

# Agency and Identity: Indigenous-Led Holistic Education

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## Abstract

Indigenous-led education can foster Indigenous individual and community health and healing in the ongoing wake of settler colonial violence in Canada. Through a culturally appropriate interview grounded in Indigenous epistemologies, an Indigenous graduate student and mainstream scholar spoke with an Indigenous community member participating in culturally safe community programs at a Native Friendship Centre in Ontario, Canada. This paper focuses on two themes grounded in the data and identified as: 1. Ancestral Knowledge and 2. Indigenous Identity and one core category identified as The Cycle of Disconnection. Importantly, this paper recognizes that many Indigenous identities evolve through links between the past and the present, which Indigenous peoples reflect on and rework to move into a better future (Brogan, 1998; Eyerman, 2004; Short, 2011). As the participant themselves described, "I believe in blood memory because it shakes your heart and your whole being." This paper elaborates that regardless of history and experiences with settler colonial violence in Canada, it is still very possible and important for Indigenous peoples to remember and give presence to their collective memories and the memories of their ancestors (Brogan, 1998). Among the significant outcomes of this paper is that for Indigenous peoples, having the agency to create education focused on addressing all parts of their identities in a holistic manner is one avenue toward Indigenous futurity in Canada. For non-Indigenous people, supporting Indigenous-led and centred education outside of settler colonial control is one way to work toward decolonization and reconciliation in Canada.

**Keywords:** community health, decolonization, settler colonialism

## 1. Introduction

For over 500 years, Indigenous peoples in what is now known as North America have been subject to settler colonialism and extreme settler colonial violence (Hill, 2009). In Canada, settler colonial violence against Indigenous peoples has taken the form of attempted extermination, forced assimilation, and erasure of Indigenous histories (Hill, 2009; Starblanket & Hunt, 2020). This settler colonial violence and erasure exists in many settler colonial institutions in Canada, including education, through which settler stories of Indigenous peoples being uncivil or willingly giving up their rights and lands are espoused and normalized (Starblanket & Hunt, 2020). One symptom of settler colonial violence that Indigenous peoples in Canada face is a fractured or severed connection to their cultures, communities, and identities (Lavallee & Poole, 2009; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

### 1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how Indigenous-led and centred education could foster community health through holistic identity development. This examination stems from a culturally appropriate interview between an Indigenous community member in Ontario, Canada, and an Indigenous graduate student and mainstream scholar, and is a component of a larger study in which community members participating in culturally safe community programs at a Native Friendship Centre in Ontario, Canada were interviewed. These interviews were completed to investigate how the community programs, which foster the Indigenous members' identity development, influence their concepts of education and support their understanding of socially and historically constructed power relations in the context of their education and the broader community.

## 2. Approach

Recognizing and understanding the settler colonial violence inflicted upon Indigenous peoples in Canada over the past 500 years is imperative for the context of this study. The history of Canada as a country is a history of settler colonial violence against Indigenous peoples. Prior to the creation of the Canadian nation state, white European settlers imposed their Eurocentric logics and laws on Indigenous lands and against Indigenous peoples to invalidate and destabilize Indigenous societies and thereby steal lands and resources (Hill, 2009; Tsosie, 2017). Examples of these Eurocentric logics and laws include capitalist proprietary systems, white supremacy, and the European ideology of 'civility' (Onwuzuruigbo, 2018; Pasternak, Douglas, & Lenon, 2014). This stealing of Indigenous lands and resources facilitated the creation of the Canadian nation state.

Following the Canadian confederation, Indigenous peoples were subjected to state-sanctioned violence and erasure to maintain the ongoing settler colonization of Canada. Forms of this state-sanctioned violence included: residential schools in which Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their communities and forced to assimilate into white settler society; the creation of reserves on which Indigenous peoples were confined with little resources and the previously legal pass-system in which Indigenous peoples were not allowed to leave their reserves without 'authorization' from the settler government (Nestor, 2018); and over-policing and violence at the hands of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (Rhoad, 2013; Saramo, 2016). This settler colonial violence was designed to either forcibly assimilate or exterminate Indigenous peoples so that white settlers could maintain ownership, occupation, and exploitation of Indigenous lands and resources (Hill, 2009). This settler colonial violence also caused, and still causes, Indigenous peoples to become disconnected from their identities, cultures, and communities (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Of particular importance for this paper is the connection between Indigenous peoples and their identities and ancestral knowledge.

Subsequent to previous settler colonial violence and amidst this ongoing violence, many Indigenous peoples in Canada work hard to reconnect with and reclaim their identities. This work to reconnect with identity is the experience of one Indigenous community member who engaged in an interview as a component of the larger study.

In the tradition of grounded theory, the data were coded and compared to identify emerging themes and properties (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Through the selective

coding process, the themes were theoretically saturated to identify a core category. Two themes emerged from the analysis of the data and are identified as Ancestral Knowledge and Indigenous Identity. Upon the theoretical saturation of the themes and properties, a core category grounded in the data was identified as The Cycle of Disconnection.

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1 Ancestral Knowledge

The Indigenous community member expressed that ever since they were a child, they felt a pull toward ancestral knowledge that no one was able to educate them about, stating, “I was in a little rinky dink small town with a lot of churches and I always felt this disconnect. Like I remember there’s a reason I’m here, but I don’t know why.” The participant further referenced this ‘memory’ of why they were born and lived where they did as a child, expressing, “as a young child I had blood memory and I didn’t understand it and no one knew anything about blood memory.” The participant’s reference to “blood memory” infers a sense of knowing that exists deep within oneself and will be described as ancestral knowledge. The participant explained that although they felt the memory of their ancestral knowledge, or “blood memory,” they had no one to teach or guide them through the journey of accessing it. The participant further discussed their disconnect from their ancestral knowledge by explaining how the settler colonial violence and erasure that disconnected them from their community and culture was responsible for their inability to understand and learn about their ancestral knowledge as a child: “I didn’t know about my language, about my history other than what the history books taught and I wasn’t happy with that. I wasn’t, it didn’t feel comfortable.” This settler colonial violence and erasure further disconnects Indigenous peoples from their ancestral knowledges by erasing their histories from the collective national memory in favour of a white-washed history in which Indigenous peoples’ cultures are uncivil and/or extinct (Starblanket & Hunt, 2020).

#### 3.2 Indigenous Identity

Following the participant’s acknowledgement of the link between a disconnect from ancestral knowledge and settler colonial violence and erasure, the participant discussed the connection between ancestral knowledge and Indigenous identity:

It’s funny, because when I realized, well I knew I was different and I knew that I was Two Spirit, once I learned that word... I went that was part of the puzzle. Oh my gosh, I know who I am now. I’m Two Spirit. And all these little pieces of puzzle started coming and I started finding out who I was as an individual.

Learning ancestral knowledge that had been stolen from them, such as the Two-Spirit Teachings, led this participant to better understand and connect with their identity as an Indigenous person. The participant further stated,

for us you already know that our language, our customs, our culture, our histories, everything was taken away from us. Everything. You know everything except us, except our individuality, except our spirit. And that’s when we have to just grab a hold up and say I need to do this for me.

The participant explained that regardless of a disconnect from culture and community due to settler colonial violence, it is by focusing on and learning about one’s identity as an Indigenous person that reconnection to ancestral knowledge and identity

is possible. However, due to settler colonial violence and erasure in Canada, many Indigenous peoples do not have the resources necessary to reconnect to identity (Lavallee & Poole, 2009).

The inability to reconnect to identity due to the impacts of settler colonial violence and erasure is a type of spiritual, emotional, and mental harm that is widely recognized (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015); however, this disconnection from identity can also often cause physical harm. The participant identified the harm of not understanding one's Indigenous identity: "They need to understand we have almost homeless people, we have hungry people and it's not just food they're hungry for they're hungry to find themselves, their spirit." The participant expressed that without the community support to fully access their ancestral knowledge and develop their Indigenous identities, Indigenous peoples can suffer spiritually as well as physically. As the participant identified, "I believe you need to know who you are and you need to help others find who they are, because when you find out who you are, it's an empowerment to yourself and to others." The participant further explained that understanding one's Indigenous identity is important in promoting community healing, which can lead to Indigenous communities being able to help their members develop their identities and connect with their ancestral knowledges. By connecting with ancestral knowledge and one's identity, this participant explained that Indigenous peoples can help themselves and their peers and communities reconnect and heal.

#### **4. Implications**

Two themes identified as Ancestral Knowledge and Indigenous Identity emerged from the analysis of the data and contributed to the theoretical saturation of the core category identified as The Cycle of Disconnection. Settler colonial violence and erasure disconnect Indigenous peoples from their cultures and communities, which are fundamental for teaching them how to access their ancestral knowledges (Lavallee & Poole, 2009; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). According to the participant, being denied this access can significantly impede identity development, which often leads to spiritual, emotional, mental, and/or physical harms. The participant thus attested to the difficulty that Indigenous peoples experience when they cannot access their ancestral knowledges and are denied the necessary connections to community and culture to assist with their understanding.

Looking more closely at the connection between ancestral knowledge and Indigenous identity, many Indigenous peoples and communities evolve their identities through links between the past and the present which they reflect on and rework to move into a better future (Brogan, 1998; Eyerman, 2004; Short, 2011). Anderson (2000) explains that "many native cultures teach that we carry the memories of our ancestors in our physical being. As such, we are immediately connected to those who have gone before us" (p. 25). By accessing ancestral knowledge through memory, as discussed by the participant, many Indigenous peoples bring these ancestral connections into the present, ruminating on them together and individually to continue evolving (Short, 2011). This evolution works to maintain community health and promote Indigenous identities and futurities, such as the future of their cultures and ontologies. The participant demonstrates that when settler colonialism disconnects Indigenous peoples from their cultures and communities, it prevents them from learning how to access their ancestral knowledges, thereby occluding holistic identity development. The participant further illuminated that when holistic identity

development is interrupted, community health is hindered, and Indigenous peoples experience multiple forms of harm. It is through this process that the cycle of disconnection begins and continues.

As inferred by the participant, this cycle of disconnection is the ongoing legacy of continued settler colonialism in Canada. However, the participant identified Ancestral Knowledge and Indigenous Identity as the means to disrupt this cycle of disconnection. In stating all that has been stolen by settler colonization, the participant explained that everything has been stolen “except us, except our individuality, except our spirit. And that's when we have to just grab a hold up and say I need to do this for me.” The participant shared that it is possible to disrupt the cycle of disconnection when Indigenous peoples reclaim their identity and spirit and work to learn about themselves and their cultures. Regardless of a history and present affected by settler colonialism in Canada, it is still very possible and important for Indigenous peoples to remember and give presence to their collective memories and the memories of their ancestors (Brogan, 1998). As demonstrated by the participant, by giving presence to these memories and their ancestral knowledges, Indigenous peoples can reconnect with their identities. The participant further explained how to disrupt the cycle of disconnection by focusing on identity through ancestral knowledge: “I believe in blood memory because it shakes your heart and your whole being. You know that that gut inside you says you got to find out more about this. You've got to connect the dots and education is wonderful.” Again, by holding on to ancestral knowledge even if it is not yet intelligible, the participant explained that Indigenous peoples can reconnect with their identities. The participant expressed that by learning about their cultures, communities, and ancestors, Indigenous peoples can learn to access and understand their ancestral knowledges and thereby reconnect with and develop more facets of their identities. By more fully and holistically developing their identities within community, Indigenous peoples can then work toward individual and community health and ensure Indigenous futurities in Canada, thus disrupting the cycle of disconnection.

As identified by the participant, an important way for Indigenous peoples to learn and reconnect with their identities is through education. However, Indigenous peoples must have the agency to create their own education systems outside of settler colonial control that focus on addressing all parts of their identities in a holistic manner (Shorty, 2016). The participant substantiates this need, explaining that they were uncomfortable with what they learned from “history books” in mainstream education. An essential facet of creating Indigenous-led educational systems is for Indigenous peoples to turn inward and create space within themselves and their communities outside of settler colonial control (Simpson, 2017). As the participant explained, once they turned inward toward their identity and “spirit,” they began the journey of reconnection and creating space within themselves to disrupt the cycle of disconnection. Indigenous peoples in Canada are working to create these spaces outside of settler colonial control in realms outside of education, such as the reclamation of PKOLS (Mount Douglas) in British Columbia or the reclamation of Haudenosaunee land and refusal of more settler colonial development during the 1492 Landback Lane resistance (Forester, 2021; Simpson, 2017, pp. 240-242). However, the participant underscores the need for sustaining this work in education. Indigenous peoples' agency to create, or re-create and regenerate (Simpson, 2017), education systems focused on addressing their identities in a holistic manner is another important avenue to create this space.

Indigenous-led education systems can work alongside mainstream settler education systems as long as Indigenous education remains unencumbered by settler colonial expectations and domination. As explored by Tlingit scholar Norma Shorty (2016), many Indigenous peoples, including those in the Yukon, need and work toward a future in which their education system is no longer constructed by or based on Eurocentric standards and is instead created by and for their people. Importantly, Shorty (2016) finds that this education must first help Indigenous students find and understand their identities in order to hold on to and ensure the futurity of their cultures. By turning inward and toward community, Indigenous peoples can create or regenerate Indigenous-led education that focuses on ancestral knowledge and identity (Shorty, 2016; Simpson, 2017). As inferred from the participant's experiences, this Indigenous-led education will then have the power to lead many Indigenous peoples into a future where they can more holistically develop their identities and disrupt the cycle of disconnection. From there, as explained by the participant, by reconnecting with one's identity, Indigenous peoples can further help their peers and communities reconnect, helping to solidify community healing and health and thus Indigenous futurities. However, the responsibility of disrupting the cycle of disconnection and ensuring community health is not solely on Indigenous peoples.

It is up to the settler colonial government and settlers themselves to support Indigenous-led education if any hope of decolonization or reconciliation is in the future (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Indigenous peoples have long been creating Indigenous-led and centred education systems in their communities and societies. However, it is difficult for Indigenous peoples to disrupt the cycle of disconnection while being forced into current settler colonial education systems. The lack of support for, and direct interference with, Indigenous-led education systems from the settler colonial government only maintains the cycle of disconnection. Moreover, although complete decolonization and reconciliation are impossible while living within a settler colonial country, supporting Indigenous-led and centred education efforts outside of settler colonial control is one way that the settler governments and settlers themselves can work toward decolonization and reconciliation (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Indigenous peoples are the only ones who can educate themselves and their communities about ancestral knowledges and how to address their identities holistically; it is not the place of the settler colonial government to impose restrictions or sanctions on this education. For example, the majority of schools in First Nations communities have almost identical curricula to the curriculum found in mainstream provincial and territorial schools due to a lack of government funding for Indigenous-led and created education (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). As asserted by the participant, settler colonial erasure in mainstream education left them not feeling "comfortable" with what they were learning and disconnected them from their ancestral knowledge, identity, and culture by erasing their history. By restricting funding to Indigenous-led education and thereby enforcing mainstream curriculum in First Nations communities, the settler colonial government is impeding Indigenous-led education and thus maintaining the cycle of disconnection (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

## **5. Conclusion**

From an interview with an Indigenous community member in Ontario, Canada, two themes emerged and were identified as Ancestral Knowledge and Indigenous

Identity. A core category was subsequently identified as The Cycle of Disconnection. The cycle of disconnection occurs when settler colonialism partially or completely severs Indigenous peoples' connections to their identities, cultures, and/or communities, leading to spiritual, emotional, mental, and/or physical harms. One key to disrupting the cycle of disconnection is Indigenous-led and centred education that focuses on addressing their identities in a holistic manner. By having the agency to create education that teaches about and addresses all parts of their identities in a holistic manner, Indigenous communities can further create and maintain spaces for reflection on and evolution of identity outside of settler colonial control, thereby working to support community health.

### 5.1 Limitations

Although this paper identifies a cycle of disconnection in the context of one Indigenous person's experiences, this conclusion cannot be applied to all Indigenous peoples or communities in Canada. First, there are thousands of diverse Indigenous cultures and communities in Canada with different understandings of identity and education. Second, every Indigenous person has their own unique experience with settler colonialism that may not necessarily align with those experienced by the participant. If the cycle identified in this paper is to be used elsewhere, the user must fully understand the nuances of Indigenous peoples' experiences with settler colonialism and the specific ways that the Indigenous community they are working with understands identity and education.

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