for O'zhigan (creating). Opii explains the emphasis on "o" in the word O'zhigan "means as it formulates or brings life into that process of creating and making something." For Opii, "O'zhigan allows one to connect with mind, heart, and spirit to ancestral knowledge, and it is our hands that are translating that energy."

Researcher Reflections

Dear Opii,

Miigwetch for sharing how you honour your gifts and clanship responsibilities, becoming what your auntie had seen in you, long before you did, which was an educator. The sharing of your shift in career choice seems to have engaged you in the bigger picture of what you hope to achieve within well-being, not only for yourself, but the children, families, communities, and nation.

The story you shared of your doodem reminded me of an article of an Anishinaabe kwe in the late 1800s who used her quilling art as a form of literacy, such as one would have used in petroglyphs in historical times.

What struck me most was the image of the heart that this Anishinaabe kwe had designed on a birch bark book cover she had made for her brother's book. It had been interpreted as not a symbol of love but of "de"(heart), which is in the word doodem (meaning clan). I see connections between my quill box methodology and the references you made to the importance of knowing one's clan. Clanship was mentioned by other participants as well; I just find that this is so interconnected to the

idea of innovation of sharing who one is through their literary art, and by learning more about what this means and how powerful it can be as a tool for remembering. I will think more about this connection!

Miigwetch Nwiijkewenyik (friend),

Melanie

Next, we hear from Shannon. I met Shannon at a First Nations supervisor network meeting. During her presentation, I was intrigued by her work for the Indigenous Centre of Excellence and wanted to learn more, as it aligned with my research inquiry. I reached out by email, and she agreed to participate. Let us now listen to Shannon's story in IECE.

A Conversation with Shannon

Build kinship with each other and our teachings.
The teachings are lessons we learn over a lifetime
through the experiences that we go through,
which make us who we are today. (Shannon)

Shannon is Haudenosaunee from Six Nations, Ontario, and has lived in Niagara Falls over her lifetime. She has been in Indigenous Early Childhood Education for over 20 years. There was a time in Shannon's life when she felt disconnected from her culture and identity. She learned young that her identity was something to hide, but an opportunity during her educational pursuits changed her life. She has now come full circle in her journey of coming to know.

This life-changing moment began when a professor asked Shannon if she wanted to do a field placement at the Ontario Aboriginal Head Start Association (OAHSA). Initially, Shannon did not think much of the opportunity, but from that moment on, she began to see how "education can have power." This experience was her first exposure to her traditions, one being smudging (a ceremony that cleanses one's body, heart, and spirit using sage, sweetgrass, cedar, and tobacco). Here is Shannon's reflection on Endaaying (coming home):

> I went to Mohawk College to get my ECE. . . . And when we started to do placements, one of the professors must have seen on my paperwork that I had Native status. And so they said, "how about we link you to the OAHSA Headstart," and I was just like, "Sure. I was like, oh whatever; there was no connection, there was nothing. It meant nothing to me." And – I will never forget. So my first day, I showed up to the Head Start, and they were doing their circle time, and they were doing their morning smudge. And I remember being so nervous because I didn't know what to do, like any of that. I was watching these two and a half-year-olds, three-year-olds, and four-year-olds and going to copy them, so that's who I was learning from. And then, when the medicines came to me, I remember being so overwhelmed with emotion, and it scared me. I didn't know what that was. What I know now, it was an awakening. It was a connection. It was coming home.

Over the years, Shannon had many roles within Indigenous urban and rural communities, from her early beginnings as a practitioner within her community and then as a consultant providing professional learning development for childcare settings. Through her past roles working within Urban Indigenous programs, she brought Indigenous teachings to an Indigenous Early Childhood context.

Moments Causing Shifts in Thinking

The most significant shift in her educational journey occurred when Shannon reconnected with Elders and Knowledge Keepers at OAHSA. They helped her let go of the challenges and adversities she had faced growing up not connected to her Indigenous identity and traditions.

As already mentioned, Shannon’s experience at OAHSA sparked her journey of reclaiming her sense of self and identity. She often asked reflective questions about what identity meant and what she believed. Shannon faced challenges such as cultural policing (the act of someone

questioning how you express your Indigenous ways). However, this did not stop her from moving forward and being true to who she was. She accomplished this by building more profound and meaningful relationships with herself, children, families, educators, land, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers. Elders and Knowledge Keepers took her under their wings and supported her in finding her voice and learning more about Indigenous ways of being and doing.

Shannon initially built deep relationships and connections with children in her educator role before considering supporting the whole family. For Shannon, this became the start of another more profound shift in her learning journey, as "her journey became everyone's journey." Her responsibilities went beyond supporting children and included women, men, and youth through various existing programs and new programs that she helped develop within the community. Through this work, she began to realize, "when you go to our roots of offering the sense of community and taking care of one another . . . you can have a bigger impact on the healing and growth of individuals."

Shannon noticed the children who previously attended Indigenous-led centres would express their need to reconnect to their teachings as a way forward, and she listened. Shannon reflected:

> When we hold true to our practices and ways of being, this is the stuff that comes through . . . . Lift up our communities through mentorship and empowerment. People have those embers going, and we have to go in and start to fan those fires to make them stronger and remind them of that community responsibility. In essence, coming home to find your pathway to healing.

Through her questions of what all of this meant to her identity and what she believed, Shannon began to explore the many possibilities of learning through an Indigenous lens. Reconnecting with traditions and ceremonies not only supported Shannon in her journey, but she could also see how this

impacted the lives of the children who had access to a wholistic education, a fundamental foundation of Anishinaabe ways of being.

Key Principles that Give Life to Indigenous Early Childhood Education

Like many of her stories, Shannon felt hesitant when approached for this new opportunity to work with the youth. She did not think that this area was her strength and, reflecting on her teenage years, she thought of the challenges she would face. This experience, however, added to her learning bundle. She worked and learned from and with the youth, some of whom were her previous students at OAHSA. Shannon reflected:

> My youth were the two-year-olds and the babies that I had seen born from the early years centre. But now they were coming and they were part of the Friendship Centre. And they were so proud to be native; they had gotten their spirit names, or went by their spirit names; others were seeking that [identity]. One youth that was engaging in gang activity, and just this tough, tough person, brought me a Christmas ornament that I had made for him when he was like four. And he was like, "I still put it on the Christmas tree."

For Shannon, she began to recognize the impact she had on the younger children and the importance of connections and building relationships. For the young child above, he held onto the gift Shannon gave him, sharing how special this was to him.

She saw how the programs offered by OAHSA lit a fire within the children. As they left the program, they returned asking for the embers inside to be fanned - a metaphor for wanting to learn more about themselves and their Indigenous ways of knowing:

> Those youth started asking for ceremony, and ceremony wasn't something I was engaging in because I was kind of fearful and stuff. But they were asking for it. And I was like, "Okay, I will do this." I started working with an Elder. We needed somewhere that they are going to be

> accepting of the youth, and that they understand harm reduction. I didn't want them shamed or guilted because they were asking for these things.

Shannon understood the historical trauma of the Anishinaabe people and was mindful to ensure that when the youth were reaching out, they were being met with respect and kindness to feel that they were in a safe space. Shannon continued:

> So another opportunity to work at [name of organization] came up and I thought, well, I've seen youth, I've seen what it looks like when they have that early start of having access to culture and language and what that could look like. I don't know where the time went, that I got to witness that, but I also then saw men and women, when that [Ceremony] wasn't offered, and what that looked like for them, and how I was helping them when they were 40, 50, and 60. So I was like, you know what, I'm going to try.

Providing access and space for traditional ceremony practices comes through in much of the work Shannon has coordinated; beyond coordinating, she revealed that ceremony also became part of her life.

Shannon recalled a time they were searching for a name for their youth housing project. She was nudged to ask for the building's name in ceremony but felt hesitant; she did not feel ready. After visiting a youth program out West, and after a dream, she decided that asking for the name in Ceremony was heading in the right direction:

> I went out West to look at other Indigenous youth programs to see what they were doing. And it was in that moment, when I realized, this is what I'm fasting for, it is for the youth, for this housing [project], and so that I can ensure the right people come forward to do this work. So there I was, fasting. . . . I dreamed of a lodge being outside the door, and I would wake up with part of a song. And I remember that I knew the song, but I could not find the words for

> it. And when I sat down with the Elder to receive our name, they said to me, they're like, "Well, you know this song." He's like, "Remember; you used to sing this back at OAHSA." And he's like, "and that's the name I have for you." Which was Endaayaang. And as soon as he said it, I knew the whole song. But I didn't realize that Endaayaang…because, again, where I was in my journey, I didn't realize that it was a song about welcoming home, like coming home and coming to a safe place. And when they said that name and when they broke it down, like the root of endaayaang [home] is like, where the heart is, it's the center, I was like, "Wow." I put it back to these things that happen; when you are grounded in Ceremony, when we hold true to our ways in our practices, this is the stuff that comes.

Hopes for Indigenous Early Childhood Education

Shannon's story of experiences embeds hope and thinking about how programs for the community can be different and her willingness to be that change she wished to see. Shannon elaborated:

> From the beginning, [IECE] grounded in our principles, grounded in our culture, and our ceremonies. Culture isn't a lesson plan or, you know, a calendar date, but the values are embedded throughout everything. So I think that's the thing, but that means the whole aspect, like how are you including community? How are you consulting with the elders? How are you ensuring that the family members are part of that circle, not separate?

Having come full circle, Shannon's vision for IECE radiated throughout our conversation, and her hope for the integration of Indigenous Knowledge and pedagogies within the early years provides a way forward within IECE. Reflecting on her roles and responsibilities as an auntie, Shannon pondered "the input we have in those who cross our paths" within the field of IECE and beyond. Shannon's fundamental principles within IECE include the reawakening of N'dow (identity) and

Anishinaabe Aadzawin (teachings). For Shannon, this means “coming to live and walk our principles and values through our teachings.”

Researcher Reflections

Dear Shannon,

To hear that your “journey became everyone’s journey” is so telling about how the stages of life are interconnected. I am noticing this interconnection with other participants as well. When you shared about the naming of the youth centre, Endaayaang [home is where the heart is], I began to think about the symbol of a heart in relation to connecting to who you are. Opii reminded me of this as well when sharing about her doodem. I, too, have been on a journey that has come full circle. As I shared with you, I started my career in the ECE field and after a couple of decades of ongoing learning and work opportunities within the field of education, I returned to IECE with a much different outlook and a perspective that came from these experiences. I also connected to your story of Endaayang as I believe that the childcare centres are places that feel like a home away from home. I appreciate learning about how IECE has shifted in the work you are doing and continues to evolve.

Miigwetch Nwiijkewenyik (friend),

Melanie

The conversation continues with Elaine as we sit and learn about her experiences in the field of early learning. I met Elaine through various professional learning opportunities as educators. I also had an opportunity to visit her Immersion school when I was a School Success Support Educator. As I began to think about potential participants, I recalled the work Elaine had been doing. I shared the information about my study, and she agreed to participate. Let's sit with Elaine’s story.

A Conversation with Elaine

The hope is to produce speakers and be
proud of their Anishinaabe roots.
Kendan wii Giigdiiyin, Giigidan wii Kendman
(Learn to Speak and Speak to Learn). (Elaine)

Elaine is an Anishinaabe Kwe from M'Chigeeng, Ontario, and has lived there for most of her lifetime. She has been in Indigenous Education for the past 21 years, with the last ten years specific to Indigenous Early Childhood Education. Her passion is to pass on the Anishinaabemowin language to the next generation. For the past eight years, Elaine has taught in an Anishinaabemowin (Ojibway) Immersion Program. She started with a cohort in junior kindergarten and has continued to follow the same students through each grade. She has taught multiple grades but finds she can use her language more with younger children as they are "like sponges for learning Anishinaabemowin" and, at the same time, "they are so forgiving."

Moments Causing Shifts in Thinking

For Elaine, the Immersion in IK program supported her journey of revitalizing the Anishinaabemowin language with the next generation. This new role also marked Elaine's most significant shift in her teaching career. Through her passion for sharing her language, she had the opportunity to learn a new way of teaching through various approaches. It was more than what mainstream education had to offer. Elaine began to realize that the traditional classroom was no longer for her, explaining:

> I have been a regular classroom teacher for the past 21 years and I will never go back to teaching a prescribed unit or lesson that does not draw upon a child's natural curiosity.

> The children are relaxed and comfortable, just like being at home. I have seen very few behaviours, and I believe that is because they are stress-free, have no restrictions as to where they can visit a learning space, and that time at a studio is unlimited.

Reflecting on the program, Elaine considered why it was so important to her and the children:

> I was fortunate to be a part of the pilot project in 2013. It was to support the restoration of Anishinaabemowin. It is well known that our language is in a critical state. So the project was to attempt to restore language to our children. We incorporated the Seven Grandfather Teachings as a focus on nurturing the children and how we view them as strong, powerful, and very rich in their potential. And we strive for the mino-bimaadiziwin, which means the good life, being the steward of Shkagamik-kwe [Mother Earth]. That's where my different style of teaching began, in the Immersion program, not so much so in the regular classrooms. But that's where it kind of sparked.

Within a new program, new space, and using a new curriculum, Elaine began to shift her way of teaching, becoming excited about what an Indigenous Education framework allowed. She ensured that Anishinaabe teachings were the foundation of the IK program. The kindergarten curriculum expectations complemented what the program set out to do: impart traditional knowledge, pedagogies, and language learning to a new generation of Anishinaabe. Elaine felt that passing on the Anishinaabemowin language was an important role she wanted to take on.

Key Principles that Give Life to Indigenous Early Childhood Education

Elaine was mindful of the past negative history education had on Indigenous children. She shares ways of passing on knowledge that is critical to Anishinabek education.

Elaine encourages using the Anishinaabemowin language and culture within the learning environment to nurture N’dow (identity). She respects and accepts each child as unique and special

and keeps the teaching of respect at the forefront: “it is one of our teachings to model within our ways of being.” She seeks to create a sense of belonging by being in relation with the whole child and drawing on their natural curiosity. She also believes, “Our learning environments should be relaxed, comfortable and non-threatening, and that children are our natural teachers.” Elaine provides opportunities for land-based, experiential, inquiry-based learning through invitations and provocations that allow children to have opportunities to explore learning at their own pace and interests.

Hopes for Indigenous Early Childhood Education

Elaine feels strongly about her responsibility to share the Anishinaabemowin language with the next generation of children. As she put it, “We need to produce more speakers.” Elaine believes that the Anishinaabemowin language is essential and is at a critical state; therefore, using the language as much as possible is vital. Bringing back the Anishinaabemowin language in school is a way forward through immersion. Elaine’s thoughts on language revitalization are as follows:

> The use of language by educators reinforces the children to hear the conversations. Language acquisition is when you take an effective teaching practice using body language, gestures, tones, visual aids, songs, repetition, stories, and acting. Eventually, the children chime in when they are ready. It is a magical moment when the child asks for either a drink of water or to use the washroom. The hope is to produce speakers and be proud of their Anishinaabe roots. “Kendan wii Giigdiiyin, Giigidan wii Kendman (Learn to Speak and Speak to Learn)”.

For this to occur, Elaine offers:

> It’s all about rethinking, restructuring the current program to the future program; to change my way of thinking in a number of ways, to the materials we use, to the classroom structure;

to realize what our children are capable of, and my role to help children realize their potential, and how will I help parents understand the value of play.

For Elaine, pedagogies of learning the language in her program include "learning through listening, learning by observing, and learning while doing." Much of her day is spent outdoors, as land-based learning naturally embeds language and cultural understanding.

Researcher's Reflections

Dear Elaine,

Miigwetch for sharing your passion of teaching Anishinaabemowin with me. Much of what you have shared speaks to the importance of passing on Indigenous knowledge and imparting the Anishinaabemowin language on to the next generation. We talked about mino-bimaadiziwin (living a good life) as the goal for Anishinabek, and this is something I hear often in Anishinaabe circles. I also hear the ways you are striving and hoping for a sustainable future that is founded on Anishinabek traditions that will have a positive impact not only for Anishinabek, but for all who call Shkagamik-kwe (Mother Earth) home. After taking some time to reflect on your contribution to IECE through an Immersion program, I began to sense what it feels like to exercise autonomy within IECE, by providing an immersion language program and a curriculum that works with the interests of the child. For me this gives hope and inspires the change we wish to see within Indigenous education.

Miigwetch Nwiijkewenyik (friend),

Melanie

The conversation continues with Jill. I met Jill informally through a professional learning network for supervisors. I thought of her when I began my study because of her many years within IECE. I noticed the learning opportunities she shared in this network aligned with my research questions. I reached out by email, and after sharing my goals with her, she agreed to be a part of my study. Let us sit with her reflections on working within IECE.

A Conversation with Jill

It is important to learn from communities
and recognize what childcare centres have to offer, and
listen to the community's challenges and successes. (Jill)

Jill is from Northwestern Ontario and has lived there all her life. She has worked in Early Childhood Education for 25 years, with the past 17 years being in Indigenous Early Childhood Education. Her first experience with childcare was caring for her younger sister. This experience sparked her interest in learning more about early childhood care. She entered an ECE diploma program, after which she worked in a mainstream urban childcare centre for many years as an educator and then moved to a supervisor role. After many years in a supervisor role, she moved to a First Nations-led childcare organization, supporting FN communities with their early learning programs. Jill's ELC position reconnected her with the community and gave her a sense of connection and advocacy for what matters within IECE. In this role, she noticed an emphasis on school readiness and getting ready for kindergarten. She had many requests for a ready-made curriculum to support skill development in preparation for school.

At the same time, she noticed a change in ECE with the introduction of How Does Learning Happen (2014), a new early years framework. These changes opened up spaces for communities to take the lead as to where they wanted to go with early learning and, in doing so, moved the focus away from thinking solely about school readiness and success.

Moments Causing Shifts in Thinking

Jill's move from a mainstream urban to an Indigenous-led program shifted her thinking about what the next generation of educators should know when providing early childhood care. A big part of her role was to promote ways to move towards Indigenous ways of being and doing by utilizing the place and space of the community to encourage meaningful programs for children.

Jill found the new curriculum (How Does Learning Happen, 2014) was a positive way forward within ECE because centres could base their direction on community strengths and recognize that children are competent. Jill encouraged and promoted onboarding Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and community members as part of their staff. She has continued to notice similar shifts in childcare practices throughout her visits, especially in the northern communities. Examples include traditional methods of caring for children, such as traditional infant swings (ropes anchored to the ceiling with a blanket) and Tikinaagans (cradle boards) in the sleep room.

Jill felt connected to the northern communities she visited. Although she grew up in an urban setting, her mother and grandmother had been raised within their FN community. Her grandmother had shared the gifts of beading and language with her, a memory she holds dear. She reminisced, "Experiencing visiting remote communities feels like home." Jill continued:

> And I'm telling you, every time I land, it's like, I feel like I'm coming home. You know, it's just that feeling that you get from being, you know, out in the wilderness. You know, you've been dropped off. My mother grew up in a fly-in community. When my youngest sister was of school age, she used to take her to visit her parents. So I've been to my mother's community a couple of times. Now that she's elderly, she can't go. She still stays in connection. And I grew up with my dad's parents. . . . My grandmother came from a First Nations community in Manitoba. And my grandmother excelled in beadwork...Well, that was her business. She would make deer hide coats moose hide jackets, and they'd [the jackets] would be filled with beadwork.

For Jill, the change in her role was significant in her professional and personal growth as an Indigenous educator. This idea of returning home was also shared by other participants as a reawakening of their spirit.

Key Principles that Give Life to Indigenous Early Childhood Education

For Jill, building relationships is essential, from reaching out to families, getting to know them, and supporting them to meet their needs. As a supervisor in an urban community, she would reach out to parents and share information about the program. She would help them fill out paperwork for registration and connect the families with transportation when needed. She finds it essential to learn from families about their interests and how to incorporate these interests into the class. An example is the importance of listening and acknowledging when families share their gifts. Jill shared the following story:

> I had one grandparent who taught me . . . she and her grandchild had collected birch bark on the trail they used, so she handed me a bundle of sticks. . . . And she said, "Here, you can use this during your circle today; talk about this." Even though I wasn't in an Indigenous childcare center, I still had these connections, people bringing me their gifts. That was always nice. So when I did leave the urban childcare center, as a supervisor, I moved into this role of supporting First Nations childcare centres. That's when I started to see all that the communities had to offer and their challenges as well as successes. I've built a lot of great relationships with the supervisors all across our region, and I'm still learning from them and their staff.

For Jill, it is essential to learn from communities, recognize what childcare centres offer, and listen to the communities' challenges and successes. Jill deems it necessary to advocate and connect with provincial advisors and supervisors, to learn from each other and understand the challenges faced within FN communities and why. It is also vital to provide networks and support to childcare centres by providing a place to share examples of practice with others to build community. For example,

childcare cooks, resource educators, and educator networks can share and exchange their knowledge. This knowledge sharing allows centres to feel supported and to grow in practice.

Providing the Indigenous-led resources they require is important to give the families as much support as possible. For example, there are services in the community led by Indigenous agencies with FN specialists on staff. Connecting families with agencies and specialists who understand their history and speak their Anishinaabe language is one way to break down systemic barriers. These barriers can impact access to services. Jill seeks to nurture a positive identity in IECE.

Hopes for Indigenous Early Childhood Education

Jill has much experience and knowledge in early childhood education, both from mainstream and Indigenous perspectives. For her, it is important to use Indigenous languages, circles of care, and traditions meaningful to the community as a regular part of programming, rather than as an add-on. She views extended family and grandparents are an essential link to IECE programs. Jill shares what she hopes for IECE:

> I'd also like to see elders in the centre for the full day, not just inviting them in for a 20-minute circle. I think elders should be part of the staff, an honorary staff member that comes into the centre every day and builds relationships with the children and the staff. It would be great to see. . . . Maybe it is a couple of elders that rotate or take turns . . . Like years ago, you know, that's who was doing the caretaking, the grandparents. I'm sure they still are. . . . Definitely, connecting with the land is something that is happening more and more often. So, I think, if we continue in that direction, then, you know, that brings so much to an ECE childcare program.

Jill hopes to bring back the connections of family and community resources to place Indigenous knowledge at the forefront rather than as an add-on to a program.

Researcher's Reflections

Dear Jill,

As I listened to your reflections and hope for IECE, I could not help but reflect on my own connection with my grandmother, the teaching of Grandmother Moon, and the important roles they both have in Anishinaabe society. The role and relationship grandmothers had with their grandchildren was and still is an important part of passing on knowledge (Anderson, 2012). Children were often raised by or were helped to be raised by their grandparents for a variety of reasons, and this is a natural way of passing on knowledge and skills through informal and formal observations (Anderson, 2012; Simpson, 2011). Oftentimes, I have heard stories in past community presentations that older children were sent to live with their grandparents to help them, yet it was often the grandparents who were helping the youth.

I am reminded of Basil Johnston's (1995) words:

> Long ago, before there were schools, parents taught their children the practical skills needed for survival. But the burden of passing on most other knowledge, such as customs, insights, understandings, and values, fell the most part to old women, grandmothers, and the few old men who had survived into old age. Perhaps it is for this reason that N'okomis, or N'oko for short, is cast as the chief storyteller in many, if not most, of the Anishinaubae stories. (p. 171)

Reflecting back to my graduate summer courses, I had been thinking about the link between Anishinaabe teachings and the importance of deep listening. I realized that teachings come back to us when we are ready for them, and maybe after hearing them again. This happened to me after attending an off-campus paint social. During the event we painted a picture of the moon in Figure 7, and its reflection in the water captivated my thoughts on the importance of Grandmothers and the wisdom they carry and pass on. For me, writing a poem is something I have not always felt

comfortable with doing. However, the conversation returned me to this particular moment in time, as you shared the passing on of knowledge of grandparents (mothers) within programming.

Figure 7

Grandmother Moon Painting with Poem (Manitowabi, 2019)

Note: Image designed and photo produced by author

Looking forward, Looking Back, Looking Forward

The sky in the night is peaceful to me,
It is mysterious but a magical sight to see.
I am reminded that I am never alone and that Grandmother moon awaits me.
I wonder how many others have looked up toward the sky before me, and I wonder what did they see?
I look back, but I also look forward, and I am in awe of all life's great beauty, under the starry sky.
I embrace my world today, and will ensure that I leave her well for those after me.
And I wonder, what might they see?

Miigwetch Nwiijkewenyik (friend),

Melanie

Next, I met Marie through the work we had been doing in IECE. I reached out to her to share the details of the study, and she agreed to share her experiences. Join me in sitting with Marie as she shares her story and journey in the field of IECE.

A Conversation with Marie

If it's going to be different, and if we're going to teach
educators about Indigenous ECE, it has to be deeper than that.
It has to have more of a spiritual meaning
if we want people to connect with children's identity. (Marie)

Marie (pseudonym) is Anishinaabe from Toronto, Ontario. She has lived in her new community on Manitoulin Island for the past ten years. Marie has been in the field of Indigenous Education for 25 years. Her passion for early childhood education has been with her since she can remember.

Marie has worked in the ECE sector, running day camps in high school, where she connected with children. She found this to be a way to rekindle her childhood, as she had grown up fast and did not have the time to enjoy it. After working within the early childhood sector as a support staff educator, she took up an opportunity to enroll in an Indigenous ECE program, which allowed her to continue working while attending school and attaining her degree.

Marie worked in several sectors that supported children and families who required specialized services on their educational journeys. She then took an Indigenous Early Learning Coordinator role for Urban Indigenous Childcare Centres. She provided culturally relevant programs for families and professional learning for educators within the field. In addition, this program supported professional learning opportunities for educators to learn about the Anishinaabe ways of being of those who live within the territory. Recently, Marie has also been teaching courses in Indigenous ECE at an Indigenous-led post-secondary institute.

Moments Causing Shifts in Thinking

A significant shift in Marie's learning journey occurred when she began teaching in an Indigenous-led Early Childhood Education College program focused on Anishinaabe perspectives. The program focused on IK and IP about what the next generation of educators should consider when providing early childhood care to Indigenous children. It included language, traditions, identity, and culture and the use of the HDLH (2014) framework. Marie recalled: "It was important for me to share all that I learned with my students for them to learn as much as they can." Through her teaching, Marie noticed the four quadrants within the HDLH (2014) framework – belonging, engagement, well-being, and expression – aligned with the four quadrants of the medicine wheel – physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. Within the medicine wheel, to live in mino-bimaadiziwin (the good life), one needs to be balanced in each of the quadrants of one's life. Elaine also shared this idea. Other participants did not use the same term but spoke of a similar concept.

As she reflected, the program Marie was teaching was much more meaningful than the program she had taken as a student. The significance of this shift brought excitement to Marie’s face as she considered how she had come to think more deeply about what teaching to the child's spirit means.

The opportunity to educate pre-service educators allowed Marie to advocate for what she has come to know as important for IECE. Rather than just using checklists (a form of mainstream assessments of child development), she felt a much deeper understanding about building relationships with the child and their spirit. For her, it was about the importance of the philosophy of reconnecting and reclaiming the teaching of “children as a gift from the Creator.” In Marie's words:

> It was when I sat down [planning course work], I was thinking, "If it's going to be different, and if we're going to teach educators about Indigenous ECE, it has to be deeper than that. It

> has to have more of a spiritual meaning if we want people to connect with children's identity." And especially with what's going on in the world now, with everything that's happening [residential school investigations of unmarked graves and TRC report]. Education with Indigenous kids can't continue the way that it was typically. It can't be that way. It's going to have to be different.

For Marie, her reflection on how the curriculum would be different speaks to the historical traumas faced by Indigenous people. She envisions a move from a previously negative dominant narrative toward one that is culturally responsive to the current context within IECE to be relevant to the needs of communities today.

Key Principles that Give Life to Indigenous Early Childhood Education

As part of her work, Marie makes space for reconnecting with Anishinaabe spirituality and traditions within an urban setting. She supports the mandate of her program to be culturally responsive and competent. She includes Anishinaabe ways of knowing in many ways. The inclusion of all families, educators, and communities within programming is a key principle in her programs that reflects relationality and develops an understanding of the medicine wheel teaching that we all belong in the circle. Marie believes it is important to go beyond thinking about deficits in children and families. Marie seeks to “learn about each child and their spark.” She feels responsible for supporting children in their learning journeys in any way she can.

Hopes for Indigenous Early Childhood Education

Marie always wants the best for the children and respects each child’s spirit as an essential aspect of her career. Marie feels strongly about her responsibility to share her experiences with pre-service educators. For her, this is an opportunity to share what Anishinaabe education hopes could be for the next generations of Anishinaabe children. Marie’s hopes for IECE include:

> I'd say more language, full immersion, and more Indigenous early on centres or daycares. More programs like the one that we currently are offering, with an Indigenous focus. ECE program where the language component is strong, and the cultural part is strong, and more inclusive of family members and extended family members.

For Marie, her shift in thinking about IECE is intricately linked to the principles and hopes she shared for a culturally responsive program that values the culture and identity of Anishinaabe.

Researcher's Reflections

Dear Marie,

The hopes you shared for IECE echo what I have heard from many Indigenous circles I have been in: the hope for language revitalization, strong identity formation, and that each child is nurtured within their gifts. These are reflections of the current state of Anishinaabe ways of being and doing that have been disrupted throughout time. It seemed that for you and the ECE program, the shift to rethinking how learning happens allowed for you to revisit the image of the child and think about what was important from an IECE perspective.

The connection you made between HDLH (2014) and the four quadrants of the medicine wheel speaks to a teaching that has been shared to me in many ways. I, too, have learned a great deal from my teachers about the importance of balance for well-being. As an early childhood educator, I now continually ask myself these questions when working with HDLH (2014):

1. *How does learning happen within the four quadrants?*
2. *Are centres balanced in these quadrants?*
3. *What does that look like and feel like from the child, family, and educator perspectives?*

When sharing the HDLH document with staff and pre-service educators from Indigenous communities, I have found it can initially be difficult to understand the document from a western

perspective. But I also have noticed that when explored from an Indigenous standpoint, such as through the wholistic medicine wheel with the four quadrants, educators began to connect with it in relation to their own ways of being. Once they were able to look at the document through an Indigenous lens, the educators and I were able to see how this reflects our own Anishinaabe teachings. As you have reminded me, when working with pre-service and in-service educators, discussions of Indigenous early years pedagogy can begin with what educators already know and wish to see differently within their own childcare practice and their centres.

Miigwetch Nwiijkewenyik (friend),

Melanie

Looking Across Stories

Indigenous people are also moving beyond
critiques to address the healing and wellness of themselves
and their communities to reshape their contexts
and affect their situations, and to create reforms based on a complex
arrangement of conscientization, resistance, and transformative action.
(Battiste, 2013 p. 69)

As I sat with the participants and listened to the stories of their lived experiences, I felt fortunate to have this opportunity to share and learn from each other. Each educator provided examples of key or aha moments that caused shifts in thinking within Indigenous Early Childhood Education (IECE). They considered the following ways forward in early learning as Indigenous educators:

- integrate land-based learning
- provide support for learners, families, and educators
- embed the Anishinaabe language and culture within the learning environment and curriculum
- learn from and through Indigenous knowledge and teachings

- build partnerships within the community
- provide mental health resources and access to culturally relevant services
- provide respectful spaces and places that nurture healthy relationships and well-being
- provide opportunities to learn the history of Indigenous people to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants and community partners
- understand and learn about trauma-informed care
- nurture a positive identity

These ways forward highlight educators' concerted efforts to provide Indigenous education within the early years.

From all participants, I observed that the image of the child for Anishinabek is central to the community and a gift full of potential in their own right (Anderson, 2012; Simpson, 2011). Participants spoke about children as unique, smart, and knowledgeable, as well as the importance of knowing they come with their own teachings that educators can learn. As Pacini-Ketchabaw et al. (2015) argued, it is one thing to reimagine our image of the child, and the challenge is making these images explicit in our practice. Pacini-Ketchebaw goes on to share that we need to deconstruct the dominant image of the child and reconstruct alternative ones. Then, we may begin to see the child as more than we have given them credit. She elaborated:

> These alternative images allow us to interrupt, if only momentarily, our dominant images and create more complex subjectivities for and with children. We don't argue that these alternative images are better, but rather they are necessary in our journey of complexifying practice. We are ethically obliged, from the perspective, to always question our images, even our alternatives to dominant narratives. (Pacini-Ketchabaw, et al., 2015, p. 47)

I reflected with each participant's story about overcoming adversities in life, both personal and professional. I noticed a cyclical pattern emerging. It seemed that everyone struggled with confidence in providing IECE along their journeys. Most suggested that asking ourselves reflective questions was and continues to be a way forward within Indigenous Education (IE). I began to sense that participants and I used education as a powerful tool to transform learning environments. I felt we all wanted to be the change we wished to see in IE from an Indigenous lens.

Geniusz (2009) referred to this in her work as Anishinaabe biskaabiiyang methodology, meaning 'returning to ourselves.' She states, "Through Anishinaabe biskaabiiyang methodology, research goes back to the principles of Anishinaabe inaadiziwin in order to decolonize or reclaim Anishinaabe gikendaasowin" (p.10). Through the educators' reflections, I heard how each educator began applying the following principles from the Anishinaabe biskabiiyaang methodology within their own lives and practice. These principles are written within the eastern Ojibway, Odawa spelling, and are used within the territory in which this project has taken place:

- Anishinaabe aadzaawin (Ojibway ways of being or way of life)
- Mnidoo-aadzaawin (spiritual way of life)
- Anishinaabemowin (Ojibway language)
- Mshkiki-aadzawin (land as medicine/teacher/way of life)
- Mino bimaadiziwin (living the good life)
- Anishinaabe gkendaasowin (Ojibway intelligence and knowledge)

In the next chapter, I expand the teaching practices related to innovation as each participant shares a key artifact that guided them in their teaching careers. We also explore the term innovation from an IECE lens.

Chapter Five: Sweetgrass, Birchbark, and Quills as Places and Spaces That Hold Principles and Values

Debenjiged kiimiingona dedbinwe wi naagdowendiwin.
Creator gave us sovereignty to govern ourselves. (UCCMM, 2011)

In the previous chapter, I introduced each participant and their lived experiences as Indigenous early childhood educators. In this chapter, I turn the focus to our conversations around innovation, which took part in the second set of individual conversational interviews, approximately 2-3 weeks following the initial interviews. For this second conversational interview, participants were invited to bring one or two cultural artifacts/symbols of their choice that represented innovation and its influence on their work. These cultural artifacts/symbols consisted of the following: a feather, an inspirational quote, a birch bark canoe, Indigenous teachings, bear figurines, an eagle woodchip, and an eagle puppet.

After logging onto Zoom, we initially conversed about how things were going for each participant and discussed any interesting events since the last time we spoke. I then asked participants if there was anything that resonated with them from our previous conversation. Some participants shared additional thoughts, which I added to the summaries of their transcripts later shared with them. We explored their artifact(s), referred to by some participants as a learning tool. The questions that guided our conversations around the selected artifacts included:

1. What artifact and or learning tool did you bring with you today? Please tell me more about what this piece means to you and why you chose this piece to share with me.
2. What comes to mind when you think of the word innovation?

The artifacts helped spark our exploration of innovation within an Indigenous early childhood and learning context. In sharing their understandings in this chapter, I recognize the importance of their contribution to the meaning-making of innovation through an Indigenous early

childhood lens. The opportunity for conversation also allowed me to think about the literature I reviewed.

Exploring Innovation with Ramona

Figure 8

Ramona's Feather

Note: Screenshot by author, photo reprinted with permission

Ramona brought a talking feather, and I quickly noticed this artifact held many stories and layers of meaning. Ramona shared its origin and significance:

> I asked the students if I could keep it once they had moved on to grade one because we had created it together in our community. And they thought it was okay for me to continue to use it with other students. . . . I said, "you know, I'll still have little ones coming in, and I want to do some of the same work that we were able to do together as a group." So they were okay with that as long as I knew how to care for it. . . . They were very specific to make sure that I take good care of it. And that I treat it well. And this has so much meaning for me. I think

> because it was the beginning. It was one of the first things I did in the classroom. When I was thinking about our own ways of knowing and being, where could I start, what is the starting point for me that would seem fairly simple to do with four- and five-year-olds? I thought, you know, we already gather in a circle in kindergarten, so that wouldn't be unfamiliar. Perhaps this would be kind of a safe place to go with kids and then I could look at intentionally layering the different aspects of being in circle, and then look at how we can develop their ability and their capacity to be in that space and respect each other.

It was during a Master's course that Ramona first began to think about how she defined innovation from an Anishinaabe educator perspective:

> I see it more around our practice in education and our own shift in where our focus is. . . . Words like collaboration come to mind for me, how we work together. And this idea of teaching and learning being a reciprocal process, that it's not just the teacher dumping knowledge, but that we position ourselves in a place where we know there's things to be learned from the children. So we're open, and we are willing to be in a learning stance. So, again, that reciprocity. I think is really important. And then, I think when we create an atmosphere where we value this idea of co-constructing knowledge, children start to see that their voice is valued, that what they have to say; whether it's a theory or sharing their own teachings from their own lodges, that's when they see that a space has been created where that's valued. Then we contribute to so many things for these young children. We contribute to positive identity and self-esteem. And we really do as adults have a lot to learn from them, but we have to be willing to position ourselves in that space. . . . So, that's kind of where I took innovation, and then I think about my artifact. And this [feather] holds all of that. . . . It's history, as this allows us to see what innovation is. Without knowing history, we don't really

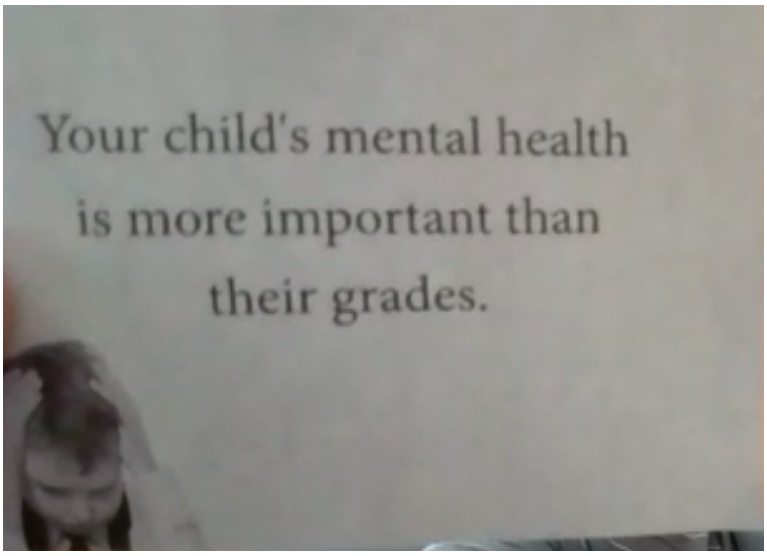
know what innovation is.

Through her experiences, Ramona has come to believe that innovation is about change that ensures that Anishinabek ways of doing and being are embedded within education. While these ideas were not new for Ramona, they had not necessarily been recognized within her previous educational spaces.

Exploring Innovation with Kevin

Figure 9

Kevin's Quote



Note: Screenshot by author, reprinted with permission

Kevin keeps this quote (Figure 9) on his computer desk. He showed me the quote by holding it up to the screen while sharing:

> . . . it's really important to me because a lot of our children that come to the program move on, and they go to school, and that's our job, right? Our job is to get them ready to go to school. Lot of times, we don't have the time or the resources to get them properly prepared. So we ask, stay, stay with us. I'll keep it going [OAHSA program] if you're six years old if I have to, turning seven. Don't worry about it all, I'll do that. I'll do whatever I have to do to

keep you here.

He continued with his view on school readiness:

> Our job is to send them off when they're ready to go. And when I say that, you know your child's mental health is more important than your grades. A lot of times I find that people are pushing children to go to school, when they're not ready. And when they're not ready, and you're not mature enough to be over there, they are either set aside because they don't say anything and they're good children, or they're sent home and modified days because they act up, [because] they're not ready for school. And I've had a three-year-old or a four-year-old say they hate school. You are four. How can you hate? What does that word even mean to be four years old and hate school? But if you had such a bad experience at such a young age, it's never going to be good for you.

The underlying message conveyed by Kevin is the need to shift learned practices that are not meeting the needs of children and to reconnect with ways of knowing and being that are relevant, responsive, and genuinely matter. He emphasized, "If all children matter, then it takes many years to learn to unlearn how to support all children rather than abandoning them because it's too hard." Kevin included our responsibility for children's success, which lies within how we respond to their needs. He suggested the need to "provide programming that meets the needs of the child, not the needs of the adult." He emphasized his belief that the role of the child is to be a child and that school readiness means they are ready in a balanced way, mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. In his words: "Treat others with respect always, and always do what you can for anyone to give them a better life, a chance, because they deserve it. . . . Being Anishinaabe is to want more for your families and communities and is not about myself."

For Kevin, innovation is a shift in the education system hierarchy that supports children wherever

they are in their journey. He feels strongly in the importance of developing a vision, mission, and philosophy that reflects the teachings of Anishinaabe and that innovation must lift families up and to do what matters the most. He envisions that transitioning from childcare into schools may look different and alternative to mainstream Western education systems. He suggested, “think outside the western box.”

Exploring Innovation with Opii

Figure 10

Opii’s (Sophie’s) Birch Bark Canoe

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Opii brought a birch bark canoe (see Figure 10) artifact that she made and explained how it applied to her learning journey:

> I've been building these different pieces that are a part of my, my bundle, and that will probably be passed on to my daughter. . . . This [in reference to her canoe] we see these everywhere, being sold [at] powwows. I've never actually even had one. . . . Lately, they've come into my life, the birch bark canoe and the thought of it . . . Maybe three to five years ago, my grandma started talking about one of our oldest family members, Biimibimijiman. Biimibimijiman . . . translates to “whom who is abundant.” And so the story is [in the] late

> 1700s, he [Biimibimijiman] was placed into a canoe . . . just a baby he was put into a canoe and all kinds of goods were placed in there with him. . . . So when the person found him, they ended up naming him [Biimibimijiman] because he came with abundance; he was taken care of, even though he was put into a canoe and sent off.

The history and relationship with the canoe were further explained by Opii:

> So a long time ago when our communities or our villages and our nations were under attack, and/or illness, disease, smallpox and stuff, to save the babies or the older people, they would put them into a canoe and just send them off, so they could live. . . . So, that's how my generation is here today, because of this individual that was sent off in this jimaanans [canoe].

Learning how to make a birch bark canoe also held significance for Opii:

> We have hereditary or genetic DNA memory. We also have intuitive wisdom. And so we might not know why our interest is being called to a particular thing. But after seeing these canoes, I never cared about them before . . . all of a sudden, this drive came into me that I wanted to learn how to make the small birch bark canoe. . . . I decided to teach myself. I know the key concepts of working with birch bark; I found sweet grass and I found birch bark. And this was one of my first templates [Figure 10] . . . I showed my grandma right away, because it kind of aligned with her story that she's shared with us.

For Opii, spirituality is part of the making process:

> We can't always just rely on somebody else to show us, because we already have some story, we already have some knowledge, we have significance already. And sometimes we just need to bring it together ourselves. . . . We receive some of that intuitive direction or that spiritual connection or direction, guidance. . . . This is the artifact that I chose to share; . . . it is about

> that history, that connection to family. It's become a part of my bundle. And then of course, I pass this on to my daughter or maybe it'll be a grandchild.

Through this story, Opii shared the development of her gift of making and her identity formation. It was thinking about the story of her ancestor that led her to create a representation (the canoe) to share her story. The canoe became a reminder of her story that will be passed down from each generation to the next.

Exploring the meaning of innovation, Opii reflected:

> When I was thinking of innovation, I was only thinking of something totally brand new. Then I'm thinking, no, it just means restructuring. Because schools are kind of relatively new to us. It just means, how do we restructure or re-create a variation or alternative or just chang[e] the way we teach or the way we learn, because the whole textbook and testing is not really the way to go. So how can we look at holistic evaluations and holistic learning?

For Opii, innovation:

> . . . reclaims, revitalizes, brings back Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing to our children as a way forward to what was once taken away from our people, such as traditional family responsibilities, learning within creation, children learning within a family group setting, nurturing each child's bundle while adding to their bundle. Being open to other realms invites innovation; . . . embeds respect and embeds reciprocity.

Opii viewed innovation as a way of reconnecting to Anishinaabe ways of being and doing. Her examples share the grounding of family and community responsibilities that nestle the child at the centre, providing guidance and security as they grow into who they are meant to be.

Exploring Innovation with Shannon

Shannon's artifact took the form of two oral teachings, and no physical artifacts were

provided. The first was the turtle teaching, depicted as an image of a turtle with a body having a head, four paws, and a tail. The second was a wampum belt. Wampum belts are made with wampum beads sewn into a pattern to describe historical events between First Nations people and the colonial government. The teachings can take multiple times of hearing before applying it to the listener's life. The meaning is dependent on where one is on their journey. Shannon spoke about her choice of each of these artifacts:

> I couldn't come back to one book, or anything like that, it comes back to the elders and teachings. So for tools, . . . [the] teachings on the turtle, we've applied those in many ways from looking at the 13 moons. How do you program around that? But I think for me, the biggest thing is that the turtle teaching, before we get to the shell, is looking at those four paws. Looking at the foundation and understanding the history. The shell was pushed into the ground, so we have loss, but it's shaking free now. . . . And then looking at the bottom of the shell, we still have foundations there that hold us up and hold us together. So, I think that turtle teaching is a really important one. . . . I probably listened to that teaching 20 times. And it wasn't until just a couple of years ago that different parts of it connected. Connecting my own path of learning. That's why I didn't succeed with school [emphasis on hers]. Because I was constantly being this person, "I want to do, I want to try, and I want to ask why."

Expanding on the wampum belt teachings, Shannon added:

> The wampum belt teachings I think are very fitting . . . I find it even more so in this time right now of reconciliation. Because I think when we talk allyship . . . our educators have an expectation to walk in two worlds right now. And so we really kind of have to revisit this, the aspect of allyship and reconciliation. . . . Having our ways, we can still appreciate the western ways, but also remind non-Indigenous people like, you can have your own ways, and they can

> be beautiful; our ways are not superior to yours, and vice versa. We just have different ways of living, but we have mutual responsibilities, to ensure that we keep truth, and that we keep peace, and that we keep friendship and respect. . . . Remembering that our treaty embedded so much of who we were and what our original teaching represented, such as reciprocity with the two distinct cultures. The hearts represented this, as one is red [Indigenous peoples] and one white [Western peoples]. This treaty was to provide assistance and was a mutual exchange. . . . It is about remembering and relearning our history and ways of being, such as going back to the original treaty of the covenant belt.

In sum, teachings from elders spoke to Shannon within her educational practice and in her life journey. After listening to the teachings over time, she understood why school was challenging. It did not reflect how she learned and thought about education. It did not fit her. Through the first teaching, she has now come to understand that we all sit in different directions on the turtle's back and that this is what makes each person unique. Shannon elaborated on the connection to innovation:

> It's all about honouring the sacred fires within us, but building those identities, and I think before we can do it for the children, we have to take that time to build those fires for our educators. We have really tried to acknowledge community sacred fires. It wasn't ever coming from a deficit view, but instead about empowerment. How can we come in and fan that existing fire that you already have? How can we turn those embers to a flame and show you that you already have this knowledge? I think that's where I'd look at real resurgence, and I would definitely look at it; it's about empowerment. We have come from a standpoint, not from ego, but from what is best for the community and really lifting them up. . . . We all had roles, responsibilities. There was never ever a leader, we just had our individual responsibilities and held to those to keep the balance in the community. That's what we look

> at from Indigenous professional learning. And I think, which is different, we never go into a childcare center or talk to an educator as if they need something or they're missing something. We really go back to, where are you on your journey? Because we know, especially if we look at our traditional teachings, it's a journey. . . . Growth is change!

For Shannon, the word innovation evoked the sense of living in two worlds. As seen through the above quote, innovation includes the resurgence of Anishinaabe ways of being and doing. It is about what we can do to impact our own lives and the lives of others through our teachings to support the next generations. In preparation for our second conversation, Shannon spoke with an Elder about innovation. The Elder asked her to pass along this quote to me: “Bring the old to the new, and the new will bring to the old. Our teachings had great purpose, and we need to embed them today.” This cyclical way of thinking suggests innovation is not always about what is new but can include returning to previous Indigenous ways of knowing.

Exploring Innovation with Elaine

Figure 11

Elaine’s Talking Stick

Note: Photo reprinted with permission

Figure 12

Elaine's Cedar Basket

Note: Photo reprinted with permission

Elaine brought two artifacts to our second conversation to spark thinking around innovation. The talking stick (Figure 11) was made and presented to Elaine many years ago as a gift by a former student. She explained:

> That stick sure means a lot to me. I've been using it for many, many, years. It was actually made by one of my students. He was in grade two at the time. He's a married man now and has kids . . . He carved it out of a piece of cedar. And he drew some flowers on it, and he put my name on it. And he gave it to me as a gift. A very special gift that I had received. And I use it all the time in the classroom.

During our conversation, Elaine explained that the sharing and talking sticks were important to help children learn to take turns respectfully. She described how children often have something they want to express, and the circle promotes attentive listening.

Elaine's next artifact, the cedar basket (Figure 12), held a special connection to her sister: "My sister is very creative, . . . so she gifted it [cedar basket] to me." Elaine continued to share why

she chose this second artifact: “Because there is no manmade attachment to it. By that, I mean, there's no store bought materials that went into it. . . . Everything came from land. . . . So that's why I chose that piece.

This cedar basket inspired Elaine to share her views on land-based learning. She emphasized how all the materials were from the land and not man-made. Elaine shared her passion for environmental sustainability and how she ensured that the children knew the important role each of them had in keeping Shkagamik-kwe (Mother Earth) healthy. In her practice, she has become intentional in not promoting the overuse of man-made materials for teaching purposes. Earlier in her career, she recalled an over-reliance on photocopying materials for learning purposes, even calling herself a “photocopier queen.”

Elaine’s views on sustainability were integrated into her thinking about innovation. She sees innovation as:

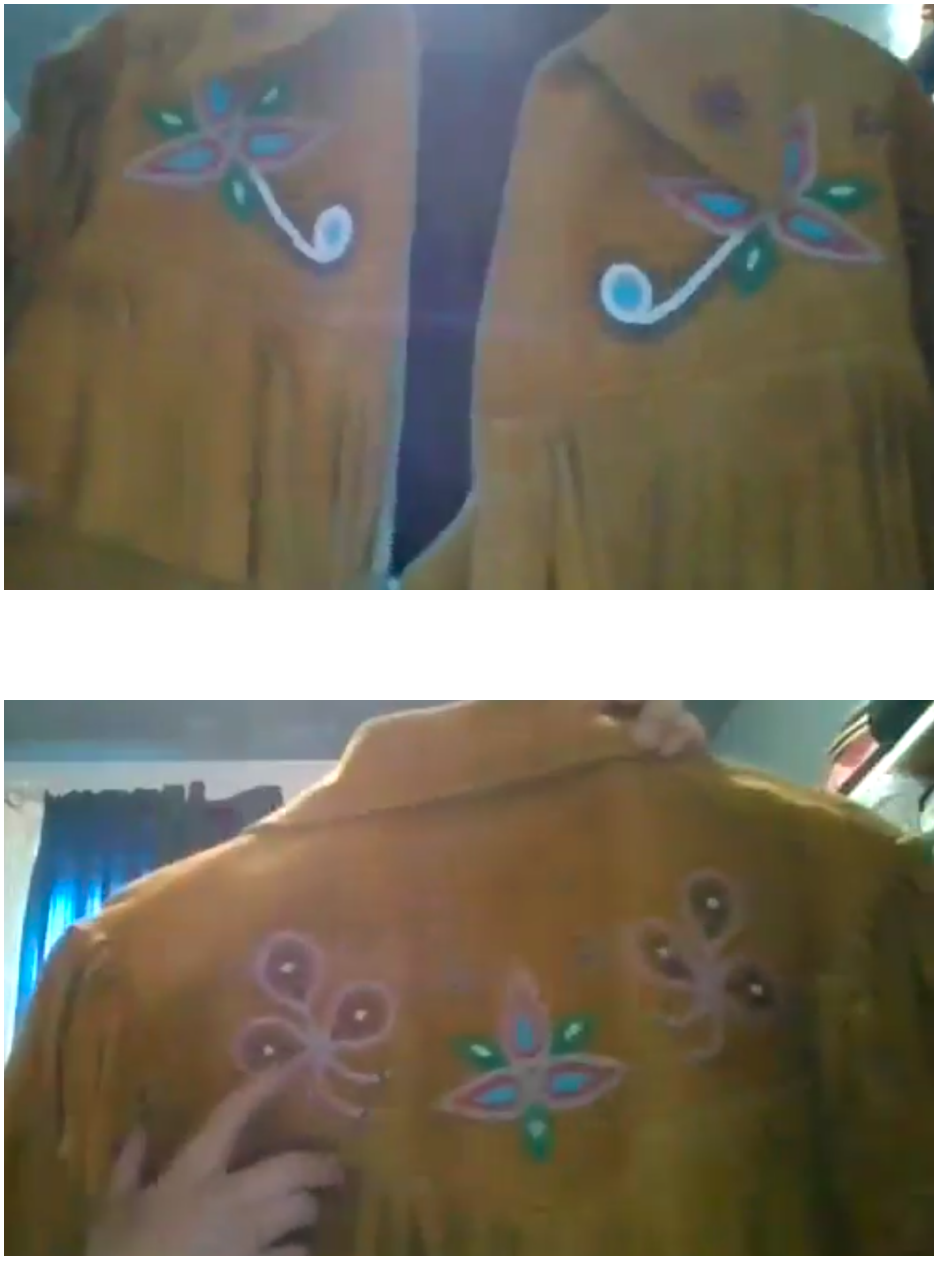
> a way of using our voice in a way that is creative and inspirational. So that learning is by doing. . . . Re-thinking, re-structuring the current program to the future program that allows for children to realize their full potential and involving parents in this new way of learning, being, and doing. . . is to create a piece of work or idea that requires a skill slash technique, which is useful. And it's a step-by-step process. Bringing the old back to the new way. . . . Share ideas and to work together!

Like many participants, Elaine focused on thinking about education from a socially-just education that respects the voice of the child, their families, and land within IECE.

Exploring Innovation with Jill

Figure 13

Jill's Beaded Leather Jacket Front and Back



Note: Photo reprinted with permission

Through her work with First Nations childcare centres in the North, Jill experienced "coming home" as she reconnected to who she was as Anishinaabe. Jill's artifact, a beaded jacket from her

grandmother (Figure 13), was significant to this journey. It began with a sense of place. Although Jill grew up in an urban community, her grandmother instilled the Indigenous knowledge, language, and teachings she then shared with her family. During our conversations, it became apparent the beaded jacket was dear to her and close to her heart. As she held up the jacket for me to see, Jill shared:

> I talked a lot about my grandmother and how she was a crafter. I have this jacket, and this is one of the examples of the work that she did, and she was able to do it. She was very talented, and she would often get numerous requests for leather jackets, beaded, for males and females both alike. . . . My generation, like my sisters and I and my cousins, didn't pick up that craft. But my daughter is now picking it up, which is really surprising. I was shocked that she took to it. And she didn't start it until this year, this past year. . . . She went to [university]. They had this Native Association, so she joined it. And that's where she got into the culture. And then she made herself a pair of mitts, and she made earrings. And now she's making moccasins. She's actually doing beadwork. So I'm quite happy.

Jill's history was evident in sharing her artifact, her pride in her grandmother's craft, and the legacy it left behind. Bringing in her stories of coming to know who she is and where she comes from became a powerful tool that Jill shared with me. Through our conversation, she began thinking about the power of story and items we hang on to and cherish.

When it came to the term innovation, Jill began:

> Well, at first, I believe, innovation to me always sounded like, it just sounded familiar to inventing. . . . Those two words would kind of crossover for me like innovation and inventing. I kind of think of them along the same lines. And now when I think of innovation, I think I got a clear understanding of what that is, just through reading different articles. And just seeing the word more often now, especially, you know, in my line of work. And so, now,

> when I think of innovation, I think, like changing something that was done previously, and then bringing it back and doing it maybe in a different way. I think innovation is just, you know, changing something to suit, I guess, to suit modern day.

Reflecting on IECE more specifically, Jill continued:

> I feel that innovation does happen in the early learning programs. But what I'm finding is that people are not recognizing [it] as part of innovation. They're not even aware that it is happening. An example would be just bringing more of the family into the learning program. Years ago, [the belief was] this is a service that we're providing for the community, this is where you drop your children off and away you go to work. But now, I feel that the educators are more welcoming the family into the centre, and not just the parents, it could be grandparents or even, you know, older siblings. It seems like the doors are opening . . . and it's an intergenerational center now. Well, I think innovation can happen slowly. . . . Innovation is learning about reimagining IECE in our own terms.

Through her response, Jill speaks to the *what* and *how* of innovation as an IECE educator. She had come to believe that intergenerational learning benefits the whole community. Innovation is a way of thinking about bringing forward past Anishinaabek practices that support the entire family. Bringing back ways to strengthen the family offers a way forward within IECE.

Exploring Innovation with Marie

Figure 14

Marie's Wood Chip with Sketched Eagle Head Image

Note: Photo reprinted with permission

Figure 15

Marie's Bear Figurines

Note: Photo reprinted with permission

Figure 16

Marie's Eagle puppet

Note: Photos reprinted with permission

Marie brought three artifacts to explore the meanings of innovation. She began with a story about her artifacts:

> Maybe a few years ago, I did see an elder and they told me my clan - Migise (Eagle) Clan [Marie refers to Figure 14]. But prior to that, when I didn't know my colors or anything, I just went with my mom's clan, which was the bear clan. So I have these little bears [Figure 15] that I've always had on my desk and then because I wasn't sure, I just thought okay, well I must be a bear clan too. And so I had these bears and I always thought of my role as being a caregiver. And working with kids, and being protective, providing like the mama bear, providing that safe feeling. Then later on, I learned more about how we follow our father's clan. So that was a teaching I had, and when I was given my clan, I still kind of hung on to both, and both have a lot of meaning to me. So like I said, for the first one, like with the bears, I still have that with me and I also have this little leather bear that I made. . . . I hang on to

> both because I still feel a strong connection to both in my role, working with kids and working with families. I always felt like that's been my role.

Marie focused on her third artifact (Figure 16), the eagle puppet, and its link to learning:

> . . . I have this Eagle puppet. So for working with families and children it brings up the topic if children don't know their clan. That's okay! Then we explore it and we talk about the different clans, so it kind of plants that seed that they are a part of a clan. . . . [This] extends into their own identity and self when I think of teachings of the ego, intuition, trusting their own judgment and getting to know their self . . . on a spiritual level. . . . For the eagle, planning for the future and what direction we want to go in, with other centres. With everything that's happening now with TRC [Truth and Reconciliation Recommendation, 2015], and the residential schools and the children, what direction do we all want to go together? . . . I also just want to say, I am still learning more about responsibilities or roles within each of the clans, especially my own. So it's a learning journey.

Bringing in her personal stories had become a powerful learning tool within her teaching methods. Marie's own story of relearning her clan also opens the learning possibilities for others.

When I asked Marie if she had ever used the word innovation or heard it being used, she initially offered a connection to similar words that she had heard:

> Innovation, the word, is just new or outside of the box or looking within. I think those have come up. Because I think when we think we're doing something new, sometimes it's not actually new. . . I hear that a lot, "think outside the box," but sometimes maybe we've put so much energy in over complicating things and trying to think of a new way of doing it. If we sit back and look within or look to the past with our ancestors or, you know, ways of doing things that were done in the past, but bringing it to this generation with a new innovative spin

> on it? Say in terms of planning our activities, we should plan with the seasons. Some might say, “Oh, that's a new way of doing it.” But really, it's using our traditional knowledge of working with the environment, and knowledge from knowledge keepers or elders, or people who are more connected to the land to share. Technically, it's not new, but I guess it's an innovative way of connecting both worlds.

For Marie, innovation within IECE is often viewed as a new way of learning. However, from her learning journey, Anishinaabe ways of being are not new, but the way they are being brought back into learning environments is a way forward within family programs.

Looking Across Artifacts

As we discussed innovation, participants shared like-minded terms and phrases in the context of their programming. Some were similar to a mainstream definition of innovation, like thinking outside the box, which Kevin and Marie shared. Another frequent definition that most participants shared was the act of trying to do something new in the learning environment. As we began to unpack innovation from an Indigenous lens, Ramona, Kevin, Opii, Shannon, Elaine, Jill, and Marie shared the idea of bringing forward traditional teachings, Indigenous knowledge, and ways of being of Anishinaabe as the foundation of a learning environment in new and contemporary practices. The educators considered the following strategies when thinking about Indigenous Innovation within the early years:

- Advocate for change in education systems at all levels
- Learn from the past histories of Indigenous people
- Embed holistic ways of being
- Engage in critical reflection
- Empower collective voice

- Provide positive leadership
- Unpack dominant discourse and terminology
- Embed Indigenous knowledge in the curriculum
- Provide space for the revitalization of language and culture to thrive
- Include culturally relevant and responsive methods in programs

This reflective thinking allowed participants to consider the taken-for-granted work each participant contributed within IECE.

Kevin's quote reflects the standard practice of educational systems today. Although education systems say they want to be innovative within the learning environment, this may only reflect tools to enhance the skills of children who are already ready to learn (Kirkland & Sutch, 2009; Pearson & Degotardi, 2016). I heard from Kevin and other participants that mainstream systems are missing the mark for all children's learning needs. They shared many outside-of-the-box approaches to learning concerning support services that mattered to children and families. Two approaches offered by Kevin were the "circle of care" and modifying how to structure a school day for children who would benefit from more time to get to where they need (w)holistically before learning the curriculum expectations. Another example offered by Marie was to “plan with the seasons.” She had moved beyond theme-based planning (e.g., apples in Fall) to planning with traditional knowledge and ecological practices intertwined into the planning process.

In my IECE career, I related to my participants’ frustrations and how it seems like such an easy solution to work together to have the best possible outcomes for our children and families. There seems to be some something (e.g., policies) that does not allow all organizations to work together. I have often heard that we are good at creating and sustaining silos. I also noticed that how Opii was thinking through what matters to Anishinabek's education systems today went beyond how students

can do better in school. Instead, she ponders how students can continue their education meaningfully, grounded in Anishinaabe ways of knowing and being, and sustain Indigenous knowledge for generations to come.

Shannon told me that bringing Indigenous knowledge and natural laws within an educational space guides our work. Shannon shared moments when she had felt shifts in her thinking about her own Indigenous identity, and the fear of knowing was met with resistance. She ended up facing many worries about her culture and traditions. Although she had hesitations, she had this innate sense of responsibility to let those fears go and be a helper to families; as she put it, "letting go of ego." I noticed this sentiment was shared by many within the group as they shared stories of learning more about their history. By embedding Indigenous knowledge, they became more confident in sharing their knowledge within their programs and services. Bringing in stories of the sharing circle and the feather, it was apparent that this form of learning resonated with Ramona as a bridge of reconnecting to her traditions. Through Ramona's sharing of her work, I sensed that her educational journey was also reconnecting to Indigenous Ceremony in an educational space, like the work of Wilson (2011).

The impact of Jill’s grandmother also speaks to the resurgence of bringing in Knowledge Keepers (KK), Elders, and grandparents as an integral role for Anishinaabe communities, which supports and reclaims the importance of place-based and intergenerational learning as an essential aspect of Indigenous education. It also makes me think about how policies within the childcare act seek to employ individuals within childcare centres and require an ECE diploma. However, KK, Elders, and grandparents hold a specific knowledge that may not come in the form of a diploma, but are equally important and benefit the whole community, especially by reasserting a place-based knowledge in educational spaces.

From Jill's sharing, I thought about the Māori people's education system and their movement to revitalize their language and cultural ways of being. This movement started by utilizing localized knowledge (Pearson & Degotardi, 2016; Smith, 2003). They accomplished their goal by introducing language nests that brought language speakers, who in the beginning were not necessarily educated in ECE but had their language. They relied on the older people within the community who could share their knowledge with the families in a natural setting, so that they could naturally teach the language from the very beginning of the child's life. This grassroots movement led to revitalization of the Māori language, and they now have education systems from early learning to university in their language.

Marie's artifacts highlighted the importance of clanship traits for educators. Marie was more familiar with her clanship traits on her mother's side. Later in life, she also began to learn more about her father's clanship and began integrating both clans to further her understanding of her role and responsibility as an educator. Opii also shared about understanding her clan's role as an educator. Shannon, too, noticed the importance of her role as an auntie within her programs. I sensed from the participants that this interconnectedness with participants nurtured a positive identity within and with others.

The sharing of land-based artifacts meant a lot to many participants. I sensed their role as educators is to provide opportunities to share knowledge about sustainable environmental practices within an educational setting. These artifacts and shared practices have led me to think about ways I tried to shift my teaching practice by not solely relying on store-bought materials and the overuse of paper. When I began teaching, it seemed like this was a common practice to ensure children were learning and could bring this learning home to share with their families.

What also came to mind is the resurgence of Indigenous Land-Based Learning (ILBL) learning. ILBL is not considered an essential education from a Western educational perspective. Schooling for Indigenous and non-Indigenous children has emphasized that learning from the land no longer serves the purpose of colonial or imperialist rule (Battiste, 2013; Geniusz, 2009; Kawgley, 2006; Kimmerer, 2013; Simpson, 2011; Styres, 2019). Through this research, I am noticing a resurgence of Indigenous land-based learning to pass on traditional ecological knowledge to the next generation of learners as a resistance to the colonial agenda. Elaine provided ways of passing on this knowledge to her students, as she is conscious of the impact and the overuse and reliance on manufactured learning materials on the environment and the messages this gives to the learner.

The form of storytelling Opii shared also resonated with me as dibaajimowinan (personal stories and history) (Geniusz, 2009: Johnston,1976; Simpson, 2011). We learn more about ourselves as Anishinaabe people by hearing our own stories of who we are. Once this happens, we can build on these stories by adding our story where another has left off and continuing the cycle of passing this knowledge down to the next generation (Hopkins, Personal Communication, 2022). I can see how Opii's grandmother has contributed to sharing dibaajimowin with her, and Opii will continue to pass this knowledge on to her children. Jill also offered this sentiment as she shared the importance of grandmothers within the program as an essential link to intergenerational learning. Ramona shared her passion for oral language using the talking feather and sharing circles. She shared stories of the Anishinaabe trickster Nanaboozhoo to learn more about Anishinaabe ways of knowing with her students. Marie also brought in ways to engage families by sharing her personal story of how she is learning about her clanship. The use of puppets to share this story was well-received within her family programs.

Looking Back

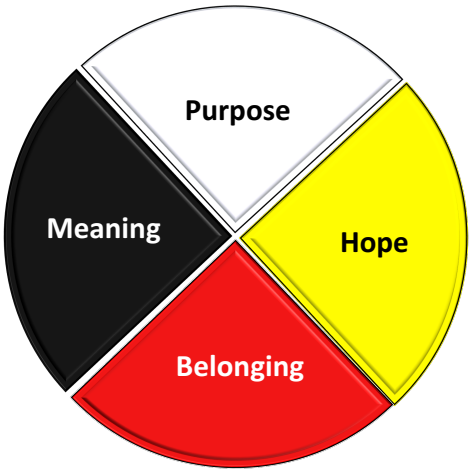
I was not sure what participants would share during our conversations. I could not help but return to the Anishinabek teachings I learned in my educational journey and the literature shared within this chapter. From an Anishinabek perspective, I observed how the participants are doing considerable work to shift IECE. Through their stories of innovation, they supported and contributed to a critical culturally-sustaining/revitalizing pedagogy and Indigenous education sovereignty, which is not always easy work (Lomawaia & McCarty, 2014; Paris, 2012; Tom et al., 2019). Huaman (2015) has even suggested this critical work is often done in the margins. At the same time, one takes a sense of commitment to support the next generation to be stronger and more confident and learn about who they are as Anishinaabek. I noticed that the participants' thinking centered on advocating for change and taking on the change agent role (Anderson, 2012; Friere, 1970). Participants spoke to a shift in thinking, from a deficit-based learning toward a strength-based approach. This shift seeks to build upon the principles and values of Anishinaabek teachings that have continued to be held dearly by Anishinaabe people throughout time and aim to change the learning environment toward holistic learning. When speaking with participants, I could not help but think of innovation as a resurgence of Anishinaabek ways of being and doing in an educational space (Simpson, 2011).

The use of artifacts as a form of learning resonated with participants as a bridge to reconnecting to traditions. Wilson (2008) shared what he has come to know when connecting research with ways of being and knowing through an Indigenous paradigm. Listening to the sharing of meaningful artifacts, I sensed this was a moment for educators to express to me their process of re-learning, re-thinking, and re-imagining what education might provide to learning environments that support Anishinaabe biskaabiiyang (Geniusz, 2009). However, to return to ourselves, we must consider from what we are returning. As participants shared, the re-learning of the history and

historical trauma of the Anishinaabek people is essential. Anishinaabe biskaabiyaang then speaks to colonization's impact on Indigenous communities. The participants told their stories of reconnecting to Anishinaabe aadzawin (ways of being and knowing). As I think about the stories further, I sense that, as an Indigenous educator, Kendaasowin (coming to know) drives the innovation process when taking up the role and responsibility of a change agent. Knowing and understanding participants then brings forward their innovative ideas within IECE. From an Indigenous educator's lens, innovation looks different from the dominant discourse because it comes from their terms and principles as Anishinaabek (Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2018).

Through the conversational interviews, I had the opportunity explore with Indigenous educators and think about innovation. The educators spoke about how Western educational systems' language and words tend to become the dominant discourse. As Jill shared, "Words have power." We spent time exploring what, why, and how learning environments are shifting to meet the needs of Anishinaabe learners. This change is necessary to positively impact both the educators' and children's lives, which not only includes the child but is inclusive of their families, extended families, nation, and land. Sometimes the pressure of thinking about how to do things differently may take away from what we are trying to do differently, what purpose this innovative practice serves, and to whom. Marie offers wisdom here about not overcomplicating things in planning how to do things differently.

The next chapter will discuss the themes emerging from the participants' exploration of innovation, which I refer to as learning bundles. The learning bundles will bring together what I have come to learn about Indigenous innovation and the future implications this has within IECE.



Note: Repeated visual (Figure 1) to return to the structural parts of the dissertation

Part 3: Meaning (Knowledge)

I move into Part Three with the intention to put all the pieces together of what I have learned in life and research at this point. My experiences as a mother and educator (formal and informal) have contributed to getting to know myself better. These experiences have led me to think about situations differently than in my beginning years. From Anishinaabe perspectives (teachings), this would be known as part of our journey through the four hills of life. Through each hill or stage of life, we learn more and bring this knowledge into our next chapter in life. I have found this true when I think about the research journey. We are presented with a set of ideas, questions, literature, design methods, and collect data. From all this information, we sit, sift, draw parallels, and look for similarities and differences. We ponder new ideas and meanings that build on prior knowledge. We continually learn from and share with others to further even more learning opportunities. The goal of Part Three is to expand the meaning of and share new understandings in my research journey.

Chapter Six: Assembling the Sweetgrass, Birchbark and Quills

Ka mnaadendanaa gaabi zhiwebag miinwaa nango
megwaa ezhwebag, miinwa geyaabi waa ni zhiwebag.
We respect and honour the past, present and future.
(Preamble UCCMM Elders Council, 2011)

For my research study, I looked deeply at innovation pedagogies and practices through an Indigenous Knowledge paradigm to understand what these practices look and feel like from an educator's perspective. In the previous chapters, I threaded stories of my participants and myself, similar to the threading of a quill box. Now that I assemble the sweetgrass, birch bark, and quills, I take the next step on my research journey to bring Indigenous innovation to life.

My inquiry was informed by three intersecting theoretical traditions: Indigenous Knowledge (IK), Indigenous Pedagogy (IP), and Decolonizing Education (DE). These traditions also informed my understanding of educational sustainability within IECE. I utilized the methodology of Indigenous Storywork (ISW) to gather these stories, which took the form of IECE portraits and the presentation of artifacts.

The following chapter provides a discussion of what I have learned and come to know about Indigenous innovation in the early years. I begin by returning to the completed quilled medallions first outlined in Chapter Four. I then describe my recursive and reflective thinking process of what I have come to learn about (a) transformative education, (b) decolonizing education as a resurgence of Indigenous education as a sovereign right, and (c) the idea of returning to ourselves (Anishinaabe Biskaabiiyang). I consider wholistic learning models to expand participants' points about nurturing each child's learning spirit. Following this discussion, I return to what defines Indigenous innovation and the impact innovation has on Indigenous education. I consider previous definitions shared in the literature and offer my definition of Indigenous innovation informed through the reflective process of the research, including a conceptual framework for Anishinaabek innovation.

Lastly, I briefly discuss my study's limitations, followed by implications and suggestions for future research. I conclude this chapter and my dissertation with an epilogue in the form of a letter to participants, as I share what they have taught me throughout our time together.

A Return to the Quilled Medallions

When I began my research inquiry, I thought about my grandmother's crafting of a porcupine quill box as an analogy for the Indigenous research methodology of Storywork. This analogy helped combine the pieces of the research journey into workable bundles. While gathering the bundles, I created an image in Chapter Four that began my process of thinking about the stories shared with me. As I progressed in my work, I began to pull together ideas of what was unfolding during this time which is represented in Figure 17.

Figure 17

Quilled Medallions: Honouring the Voices of Participants

Note: Image designed by author and photo produced by author

This process made me think about how cultural symbols represent ways of seeing, and as

the symbols come together, they tell their own story. The traditional Anishinaabek governance system known as the Anishinaabe doodemaag (clanship) inspired the cultural symbols in Figure 17. The seven-point star medallion in the middle speaks to the interconnectedness and relationality of the seven medallions which encircle the star. The seven medallions do not equate a specific participant's doodem; rather, the medallions reflect the seven conversations with the participants and their contributions to my learning journey. Each doodem (clan) within the Anishinaabek nation includes specific animals: loon, bird, crane, fish (image replaced with turtle), marten, bear, and deer. As a governance model, each animal has its particular role and responsibility within the community linked to the person's family name. For this study, I will not go into great detail about each governance role. Still, as I listened and learned from each participant, I began to discern what it means to reconnect to traditional roles of the Anishinaabek and their importance within community decision-making. Participants shared how they enacted their Indigenous roles within an education system, allowing them to share their gifts with children, families and communities, and land. This chapter will highlight these roles and what I think they mean when defining innovation from an Indigenous lens.

Looking Back, Looking Forward Looking Back, and Forward

Throughout my career, I often found myself asking how I, as an educator, could do more for Indigenous Education (IE). How could I support families and children to succeed in their learning journeys? I did not always find answers immediately but worked to provide hands-on experiences to engage my students and develop meaningful relationships with each student to better understand what I needed to do to provide the best learning environment I could. I strived to connect with my students who struggled or thrived in their academics. It seemed a great way to balance learning styles and build connections. Looking back, however, it was not always evident how I linked Anishinaabek ways of being and doing as a foundation for learning. I listened to the participants'

stories about their shifts in thinking, the principles and values they uphold, along with their hopes for a better future for children within early learning and beyond. What I have come to learn through my research is that educators are designing learning environments that embed IK and IP. I began to think about what these examples meant for the future of learning environments for all children, especially Indigenous children who have been marginalized based on their identity. For me, it is about providing an education that allows children to be who they are in a safe, loving environment, free of racism and systemic violence. It also means providing a learning environment where children feel pride in their identity and gifts. All participants questioned what education meant for Indigenous children and their families. The participants shared how they took up the responsibility of shifts in practice. While they learned more about Anishinaabe culture and ways of being, they connected this importance to the need to support the well-being of children within an early educational environment.

Participants shared artifacts that supported learning in new and meaningful ways. The artifacts, also referred to as teaching tools by participants, were an example of the resurgence of Indigenous ways of being and promoted IK and IP as ways of being. During the meaning-making process, I began to think about dominant discourses and the meaning of words. I had moments of uneasiness with my own language that I used in this study. I have come to liken this to the 'ouch' moments I felt when I poked my finger with a quill while making a medallion. For example, I understood artifacts in education as items created in the learning environment that could be shared with others. I then began to think about the discussion with Rhonda who shared that she would not refer to the items she brought as artifacts but instead as learning tools. The term resonated with me, and I thought about how the definition of artifacts is used within museums, where many Indigenous historical pieces are stored, owned, and represented and most without permission (Phillips, 2022). I pondered this uneasiness as I re-listened to how the participants shared their use of teaching tools. I

began to think about the resurgence of Indigeneity when educators brought forward traditional teaching tools in early learning environments. As I dug deeper into definitions of artifacts, I realized that the term artifact holds the history of past actions where Indigenous artifacts were often stolen and misrepresented. I have learned that in its original meaning, a cultural artifact refers to any item made by humans. I now use the term with caution as I move forward from a place of learning. For example, Ramona shared that she co-created a learning space with her students where they respected and shared the responsibility of the feather within a sharing circle. When her students were ready to move on to the next grade, she asked the students if it would be okay to use the feather with her next class. The students were mindful of their responsibility to the feather and gave their permission, as long as the next group promised to take care of it. This was a powerful moment of co-creating learning spaces within the classroom and honouring student voices while learning through Indigenous ways of being and doing. At the conclusion of this dissertation, I continue to ponder the term that best encompasses the artifact/learning tool pieces that were shared with me.

As I began my research, I recognized the importance of keeping Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing at the center with the intent to build on the work of others. As mentioned previously, Battiste (2013) called upon systems to decolonize education through innovative ways to meet the needs of Indigenous people. Heeding this call, I sought to understand the question: What does innovation mean within the context of an Indigenous childcare/early learning centre? Listening to each participant's journey within the Indigenous Early Childhood Education (IECE) field, I began to hear emerging ideas related to (a) transformative education and critical conscientization, (b) decolonizing education, (c) wholistic learning models, and (d) nurturing the learning spirit**.**

I reflected, journaled, sat with the data, and returned to the literature to consider parallels. In this section, I highlight the connections discovered. This process for me is ongoing, and as I move forward, I will continue to look to the past, present and future. To know where I want to go in

IECE, I must reflect and learn from where I have been and what has brought me to where I am today. This analysis has been like threading the sinew through the layers of birchbark medallion, spiralling through the top and bottom of birchbark, pulling the pieces together.

Transformative Education and Critical Conscientization

As I sat with the participants, they shared challenges and successes in their teaching praxis over time. Not always confident that their voices mattered as Indigenous educators, they shared that they always wanted more for Anishinaabek and non-Anishinaabek children and their families. Each participant experienced moments when they questioned education systems, as they became critically reflective of what and how they were teaching. They thought about the bigger ideas of what it meant to teach from their Indigenous standpoints and how they viewed the world as Indigenous educators. These moments of reflection led them to see the need for an Indigenous worldview, which offered a way forward for all learners. Once they began taking this stance, they became more confident in bringing in more Indigenous culture as part of the curriculum, rather than separate from it. Ramona shared her experience teaching in a mainstream school and compared what other schools do to enhance their kindergarten programs. She shared her frustration with trying to be like other schools and their ways of being that were somewhat foreign to her school community. Her *aha* moment was realizing that it was not about the curriculum per se, but rather about the cultural lens through which spaces and places incorporate their views within the curriculum content. Once she made this connection, her praxis was transformed.

Friere's (1993) work on conscientization wove in and out of the conversations with participants. As I thought about the challenges faced in mainstream schooling, I considered the hierarchical structure in education systems. To do things differently is to think critically about how we shift and change within our practice at a much deeper level, which is difficult work. Friere (1971) argued that an inside-out transformation model involves freeing ourselves before we can free

others. Smith (2003), when sharing the Kaupapa Maori approach from Aotearoa/New Zealand, emphasized that transformation requires confrontation in two key areas: facing the colonizer and confronting the self. As Battiste (2013) stated:

> Indigenous people are also moving beyond critiques to address the healing and wellness of themselves and their communities, to reshape their contexts and effect their situations, and to create reforms based on a complex arrangement of conscientization, resistance, and transformative action. (p. 69)

The educators in this study spoke about how this work of transforming oneself happened over time. Once they recognized the need for change, they noticed this changed their personal and work life for the better. They became change agents. For example, once Kevin learned more about Indigenous history and Indigenous struggle, he invested his energy in learning more about traditional knowledge, healing, and ceremony and their impact on wellness. He shared how this learning "had changed his life." In his current work, he continues to use his voice for change in education systems to support children and their families in their learning journey. Huaman (2015) stated:

> Our baseline assumption is that Indigenous peoples, communities, cultures, languages—indeed, our ecologies—are quite dynamic, and further, borrowing from United Nations and grassroots Indigenous movements, that Indigenous peoples have legal, cultural, moral, and spiritual rights to identify, maintain, protect, revitalize, improve, strengthen, and develop their lands, languages, cultural practices, and forms of knowledge. (p. 4)

I, too, have shifted my thinking over time and transformed my practice, which I hope is for the betterment of the next generation. I have struggled with the right thing to do in educating the very young and have come to know that when a collective voice comes together, it can become a more

robust learning environment where everyone's voice matters.

Decolonizing Education

For all participants, their teaching practice seemed to be a space to enact their sovereign rights as Anishinaabek within an education system. These hopes reflect a desire for the resurgence of Anishinaabek ways of being and doing, disrupted by colonization. Many policy papers have come out to ensure that Indigenous peoples have control over their education. For example, The National Indian Brotherhood (NIB), now referred to as the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), a grassroots Indigenous political organization, wrote a policy paper stating their hope for education. Their 1972 policy paper, entitled "Indian Control of Indian Education (ICIE)," stated:

> We want education to provide the setting in which our children can develop the fundamental attitudes and values which have an honored place in Indian tradition and culture. The values which we want to pass on to our children, values which make our people a great race, are not written in any book. They are found in our history, in our legends and in the culture. We believe that if an Indian child is fully aware of the important Indian values he will have reason to be proud of our race and of himself as an Indian. (p. 2)

Although written over 50 years ago, the sentiments still hold. Furthermore, as Marie and others shared, as educators, they continue to offer space and place to provide culturally relevant, competent, responsive, sustaining, revitalizing, and specific learning environments, delivering a curriculum reflective of an Anishinaabek worldview. As Battiste (2013) argued, a decolonizing education reimagines what an IECE program could be, and resisting the status quo shifts the discourse toward an education grounded in Indigenous knowledge and seeks to support the well-being of children. Indigenous cultures have been continually threatened to be erased by colonial rule (Phillips, 2021). Despite this history, Indigenous communities continue to resist assimilation and push forward in re-

establishing their inherent rights to self-determination (Phillips, 2021). Benton-Benai (1988) shared his hopes for the future of Anishinaabek:

> I believe that, together, we can begin the journey back to find what many of our people left by the trail. This will be a journey to rediscover a way of life that is centered on the respect for all living things. It will be a journey to find the center of ourselves so that we can know the peace that comes from living in harmony with powers of the Universe. I do not believe in isolating myself in memories of the past. I do believe that with the teachings of yesterday we can better prepare ourselves for the uncertainties of tomorrow. (p. 2)

Benton-Benai is referring to the teachings, stories, philosophies, knowledge, and pedagogies that speak to a vision of Anishinaabe education and a way of life. Simpson (2011) argued that returning to our ways of knowing does not necessarily include returning to the past. Instead, it means a robust regeneration of our ancestral ways of knowing being applied to our current lives.

Returning to Ourselves

In Chapter Four, I discussed participants' descriptions of growth and shifts in their teaching practice over time. Examples included seeking mentors such as Elders and Knowledge Keepers to learn from and returning to formal education focused on Indigenous education. As IECEs began to engage with their learning, they spoke to the realization that their culture and traditions mattered within their learning journey and that of the children. Geniusz (2009) explained that the biskaabiiyang methodology (returning to ourselves) begins with an interrogation of the effects of colonialism on our lives, minds, and spirits; through this process of decolonization, one can then return to their ways of knowing to engage in regeneration fully.

Participants provided traditional teachings to children that allowed them to think about themselves within the world and how actions have consequences, in a non-threatening way.

Ramona highlighted the example of taking children on the land to learn about their responsibility of caring for mother earth. She also used Nanaboozho stories to learn about behaviours and actions within one's community. Marie and Sophie shared stories with the children about the responsibilities and roles a family's doodem provides. In doing so, they also learned about their doodem and how it gives life guidance.

Pacini-Ketchabaw et al. (2015) described the need to rethink the dominant discourse which we have come to know:

> In our context in North America we tend to see children as having needs and vulnerabilities, mostly defined through developmental lenses. Children are seen to have emotional needs, social needs, language needs, cognitive needs, and physical needs that vary according to their stage of development. (p. 46)

Although Pacini-Ketchabaw et al. (2015) indicated that these dominant discourses are not "wrong," these discourses do become perceived as "truth" (p. 46). They added that, when seen as true, dominant discourses such as child development become known as "regimes of truth" (Foucault, 1980, p. 46). Pacini-Ketchabaw et al. (2015) explained:

> As regimes of truth, discourse holds power over individual and societal ways of understanding the world, they organize the everyday experiences of the world, govern our ideas, thoughts, and actions. (p. 46)

For Anishinaabek, this discourse is problematic when their worldview collides with western-based programs that are dominate in mainstream perspectives (Little Bear, 2000).

For most participants, Anishinaabe ways of being were not present within mainstream education when they began their teaching careers. Integrating Indigenous worldviews within education settings increased across their careers, especially with the Truth and Reconciliation report from the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs (2015). For example, the examination of what is taught in

schools has led Ontario's provincial education to rethink and shift curriculum expectations to be more culturally responsive and inclusive of the Indigenous peoples of Canada (Ministry of Indigenous Affairs, 2016). The TRC (2015) recommendations and Calls to Action 62 and 63 have been linked to the movement towards providing land acknowledgements in educational settings, as well as some changes within the Ontario curriculum. For example, there have been changes to the history, sciences, art, culture, and languages curricula. Additionally, the onboarding of cultural resource educators has increased within educational settings (Ministry of Education, 2021). As demonstrated by the above participants, Indigenous history and ways of being are being picked up, brought forward, and shared today for everyone to learn (Benton-Benai, 1998). Although, IK and IP have been the goal of IECE programs and services from its inception, the momentum from moving Ifrom the margins to being centred has taken time (Anderson & Ball, 2020; (Greenwood and Jones, 2000; Greenwood, 2018; Hare, & Davidson, 2020).

Wholistic Learning Models

In Chapter Four, I noted how Marie connected the four quadrants of How Does Learning Happen? (HDLH) (2014) to the medicine wheel and its wholistic quadrants (physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual). As mentioned previously, to live mino-bimaadiziwin (living the good life), balance is required in each quadrant of the medicine wheel. The HDLH (2014) includes questions such as, "Children's present and future well-being is influenced by their ability to self-regulate. How can your program move from a focus on the adult managing children's behaviour towards a stronger focus on supporting children's developing self-regulation capacities?" (p. 34). I have found that the above question promotes rethinking the dominant western discourse within childcare contexts, opening up spaces towards reimagining IECE's wish to see change within their own practice. It also asks educators and administrators to question how these changes include the voices of the child, family, and community. For example, "How can families be engaged and be

drawn into the space? How can children and families be engaged in shaping the environment?" (HDLH, 2014, p. 39).

Jill similarly noted shifts in programs with HDLH (2014) as educators began to reflect on the questions such as those shared above. She recalled how in previous practice, parents were rarely invited into programs or to share their ideas. Over time, she noticed an increase in participation at community events and that Elders were invited to programs to share their knowledge. There was also greater focus on the revitalization of land-based activities and cultural traditions. These examples provided by Jill suggest that when educators have the opportunity to think about what they are teaching, why it is beneficial, and for whom, they begin to engage in decolonizing work. This work supports a curricular approach that emphasizes teacher inquiry and explores the questions of what matters in the community. Space for dialogical conversations thus becomes a possibility.

However, as I think more about curricular frameworks designed by those working from the dominant Western lens, a hierarchical structure exists. Although the HDLH (2014) is based on goals developed by the centres through pedagogical discourse, there are regulations that occur behind the scenes. For example, the policing of policies that are mandated by the Ministry and the annual Ministry visits leave educators and administrators on guard. When I first began as a Supervisor, I recall a conversation with a licensing agent regarding the language used in the annual review/inspection, such as compliant and non-compliant, and the overall tiering system a centre received after an annual review. I felt the uneasiness this evaluation created. For me, this is unlike the Anishinaabe wholistic ways of being described by my participants. I continually wonder what it would be like if evaluation and reviews were designed by and with communities, allowing space for culturally relevant pedagogies specific to centres and their philosophies. I recognize this is a topic for ongoing discussion and beyond the scope of this dissertation and one I hope to explore further in

future work.

It is my hope that annual reviews and inspections are for the betterment of child well-being and are intended to inform next steps. The TRC (2015) brought forward the need for a more culturally-relevant and responsive curricula in early learning programs, and since its release, conversations have opened up in early learning centres about how to implement this. Questions are being asked about what next steps are needed to support a positive identity formation in the early years. Curricular frameworks designed to promote critical reflective thinking will support these ongoing conversations. The HDLH (2014) is a starting point for Anishinaabek education to think about prompting questions within their own pedagogies and philosophies of learning. As stated in the Chi-Naakinigewin Preamble (see Figure 2), “Debenjiged kiimiingona dedbinwe wi naagdowendiwin (Creator gave us sovereignty to govern ourselves)” (UCCMM, 2011).

Nurturing the Learning Spirit

All participants emphasized that a child is a gift. From the stories shared, there is a need to restore, revitalize, reclaim, and reimagine a learning environment that centers around the child's spirit and their place in this world (Greenwood & Shawana, 2000; Huaman, 2015). When communities exercise their sovereignty within childcare, they provide pedagogies that honour the child and place their Indigenous knowledge at the centre where the child’s gifts are nurtured from their first breath (Anderson, 2012; Anderson & Ball, 2020; Hare, 2020; Gerlach et al., 2008).

There was also a strong desire to provide opportunities to build relationships and connections with educators, family, community, nation, land, other-than-humans, ceremony, and the learning spirit from the start within their respective programs. The strong desire to share traditional teachings and pass on knowledge about the Anishinaabe people is important (Anderson, 2012; Greenwood, 2016; Gerlach, 2018; Little Bear, 2000; Hare, 2011/2020; Hare, 2016 Simpson, 2011). Participants emphasized that critical self-reflective questions were important throughout their learning journeys.

Through these questions, they began to nurture their learning spirits and build their confidence, taking up space as Anishinaabe educators in urban, rural, and First Nations settings.

An Alternative Discourse

While reflecting on these relevant theories, I found myself returning to Pacini-Ketchabaw et al.'s (2015) term reconceptualization, and I see this term as a way forward in decolonizing ECE. The educators I spoke with brought new ideas from their lens and provided an alternative discourse to ECE programs. These new ideas are aligned with the postfoundational definition from Pacini-Ketchabaw et al. (2015):

> Postfoundational theories include poststructuralist, queer, postcolonial, and sociomaterial theories, among others, all the while interrogating how "their effects have been devastating to many people on the wrong side of humanism's subject/object binaries . . . [who] have struggles to reclaim and rewrite untold histories, to subvert what counts as knowledge and truth, and to challenge those who claim the authority to speak for them" (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000, p. 5). (p. 207)

As I have been moving through the process of going back and forward within each of the stories shared, I turned my reflections to definitions of innovation and considered the meanings provided by Indigenous educators. The more I thought about this definition and what I learned from the educators, the more I sensed that much of their work was about reclaiming who they are as Indigenous educators within a mainstream education. Next, I will discuss definitions of innovation and return to how I have come to define innovation after this research.

Defining Innovation

The findings shared in Chapter Five support the definition given by Huaman (2015), which states, "Indigenous Innovation is distinctive, *already at the center*, as theory, process, and practice" (p. 5, italics original). Looking back to Chapter Two, seven of the eight categories defined within

Huaman's (2015) work with educators were also present in this study. A key difference is that the seven participants in this study were from the Indigenous Early Childhood education field, offering an expanded voice to these previous findings. I mentioned the concept of bundles earlier when exploring the quilled medallions. Here, I return to bundles when comparing these seven categories from Huaman (2015). The bundle represents the many layers in the categories that give breadth and depth to the overall meaning of Indigenous innovation, like the medallions in Figure 17. Each medallion has layers of material that come together and hold multiple meanings, which I also found within the stories shared with me by the participants, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers. Their stories, part of their bundles, are compared to the Huaman (2015) categories (see Table 1) to highlight shared and differing aspects of innovation.

I have also been thinking about the working definition of innovation provided by Waterloo Institute for Social Innovation and Resilience (2021). This definition is powerful and aligns with scholars interested in Indigenous innovation, like Huaman (2015). The participants in this study shared a hope to pass on IK and impart the Anishinaabemowin language to the next generation. As mentioned, mino-bimaadiziwin (living a good life) is the hope for Anishinaabek. As I have explored innovation broadly and specifically, a powerful quote from Elaine's cedar basket description resonated with me:

> Back then our people used to create and make baskets and some of our people are trying to bring back this art. The forest is like a store is a description I have heard. Everything you need to build a canoe is found on Mother Earth . . . our ancestors used to be so innovative.

This speaks to the pride that participants had and wanted to share with the next generation of learners to instill past and current contributions Indigenous peoples have made in designing a better life for their people.

I have concluded that innovation from an Indigenous education perspective may be about asking the question, "How do we support children when they transition through each stage of their life journey as one Anishinaabe family?" Anderson (2012), who has collected lived experiences and teachings from Metis and First Nations people in Canada, explained the importance roles and responsibilities of the community had at the beginning of the child's life in past times:

> All community members had roles to play in preparing for new life and ensuring that the proper care was given to the pregnant woman and then the newborn . . . This sense of identity and belonging began as early as conception and was fostered through infancy, so that from the youngest age, community members knew their place and developed a sense of trust. (loc 998)

The participants shared this sentiment as they considered how feelings of belonging are important when building relationships with children and families. The practice of nurturing trust within the early years and beyond connects to the Harmony Rings (see Figure 3, Chapter Two). This overall goal is also echoed in the Indigenous Early Child Care Framework (IECCF) shared in Chapter One.

Table 1

Huaman's Categories in Relation to Innovation Bundles Provided by Participants

Huaman's (2015) Categories	**In This Study…**
a) driven by Indigenous people (i.e., who are accountable to local community)	**Bundle 1.** Stories of innovation were collected from IECE educators and the systems in which they work (OHASA, childcare, schools).
b) seeks to restore, reclaim, protect, maintain, and revitalize local IK linked with Indigenous cultural practices and languages	**Bundle 2.** All participants spoke to similar goals for restoring, reclaiming, maintaining, and revitalizing IK. Examples included: Immersion programs, cultural teachings (including Elders and Knowledge Holders in educational spaces), spiritual ceremonies, Anishinaabe aadzawin (ways of being and doing).
c) draws from local IK systems	**Bundle 3.** All participants supported a blend of land-based learning (literacy of the land), including: relationship with the land, language, Elders and KK, spirituality, ceremonies.

d) is equipped to conscientiously respond to imperialisms and their strategies, including colonization and capitalism	**Bundle 4.** All participants highlighted conscious strategies they were taking up as part of a similar conscientious response to imperialism. Examples included: land-based learning, language revitalization, ceremony (e.g. smudging), sustainability practices, Aki-aadzawin (learning about medicines on the land), reflexivity within educators' teaching practices.
e) creates spaces where metanarratives are problematized, approaches evaluated and reevaluated, and tensions appropriately addressed	**Bundle 5.** All participants reflected on what they felt mattered within the education system based on their own Indigenous identities. They spoke to shifts they had made to culturally relevant pedagogies.
f) opens, expands, and rebuilds dialogue within and between Indigenous communities	**Bundle 6.** All participants advocated for the rights of the children and the gifts that each child brings. Educators worked in or helped to create spaces that were inclusive of Indigenous Knowledges. Examples included: Immersion school, land-based learning, circle of care, intergenerational learning, and inquiry-based learning.
g) explores and builds connections with other knowledge systems (i.e., western modern science)	**Bundle 7.** All participants shared a two-eyed seeing approach to learning. They drew from other programs/curricula (Headstart, Reggio Emilia), as well as inquiry-based learning. They shared cultural artifacts as learning tools within Western curricula (How Does Learning Happen and the Early Learning Kindergarten Document) and connected language and land using artifacts and sustainability practices.
h) is concerned with how Indigenous people are benefitted and for how long (p. 5)	**Bundle 8.** All participants shared the hope for childcare, families, and community and the next generations to come.

Looking Back and Looking Ahead - Returning to Anishinaabe Aadzawin as Innovation

Huaman's (2015) definition of innovation theory is intricately connected to the processes and practices of innovation. A recurring idea emerged as I reflected on how participants described Indigenous innovation. I began to think of Indigenous innovation as a methodology within Indigenous Early Childhood Education. Participants shared that they have returned to traditional values within their teaching practice. They also shared that once they went back to learn about Anishinaabe Aadzawin and brought traditional ways to their current learning spaces, these ways provided support to self, children, families, and community. The return to traditional values described by Elders and Knowledge Keepers is the way of reawakening the social, emotional, physical, and

mental being of our Anishinaabe selves (Personal Communication, Hopkins, 2022; Personal Communication, Dumont, 2022; Personal Communication, Oshkabewisens, 2022). In the literature, Anishinaabe aadzawin is referred to as biskaabiiyang methodology, as decolonization (Geniusz, 2009; Simpson, 2011; Wemigwans, 2017).

The disruption within Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies brought on by colonization is often referred to by Elders and Knowledge Keepers as historical trauma and is passed down intergenerationally (Personal Communication, Hopkins, 2021). As a community member on Turtle Island (now referred to as North America), I can see the intergenerational trauma caused due to colonialism (Anderson & Ball, 2020; Hare & Davidson, 2020; Simpson, 2011). However, I can also see the Anishinaabek spirit resist and reclaim the Anishinaabe ways of being and doing as they push for change through Anishinaabe Biskaabiiyang (returning to ourselves as Anishinaabe) (Geniusz, 2009; Simpson, 2011, Wemigwans, 2017). I think of Anishinaabe Biskaabiiyang as an innovative approach to western colonial education. Although participants may follow a mandated curriculum, they are not succumbing to the colonial agenda. Instead, they are working towards the needs of their community's health and wellness, which supports children in their lifelong learning journey. It is a continual process that has no final destination, and it starts with their journeys of change (Greenwood & Jones, 2018).

Dumont (2022) disagreed with the use of the word decolonization, seeing it as a negative word. This perspective is also shared by the Elders and Knowledge Keepers I have listened to, as well as scholars such as Graham Smith (2002). Smith (2002), a Maori scholar, shared that when the Maori wanted change for their people, they put Maori at the centre. Smith felt that this allowed Maori to be critically conscious of where they are and where they wanted to go, rather than being caught in the web of the politics of distraction. Dumont (2022) suggested that "we need to speak about the

positive way of life to understand our way of life and get back to it." According to Dumont (2022), "We cannot create positive life-giving when talking about the negative." Biskaabiiyang is the term that Dumont (2022) felt reflects an Anishinaabe way of being and doing. For Dumont, biskaabiiyaang "is returning, going back to culture as a way of life, and spirituality" (Personal Communication, Feb. 22, 2022).

As Murray Sinclair pointed out, "Innovation isn't always about creating new things or creating new ways of doing. Rather, it sometimes involves looking back at our old ways and bringing them forward to this new situation" (National Association of Friendship Centres, 2015, p. 5). Looking back at the data, I began to thread together the terms biskaabiiyang and innovation. For Anishinaabe ECE, innovation is non-static. It is not only theory; it is a methodology of practice and is a living discovery of life that is cyclical and reciprocal.

Sustainability in Education

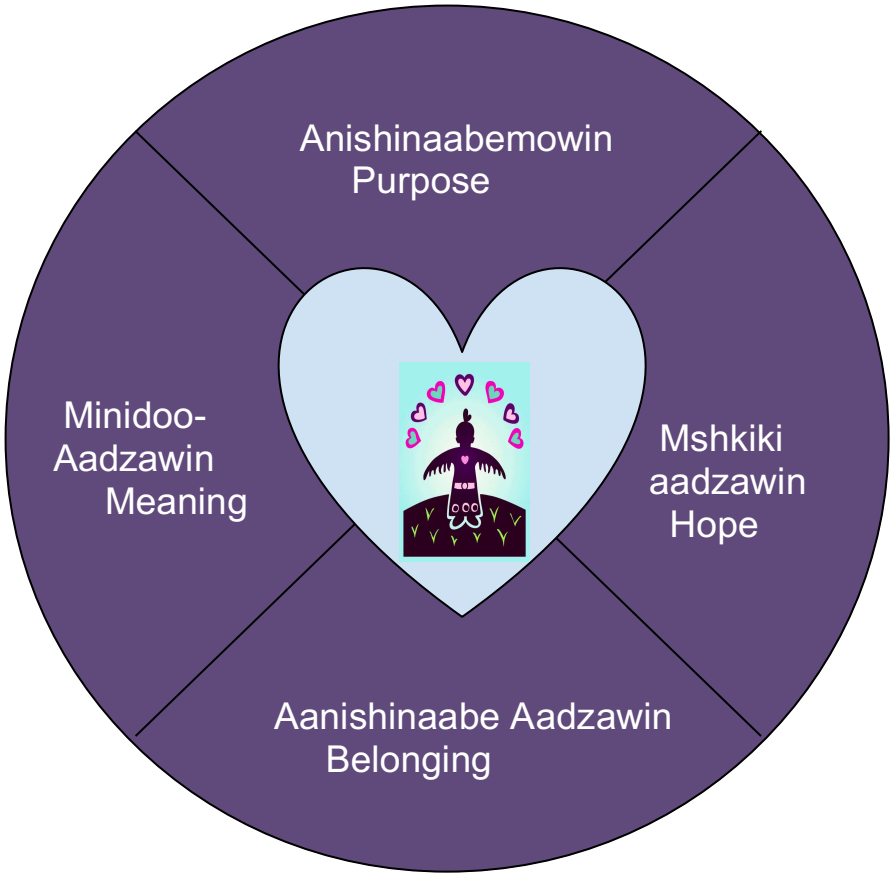
As I revisit the definitions shared by Sinclair, Huaman, and the Waterloo Institute, I also hear the hope that Anishinaabek ways of being can bring balance to one's life and have a ripple effect. These ripples will make for better ways of living in a world that continues to provide the breath of life for the next generations to come. I see how the definition shared by Waterloo is a step forward towards social change and decolonizing the academy to make life better for everyone. Anishinaabek peoples are collectively striving and hoping for a sustainable future that is founded on Anishinaabek identity and traditions that will have a positive impact not only for Anishinaabek but for all who call Shkagamik-kwe (Mother Earth) home. Next, I share the layers of thinking I have experienced during this research study. I consider the overall meaning gathered from participants through a visual design similar to the creation of the medallions using a graphic design option which embeds key principles which supports and contributes to Indigenous innovation within education.

Bringing Indigenous Innovation to Life

In this section, I visualize the findings of this research study. Figure 18 presents a medallion-like graphic that includes key principles for Indigenous Innovation praxis and methodology. I engaged with the ideas of interconnectedness, relationality, roles and responsibilities, and wholism more deeply as I embodied the messages each participant shared.

Figure 18

Principles of Indigenous Innovation for Anishinaabek Education (Manitowabi, 2022)



Note: Image designed by author and image of the child is used with permission

Designing Figure 18 helped me to better understand Indigenous innovation and what matters to Indigenous Early Childhood Educators when providing spaces and places for Indigenous education to thrive. It is a layering of past Indigenous teachings (Dumont, 2022; Geniusz, 2009; UCCMM, 2011) utilized in a contemporary image to understand Indigenous innovation.

Expanding the Visual

Below I outline the design details of the medallion presented in Figure 18:

- The outer circle represents wholism, which encompasses the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual development of each person. The circle represents the ongoing cycle of renewal and growth and is continuous through each stage of life.
- The four purple sections are equally divided to represent balance in one's life. The colour purple is significant as it represents the wampum shared in the Chi-Naakinigewin. This colour reminds me of the relationships and inherent right of self-determination and the constitutional right to Indigenous education.
- Each purple section, starting in the east (right-hand side of page), represents a return to Indigenous innovation:
    - Mshkiki Aadzawin, which means land as teacher, medicine, and pedagogy, and represents hope.
    - Aanishinaabe Aadzawin, which encompasses teaching of Indigenous values and principles, and represents belonging.
    - Mnidoo-Aadzawin, which refers to spiritual life and the interconnectedness of all things, including the importance of relationships to all creation, and represents meaning.
    - Anishinaabemowin, which refers to Ojibway language learning, as each person journeys through life, and represents purpose.
- The blue heart wrapped around the child at the centre of the circle reflects that each child is born to a doodem (clan). The child is placed in the centre, as they are viewed as a gift from the creator and central to the community. The seven additional hearts above the child represent the seven sacred gifts to guide and support them through life. Altogether, this

gives the breath of life and Indigenous cultural teaching tools and strategies towards the ultimate goal of mino-bimaadiziwin (living the good life).

Situating the Visual

Murray Sinclair shared a strong message during the TRC (2015): "education is the key to reconciliation," adding, "education got us into this mess, and education will get us out of this mess" (Walter, 2015). Figure 18 looks back to Indigenous ways of being while continually looking forward to a robust future for Indigenous education. It foregrounds Indigenous knowledge and practices that have been previously left along the trail for educators to find and bring back to our Anishinaabek educational systems, as described by the participants.

The traditional Indigenous values of family mean everyone is part of raising children in some way to ensure the care of all members of the community. In Chapter Four, Shannon talked about naming the youth centre Endaayang (home is where the heart is), and Kevin spoke to this understanding of family when he shared:

> Education includes the whole family, which includes the parents, grandparents, and extended family. "It takes a village to raise a child" is a great quote and [is] true, because the more support the family has, the more the child has, and everything trickles down.

As I looked back through the participants' transcripts, they shared many similar principles, values, hopes, and examples within their teaching practice as they took up their roles and responsibilities as Indigenous educators woven into the Chi-Naakinigewin Preamble (Figure 2).

Decolonizing work recognizes that we need to know where we have been, where we are today, and where we want to go as Anishinaabek people. Firstly, it is important to understand that colonization is a powerful force and continues to impact Indigenous people today, as well as education curricula and policies. Shannon shared that the Covenant Belts holds the history of the

relationship and agreement between Indigenous peoples and the Colonial Government. She returned to what this initial relationship meant, and it guided her way of thinking, being, and doing today:

> Having our ways, we can still appreciate the western ways, but also remind non- Indigenous people, you can have your own ways and they can be beautiful; our ways are not superior to yours, and vice versa. We just have different ways of living, but we have mutual responsibilities to ensure that we keep truth, and that we keep peace, and that we keep friendship and respect.

Shannon was referring to past relationships with the British Crown, such as the Royal Proclamation of 1763, which set how the colonial administration would establish relations with the First Nations peoples. It was also the fiduciary responsibility of the colonial administrators to ensure certain rights and protection for First Nations peoples, and the legislation also outlined how the government could gain ownership over First Nations' lands. More acts were to come from this initial legislation, all moving towards the assimilation of First Nations people and away from the initial nation-to-nation relationships that were once agreed upon (Parrot, 2022). As shared by participants, through their life journeys, they felt that much of what they experienced in education spaces and places was a strong maintenance of mainstream values and traditions, while their Indigenous voices were silenced. All participants conveyed the importance of knowing and learning about Indigenous history and traditions as a way forward for them and the learning spaces they occupy today.

Figure 18 pushes back against mainstream curricula (e.g., HDLH, 2014) and is an innovative Anishinaabe approach to Early Childhood Education. I recognized that problems arise when we do not think critically about the impacts of hierarchical structures and linear thinking. This lack of critical thinking can perpetuate the notion that "other" ways of being and doing are pagan and non-progressive (Corbiere, 2000). As Smith et al. (2019) remind us, once dominant discourses take

precedence, it takes more than policies to shift embedded colonial structures. Smith et al. (2019) further stated:

> Decolonizing studies, when most centered in Indigenous philosophy, push back against human development, and argue the renderings of time and place that exceed coloniality and conquest. (p. xiii)

If educators and communities wish to uplift and advocate for change, it is important to know what it is we are advocating for and what it is that we want to change, not only in education but also in the way we view the world. Paradigms and worldviews are powerful tools that can be used to shift our thinking for a better tomorrow, but can also be used to reproduce the same results that negatively impact how we imagine moving forward with dignity and respect for each other. As Ramona shared her thoughts on innovation, she stated, "It's history, as this allows us to see what innovation is. Without knowing history, we don't really know what innovation is."

My Expanding Definition of Innovation

Through this study, I began to formulate my definition of Indigenous innovation. For me, at this moment, Indigenous innovation is looking back to Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies that ground Indigenous peoples in their cultural, social, and political traditions, and bring them forward within educational systems in new ways. Indigenous innovation as a methodology includes many forms of learning from the land, people, oral stories, spirituality, teachings, languages, natural laws, and is relational that seeks Mino-bimaadiziwin (the good life). Innovation is informed by the past, present, and future of Anishinaabe ways of knowing, being, and doing, and offers vital contributions to cultural and ecological sustainability. Innovation as being transformative, critical, reflective and conscious of self and praxis, decolonizing, wholistic and nurtures the learning spirit.

Indigenous innovation seeks to dismantle the Eurocentric system that has rationalized western globalization as development and progress. Disrupting these dominant discourses then

transforms the institutional systems and allows for shifting the discourse towards wholism and Anishinaabe mino-bimaadiziwin. Having the opportunity to explore innovation through an Indigenous lens has brought clarity to my work. It will continue to provide me with guidance as I continue along my educational journey.

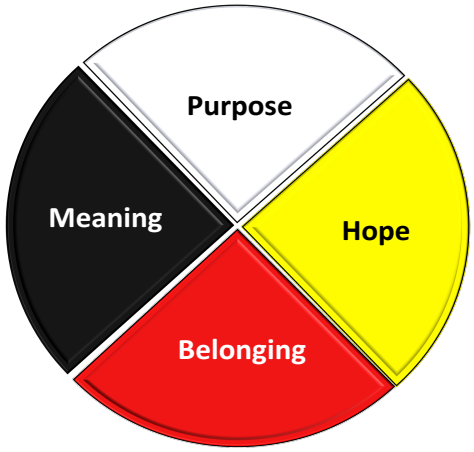
Mino-Bimaadiziwin - Returning to Ourselves

This study contributes to the topic of innovation in an Indigenous early learning/childcare environment through an Anishinaabe lens. Innovation from an Indigenous perspective includes many facets that are much different from western colonial education's vision of innovation, as well as of the purpose education serves. Innovation is different within Indigenous Early Childhood Education because colonial histories have been founded on grand narratives that erase one culture for another's cultural gain (Battiste, 2013; Parrot, 2022; Tuck and Yang, 2019). It is much more than changing the learning environment to increase student success. Innovation as Anishinaabe biskaabiiyang brings well-being and mino-bimaadiziwin (living a good life). Further to that definition:

> Mino-bimaadiziwin "is seen by many people as the overall goal of healing, learning and life in general" (Hart, 2002, p. 44). Anishinaabe bimaadiziwin is recognizing your gifts, and recognizing that you have answers. The search for who you are is internal. To recognize your gifts, you need nurturance and love, as these supports help bring the gifts to fruition. Reaching the good life, therefore, involves the family and community in addition to the self. Herring supports this idea of self-actualization when he states that Indigenous "cultures emphasize cooperation, harmony, interdependence, the achievement of socially oriented and group goals, and a collective responsibility. Thus the goal [of self-actualization] is more akin to family and tribal self actualization" (Hart, 2002, p. 74). (Bell, 2016, p. 17)

From what I have heard from each participant, innovation is about healing and wellness. It is about remembering to make our places of learning spaces that encompass the child's spirituality.

All participants shared the same sentiments of finding one's purpose in Early Childhood Education and then carrying out their purpose by taking action in their respective learning environments. In doing so, all participants contributed to re-creating, revitalizing, and re-establishing traditional values, principles, and knowledge within a learning environment. For me, this is an example of what it looks like to return to our traditional Anishinaabek roles and responsibilities. Dumont (see page 139) shared in his teaching about finding our purpose and what that means from an Anishinaabe perspective. Once Dumont found his purpose through his vision quest, he lived his life fulfilling his vision. Along his journey, he was guided by Elders and Knowledge Keepers who helped him understand his purpose. This allowed him to continue working towards enhancing Indigenous Education through Anishinaabek Biskaabiiyang (returning to ourselves).The return to these roles supports the change and transformation in mainstream education by being the change we wish to see in the world (Gandhi, 1964). For Indigenous education, this means re-storying Indigenous education, which includes learning through and from the positive and negative experiences that we all share in order to come up with a more meaningful and robust future for all towards mino-bimaadiziwin (living the good life).



Note: Repeated visual (Figure 1) to return to the structural parts of the dissertation

Part 4: Purpose (Action)

Part Four signifies the completion of another chapter in my story. I have spent several years in post-secondary education as a curriculum developer, researcher, and educator. Through-out life, I sought to practice what I hoped for within the Indigenous education field. I developed relationships with self, students, family, nation, and clan. From this study, I have learned how educators, including myself, have created, designed, and implemented innovative learning approaches that include Indigenous knowledge and pedagogies. Participants' stories and artifacts highlighted innovative approaches to learning in a contemporary context that illuminated the resurgence of Indigenous ways of knowing. Anishinaabe biskaabiiyang methodology (Geniusz, 2009; Simpson, 2011) also opened spaces for considering the transformational ways in which IECE's praxis expanded towards mino-bimaadiziwin (the good life). In this last part of my research journey, I seek to honour my purpose by acting as an agent of change and helper to fulfill the work provided in the recommendations offered in this section. I will continue to push the boundaries and status quo of colonial education systems as

we see them today.

Chapter Seven: Adding the Finished Quilled Medallions to My Learning Bundle Through Reciprocity

As I finished the work of putting the quilled medallions together, I reflected on how each piece represented the voices of my participants. As pleased as I was with how the medallions turned out, I always knew that I would be giving them away. I knew it would not be easy to do; I put much energy into making the medallions, as I did the dissertation. But in the end, when I sent out the medallions, I felt what reciprocity truly meant. I think this is also how my grandmother might have felt when she finished a piece of work and then let it go, knowing that they were never ours to keep. As part of Anishinaabek protocol, it is customary to give a gift to show your appreciation for what participants have given. Giving feels just as good as receiving when done in a good way. As the teaching goes, what you put out there will always come back to you, so always put out the good!

This research exploration gave me insight into what innovation means within the context of Indigenous Early Childhood Education. The educators who shared their stories with me provided a glimpse into the resurgence of Indigenous knowledge and pedagogies within their own lives and educational spaces. This research answered Battiste's call to decolonize education through innovative ways to meet the needs of Indigenous people. In Chapter Four, the stories shared allowed me to understand the what, why and how of bringing in Indigenous ways of being within both mainstream education systems and First Nations' systems. I have learned that some educational systems were more prepared to ensure that Indigenous education was at the forefront, based on their educational approaches. Some educators pushed the boundaries within curriculum frameworks that were not explicitly centered around the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge and pedagogies. It was also apparent that the Truth and Reconciliation Report (2015) has provided opportunities for education systems to think about how they will provide culturally safe, competent, and relevant guidance within

the early years centres (Centre of Excellence, 2016). In this final section, I turn to action by sharing recommendations and considerations for future research along with my closing letter to participants.

Recommendations

Several recommendations arose from this study and can be implemented for planning Anishinaabek education in innovative ways:

1. Develop teacher education programs that provide a wholistic understanding of student well-being.
2. Provide a model for professional learning communities to be established within early learning centres as part of pedagogical discourse.
3. Provide opportunities for sustainable practices within education to ensure that the goals of Indigenous knowledge and pedagogies are ongoing.
4. Provide education programs in transformational leadership in Early Childhood Education programs.
5. Provide mentorship programs for educators to learn from experienced educators in language and culture.
6. Develop partnership programs within the community to provide meaningful land-based education.
7. Develop Indigenous-led strategic planning models for education and immersion programs.
8. Develop cultural competency and responsive learning modules for onboarding staff as part of ongoing orientations.

These recommendations are a start toward reconciliation in education. There is a need for more programs to provide access and knowledge of Indigenous ways of knowing and doing to the next generation. The hope is to learn with and from Indigenous ways of being and to plan how this

knowledge and pedagogy will be shared in today's learning environments. Allowing Indigenous knowledge and pedagogies to flourish within the education system is a way forward for all who call Turtle Island home.

Reflecting on Limitations and Possibilities for Future Research

It is important to consider the limitations of my research as I ponder possibilities for future work. One limitation of this study was the need to meet with participants virtually for data collection. Due to the global pandemic, I could not make one-on-one personal visits with each participant or visit the childcare centres in which each participant worked. As part of conversational methods within Indigenous Storywork, it is good practice to share in conversation over tea, including the sharing of food, which is a respectful way to engage in conversations within Anishinaabek communities. However, the participants fully understood and were comfortable visiting virtually, as they had been doing many meetings and providing virtual learning and family programs throughout the past year.

While this research project had a small sample size of nine participants (seven practitioners, one Knowledge Keeper, and one Elder), this number aligns with an Indigenous Storywork methodology to allow each participant's voice to be heard and contribute to the exploration of Indigenous Early Childhood Education and innovation.

Looking ahead to future research possibilities, I learned how each of my participants' communities has the resources to support and define what innovation means to them and what this would look like within their education systems. As a future study, I foresee sharing community stories that highlight innovative and wholistic approaches to learning. Part of this conversation might include how communities are moving forward within their educational systems in the time of reconciliation. As a next step for my research, I would like to explore projects that have come out of

the Indigenous Early Learning and Childcare funding from the federal government, which supports Indigenous communities in their innovative projects within early learning. It would be interesting to learn what their projects were and how they might define innovation from their lens, with examples of their projects and the sustainability and/or challenges of these projects. There are many directions this research could take, as this is only the beginning of our story of where Indigenous innovation within Early Childhood Education will go for the next seven generations. To conclude, I return to the writing format used in Chapter Four to provide my final thinking and appreciation for the conversations shared with participants and leave participants with a teaching that resonates with our exploration.

Closing Reflection Letter to Participants

Dear Nwiijkewenyik (friends),

Before I begin, I wanted to express my gratitude to all of you who have come along with me in my re-search journey. My choice of re-search with a hyphen reflects an Indigenous movement that allows researchers to rethink the purpose and intent of research within the community. Miigwetch for sharing how your life journey in education shifted and evolved throughout time and space, and for giving freely of your time. I learned a great deal from your lived experience in IECE and the meanings you brought to the term innovation.

While you shared, I began to think about four key points that I continued to circle back to as I listened to our conversations and began to make connections and meaning. These key points include: hope, belonging, meaning, and purpose (Figure 1). I heard these key points before when I heard Elder Jim Dumont retell the Creation story. For me, I could hear the hope *we all have for our children, family, and communities and the vision we have for all families to live their best lives through the nurturing of their spirit. I also heard* belonging*. This is the important relationship we*

have with each other and is strengthened by the interconnectedness we have with one another when we come to know. I also began to think about meaning *as a process. When we give time to reflect on what really matters within an educational setting, such as ensuring that it is balanced and wholistic, we then begin to look deeper into the lens of Anishinaabe ways of being. Lastly,* purpose *was also shared and, for me, I find that once we find our purpose in life, we begin to fulfill our responsibilities as an Anishinaabe. We are in constant movement with our actions, and this allows us to heal, resurge, and reignite our ways of being and doing with ourselves and extends out to those around us.*

I have thought about the teachings that were shared with me and how they affect me as a learner and a researcher. One in particular is the meaning behind the seven stages of life. This teaching is about living, learning, and relearning through our life experiences, both the positive and the negative. Although some of these experiences are hard to go through, they shape who we become, and through those seven stages of life, we become who we are meant to be. For example, in our conversations this included facing the historical trauma, hurt, and uncertainty of bringing in our voices as Indigenous educators and how this impacted our growth at times. However, by being able to heal and come to terms with these experiences, we have been able to want to change and do things differently, making our way back to a more positive and meaningful journey and taking up our roles and responsibilities to the community.

I sensed the challenges growing up, both in a First Nations community and those who grew up in urban or rural areas. As I have been reflecting on that area, I think this is where my story as an EL educator intertwines with my journey growing up rural and then returning home to live, reconnect, and work. This in itself reflects the researcher/learner/educator identity and my story of

my history through the unfolding of my various stages of life and how I have come to be (Absolon, 2011; Kovach, 2009/2010; Scheffel, 2011; Wilson, 2008).

I end this letter with my deepest gratitude for all that you have taught me. I leave you with this teaching from an Elder from my community, who shared her teaching of the rose for all to learn from. For me, this is how I see the journey of IECE and innovation continuing to unfold. This also echoes the teaching shared by Rhonda, as she states, "Our greatest teachers are our mistakes, and we need to allow ourselves those mistakes, because otherwise we would never learn" (Personal Communication, 2022).

> Each of us carries a fire within. Whether it's through the knowledge we have, or through our experiences and associations, we are responsible for maintaining that fire. And so as a child, when my mother and father would say, at the end of the day, "My daughter, how is your fire burning?," it would make me think of what I've gone through that day. If I'd been offensive to anyone, or if they have offended me. I would reflect on that because it has a lot to do with nurturing the fire within. And so we were taught at a very early age to let go of any distractions of the day by making peace within ourselves, so that we can nurture and maintain our fire.
>
> We have many teachings on the value of nurturance. When I was a child, my father told us about the Rose Story. He said the Creator asked the flower people, "Who among you will bring a reminder to the two-legged about the essence of life?" The buttercup answered, "I will, Creator, I will." And the Creator said, "No, you can't, because you're too bright." All of the flowers offered their help. At the very end, the rose said, "Let me remind them with my essence, so that in times of sadness and in times of joy, they will remember how to be kind to themselves."

So the Creator, the Master Gardener, took a seed of the rose and planted it in Mother Earth. The winds tilled the soil, and the warm rains gave it water until a very small sprout came through the ground. Day after day it grew. The stem sprouted little thorns that were very, very sharp. After the thorns came the little leaves. As time went on, a little bud formed. After much care, this little bud bloomed into a full rose.

And so life is like a rose. The thorns are our life's journey; without them we would lack the hard won teachings that we need in order to grow. Life's experiences make us who we are. And like the rose, we too decay and die many times in a lifetime only to come back to fruition again and again, after reflection, meditation, awareness, acceptance, and surrender.

My father told us the rose is both life and its gifts. So when I am making my own Medicine Wheel, I put the rose here in the centre as a reminder of my own life's journey and its gifts. (Pitawanakwat, 2006, p. 3)

Miigwetch Nwiijkewen (friend)
Melanie

Epilogue

The art of quill box making is a metaphor I return to throughout my dissertation. After reflecting about what I was learning, I began to think about how quill box making embeds the concept of Anishinaabe biskaabiiyang (returning to ourselves). I have come to understand and enact Anishinaabe biskaabiiyang as a methodology that represents going back to the principles of Anishinaabe aadzawin (ways of knowing and being of the Anishinaabe people). Applying the above concepts through this research project has allowed me to continue to move forward in decolonizing my own mind, body, and spirit as I reclaim and resurge Anishinaabe kendaaswin (specific knowledge from our personal teaching) so that I can pass these principles on to the next generation.

My grandmother had also lived by these principles and knew her strengths as an Anishinaabe. She shared her strengths and knowledge through informal teachings to her family. I learned through her own way how to be present with the materials she worked with and the overall process it had taken to start and follow through a project to its completion. This memory and reflection have taught me more about who she was and how she made a better life for her children. There are many more teachings that go beyond her quillwork, but for this section I wanted to honour what I learned from her craft and from her teachings to uncover more about who I am as granddaughter of a master Anishinaabe crafter. I believe that is the beauty of teachings.

During the research study, I decided that I wanted to apply a creative approach when learning from and with participants' stories, including my own story. Through this process of creating, I have come to understand more about what Indigenous Innovation means through an Indigenous lens. I have also learned that the knowledge I have gained has come from dibaajimownan (personal stories, histories, teaching and ordinary stories) and aadizookan (traditional legends) shared by the participants, which is core to Indigenous Storywork principles.

For me, bringing together each story through the aid of using my own knowledge of quill box making helped me put the pieces together, which now contribute to the sharing of our story of what Indigenous Innovation means within Early Childhood Education. From this unfolding of the analogy of the quill box, I have also come to know that this analogy was becoming into its own methodology, an Indigenous methodology. Smith (2019) shared her connection to a sweet grass porcupine quill box as methodology in her work. I too, have come to this in my work. This in itself is an innovation towards the creation of a methodology that is situated within an Indigenous paradigm and is a form of returning to myself as an Anishinaabe kwe.

What unfolded through this research inquiry were the stories of hope, belonging, meaning, and purpose. What resulted from my meaning-making was vision, relationship, knowledge, and action. These are represented in the image of the circle shared in Figure 1. The circle is about balance, story, teachings of history, ceremony, the stages of life, and the changing seasons. Within Anishinabek teachings, the circle never ends; it is continual, interconnected, interrelated, and synergistic, and whole. My continual journey within the field of education is also cyclical and will be continuous.

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