

## Land-Based Education: Stepping Back To Save the Future

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### Abstract

*The impact of Residential Schools on Indigenous People has left a long-lasting crippling effect on the subsequent generations of Indigenous youth. The resultant intergenerational loss of identity and self-value has cost the Indigenous People and their communities immensely. Aboriginal People based their education system on the real world around them for centuries and are intrinsically attached to nature. This article investigates the benefits of re-introducing Indigenous youth to a land-based educational system as a means of re-attaching the severed familial and communal ties. The very nature of traditional Land-based education practices such as hunting and gathering form strong bonds between participants and nature, and lays the foundation for interpersonal community relationships. It is believed that, by returning to a land-based teaching approach, Aboriginal communities can be rebuilt.*

Roman Catholic, Anglican, United, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches were the major denominations involved in the administration of the residential school system. The government's partnership with the churches remained in place until 1969 and, although most of the schools closed by the 1980s, the last federally supported residential schools remained in operation until the late 1990s (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). These schools were designed to ruthlessly remove the cultural identity from the Indigenous youth through community isolation and colonial immersion, thereby stripping them of their sense of social belonging and self-worth. The stories of that experience are sometimes difficult to accept as something that could have happened in a country such as Canada, which has long prided itself on being a bastion of democracy, peace, and kindness throughout the world. Children were abused, physically and sexually, and they died in the schools in numbers that would not have been tolerated in any school system anywhere in the country, or in the world (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

As children, Indigenous elders of today were forced to attend Residential Schools, where they suffered many hardships from racism to physical and sexual abuse to dislocation from community and family. For children, life in these schools was lonely and alien. Buildings were poorly located, poorly built, and poorly maintained. The staff was limited in numbers, often poorly trained, and not adequately supervised. Many schools were poorly heated and poorly ventilated, and the diet was meagre and of poor quality. Discipline was harsh, and daily life was highly regimented. Aboriginal languages and cultures were denigrated and suppressed (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). After centuries of land-centred living, followed by decades of oppression, the First Nations people of North America are struggling to reconnect with their identity. Family and community connections that provided emotional, spiritual, and physical support have been brutally and systematically dismantled (Corntassel & Hardbarger, 2019). Entire generations were removed from their communities, and knowledge systems rooted in land were disrupted (Madden, 2019).

Re-introduction of land-based education has been a stepping stone to reversing the effects of Residential Schools. Many of the traditional/cultural activities require multiple participants to work collectively toward common goals and offer a wide range of opportunities to establish meaningful instructional relationships while sharing knowledge in the sustainability of resources in a natural habitat. While gathering firewood, a discussion about the importance of not removing all of it since it is necessary to replenish nutrients in the soil. When hunting, there are many discussions around ethics and proper handling techniques to ensure that the life of

harvested animal is honoured, and the creator is thanked for the offering, by utilizing as much of the carcass as possible. Students have found that reconnecting with the land through traditional practices has facilitated the transition in their lives from the sense of desperate one-ness to a feeling of collective belonging.

### **The Detrimental Legacy of Residential Schools**

Callously disallowing an Indigenous worldview approach has maintained the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in education and, ultimately, multiple areas relating to employment, health care, and treaty rights. Residential Schools played two roles in intergenerational transmission of disadvantage: it dispersed socio-economic reproduction while at the same time inhibiting socio-economic mobility (Rebeiz & Cooke, 2016). Circumvention of hands-on, traditional approaches discouraged a reconnection of community relations to the land, water, plant, and animal species that have sustained Indigenous peoples for generations (Corntassel & Hardbarger, 2019).

Forbidding land-based, traditional education denied a natural pathway for survivors and their descendants to revive and revitalize the language and culture of their ancestors while providing a better foundation for academic success. Indigenous students still struggle mightily with the various social and emotional challenges of having their storied heritage scorned and shamed. As a result of the historical injustice of Residential Schools, the Indigenous youth of today are the product of the many oppressive factors of yesterday and the symptoms of disjointed, severed familial relationships of today. Aboriginal peoples feel that they used to have each other but now they only have themselves (Downie & Lemire, 2016). The students were left with a lonely existence where they were without any semblance of belonging.

Residential schools were created for the purpose of separating Aboriginal children from their families, in order to minimize and weaken family ties and cultural linkages (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Indigenous communities endured an intergenerational loss of culture, land, medicine, language, knowledge, and traditional lifeways. The eradication of educational, cultural, environmental, spiritual/religious, and gender-based practices that sustained and structured the ancient communal relationships and values have left Indigenous youth and communities with multiple social-economic disadvantages (Corntassel & Hardbarger, 2019). It is believed that land-based pedagogies can be one of the instrumental pathways to educational successes, and community resurgence and sustainability, by reclaiming the relationships intrinsically grounded in land, culture, and community.

As a result of Residential Schools, disparities in educational successes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (Rebeiz & Cooke, 2016) are very apparent across Canada. Disallowing Indigenous students to maintain their natural connections to the land and familial relations mired the students' ability to adjust to a completely foreign education system. Indigenous students were savagely stripped of everything they knew, and were violently forced to conform to Western Education ideals with no support system. Educational excellence gaps have been found to be present from the beginning of third grade due to the influence of poverty, which is typical in First Nation communities (Rambo-Hernandez et al., 2019). Gaps in educational attainment between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students persist, with numerous studies suggesting that restoring traditional ways of teaching and learning can offset this trend (Rebeiz & Cooke, 2016) due to these renewed bonds.

### **Land-Based Education as a Cultural/Educational Bridge**

We call on the federal government to draft new Aboriginal education legislation with the full participation and informed consent of Aboriginal peoples. The new legislation would include a commitment to sufficient funding and would incorporate the following principles:

- i. Providing sufficient funding to close identified educational achievement gaps within one generation.
- ii. Improving education attainment levels and success rates.
- iii. Developing culturally appropriate curricula.
- iv. Protecting the right to Aboriginal languages, including the teaching of Aboriginal languages as credit courses.
- v. Enabling parental and community responsibility, control, and accountability, similar to what parents enjoy in public school systems.
- vi. Enabling parents to fully participate in the education of their children.
- vii. Respecting and honouring Treaty relationship.

(Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, pp. 321-322)

It is well-documented that Residential Schools were established with a goal of destroying family and community ties, and aggressively cleansing Indigenous People of their culture and natural connection with their surroundings. It was found through many studies that fostering relations with elders, grandparents, and parents while working shoulder to shoulder on traditional practices perpetuated Indigenous knowledge and was seen as a catalyst for change, thereby promoting community/cultural sustainability, specifically regarding interpersonal relationships (Harper et al., 2019). Forging a new path by employing Indigenous-based education practices improved graduation rates and increased post-secondary education success (Rebeiz & Cooke, 2016).

In order to engage the next generation's development, growth and spirit, educators need to understand the lived experiences of Indigenous youth, and the monumental importance of reviving their relations with their land-based heritage. Engaging in cultural practices such as basket making, pottery and beading, gathering and cooking certain foods, upholding communal and cultural values, and perpetuating language honour relationships also instills a feeling of responsibility, awareness, and tenacity to resurrect Indigenous communities and traditions. The success of adventure-based education, stressing ethnobotany (the study of plants and animals as they relate to the traditional practices and knowledge of a society and culture), has proven to be extremely effective in engaging students of Indigenous and non-Indigenous ancestry (Hansen, 2018). Spiritual ceremonies, peacemaking practices, and stories have been used from time immemorial to restore harmony and maintain good relations (Madden, 2019). Educators must stress the reciprocating relationship between human, land, and spiritual worlds when reworking the curriculum to respect the natural balance and reflect Aboriginal educational values).

An Indigenous-centred program that incorporates land-based learning, spirituality and the Medicine Wheel has created a blueprint for heightened student engagement and retention (Rebeiz & Cooke, 2016). School divisions have called upon their educators to build cultural bridges between Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff and students in an effort to overcome educational, emotional, and social barriers. There is evidence to suggest that the implementation of traditional Indigenous worldviews and land-based initiatives inspired and directed by Elders and knowledge holders has increased the educational engagement of students of Indigenous as well as non-Indigenous backgrounds (Marker, 2017).

To counteract the effects of Residential School legacies, numerous ministries of education are mandating that an Indigenous perspective be integrated in curricula development. Many modern school divisions and First Nations communities have realized that Indigenous students must rediscover their heritage and embrace their culture to be successful students scholastically and socio-economically. Canadian educators are charged with reforming their approach incorporating pieces of Indigenous knowledge, cultures, and history into their practices. Each educational institution requires situation-specific adaptations to address the challenges and successes unique to their demographics, school cultures, and community dynamics.

One such community is Waywayseecappo First Nation, situated in southwestern Manitoba. The Education Director for Waywayseecappo recognized the need for an Off-Campus School for students aged 15-21 who were unable to succeed in the mainstream high school systems of neighboring communities. The students' feelings of exclusion and alienation from the surrounding traditional Western schools resulted in an elevated dropout rate. The Off-Campus School staff gradually began to introduce land-based education experiences in conjunction with local Knowledge Keepers as the leaders. The staff and students attended various cultural events within the community together, involving members of a wide array of generations. Off-Campus became involved in several land-centred projects in the area with multiple environmental agencies, enabling the students to learn invaluable hands-on skills from highly trained professionals. The staff brought the outdoors into the classroom and the classroom into the outdoors by processing wild game and writing essays when in natural surroundings.

With the direction of local Knowledge Keepers, Elders, and environmental experts, the school has tanned hides, produced drums, netted and canned fish, participated in traditional ceremonies, and enhanced marine and terrestrial ecosystems. Most importantly they have formed a cohesive family culture among the staff and students, community members, partner agencies, Elders, and Chief and Council. The students have gained Manitoba Education approved credits toward graduation while learning interpersonal, cooperative, and collaborative skills, and developing lifelong traditional methods of sustainability. The students' engagement and attitudes toward the educational facility have exponentially improved, and attendance continues to rise. The culturally relevant approach of land-based education has paved the way for students to be successful and has instilled in them a sense of self-purpose. Cultural bridges have formed between staff and students while working together on multidisciplinary adventure-based activities.

### **Conclusion**

The impacts of sexual, mental, and physical abuse, shame, and ancestral connection deprivation continue to affect Residential School survivors, their families, and communities today (Hudson, 2016). Indigenous youth suffer from the methodical loss of cultural identity, strained familial relationships, and disintegrated community connectedness that was imposed at Residential Schools throughout Canada. With a virtually non-existent community socio-economic support system left in place, Indigenous community administrators are desperately searching for ways to resurrect a once-proud heritage and create a positive outlook for their youth. Modern educational leadership needs to promote the integration of lifelong intergenerational wisdom traditions in conventional science and environmental education (Datta, 2016). First Nations knowledge holders, who deem land as their first teacher, in conjunction with school teachers must work together with school teachers to fill the gaps between Western and Indigenous educational ideologies.

A land-based enriched educational program has been identified as a foundationally sound approach to restoring traditional, cultural values, thereby initiating an ever-ascending vision of communal and familial connectedness and life purpose. Land-centered literacies are believed to instill a sense of one-ness with land, water, and non-human relationships that are essential to cultural resurgence and the feeling of strength of unity. A documented consequence of the experiential and dynamic learning strategies of Indigenous society is heightened knowledge retention and applications due to the synchro-kinetic aspects of the naturally cyclic world that Indigenous culture embraces. Youths engaging in traditional activities are able to close the generations-old educational gaps that still exist, and realize sustained scholastic successes while working with Elders, community members, local Knowledge Keepers, and family members. Student engagement is improved through employing the age-old traditional approach of hands-on learning in a naturally cooperative learning environment.

Researchers and Indigenous leaders feel that by incorporating land-based education strategies, Indigenous youth can shift the paradigms, thereby creating a balance in educational successes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, and lead the resurgence of cultural spirit for all Aboriginal People of Canada. By reconnecting with their ancestral identity through land-based education, Indigenous youth will form lasting relationships with Elders, community members, family, and nature.

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## About the Author

*Born and raised in a small northern Manitoba town, Patrick Loewen was immersed in the wilderness from a very young age: fishing, hunting, and trapping. Many of his closest friends are Indigenous, and he now works as a teacher at a First Nation Off-Campus School. It is from this background of influences that he drew inspirations for this article.*