Identity and Knowledge in Indigenous Young Children's Experiences in Canada

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By watching, listening, experiencing, and participating, everyone learned what it was to be one of the People, and how to survive in community with others. Learning how to care for oneself and others, learning relationships between people and other things, learning the customs, traditions, and values of a community: all these understandings and more were the daily course of Indigenous education. (Cajete, 1994, p. 176)

In Canada, as around the world, large numbers of Indigenous children encounter culturally dissonant learning environments in preschools and schools. Many of these children experience serious challenges, in part because of a striking mismatch between their early learning experiences in the family and community, and the expectations, perceptions, and task demands of non-Indigenous educators. These mismatches undoubtedly contribute to frequent identification of First Nations children as having learning disabilities, and to consequently high rates of early school failure and drop-out (Assembly of First Nations, 2005; Richards, 2008). Thus, it is crucial to understand the ways in which Indigenous children are ready to learn, and to acknowledge the skills, interests, and knowledge they have developed in their families and communities during their early years.
Indigenous peoples in Canada include four main populations: First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and urban Aboriginal. Many different cultural and language groups are found within each of these populations, each with their own history, community structures, and socialization practices. Indigenous children's early experiences in Canada vary along a continuum, from being raised in traditional cultural ways that tend to flourish in rural, remote, and isolated settings, to being raised in ways that greatly resemble the dominant Euro-Western hybrid culture that defines growing numbers of families in metropolitan centers along Canada's southern border.

The author focuses on First Nations children in Canada because of two decades of partnerships with them in order to deliver a bicultural, post-secondary diploma program to prepare early childhood educators (Ball & Pence, 2006). The observations and insights offered here are gleaned from a number of research projects about the development of First Nations children. It is worth noting that many Indigenous scholars identify commonalities among Indigenous populations around the world (Battiste, 2000); thus, some concepts discussed here may be generally relevant to working with other Indigenous groups and may help early childhood educators to reflect upon the knowledge that is transmitted in the various cultural groups.

This article highlights First Nations children's participation in family and community activities in order to learn such time-honored concepts and skills as the heritage Indigenous language, a literacy of the land, and the right time and place for different kinds of activities and expressions. The discussion emphasizes how these early learning opportunities stimulate First Nations children's cultural identity and spirituality and concludes with how teachers can create a culturally safe environment for building children's self-concepts as capable learners.

**Indigenous Knowledge**

What is Indigenous or community-specific knowledge in the context of children's early learning experiences? Emery (2000) defines traditional knowledge as "a way of life, an experience-based relationship with family, spirits, animals, plants, and the land, an understanding and wisdom gained through generations of observation and teaching that used indirect signals from nature or culture to predict future events or impacts" (p. 37). He also distinguishes between ancient and modern traditional knowledge: ancient knowledge...

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*Squamish First Nation girls participating in an annual pow-wow in West Vancouver, British Columbia*
is "passed down from generation to generation," while modern knowledge is "that which is acquired in present-day circumstances, and will be handed down in generations to come" (p. 79). This distinction underscores the idea that culture is dynamic; earlier ideas and practices are adapted as families and communities respond to emerging concepts, needs, resources, and opportunities (Dei, 2000; Rogoff, 2003). In many First Nations, it is assumed that what is "true" or "necessary" may give way to new, more fitting knowledge, and that knowledge changes depending on the seasons, who bears the knowledge and who receives it, and other factors.

A First Nations worldview can best be understood by paying careful attention to how people talk about the world around them in terms of relationships, the environment, family, community, and the spiritual world (Spießmann, 1998). Children who are raised in their own families within their cultural community are routinely exposed to an authentic "cultural socialization curriculum"—a way of relating themselves to the social, sensory, and physical world. As a First Nation Elder stated, "Children become members of their culture by observing the way people in their lives behave during everyday activities." Some activities, attitudes, and values are so much a part of young children's daily experiences that they cannot easily be codified or examined in order to uncover conceptual underpinnings, historical roots, or cognitive outcomes of children's guided participation in them (Battiste & Henderson, 2000). As a First Nations early childhood educator explained, "We do have books for the children that tell native stories and show native people. But it's not because we read them these books that they know who they are and learn their culture. They know because we are all related here, in some way, and we are all native" (quoted in Ball & Simpkins, 2004, p. 486). It is not necessary for children to be engaged in a specific cultural curriculum or with carefully chosen cultural objects in order to learn culturally based ways of doing things. A few examples that illustrate this idea are: the procedural knowledge about what should be shared and what should be kept private (Ball & Simpkins, 2004); the protocols for speaking and listening, such as the tone of voice, topics, and conversational wait times; and the format for sharing a story based on what is important for the listener to know.

It is vital to acknowledge this implicit, quotidian, communal knowledge that is transmitted to young children through their growing ability to observe, listen, and participate in communal activities. This knowledge, and the self-concept as a learner who participates confidently in increasingly complex tasks with others, are so often overlooked by educators and investigators. We can easily identify certain activities, such as dancing, drumming, singing, beading, weaving, or berry picking, as specific to a community or region and as manifestations of particular cultures. If knowledge itself is "not a thing or a possession, but rather the name for a series of relations that are always shifting" (Valverde, 2003, p. 221), then the Euro-Western tendency to look for such concrete identifiable practices as signifiers of culture may prevent acknowledgment of the significant underlying attitudes, meanings, memories, and values of the First Nations people.

Kawagley (1993), in describing the Yupiaq worldview, writes,

Those who have the knowledge use it routinely, perhaps every day, and because of this, it becomes something that is a part of them and unidentifiable except in a personal context. These cognitive maps are created by humour, humility, tolerance, observation, experience, social interaction, and listening to the conversation and interrogations of the natural and spiritual worlds. (p. 18)

In First Nations cultures, all of these components, woven together, form the shared rhythm of daily life and children's early learning experiences in their family and community contexts.

**The Purpose of Early Learning**

According to Indigenous scholar Cajete (2000), "There is a shared body of understanding among many Indigenous peoples that education is really about helping an individual find his or her face, which means finding out who you are, where you come from, and your unique character" (p. 183). One of the ways that children learn their communal identity is through learning their genealogy. Similarly, Rinehart (2000) explains that "language, culture, and the home environment tell children who they are and how to construct their learning" (p. 136). As a First Nation Elder explained, it is each family's responsibility to teach young children about their relations, including their ancestors who have passed on.

Daily activities give relationship building its importance. It is common for young children to be asked to perform basic care routines (e.g., feeding, holding, supervising play) with infant siblings or cousins, and to serve food to Elders. Children learn their individual identity through one-to-one activities with older relatives who come to know the spirit of the child. The traditional name ultimately chosen for the child signifies that spirit, and it is then conferred in a communal naming ceremony, typically when the child is 3 or 4 years old. One
parent noted that many First Nations youth do not go through an identity crisis during adolescence: “They do not have to ask ‘Who am I?’, because from a young age they have known who they are.” Thus, parents support the identity development of their children very early on.

Heritage Language Acquisition
For many First Nations parents, having their children learn their Indigenous language is as important, or more so, than acquiring English or French. First Nations scholar Pelletier (2009) explains that many Indigenous people believe the Creator gave them their language, so when children learn to speak it, they consolidate their connection to the Creator. First Nations families in Canada that still speak their Indigenous language usually teach it to young children in an experiential environment; consequently, appreciating the connection to land and traditional foods is as much a part of the learning as the language itself (Pelletier, 2009). In Canada, where the heritage language is nearly extinct in many First Nations, efforts are being made to revitalize it through language immersion “nests” for infants and toddlers, and through Aboriginal Head Start preschools (Ball, in press). Teachers can help by providing opportunities for children to continue to develop fluency and literacy in their heritage language—if not as the medium of program delivery, then at least as a subject of study, with the help of community members.

A Literacy of the Land
First Nations parents often explain that children need to experience a deep connection to the land, their birthright. It is often the Elders who support children in developing this knowledge and relationship to the land through guided participation. Different activities are carried out with the purpose of helping children respect and learn to live on the land. Children learn the names and uses of plants, observe wild animals and birds, trap and fish, and collect wild vegetables and eggs. Many First Nations children also learn about how to prepare traditional foods, such as fermented berries, smoked salmon, wind-dried meat, and fried bread. A parent explained, “They start learning their culture early. They’re going into the bush and on the water—going out to see it. It’s not like learning on paper. The person who is doing it explains it with their hands.” Thus, literacy through experiential learning is a way of life.

Nurturing the Child’s Spirit
Most First Nations parents believe that it is an important goal for their children to develop a sense of one’s spirit and their relationship with one’s ancestors and with a benevolent Creator. Cajete (1994) explains that individuals “reach completeness by learning how to . . . recognize and honour the teachers of the spirit within themselves and the natural world” (p. 227). Many parents feel that developing a strong sense of one’s spiritual identity can help children weather the difficulties they invariably face in school and a society that remains deeply colonized. Parents model how to lead a good life through sharing what they have with others, being respectful, and serving other community members, especially babies and old people. First Nations child rearing often encompasses extensive care of younger children by older ones. It is common to see children on playgrounds in pairs, with a slightly older child keeping a watchful eye over a younger one. This kind of child-to-child caregiving builds empathy and social responsibility and a sense of self-value within the family.

The Right Time
First Nations parents and other caregivers often speak of the “right time.” As a father explained, “When the time is right for particular kinds of stories to be told or for children to be included in a traditional activity, then it happens. There is no need to have a meeting to make decisions about these things. It is just something that people who are involved in caring for a child know—when they are ready and the time is right.” Children who are being traditionally raised learn that there is a right time, a right place, and a “good way” to engage in an activity and interaction. Children become attuned to how social and temporal contexts apply to everything, from seasonal activities related to the life cycle of plants and the migratory patterns of animals, fish, and birds, to such cultural events as naming ceremonies, potlatches, pow wows, and coming of age rituals.

Another aspect of “the right time” refers to the timetable for children to demonstrate their knowledge. Many parents and Elders explain that after children are exposed to a certain story, skill, or knowledge, they will demonstrate their learning at a later time when they need to use that knowledge or skill. This could happen hours, days, or even years later. One parent elaborated, “When it is the right time for them to know it, they will know it, because they have heard it before.” Many First Nations people do not value overt demonstrations of what one knows without any practical purpose for such a performance. A parent asserted, “We want our children to be kind and cooperative, and not to push themselves forward to gain attention or special consideration. Our people are modest and unassuming, and we don’t tend to like people who are loud.
or who brag, and we don’t like to talk about our accomplishments.” As well, a rationally raised First Nations child would typically learn not to demonstrate knowledge of something she or he expects an older person to already know (for instance, answering such questions from the teacher as, What color is the sky today?). Questions of this nature puzzle many Indigenous children.

Educational Implications for Indigenous Children

For Indigenous young children, the experiences described above develop their cultural identity and knowledge, often yielding cognitive strengths that are not always recognized by non-Indigenous educators (Battiste & Barman, 1995; Bernhardt, Ball, & Deby, 2007; Castellano, Davis, & Lahache, 2000; Hare, 2011). For example, First Nations children are often adept at code-switching between different dialects of a language (e.g., from a local dialect of English to the dialect of English used in school) (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008). Indigenous children who gradually acquire the skills to code-switch are becoming “multi-contextual communicative experts” (Hall, Cheng, & Carlson, 2006, p. 233). Research shows that code-switching “can enhance their sense of personal well-being, their sense of social justice, and their tolerance and appreciation of human diversity” (Lambert, 1975, p. 79). Thus, children develop automaticity in switching from one language to the other. Such experiences help the learners maintain their individual and social integrity while helping them build pragmatic and semantic bridges for living in two worlds.

Non-Indigenous teachers may underestimate Indigenous children’s emerging bilingualism and bidialectalism, literacy of the land, and ability to take their place and perform rituals, songs, and dances alongside older children. They also may be unaware that many Indigenous children do not display emotions in the presence of Elders or when it is not the right time or place. Teachers may misinterpret why children who have learned to moderate their behavior in accordance with cultural protocols are not forthcoming about what they know (Crago, Eriks-Brophy, Pesco, & McAlpine, 1997). As a child’s behavior might be different from what the teacher expects it to be, it is important for teachers to be cognizant of the child’s cultural background.

Agbo (2001) emphasizes that socialization and education focused on intergenerational continuity, idealized human relations, and a sense of personal and collective dignity can boost students’ self-esteem and self-confidence, therefore potentially raising their academic standards. Studies of older children point to the contributory effects of positive cultural identification in childhood on adjustment later in life. For example, the collective results of several studies reviewed by Demmert (2001) provide evidence that “Aboriginal language and cultural programs, and student identification with such programs, are associated with improved academic performance, decreased dropout rates, improved school attendance rates, decreased clinical symptoms, and improved personal behaviour of children” (p. 9). Thus, the power of developing positive cultural identity in the early years goes far in helping children adjust to school life.

Conclusion

Indigenous child rearing may be oriented toward nurturing distinctive cultural values in children through their everyday practices. Parents and Elders teach young children what they want them to know by guiding them to perform meaningful roles in family and community life—thereby scaffolding their teaching and learning at the “right time” for each child and circumstance. Indigenous peoples in Canada have long advocated for having control over the education of their own children (Assembly of First Nations, 2005; National Indian Brotherhood, 1972); for having their cultures and languages preserved (Barnaby, 1992); and for respecting children’s development in early childhood and school settings operated by the dominant Euro-Western culture (e.g., Battiste & Farman, 1995).

This discussion has implications beyond First Nations in Canada. There is a worldwide increase in recognition of the importance of representing Indigenous knowledge in considerations of children’s rights, education, and well-being (Fuller, 2007; Nsamenang, 2008). Establishing linguistically and culturally congruent approaches to promoting holistic development, health, and quality of life for Indigenous children is a matter of urgency (Ball, in press). As members of children’s own cultural communities embody the authentic cultural knowledge that is each child’s birthright, teachers can ask parents and Elders for guidance in providing culturally meaningful learning environments and activities, where possible, incorporating heritage language and culturally based early learning curricula into children’s everyday experiences (Hare, 2011). Early childhood educators and school teachers need to make a concerted effort to create a welcoming environment in which parents and Elders can play meaningful roles in children’s programs, and also encourage young children to display what they know and integrate it into their learning at school. Co-created curricula that tap into the riches of the culture can build bridges between home and school.
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