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# **Everyone Has a Piece of the Story: A Community of Practice Approach for Supporting Early Childhood Educators' Capacity for Fostering Empathy in Young Children through Nature-Based Early Learning**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Empathy can be a powerful means for positive social change and for caring action toward wildlife and nature. Thus, there is a need for interventions that build the capacity of early childhood educators to support empathy development in young children, given the critical developmental period of early childhood and the relevance of empathy to social-emotional learning, which is an emphasis in early childhood education. This article describes a project that used a Community of Practice (CoP) approach to engage a cohort of 15 regional early childhood professionals in the co-creation of empathy practices that are deepened through a Two Worlds approach. We also offer the results of our shared learning, including the co-constructed practices for infusing empathy into nature-based early learning and the impact of participation, as well as our reflection on the use of a CoP approach to build organizational and community capacity for supporting empathy.

**Keywords:** empathy, community of practice, capacity-building

Empathy is gaining traction within conservation circles as a motivator of conservation behavior (Khalil et al., 2020). A network of zoos and aquariums, *Advancing Conservation through Empathy (ACE) for Wildlife*, facilitated by Woodland Park Zoo (Seattle, Washington, USA), is leading efforts to learn how empathy for wildlife in zoos and aquariums can be a catalyst for conservation action for wildlife, ecosystems, and the planet. In conservation contexts, empathy is defined as a stimulated emotional state that draws from the ability to perceive, understand, and care about the experiences or perspectives of another person or animal (Wharton et al., 2019). Empathy with animals can activate empathy more broadly toward the natural world (Sevillano et al., 2007). This dispositional empathy with nature predicts biospheric concern more broadly and correlates with environmental behaviors (Tam, 2013). Gosling and Williams (2010) propose connectedness to nature enhances dispositional empathy with nature, and empathy likely mediates the relationship between nature connectedness and conservation behavior. While more research is needed, Tam (2013) emphasizes the importance of empathy in our efforts to nurture humans' relationship with nature and motivate conservation behavior. In addition to its links to conservation behavior, empathy is also integral to achieving a more compassionate and just society (Zaki, 2019). Not only is empathy part of a broader category of prosocial actions that promote the collective good, but it is also surfacing as a pathway toward social justice and as a key strategy for raising antiracist children (Kendi, 2022).

## **Empathy In Early Childhood**

Due to the high plasticity of young children's brains, early childhood is a sensitive developmental period for nurturing empathy. Positive environments and early interactions with people and the world, as well as secure attachment relationships with caregivers, can provide a solid foundation for empathy that can be reinforced as children grow (Zahn-Waxler, 1992). Empathy also can be supported through instruction, modeling, and practice with feedback (Teding van Berkhout et al., 2016), particularly when placed within the context of a social-emotional learning curriculum (Malti et al., 2016). Social-emotional skill-building interventions tend to be most effective when they are developmentally responsive, begin early, and include repeated opportunities to practice these skills beyond the curriculum into authentic scenarios (Durlak, 2011).

Play-based interventions also can be effective in helping children develop a range of social-emotional skills; through the repeated social interactions of peer play, children develop abilities to relate to the world around them and interact well with others (Fisher, 1992). The impact of nature play on social-emotional learning and prosocial behavior also has been studied across disciplines, with a range of outcomes including positive peer play behaviors, cooperation, teamwork, sharing, and helping behaviors (Bal & Kaya, 2020; Brussoni et al., 2017; Burgess & Ernst, 2020; Fyfe-Johnson et al, 2021; Sandseter et al., 2023). This impact of nature play on social-emotional competencies is perhaps unsurprising, given the dynamic aspect of nature play that affords problem-solving, taking risks, cooperation and helping behaviors, and constructing new meanings (Bundy et al., 2009; Chawla et al., 2014). Recently, Ernst et al. (2022) found a positive impact of nature preschool on empathic behavioral intentions in the context of humans, as well as on cognitive and affective empathy with wildlife. With the child-directed approach of nature preschool situated within natural spaces for children to roam and explore, there tends to be more child autonomy in nature preschools than in conventional preschools (Sobel, 2016) and thus, opportunities for children to assist each other as they encounter challenging activities, provide comfort to each other when they are upset, and help each other as they play and explore, rather than relying on an adult for help (Alme, et al., 2021).

## **Professional Learning Communities and Communities of Practice**

Given the research convergence on the developmental importance of the first five years and research suggesting the quality of children's early experiences are foundational to their long-term social-emotional learning and academic success (Heckman, 2011; Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015), there has been an emphasis bolstering early childhood educators' competencies for engaging in sensitive and developmentally-supportive responsive interactions with children in their care. One area showing promise is strengthening educators' skills for and use of reflective practice, as it appears to promote practices that support the social development of young children (Virmani et al., 2020). Reflective practice in early childhood education is broadly associated with high-quality education and care (Sellars, 2017). Collaborative reflection with other early childhood educators is also positively associated with the quality of early childhood teaching, as it provides educators, who are often relatively isolated from one another, opportunities to transform the lens through which they interpret, evaluate, and discuss their practices (Siry & Martin, 2014).

One approach conducive to collaborative reflection is professional learning communities, which are communities where teachers and administrators "continuously seek and share learning, and act on their learning" toward "enhancing their effectiveness as professionals for the students' benefit" (Hord, 1997, p. 1). In professional learning communities, there is reflection to deconstruct knowledge, action to reconstruct knowledge, and collaboration with peers to co-construct knowledge (Stoll et al., 2006). Professional learning communities foster an organizational culture that values collaboration that is genuine, inclusive, and ongoing toward deep reflection to improve practice (Seashore et al., 2003).

Another professional learning approach conducive to fostering reflective practice and effective in increasing practitioner confidence and capacity is the community of practice (CoP) approach (Buyse, et al. 2003). Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002) define a CoP as a "group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (p.4). A CoP shares many of the characteristics associated with professional learning communities; however, the scope of

a CoP tends to be narrower, and there tends to be a more-defined membership with a facilitator who encourages participation, supports the building of knowledge, and captures success stories (Nussbaum-Beach & Ritter Hall, 2011). Also, CoPs tend to be more collaborative in nature and build upon the expertise and goals of the participants. Like professional learning communities, CoPs vary in size and life span; some are located within an organization, but they can also span across organizations (Blankenship & Ruona, 2007). CoPs have a theory base that draws from situated cognition (learning occurs in a situated activity that has social, cultural, and physical contexts), social learning (observation and modeling play a primary role in how and why people learn), and knowledge management theory (knowledge is accessed, created and shared within community) (Blankenship & Ruona, 2007). In essence, CoPs involve situated learning that is socially and culturally constructed.

Not only do CoPs encourage collaboration and knowledge construction (Buysse, Sparkman, & Weket, 2003), but they also have significant potential for improving teaching and learning (Sherer et al., 2003). Further, in CoPs, there is a focus on communities and what it means to learn as a function of being a part of a community. While growth in knowledge and skills are relevant, there is an emphasis on developing an identity as a member of a community; becoming knowledgeable and skillful and developing that identity is part of the same process, with the former motivating, shaping, and giving meaning to the latter (Lave, 1991). As such, the benchmark for evaluating the effectiveness of a CoP is the application, rather than the retention of, knowledge.

## PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

### Rationale

Considering the significance of empathy in prosocial and conservation behavioral contexts and the time-sensitive window of early childhood for nurturing empathy in children, we designed and facilitated an empathy-focused CoP for early childhood educators. We selected the CoP approach, as it would allow for early childhood educators across various settings to deeply engage in discussion and critical reflection to deconstruct their current empathy strategies and collaborate with peers to co-construct an infused empathy approach for supporting empathy development in young children. Further, our prior empathy work (Ernst & Budnik, 2022; Ernst, Curran, & Budnick, 2022) explored empathy in the context of Western knowledge, and we recognized a need to deepen our empathy practices through engagement with Indigenous peoples and perspectives, particularly given our location on the contemporary and ancestral homeland of the Anishinaabe, Dakota, Northern Cheyenne, and other native peoples.

While not named specifically as empathy, throughout many Indigenous traditions is an abiding emphasis on the connection of all beings, which calls for deep respect, reciprocity, and care (Kapyrka & Dockstator, 2012). This deep sense of connection offers important insight into empathy development strategies. For example, Dorlando's (2011) study found that Indigenous elders identified empathy as a core component of communal coping and survival and defined empathy as a "relational and dynamic process of sharing feelings with others and acting compassionately for the good of a community" (p.43). From an Indigenous perspective, empathy then is not an individual trait but arises from relationships, from community (Dorlando, 2011). Further, a deep understanding of the interconnection of all beings is at the heart of many Indigenous perspectives, and there is "an inherent responsibility attached to this way of thinking about oneself in relation to the entire cosmos, grounded in relationships, and how one relates to all of Creation" (Kapyrka & Dockstator, 2012). This resonates with the Anishinaabe concept of *Indinawemaaganidog* (all our relations), which speaks to the deep interconnection between humans and the more-than-human world (McGinnis et al., 2019).

### Two Worlds Approach

A "Two Worlds" approach was intentionally chosen to expand our collective understanding of practices for fostering empathy at the intersection of Indigenous and Western knowledge (Kapyrka & Dockstator, 2012). A Two Worlds approach acknowledges the differences between the knowledge systems of both Indigenous and Western perspectives, and rather than aiming to synthesize them, affirms their differences and centers each in their own integrity (Kapyrka & Dockstator, 2012). (See Appendix A for more information). Our CoP was co-facilitated by the second two authors. The second author had studied empathy prior from an academic perspective and had

experience with group facilitation in the context of community organizing and social change movements. The third author is an Anishinaabe elder and lifelong educator, with whom the project organizer (first author) had an established relationship. Both co-facilitators, along with the project organizer, co-created the CoP process from the beginning of the project, from the initial grant proposal to the co-authoring of this article.

With permission, we drew from *Natural Curiosity 2nd Edition: The Importance of Indigenous Perspectives in Children's Environmental Inquiry* text (2017) and professional learning program (developed at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto). The second edition of this professional learning resource uses a four-branch environmental inquiry framework deepened by Indigenous perspectives. While focused on environmental inquiry and not specifically on empathy, the *Natural Curiosity* (2017) professional learning program is grounded in the importance of considering environmental inquiry through an Indigenous lens and through local Indigenous perspectives. Further, *Natural Curiosity* (2017) is framed as a living process toward reconciling relationships, not as a static or stand-alone product. As such, it was a fitting resource to ground and guide our efforts to deepen our understanding of empathy. Rooted in what is already known from Western science regarding fostering empathy and guided by our Indigenous co-facilitator and the *Natural Curiosity* resource, the CoP has allowed us the opportunity to work toward a co-created, deepened approach to infusing empathy in early learning settings. As Indigenous cultures deeply value and practice oral traditions, we knew engagement with Indigenous perspectives was needed beyond the *Natural Curiosity* (2017) text. The Indigenous co-facilitator invited four guest speakers to join our sessions to share their experiences and stories. It was then the role of participants to honor the generosity of the stories shared and draw connections between the guest speakers' offerings and our work to deepen our understanding of empathy.

### **Community of Practice Design & Aims**

We (the co-facilitators and project organizer) invited participation in the CoP through our local, grassroots collaborative of nature-based educators and caregivers. Fifteen early childhood educators expressed interest by submitting a brief online application form. These participants received the *Natural Curiosity* (2017) text, a reflection journal, and a stipend of \$1000 for their participation; we felt a stipend was an appropriate way to honor the participants' time as well as their role as professionals who have much to contribute and from whom we have much to learn. The participants were at varying career stages (from pre-service to very experienced educators) and were from a range of settings (private nature preschools, public preschool and Head Start programs, nonformal education settings, and family in-home providers). Among the participants were non-Indigenous and Indigenous educators, with varying prior experience with cross-cultural learning; yet all shared an interest in empathy and an enthusiasm for engaging with this topic from a Two-Worlds approach.

Our CoP met seven times over the course of the 2022-2023 school year (see the last section of Appendix A for a summary of our sessions). Each session began with a shared meal to build community and as a reflection of our grounding in a Two Worlds approach and our desire to honor Indigenous practices of meal-sharing. Our first session focused on co-creating our CoP. We opened with a land acknowledgment, and we spent time getting to know one another better and orienting ourselves to the work at hand. We introduced participants to the project's aims, which were as follows:

1. Early childhood professionals will have increased and deepened knowledge regarding effective practices for supporting empathy, particularly in the context of early childhood.
2. Early childhood professionals will infuse the co-constructed empathy practices in their early learning programming at their respective settings (zoos, aquariums, preschools, early learning centers, etc.).
3. The regional nature-based early learning community will have strengthened organizational and community capacity for fostering empathy through increased knowledge that has been deepened through a Two Worlds approach and through a collaborative culture of continuous learning and improvement.

We also collectively developed a community agreement to guide our interactions together. As part of this process, we brought to the group the idea of including a land acknowledgment at the beginning of each session, as well as an opening offering, to invite participants into shared facilitation of the sessions. Participants welcomed the idea and took turns in these roles; participants also suggested adding an intentional closing for each session, with that role rotating as well.

Our second through fifth sessions were guided by the Indigenous lenses from the *Natural Curiosity* (2017) framework (see the last section of Appendix A for more details). During these sessions, a combination of guest speakers, small and large group discussion, individual reflection and journaling, and storytelling were used to integrate new perspectives and information with past knowledge and experience toward knowledge co-construction regarding what empathy means and how we can nurture it in young children. Participants presented guest speakers with handmade notes and gifts, following the tradition of Indigenous gift-giving to show appreciation for knowledge exchanged in the spirit of reciprocity (McLay, 2020). Following each session, the collective learning, emerging insights, and co-created knowledge were synthesized and shared back with the participants for their review and building upon in the subsequent sessions.

The sixth session focused on knowledge synthesis; the empathy narrative that was being built along the way was reviewed in its entirety, with the discussion focused on refining it and exploring ways to share what we had learned. Our seventh and final session was a potluck celebrating our learning and time together. Participants had the opportunity to share a meal together, review the final version of the empathy narrative and model that had been co-constructed throughout the course of our CoP, and participate in a talking circle, sharing additional stories, experiences, or impacts of participation. The final version of the empathy narrative (see Appendix B) is organized into six sections: what empathy means; its importance; grounding concepts; strategies to support it; challenges; and stories/examples. Throughout the narrative, we have included reflection questions to guide readers' thinking and participate in the co-creation of knowledge. This learning is offered in the spirit of an Indigenous view of knowledge, wherein knowledge flows without end: it is not owned, but shaped by community (Anderson et al., 2017).

## OUTCOMES

Our project evaluation focused on these evaluation questions: Did participation in the CoP expand and deepen participants' understanding of empathy and practices for supporting it? Do educators intend to implement these practices? Does the regional early childhood community have a strengthened capacity for supporting empathy? We used a short "exit reflection" feedback-gathering mechanism during each CoP session to gather data toward ensuring we were carrying out the CoP well and that a Two Worlds approach was being used; this feedback was reviewed in our planning of subsequent sessions. The exit reflection also served as a data source that was part of the knowledge construction aspect of our work, which then allowed us to track the deepening perspectives regarding what empathy is and how it can be fostered. In addition to the exit reflection, we used an end-of-project participant questionnaire, and the responses from that questionnaire were used alongside participants' responses during the talking circle at our final session together to finalize the empathy narrative (Appendix B). We also used a matrix for documenting our reflections regarding what we were learning about the CoP as a method for knowledge co-construction and for building capacity for fostering empathy. We used this matrix after each CoP session to stay on track, review progress, and aid in the planning of the subsequent sessions.

### Increased and Deepened Knowledge

One of the intended outcomes of this project was to increase and deepen early childhood professionals' knowledge regarding empathy and effective practices for supporting empathy, particularly in the context of early childhood. At the beginning of the CoP and again at the end, we asked participants to list five words or phrases they think of when they think of empathy. Comparison of these responses indicated a deepening of knowledge and reflected the influence of our engagement with Indigenous perspectives. For example, the following descriptors were uniquely offered among the after-participation responses: reciprocity, community, deep gratitude, presence, humanity, noticing, and slow responding.

Our post-questionnaire responses further indicated this outcome of increased and deepened knowledge was met. Participants were asked how their understanding of empathy and ways of nurturing it in young children deepened through participation. Their specific responses were wonderfully rich! Participants indicated a shift in understanding regarding the meaning of empathy, as well as deepened valuing of empathy in their professional and personal lives. Participants commented on evolutions in their understanding of empathy, with greater awareness of the reciprocal cyclical nature of empathy (where sometimes we give it, and sometimes we need to receive it), as well as an awareness of presence, gratitude, and humility as what allows empathy to come forth. Another participant expressed an expanded understanding of the connection between empathy and self-regulation (both for oneself and with children). Others reflected on the broadening of their scope of understanding of empathy, in part from a recognition of how empathy has been central to Indigenous cultures since time immemorial and connecting empathy with reciprocity, alongside expanded recognition of empathy extending beyond human contexts to the more-than-human world. Participants expressed deepened understanding of the connections among our ancestors, to Earth and sky, to animals and humans, and that empathy is what connects us to the past, present, and future. Participants also expressed new understandings of how empathy and connectedness to nature are related and mutually reinforcing, as well as how empathy fosters community and is both supported by and flows from a sense of place.

Regarding strategies for fostering empathy in young children, participants also expressed expanded understandings, including strategies such as the importance of creating space for stories, honoring historical trauma, supporting a connection to place, and a deep understanding of our relationship with all things in that place, supporting a culture of reciprocity, and heart-centered learning. Here is one illustration of that deepened understanding of empathy strategies:

*I would say that over time in the CoP - the curriculum, this community, the stories - it has given me reason to think more of the beings that we're sharing our space with, within our forest, and how to really bring that into these little ones' lives. To give the spirits of our forest - the rocks, the trees, the mosses - emotions and feelings to take on human characteristics and to respect the space that they occupy. In doing so, it's been really fun to see the children become friends with these beings and to see those connections form. To see them share stories with the bugs and the flowers. They've really appreciated the canopy under the Maples this year, and the ferns as they have come up. After the long, cold, white winter, it just glows green in The Forest. Just the other day, the children were talking about how walking into The Forest felt like home, with 'the carpet and the roof.' There have been beautiful moments that we have been experiencing and appreciating together now through this new lens that the CoP has taught me to pause.*

Another deepened understanding was reflected in their greater recognition of the time involved for empathy to take root. As expressed by one participant:

*But one of the children in particular, there was a softness to him really coming out, particularly during the last month of school. And even if it was just the last month of school, we were seeing evidence of the hard work that we were putting in. And it was the reminder that a child's ability to show empathy doesn't happen overnight, and it might not even happen during our time with them. This realization was really helpful, because before, I felt a lot of pressure like, oh my gosh, why isn't what I'm saying sinking through... but realizing it doesn't happen overnight!*

Not only was there deepened knowledge about empathy and strategies for fostering it, but there also was an expansion of participants' own empathy - dispositional and situational. Participants expressed growth, especially in their own empathy toward animals and nature, and particularly with those more-than-human relatives in participants' respective places.

### **Application of Knowledge and Strategies**

A second intended project outcome was for early childhood professionals to infuse the co-constructed empathy practices in their early learning programming at their respective settings. The post-questionnaire included a

question that asked participants to share how they have been implementing what they have learned throughout their CoP participation. Additionally, during the final CoP session, participants were invited to share responses to this question through a talking circle. As an illustration of one of those responses, here is what one participant expressed:

*It's just enlivened every part of my teaching practice. And like so many of you are sharing, also the internalizing of it. This CoP has shifted my frameworks, in my teaching practice, for sure, but even in my relationships with my family, and with my friends, and with my relationship with nature, and my understanding of the non-human relatives that I'm with every day.*

Participants indicated a range of ways they were implementing what they were learning, including modeling their own relationship with nature to the children in their care and using lines of inquiry to help children stop and consider the feelings and needs of beings within their natural space to help them recognize that each being, whether a child, worm, or leaf, has purpose and value. There seemed to be a shift in participants' framing of care and concern for nature from one of stewardship to one of empathy; this seems reflective of their deepened understanding from engaging with Indigenous perspectives and their greater recognition of connections with nature, rather than superiority over nature that stewardship sometimes implies. Participants also indicated that the CoP strengthened and affirmed their instincts and gave them agency as well as deepened understanding and framing to both support teaching practices they were already using and to implement new strategies and practices.

Other examples included communicating with children in ways that were richer in emotional vocabulary with a focus on understanding children (who they are, their behavior, and the context at hand), and intentionally aiming to deepen children's sense of community and belonging within their school toward creating an environment where empathy occurs naturally because of their deep connection with and care for one another. Another response was showing children how the land and our more-than-human relatives share empathy with us and using that as a model for our expressions of empathy toward other human and more-than-human beings. Other participants referenced using the "Indigenous pause" (or the moments to sit and wait, to listen, to fully understand, and engage) introduced to the CoP by our Indigenous co-facilitator and working against the inclination to hurry and solve a problem but instead just be together with the child.

### **Strengthened Organizational and Community Capacity**

The third intended outcome for the project was that the regional community would have strengthened organizational and community capacity for fostering empathy with wildlife through increased knowledge that has been deepened and a collaborative culture of continuous learning and improvement. Based on the post-questionnaire responses, participants were in unanimous agreement that their individual capacity for supporting children's empathy was strengthened through participation. Additionally, they were asked how they saw our CoP work as strengthening organization and community capacity for supporting empathy. Participants suggested strengthened capacity at a community level through a ripple effect; by showing empathy and adjusting actions to make way for more empathy, and with intentional strategies to bring empathy forward and support its development in young children, there is a rippling outward. As one participant expressed,

*I really appreciated these multiple touch points once a month because you have all these great moments where you connect. It feels authentic. And you're just rejuvenated. And it's been so nice to come back to this crew once a month, because it keeps adding oxygen to this movement within ourselves, within this group, and within what we're putting into the community. And I have really valued being able to come back to this time and again because we just have so many valuable things to share. We've been learning from each other, we're folding it into our own practices.*

As participants returned to their work settings after CoP sessions, they shared what they were learning with colleagues. One participant expressed that the new ideas she brought back to the workplace from the CoP prompted discussions among colleagues and led to working together on a collective empathy-building approach with children in their care. One participant indicated she would be guiding a professional learning opportunity for teachers next

year at her site, and she planned to implement elements of this CoP experience with them. Another participant commented on how rarely they had time to actually be together with other staff members from their same organization to discuss, reflect, and learn together; through the CoP participation, they felt their individual efforts to support empathy were strengthened and became more effective through becoming a collective effort that was informed by that shared time of learning together.

The following is an example that illustrates the strengthening of individual capacity alongside the rippling outward to strengthening organizational capacity:

*In the winter, we're kind of the only ones in the woods, and it's easy to yell and be super loud. And it's just us, and it just echoes down the hillside. But as the leaves started to come in, and the birds started to come in, the children's volume started to bother me, and I'm very sound sensitive. From our CoP time together, I started realizing that the other beings in the forest are probably bothered by their sound too. And so I started talking to the children about the work that the birds have to do and the way that they need to communicate with each other, and that this is their forest as much as our forest that we play in. And so it's been really neat to watch how they've responded to this idea that the bird calls need space, too. So I started sharing this with my co-teachers, and they started sharing this with the children. And today, my co-teacher shared with me about being in the white pines playing. When the children arrived into the pines, they were so excited to be there and were very loud. My co-teacher brought everyone together and said, "I can't hear the Ovenbird anymore. When it was here, it was calling out Teacher, Teacher, Teacher, and I love to hear it because it's singing my work, and I can't hear it; it stopped talking." And the children started getting quieter and quieter. And then they could hear the bird call again!*

#### **REFLECTION ON COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE FOR CAPACITY-BUILDING**

We think the project was successful in building individual and community capacity due to the very two strategies that we intentionally chose and employed: the CoP and the Two Worlds approaches. We found the CoP strategy worked very well for engaging participants, not as recipients of knowledge, but as co-creators of knowledge engaged in an emergent learning process, and it was this very co-construction aspect that seemed so meaningful and effective. Participants were very vested, willing, and eager to engage, and they took the process seriously and became more and more comfortable with and confident in the emergent learning process. One participant expressed it in this way:

*When we got started in the CoP, it felt kind of like this slow trickle of getting to know each other and trying to share knowledge. And then, as we met, month after month, that flow of knowledge picked up steam and got faster and stronger. And as it did, our learning and the stories that we were hearing started to connect in my teaching space - one of the ideas we had read and talked about, that Indigenous perspectives weren't so linear, but instead had more of a compounding reality that contains so many things all at once. And now, I'm finding that the edges of what I am trying to do in my teaching are expanding in that same way, and I'm starting to feel much more comfortable with the idea that I don't know what's in all those directions.*

Participants embraced their role of making connections among the readings, speakers, and our focus on co-constructing knowledge about fostering empathy. Rather than passively receiving information, they were active in their listening, reflecting, sense-making, and sharing. We would bring forward to each session the co-constructed knowledge from the prior session, and participants would weigh in on that knowledge and continue to shape it together, resulting in the empathy narrative and model (see Appendix). They built off each other's thinking, and questions arose that we wouldn't have anticipated or have been able to structure in advance. The CoP intentionally implemented by the co-facilitators elicited reflections and ideas that seemed unlikely to have arisen in a more typical professional development setting. The CoP also was very conducive to stories; storytelling happened naturally in a learning environment that intentionally valued and invited knowledge co-construction. Through the CoP, participants were connecting their own stories to the learning at hand, as well as lifting up one another's stories and



lived experience as significant. The CoP's eliciting of stories, experiences, and knowledge-sharing seems to reflect systems-thinking and its properties of emergence and synthesis. The knowledge and community that were forming were truly greater than the sum of their parts. As one participant expressed,

*Everything we created in terms of defining empathy, grounding concepts, and strategies was created in collaboration; the ideas belong to all of us together because we all contributed. It was never in doubt that everyone's perspective was important and part of the bigger picture. We got to know one another through stories and connections to the stories of others, and building meaningful relationships allowed us to learn so much from each other.*

This relates to the other aspect that we think made the CoP such a successful strategy - it built community. The CoP approach was conducive to fostering trust, connection, and relationships. While there was an overall natural emergence of this, it was also very intentionally invited, as it was set in a context of intentionally creating a group culture that valued the voices of all and lifted up one another's stories and lived experiences as significant. The CoP made space for vulnerability, particularly as stories were shared and connections between empathy and historical trauma were made. This community-building also fostered courage to try new strategies:

*I think after being with this group over the last few months, I feel like I am trying new things and saying different words, and viewing things differently. And I think that has come from being in this group. For example, we built our first little fire. And I've been teaching for 17 years! And it was our first little fire, and it was little, but it was a fire. And it was beautiful. And we had family - we invited families into the forest and just watching the interactions and the different comfort levels of families in the forest and it was the buggiest day we've had and we still had families in the forest enjoying it. I'm reflecting a lot about this. There's a lot going on that's hard for me to articulate in this moment, but I would say courage and peacefulness are words that come to mind.*

Another participant expressed, "Being in this circle together, I can kind of start taking some steps, and I am starting to feel more confident in understanding that teaching how to live in the good way is for all of us to be exploring."

Particularly when their work as early childhood professionals can be isolating and quite challenging, the relationships that formed and the support they felt were very impactful, which contributed to the effectiveness of the CoP. Participants indicated being able to feel that support from the CoP community beyond the sessions, and that they were mindful of all their collective wisdom and drew from that in the days and weeks between the CoP sessions. For example, one participant expressed, "Every time we meet, I feel like I absorb so much rich and useful information. It lingers with me for many days after our meetings and helps me implement it at my job." There seemed almost a thirst for those relationships, and the CoP seemed to serve as a way to refill and restore their internal reserves of energy, motivation, and inspiration. The following are illustrations of the impact of the support participants felt through their CoP participation:

*I've really appreciated having other people that understand your work and having other people that have those challenging days, or those hardships or have those desires to connect kids to the earth but don't exactly know how to in the world that we're living. And so I've just really been grateful for this community, not even like a list of specifically this, and that and that; it's just connecting and talking, and having the space just somehow makes me a better person every time I'm here.*

*The support that I felt from everyone ... being in the forest, on my own, most days, every day for 10 years with these little humans... to really share with you your experiences. And like [another participant] had mentioned, just feeling that connection to each other... sometimes it can feel isolating. And it's been fun to know of the work that you all are doing. And it's inspiring to be a part of your community.*

*At first, it was just new to all of us, and we were new to each other. But now I can feel all of your wisdom with me when I'm alone. And it's just the beginning of the journey...being with all of you gives me these hints of what it feels like to build meaning and knowledge together. So now when I am alone, and I'm asking all these questions or wondering what's happening or working with a child that needs something that I'm not sure I can offer, I can feel this like flow of your presence with me. And so realizing really we're so deeply not alone. We have each other, but we also get to be all connected and supported by nature who has always supported us. It's been such a gift to be together.*

In sum, the CoP afforded simultaneous knowledge co-creation, community-building, and deepened understanding. One participant reflected,

*I have never experienced something like this, and I am very grateful for the intentionality in honoring each person's voice and thoughts/ideas. From the start, it was very inclusive and welcoming. A safe space was created for unlearning and learning new ways of knowing so that we could bring them into our own practices as educators. This wouldn't have been possible without the co-construction of knowledge.*

Another stated, "This kind of work brings people together, acknowledges community and the collective, and seeks to support all people. When we come together to learn, and both listen closely and use our voices intentionally, great learning and understanding can happen."

Regarding the Two Worlds approach, which was the second strategy we intentionally employed in this project, one participant indicated that it is "such a gift to learn from Elders and Tribal members and to learn from and with them as we step forward onto this new path of community building." Another indicated how powerful it was to have this cultural encounter through the text we used and through our Indigenous mentor and the guests she invited; it opened her eyes to see through different lenses while holding space to respect and wonder at our unique differences. Another commented on how fear of incorporating Indigenous perspectives in an insensitive or inappropriate manner kept her from using this in the past, but through the CoP, her confidence greatly increased. These participant responses not only shed light on the effectiveness of the Two Worlds approach for capacity-building, but also suggest meaningful cross-cultural learning that had taken place.

Through our work together, we also realized how appropriate the CoP strategy was for a Two Worlds approach. The CoP allowed perspectives to emerge that offered a change of paradigm, reframing beyond the dominant culture and toward a wider/longer view of empathy. It also offered the chance for others to be experts, particularly those who may not have had that opportunity to have been considered an expert with valuable stories and lived experiences to share. The CoP allowed for sharing cultural knowledge and bringing social identities into spaces where they had not always been valued or respected. The CoP was also very suited to the Two Worlds approach, as it embraces shared learning and knowledge; our Indigenous mentor would often say, "I can't tell the whole story, but I can tell a little bit." In the CoP, we each had a piece of the story. No one person could contribute it all, but each member had something important to offer. We intentionally invited participants from a range of experience levels, backgrounds, and work settings, and that seemed to serve the group well, particularly in the spirit of the CoP and Two Worlds approaches that embrace storytelling as a valued form of learning and with the recognition that everyone has a part of the story to tell.

## **CONCLUSION AND FUTURE PLANS**

In the words of a participant, the CoP process and experience were very affirming, life-giving, and authentic. As such, perhaps we would consider the most significant change that resulted from this project was, as expressed by a participant, "collective gratitude and hope for continued learning and growth regarding empathy." We feel this gratitude and hope will continue to feed and sustain practitioners' own empathy tanks and fuel their energy and inspiration to continue teaching toward and supporting empathy in their professional and personal lives.

We anticipate participants will continue acting on their vested interest in empathy-building through embedding the strategies we created and deepened together in our respective work settings. The experience has spurred what seems to have strong potential for continued and ongoing knowledge deepening. Also, due to the expressed desire to continue the CoP, we submitted a proposal to another funder to support the CoP during the 2023-2024 academic year. Participants recognized the vital need to engage appropriately and authentically in empathy building through outdoor learning on and with Indigenous land, particularly regarding honoring historical and ongoing trauma. We also seek to further explore how cross-cultural learning can be both a mechanism and outcome, building upon what unfolded in this CoP, where the Two Worlds approach gave way to considering new ways of thinking and being while honoring our unique differences.

As we look to the next CoP, we recognize that this CoP relied heavily on written words to convey the co-constructed knowledge, though we do want to emphasize the conceptual model included in the Appendix which visually depicts the empathy model co-created by our CoP. This reliance on the written word is in part due to the value we placed on each participant's voice and perspective. While we did collect extensive audio recordings of the CoP sessions, we agreed from the outset with participants that audio recordings would not be shared beyond the CoP team, and instead learning would be distilled and shared in a written format that participants had the opportunity to revise together. However, we plan to challenge ourselves to conceptualize the expressions of knowledge and the learning that unfolds more broadly, recognizing the valuable ways to not only gather information but engage with and express knowledge in ways that appropriately draw from and honor Indigenous approaches (such as oral storytelling, visual language, art, play, etc.). By doing so, our intentional Two Worlds approach will be reflected in every phase of the project, from design to knowledge co-creation and dissemination. We hope other professional learning communities will also consider ways to create and share knowledge that are relevant and appropriate given their community and context.

As of publication, we have received funding for the CoP to continue. We look forward to exploring creative ways of knowledge creation and dissemination, as we transition from a grounding in empathy and moving forward together with a focus on reconciliation. Funding and future CoP aside, the vision is for the CoP to continue as a fruitful place of learning and connection. While we used best practices of CoPs to guide this professional learning program, a true CoP takes on a life of its own and becomes self-sustaining beyond any one grant project or year. The authentic desire among participants to continue learning together as a CoP indicates we have successfully fulfilled the purpose of a CoP, ongoing relationship-building, and improving professional practice.

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APPENDIX A ([pdf version with links](#))



## Deepening Empathy:

### A Toolkit for Supporting a Community of Practice Exploring Empathy in Early Childhood

*The links and resources below are offered to support your empathy learning. We hope they will inspire Communities of Practice across contexts to strengthen our broader field.*

#### **About Empathy**

[The Case for Empathy](#)

[Best Practices for Developing Empathy Toward Wildlife](#)

[Five Tips for Cultivating Empathy](#)

[Flourishing in Nature Research Brief: Investigating the Impact of Nature Preschools on Young Children's Empathy](#)

#### **About Communities of Practice**

[Community of Practice Design Guide: A Step-by-Step Guide for Designing & Cultivating Communities of Practice in Higher Education](#)

[Community of Practice Facilitation Guide](#)

[Community of Practice Resource Kit](#)

[Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge - Seven Principles for Cultivating Communities of Practice](#)

## **The Two Worlds Approach**

[Indigenous Knowledges and Western Knowledges in Environmental Education: Acknowledging the Tensions for the Benefits of a “Two-Worlds” Approach](#)

[How Two-Eyed Seeing, ‘Etuaptmumk,’ is changing outdoor play in early childhood education](#)

[Two Eyed Seeing in the Classroom Environment](#)

## **Learning with Indigenous Partners**

[Guidelines for Practicing Indigenous Traditional Protocols – University of Regina](#)

[Why a Land Acknowledgement Statement?](#)

[A Guide to Indigenous Land Acknowledgment](#)

[Beyond Land Acknowledgment: A Guide](#)

[Pedagogical Talking Circles: Decolonizing Education through Relational Indigenous Frameworks](#)

[Guidelines for Working with First Nation, Metis and Inuit Elders and Knowledge Keepers](#)

[Education for Reconciliation: Elder Protocol](#)

[Indigenous Giving Practices](#)

## **Deepening Empathy through a Two Worlds Approach CoP**

[Natural Curiosity 2nd Edition: A Resource for Educators: The Importance of Indigenous Perspectives in Children’s Environmental Inquiry \(University of Toronto, 2017\)](#)

[Natural Curiosity Video Modules](#)

## Deepening Empathy CoP Session Overview

Session	Pre-Session Participant Preparation	In-Session Activities & Aims	Post-Session Reflection
1. Co-Creating our Community of Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Watch: intro <a href="#">video</a> on the Natural Curiosity website</li> <li>- Read: page 5-10 in <i>Natural Curiosity</i> text</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Getting to know one another</li> <li>-Orienting to the work at hand</li> <li>-Co-creating how we would like to learn together (group agreement)</li> </ul> <p><a href="#">Sample Agenda for Session 1</a></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-What are five words you think of when you think of empathy?</li> <li>-Why does empathy matter to you? To your work? To the world?</li> </ul>
2. Lighting the Fire ( <i>Natural Curiosity</i> , 2017)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Watch: <a href="#">Video</a> for Branch 1</li> <li>- Read: page 58-64 in <i>Natural Curiosity</i> text</li> <li>- Read biography from <i>Spirit of the Ojibwe</i> (Balbin et al., 2012)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Guest Speaker</li> <li>- Journal Reflection</li> <li>- Small group sharing to integrate learning across guest speaker, readings, and own experiences.</li> </ul> <p><a href="#">Sample Agenda for Session 2</a></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-What's standing out to you after the reflecting and sharing we did together?</li> <li>-What is shifting or deepening for you as you think about what empathy means, what it looks like?</li> </ul>
3. Sending Out Roots ( <i>Natural Curiosity</i> , 2017)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Watch: <a href="#">Video</a> for Branch 2</li> <li>-Read page 82 - 87 in <i>Natural Curiosity</i> text</li> <li>-Optional: Read page 65-79</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-MidWay point, begin synthesis of learning</li> <li>- Introduce Empathy Chart (meaning, strategies, importance)</li> <li>-Group discussion</li> </ul> <p><a href="#">Sample Agenda for Session 3</a></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-What's standing out to you after the reflecting and sharing we did together?</li> <li>-What is shifting or deepening for you as you think about what empathy means, what it looks like?</li> </ul>



## Deepening Empathy CoP Session Overview

Session	Pre-Session Participant Preparation	In-Session Activities & Aims	Post-Session Reflection
4. The Flow of Knowledge (Natural Curiosity, 2017)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Watch: <a href="#">Video</a> for Branch 3</li> <li>-Read page 104 - 108 in Natural Curiosity text</li> <li>-Optional: Read page 88-102</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Guest speaker</li> <li>-Whiteboard reflection activity reflecting on today and building on last time</li> <li>- Full Group Discussion</li> </ul> <p><a href="#">Sample Agenda for Session 4</a></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-What is shifting or deepening for you as you think about what empathy is and how we can nurture it in young children?</li> </ul> <p><a href="#">Mid point evaluation hand out</a></p>
5. Breathing with the World (Natural Curiosity, 2017)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Watch: <a href="#">Video</a> for Branch 4</li> <li>-Read page 134 - 139 in Natural Curiosity text</li> <li>-Optional: Read page 109-131</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Story sharing</li> <li>- Small group discussion</li> <li>-Full group discussion</li> </ul> <p><a href="#">Sample Agenda for Session 5</a></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-As you reflect on our work over the last 5 months, what has deepened for you as you think about what empathy is and how we can nurture it in young children?</li> <li>-In what ways are you implementing what we are learning here?</li> </ul>
6. Bringing it all together, synthesizing and sharing the learnings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Read our co-created Empathy Narrative</li> <li>-Reflect if you were going to share what we've learned with other early childhood educators, what would you share, draw, or synthesize?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Story Sharing</li> <li>-Small group work</li> <li>-Synthesis Activity</li> <li>-Full group discussion</li> </ul> <p><a href="#">Sample Agenda for Session 6</a></p>	<p><a href="#">Final Reflection Survey emailed post session</a></p>
7. Celebrating our Learning: Community Potluck	<p>Bring a dish to share!</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Dinner &amp; Celebration</li> <li>- Talking Circle</li> <li>- Closing Ritual</li> </ul> <p><a href="#">Sample Agenda for Session 7</a></p>	4

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First and foremost, to the land Mni Sota Makoce (Minnesota), which has been cared for and called home by the Anishinaabe, Dakota, Northern Cheyenne, and other Native peoples from time immemorial.

We are deeply grateful to our co-facilitator and mentor, Thelma Nayquonabe, a lifelong educator and Anishinaabe elder who generously shared her stories, wisdom, experience, and community. Thank you to the guest speakers Thelma invited into our circle, whose vulnerability, humility, and empathy deeply impacted this work: Sara Balbin, George Morrow III, MacKenzie McShane-Cadotte, and Randy Cadotte.

We are deeply grateful for ACE-Advancing Conservation through Empathy and the Lake Superior Zoo for seeing the value of this work and generously supporting it. We also express sincere gratitude to the Great Lakes Aquarium for generously hosting our gatherings.

This work would not have been possible without Natural Curiosity 2nd Edition: the Importance of Indigenous Perspectives in Children's Environmental Inquiry (Anderson et al., 2017), which we used to guide our sessions. Chi miigwech to everyone at the Natural Curiosity program, based at the Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study (JICS) Laboratory School at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education - University of Toronto.

Most of all, to the 15 participants who deeply committed themselves to this work, listened with their whole bodies, shared from their hearts, and whose insights make up these pages: Fouzia B. Bhat, Alexis Bruno, Haley Diem, Mikayla Falteisek, Kalina Groothuis, Desiree Hagenbeck, Melanie Michaels, Meghan Morrow, Ahna Neil, Emma Richtman, Moss Schumacher, KrystalLyn Tomlinson, Sarah Walker-Davis, Laura Whittaker, and Mandi Wojciehowski.



Natural  
Curiosity

The Importance of Indigenous  
Perspectives in Children's  
Environmental Inquiry

APPENDIX B

All Relatives Share Empathy: A Reciprocal Empathy Model



By the Deepening Empathy Community of Practice

Fouzia B. Bhat, Alexis Bruno, Haley Diem, Dr. Julie Ernst, Mikayla Falteisek, Kalina Groothuis, Desiree Hagenbeck, Melanie Michaels, Meghan Morrow, Thelma Nayquonabe, Ahna Neil, Emma Richtman, Moss Schumacher, KrystalLyn Tomlinson, Claire Underwood, Sarah Walker-Davis, Laura Whittaker, Sarah Wilcox, and Mandi Wojciehowski.

Duluth, MN  
2023

### *Preface*

This work is the culmination of seven months of shared inquiry and learning by a group of fifteen practitioners in Northern Minnesota. These practitioners working at the intersections of early childhood, nature-based learning, and empathy came together to deepen our understanding of empathy through engagement with Indigenous perspectives and building capacity to foster empathy with wildlife and people. Taking a Community of Practice (CoP) approach valuing storytelling and knowledge co-construction, we offer the following with humility and gratitude for all who shaped and shared in this work.

### *Acknowledgments*

First and foremost, we give deep thanks to land Mni Sota Makoce (Minnesota), which has been cared for and called home by the Anishinaabe, Dakota, Northern Cheyenne, and other Native peoples from time immemorial. To all our relatives, from earth to sky, the winged, the hoofed, and the finned ones (LaDuke, 2014), we give thanks.

We are deeply grateful to our co-facilitator and mentor, Thelma Nayquonabe, a lifelong educator and Anishinaabe elder who generously shared her stories, wisdom, experience, and community. Thank you to the guest speakers Thelma invited into our circle, whose vulnerability, humility, and empathy deeply impacted this work: Sara Balbin, George Morrow III, MacKenzie McShane-Cadotte, and Randy Cadotte.

We also share gratitude for the planning team: Dr. Julie Ernst, Claire Underwood (co-facilitator), Thelma Nayquonabe (co-facilitator), and Sarah Wilcox, who brought forth this project, held space for this work and organized the many logistical details.

We are deeply grateful for ACE-Advancing Conservation through Empathy and the Lake Superior Zoo for seeing the value of this work and generously supporting it. We also express sincere gratitude to the Great Lakes Aquarium for generously hosting our gatherings.

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For all this and more, we give deep appreciation and hope this work will inspire and support you in your own teaching practice and empathy journey.

### *Introduction*

For seven months, we deeply explored empathy through engagement with Indigenous peoples and perspectives. We have sought to take a *Two Worlds Approach*, which acknowledges the differences between Indigenous and Western knowledge systems and avoids knowledge domination and assimilation by engaging in a learning philosophy based in equitable inclusion. This approach embraces storytelling as pedagogy and enables the heart, brain, body, and spirit to collaborate to evoke an outpouring of critical thought and personal transformation (Kapyrka & Dockstator, 2012). We offer this work with humility, gratitude, and respect for the Indigenous traditions we have had the privilege of learning with and from.

This work has impacted every part of our lives, professional and personal. These pages are our attempt to synthesize that learning, with practitioners in mind. Perhaps you are a nature-based educator looking for resources to support your teaching practice, or a parent curious about how to nurture your child's emerging empathy, or an administrator wondering about how to support a more empathetic work and school culture. This learning is offered in the spirit of

an Indigenous view of knowledge, wherein knowledge flows without end: it is not owned, but shaped by community (Anderson et al., 2017). We hope you will take what is offered here and build upon it, joining in the flow of knowledge.

This resource is organized into six sections. First, we explore what empathy means and then its importance. We share grounding concepts from Indigenous perspectives that have guided this work. Then, strategies informed by the grounding concepts are shared, and challenges to empathy from our own experience. Finally, several stories are shared as concrete examples. Throughout, we have offered reflection questions to guide your own thinking and join in the co-creation of knowledge.

## What Empathy Means

Empathy is often defined as the understanding and sharing of others' emotions (Knafo-Noam et al., 2009). Empathy includes cognitive (understanding or knowledge), affective (sharing or feeling with), and motivational (care or action) components. What, then, does empathy mean when informed by a Two Worlds approach?

### Empathy is Active.

Empathy is *active* but does not always require action.

Empathy requires presence and active listening. Empathy is a choice to hold space and listen to another's experience. There is power in being heard and acknowledged. In this way, true empathy is not about fixing a problem. Empathy is a way of being through which we show understanding, compassion, and vulnerability.

Empathy is not only something that we feel, it is something that we do. Empathy is shared.

### Empathy is Collective & Individual.

Empathy can be a collective experience, as well as an individual one. Empathy is a bridge to understanding different perspectives and different people. Everyone, human and more than human, deserves respect, empathy, and care. When we see empathy from this collective perspective, we can empathize on a grander scale: new possibilities emerge, and healing begins. This collective perspective nurtures movement for change and right relationship with all our relatives.

### Empathy is a Reciprocal Cycle.

Empathy is a circle of reciprocity. Empathy feeds us and others, it is an endless cycle of giving and receiving: seeing and being seen, hearing and being heard, caring and feeling cared for. The empathy cycle is a circle that includes all beings that share our Earth: from rocks to the sky. All beings are active in sharing empathy, and we have much to learn from them. Empathy is not uniquely human, but it is essential to our human experience and part of the evolution of our species. Primatologist Frans de Waal has found evidence of empathy in rodents, apes, elephants, and dolphins (Waal, 2010). We have much to learn from nature and our more-than-human relatives about sharing empathy and engaging in the empathy cycle.

Empathy is not an unlimited resource. Throughout our lives, there are seasons of giving and receiving empathy. There might be seasons where your empathy is growing and blossoming. And there are also seasons where you need more empathy than you're able to give. That is completely natural and appropriate in everyone's life. There is no shame or guilt in having a lower capacity. Instead, we offer ourselves grace, acknowledging the ebb and flow of our own empathy and the wider empathy cycle.

All of life exists in a web of reciprocal relationships. We connect to Earth by giving and receiving, not by taking or controlling. When we acknowledge that reciprocal web and grow it with practice and experience, we enter into a deepened relationship with nature as teacher, and our own empathy is sustained and nurtured.

### Empathy is Noticing.

Empathy is noticing: noticing others, noticing how the self is in relationship with others, noticing the capacity you have to give empathy. Through curiosity, we cannot help but notice, care, and act. When we notice the fullness of another being, we cannot help but love: kindly, openly, humbly, and empathetically.

### Empathy is Humility, Vulnerability, & Humanity

Offering and receiving empathy requires deep humility and vulnerability: humility in knowing that we do not have all the answers and vulnerability in sharing our personal experiences. We each add an important piece to the wider collective. No one can offer everything, but we can each offer something. Often, what we can offer is simply our presence. When we empathize, we become a student with the opportunity to learn and relearn, growing deeper in our own understanding of self and others.

### Pause & Reflect:

- Think of a time you offered empathy or a time you received empathy. What was that like? How did it impact you?
- How does what is offered here deepen or shift your understanding of empathy?

## Why Empathy is Important

Empathy is a basic building block of connection.

Empathy is a basic building block of human connection. We want community and connection, in fact, we need it for our survival. As adrienne maree brown has articulated, “We know how to connect, we long for it” (brown, 2017).

Through the work of this Community of Practice, we have come to deeply understand how empathy carries us through our lives: we each are held within the empathy reciprocity cycle, and it is vital for us to connect to others and ourselves. With empathy comes connection, and with connection comes love.

In the absence of empathy, when we are disconnected from the truth of our connection, our world deteriorates. Instead of knowing our world, our relatives, and our place in the circle, we exploit it. In the presence of empathy, healing is possible. Through empathy, we understand the truth of our connection, and our place in the circle of life.

Empathy weaves a collective, reciprocal community that allows us to heal and move forward together. As we confront the truth of intergenerational trauma and the impact of settler colonialism, we know: history is not long ago, history is perspective. Empathy takes both looking behind & looking ahead. We cannot change the past, but we can impact the future using empathy as a tool for healing.

### Pause & Reflect:

- Why does empathy matter? To you? To your work? To the world?

## Grounding Concepts

Empathy is the way of life of the teacher.

The way of life as a teacher is to model empathy for children. In every interaction, children are watching us and learning from our behavior how to be in community. We can reflect and ask ourselves: what do they see? What do they learn from what they see? Sharing and modeling empathy supports children’s own developing empathy.

How we teach is, in fact, what we teach. We can spark connections through stories and play, and lead them toward understanding by authentically exposing them to place through play, learning with Mother Earth and the natural world. This active practice of empathy is the way of life of the teacher: modeling empathy to children and to the world.

### Aki - Everything is Connected.

Empathy is about connection, and everything is connected. We are of this Earth, we are of this place, not above it. The Earth is alive, and the creator's spirit is present in all. As we have learned:

The Anishinaabe work *Aki* is often translated as 'the land' or 'Earth,' but this is just a translation of the word into English thinking. Some Anishinaabemowin speakers say *Aki* can translate as 'everything,' An Indigenous sense of place extends to anything conceivably related to a place: The waters around us and the blood in our bodies, which are, of course, both connected with Grandmother Moon; all the stories of place that sing in local ways to the mysteries around us; all the dead and unborn who have walked or will walk where we do, and who once breathed or will breathe the same sacred molecules of air; the dew at our feet, which speaks with the star beings above us, and so on, in every direction and in relation to everything (Anderson et al., 2017, pg 82-83).

Everything is related. Nothing exists in isolation. Understanding how the world is deeply connected allows us to learn from our nonhuman relatives and experience the challenges and joys of existing together in this place and time. We are all connected on this Earth, and we need to honor one another and heal together.

### 7 Generational Thinking.

We are all connected to each other: not just in this space and time, but in the future and in the past, as well. The teaching of 7 generations, the instruction in the Creation story to care for Mother Earth for the next 7 generations, reminds us of our obligation to take a longer view, prioritizing the needs of the Earth beyond what we will ever see (Kirmayer et al., 2011).

As we empathize, we think of not only this moment but of 7 generations and the wider collective. To be deeply connected to the past, present, and future, to see through a 7 generational lens, changes the way we look at empathy and how we interact with the land. Our impact ripples through the generations. We are touched today by those who have gone before. We touch those who have yet to come.

### Children are Capable - We Can Learn From Them.

We have a lot to learn about empathy from children and the ears they have open to nature. Children are tremendously capable, and we affirm and honor that capability by supporting children in learning that they can help heal and help each other. It's not just the responsibility of the caregiver or the teacher to offer empathy - children are also part of the community and capable of offering empathy to one another. We see the ways children already do this: they contribute their unique strengths, offer care to one another, and help their peers resolve conflict, in doing so, they build community.

### Indinawemaaganidog - All Are Related. All are Respected.

*Indinawemaaganidog*, the Anishinaabe word for all our relations, speaks to the deep interconnection between humans and the more-than-human world. The living world is our relative: plants, animals, and rocks, are all our relatives. As we have learned:

Everything is alive with Spirit, we are related to everything, and our relatives include animals, plants, the elements, past and future beings, subtle levels of being, and the spiritual world beyond time and space (Anderson et al., 2017, pg 82-83).

All life is sacred, whether plants, animals, or humans. Even beings that are no longer living still have value, they still deserve respect. We honor all our relatives through our way of life of modeling empathy, not formal teaching.

Within this acknowledgment that all are related is an inherent respect. This respect is not the dominating, oppressive "respect" used to reinforce the status quo. This respect is rooted in mutuality. It seeks balance, a give and take, and awareness of the life and spirits around us.

### Not Everything Can Be Fixed.

We cannot fix everything, and true empathy does not require that we do. Oftentimes, when we are in need of empathy, we simply want to be seen and heard, to feel our feelings with someone close by supporting through their presence. The same is true for children. Often, they will come to their own solution simply through having the space to share with a trusted adult. You can't fix everything, but you can be present. This is essential to remember in our teaching.

### We Are Not Meant to Do This Work Alone.

In a Western mindset, we are often isolated. We have forgotten the truth that we are not meant to do life alone. We need community. This community and connection free us. We do not have to know everything or be everything, and yet we each have something important to contribute. When we see ourselves and others in this way, we understand there is no need to compete or compare, when we all bring a valuable contribution.

When we apply this framework to a school community, it creates a spaciousness where each person, child, and grown-up, are valued, respected, heard, and seen. From this place, we can build an egalitarian, supportive, empathy-building community, that is not hierarchical but mutually supportive.

### Pause & Reflect:

- Which of these grounding concepts resonates with you? What would you add?
- What grounds or shapes your understanding of empathy?

## Strategies

### Take an Indigenous P-A-U-S-E.

We have become used to interrupting or talking over someone. This is not how it has always been. We can learn from our Indigenous siblings and take an Indigenous pause, where we pause to fully hear someone, fully taking them in, absorbing what they have to say. We listen not to prepare our response, but to fully hear one another. When we pause, our response is genuine. We have stopped to listen deeply to another, and to ourselves.

### Practice Embodied Authority.

As grown-ups, it is our role to offer an embodied authority to the children in our care that is steady, safe, and predictable. This embodied authority looks like establishing clear expectations and holding clear boundaries that express care for the children. Through these boundaries, children come to understand that it is not only their parents who care for their well-being and safety, they are held and cherished in a wider web of community. Depending on age, clear expectations can be co-created, affirming children's belonging to the community. Within this safe container, children are simultaneously held and free to be themselves.

One way we can practice embodied authority is by meeting them where they are. Through this experience of the embodied authority of their teacher, the child experiences the truth of a community who loves them. In this nest of closeness, security, and safety, children's empathy can flourish.

### Listen and Speak with an Open Heart.

There is deep power in listening to each other. When we listen deeply, we don't try to solve the problem or think about how we'll respond back. When we "listen with the ear of our heart," we are able to be fully present. Through presence and active listening, we can honor the experience of another without judgment or comparison. This allows us to experience life through an open lens and share our experiences through our whole hearts. The Anishinaabe word *Debwewin* teaches us to speak from the heart (Goulais & Curry, 2005). It is our responsibility to share our inner truth: to listen with our whole body and speak from our heart.

### Seek out Stories.

Over time, stories build empathy and connection. Sharing our own stories, fiction, and nonfiction, as we speak with an open heart builds connection. Sharing the stories of the land roots us in our place. "The life of the land is



embedded in stories from where we live” (Anderson et al., 2017) p 86). We must seek out, listen to and learn from the Indigenous peoples where we live, remembering that “stories and knowledge of our place ultimately live in people, not books” (Anderson et al., 2017, p 87). Stories are embedded in place, they bring us together in our place.

#### Hold Open Space & Time.

Many children are in tune with nature, and so at home in their play and in their world. Our job is to hold open that space for their unfolding connection. We sense and know that some children are often closer in their connection to spirit. We can hold open space for them to grow in that connection and live with an Indigenous sense of place.

It has been said that children have 100 languages (*Reggio Children - 100 Languages*, n.d.), but nature also has hundreds of languages. When we give children time and space to relearn the language of the relatives that we as adults may have lost, it can feed and support children’s natural tendency to build relationships with place. We know children are ready and can enter into a deep sense of place more quickly than adults may think (Anderson et al., 2017).

We know not all children have been supported in their connection to nature and may have cultural or systemic barriers to nature. Children may need support, guidance, opportunity, exposure, and modeling to connect comfortably with nature. We remember that it is our role as teachers to meet children where they are and support them in their journey.

Children, and adults, need space to identify and feel their feelings. When we hold open space for feeling and reflection, we support children’s regulation and their developing empathy. We can do this by giving children time to decompress, acknowledging and validating feelings, and listening at their level when they are ready to talk.

#### Model.

Children learn by watching how we live, they watch us to see how we treat other people and learn from our example. The teacher guides, models, and sparks connections for children to nature, community, and history. Together we can learn the land’s history, asking: who has played here, learned here, breathed here, grown here? What has happened: for them, the forest, and you?

There are infinitely many ways we can model empathy: through art, stories, reciprocity, listening, apologizing, making repairs, and speaking our truths as teachers. In speaking our truth, in developmentally appropriate ways, we show them that adults have feelings too! We model in every moment, whether we like it or not. We can and should model empathy in many different ways, always striving to meet the children where they are at. Hopefully, by watching us, children learn that empathy and emotions are shared by all of our relatives: it’s everyone’s job to contribute to the empathy reciprocity cycle.

#### Support Children in Sharing Empathy

Children are remarkably capable. They have a natural curiosity and desire to care for one another and our Earth. We can give them the language and confidence to support and respond to each other. In supporting their skill development and offering opportunities to practice, children can respond to one another. This is so much more powerful than an adult responding! By responding to one another, they build emotional connection and resilience; they know they are capable and do not need to rely on us as teachers. We are there to support them, but we step back so they can feel good about responding to one another. In doing so, their empathy, confidence, and connection flourish.

#### Honor Differences + Hold Similarity.

Honor and acknowledge everyone’s different backgrounds. Exposure to other ways of doing and knowing cultivates empathy and deepens understanding. Teaching and showing that there is more than one answer and so many ways to do things helps us remember that within the collective, we are each unique individuals. We remember: everyone is related, and everyone deserves respect and care.

Sometimes empathy may not make sense to you, but it matters. We do not have to understand another fully to be present and hold space with them without judgment or shame. We can trust and believe their experience without fully knowing or understanding.

#### Honor Trauma.

Honoring trauma is vital. Everyone has traumas, whether it's in this lifetime or in their ancestors. We are here, in this place and time, to heal together. Through presence and listening, we can be someone children know they can come to when they're hurting.

#### Nurture Our Self-Knowing and Connection to Nature

Self-awareness and self-knowing are central to empathy. In the spirit of the reciprocal cycle of empathy, we must each take space for deep reflection on our own journey. A key way we can do this is by taking time in nature to nourish ourselves. Nature is a teacher and a healer. Each of us can create a practice that supports our own empathy work by making space to listen, learn, and be in relationship with nature. In doing so, we will remember, we are not separate from nature we *are* nature.

#### Pause & Reflect:

- What strategies are you already practicing? What is new to you?
- How might these strategies shift or support your work?

### Challenges

#### We Don't Always See Our Impact.

Every day, we are working to build growth in children that we may never see. We ask ourselves, am I reaching them? Am I supporting them in the ways that they need? Those questions may never be answered.

Though we may never see the impact of our work, it is still valuable, it matters. It is our role to plant the seeds in children to grow a beautiful, empathetic life, and to support them in responding to and nurturing one another.

#### One Size Doesn't Fit All.

We've noticed that for some people, for some children, it seems inherently harder to practice empathy than for others. This could be for many reasons and is unique to each child. Everyone moves at their own speed, it's our job to meet them where they're at. We can do this by continually offering empathy to them and trying new approaches that are responsive to the needs of the child. For children who have not experienced empathy from their caregivers or who struggle with their empathy development, nature can be an especially important outlet and source of empathy that we can support their connection to.

#### Feeling Outnumbered.

Sometimes we as adults feel outnumbered by the level of needs and support of children and their families. We try to adjust and meet every need as best we can, and sometimes we simply can't. In those moments, we remember: children are capable! Empathy can be shared by teachers but also by students. One of the most powerful things we can do is support the children to respond to one another. This might not always solve the problem but it is helpful to remember: we can't fix everything, and we are not alone in the work of empathy.

#### Filling Our Own Empathy Tanks.

As we've noted, empathy is not a limitless resource. When we give so much of ourselves, we also need to receive. This is easier said than done! It is vulnerable, but not weak, to need empathy and support from our community. While it may feel uncomfortable, vulnerability isn't a bad thing. Being vulnerable is, in fact, an act of strength and courage.

#### Pause & Reflect:

- What challenges to empathy do you experience?

- How might the strategies shared above support you in navigating those challenges?
- What support can you draw on - from the earth, from your community?

### Stories

#### Voices of the Forest

*In the winter, of course, we're kind of the only ones in the woods, and it's easy to yell and be super loud. It's just us, and it just echoes down the hillside. But as the leaves started to come in, and the birds started to come in this spring, the children's volume started to bother me. And from our time together, I started realizing that the other beings in the forest are probably bothered by their sound too.*

*And so I started talking about the work that the birds have to do and the way that they need to communicate with each other and that this is their forest as much as our forest. And so it's been really neat to watch how the children have responded to this idea that the bird calls need space. So I started sharing this, and my co-teachers started sharing this.*

*Today we were in the white pines playing. And when we came in, the children were so excited to be there, they were very loud. And Lexi brought everyone together and said, 'I can't hear the Ovenbird anymore. When it was here, it was calling out 'Teacher, Teacher, Teacher,' and I love to hear it because it's singing my work, and I can't hear it, it stopped talking.' And the children started getting quieter and quieter. And then we could hear the bird call again. And it just is like a way that these teachings have kind of gone through the filter of what we are doing and starting to come out in lessons that are connected to this learning.*

#### It Doesn't Happen Overnight

*These children deserve that connection point with me and for their needs to be seen and heard with their big feelings. And that this ripple effect, of all this energy and time that we put in, we might not see it. And you have to accept that because you still know that you're modeling it, that you're showing up for this child. And it can be very taxing. And you try to find ways to do self-care when the day is done because in the moment, you can't always give yourself that grace when it's just like something immediate that needs you.*

*But one of the children in particular, like, there was a softness to him really coming out, particularly the last month of school, and this connection with me that was really deep trust, and to get to that point. And even if it was just the last month of school, it was like we were seeing evidence of the hard work that we were putting in. And there's just this reminder that a child's ability to show empathy just doesn't happen overnight, and it might not happen in our time with them. And it was really helpful because I felt like there's a lot of pressure like, oh my gosh, like, why, what, how can what I'm saying isn't sinking through? But it doesn't happen overnight and to keep trying.*

#### Teaching the Honorable Harvest

*As new things are coming up: green things, flowered things, all wonderful things that children just want to have. We're teaching the honorable harvest, using Robin Wall Kimmerer's, guidelines of the honorable harvest, and I felt the part that is always tricky for me is having the children ask permission. You need to ask permission. They're like, 'Yep, it said yes. It said yes, it said yes, it said yes.' And, it's always such a tricky one to give to them to be like, Okay, how do I give you this information and to have you actually listen to the answer and slow down?*

*And so I was thinking of all of our conversations, that the way to connect people is through empathy. So how can we ask permission and really listen to the answer through empathy? And so we introduced all of the Honorable Harvest principles kind of loosely. Okay, first things first, greetings and gratitude. When you give a greeting, you need to know the plant. So if you greet a dandelion, you need to say hello to the dandelion, not just like, 'Oh, hey, there thing.' No, you give greetings and offer gratitude. And you never pick the first, and we pick the last - all of these wonderful ones. And they were really getting the idea of 10, ok there has to be many in order for me to pick one. But then it started to be like, 'Okay, there's 10!' So now I'm just gonna start going at it. And if there are 10, then one person picks one.*

*And then, 'well, if you picked one, then I can pick one. And I saw that you counted 10. So I'll pick one.' And so we started thinking about how can we listen to the plant? How can we listen to that answer?*

*And so we started to then dive deeper into, well, we don't speak the same language, but the plant has a language. And we can listen to it by what we know of that plant. So, what do we know about a dandelion? Well, we know that they have a blossom. So should you pick a dandelion before it blossoms? No, certainly not, they decided. And we know that it's one of the first flowers for the pollinators. So if there's only a couple, should you pick them? No, because they haven't done their job in the forest yet, which is to provide a safe haven for the pollinators in those early years. And then once you've asked all of those questions, and really thought about, what is the role of that plant in, in this ecosystem, then if you can answer all of those questions, and like hear all of those questions from the plant, and the way that I phrased it kept being like, 'Okay, well, what are you hearing from the plant?' And then they would say, 'Okay, well, I'm hearing that the apple blossoms, there are many, but they want to become apples. So we can't pick any.' And 'well, I'm hearing that, that the dandelions are many. And they've had many days of being open. So the pollinators have had a lot of opportunity, and they are ready to share a dandelion with me'. And so then they would pick one, and it was just such a full circle of, how can I do this? What would the group say if I asked the group: How do I make this connection more tangible for them? And so that was really, it was really fun.*

*And today, I watched a couple of kids go by a dandelion and look at it. And then like, Uhhhhh, and look around, and then shake their heads and keep on going. And I was like, it's working!!!! They realize that there was enough that they could have picked one, but they really listened to the dandelion and realize, No, there aren't very many dandelions right here, or this particular dandelion is saying no. And so that was, that felt really good because that one's always tender for me working with preschoolers that just want it all.*

### Reciprocal Empathy Model

We have strived to summarize this learning in the form of a conceptual model. This model depicts the core themes and learning of this work.



The moon phases represent the cycles of empathy: it is natural and appropriate to experience different phases along our empathy journey. Sometimes we are the full moon, offering empathy brightly, sometimes, we are a waning moon, in need of empathy ourselves.

The circle represents the reciprocal empathy cycle within which all our relatives are held and active. The landscapes and ecosystems depicted are reflective of the land on and with which this work was created: the North Shore of Minnesota. Red-tailed hawk flies above, rainbow trout swims below. Humans are also part of this empathy ecosystem. A teacher shares empathy with a child on the bottom left, an elder watches on from a log, offering their insight and wisdom, and two children delight in the natural world and share empathy with the creatures they find (butterfly and sprouting plant). All relatives share empathy, and all relatives are held within the empathy cycle.

### *Closing Thoughts*

We have learned through this work that we are deeply not alone here on Mother Earth. We are surrounded by a world that is alive. Our hope is that you know you are not alone - but held within the empathy reciprocity web.

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