

# A Bi-Epistemic Community Project: Accounting For Socio-Political Realities

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## **Abstract**

This paper will describe the inter-disciplinary and bi-epistemic social science research project that included Indigenous and non-Indigenous community members, leaders, educators, and researchers. In partnership with a Native Friendship Centre in Ontario, Canada, the research project honours an Indigenous knowledge framework. It should be noted that Native Friendship Centres provide various culturally appropriate and respectful services and programs for predominantly urban-based Indigenous youth and community members and supports this research to develop Indigenous peoples' identities as producers of narratives. The paper, therefore, provides the necessary context of the culturally appropriate interviews grounded in Indigenous epistemologies. Moreover, the paper will discuss how the outcomes of the culturally appropriate interviews complement the broader socio-political realities as they relate to education. Specifically, how Indigenous students' epistemologies have historically been unrepresented in public education thereby negatively impacting upon their sense of engagement, and how educators themselves can better relate to Indigenous students' learning needs and preferences.

**Keywords:** Indigenous students, inter-disciplinary research

## 1. Introduction

There is a revitalization of Indigenous research across Turtle Island. Scholars, students, community leaders, and Indigenous communities themselves are reengaging in research practices that honour their own traditions, knowledge systems, and ways of being. Equally prevalent is the engagement in research partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. It is suggested that universities in particular are better served to partner with Indigenous communities in order to become pluriversity and thus address the single-focused epistemic traditions of the past (Boidin et al., 2012; Shilliam, 2016). According to Maldonado-Torres (2016), university researchers have historically represented research agendas that undermine Indigenous traditions and worldviews and have, in fact, represented an extension of colonial practices.

Important to the context of this discussion is the fact that education, beginning with first contact, was considered a means to eradicate Indigenous cultures, languages, and traditional knowledges, including their very identities as the original peoples of this land (Starblanket & Hunt, 2020). An adverse outcome of these measures to eliminate Indigenous cultures included the difficulty for Indigenous peoples to reestablish their unique identities and practices (Lavallee & Poole, 2009). This is especially significant when one considers that the memories of ancestors, fundamental to many Indigenous cultures, are innately connected to their physical entities (Anderson, 2000).

This paper is a conceptual analysis of the inter-disciplinary and bi-epistemic social science research project that included Indigenous and non-Indigenous community members, leaders, educators, and researchers. In partnership with a Native Friendship Centre in Ontario, Canada, the research project honours an Indigenous knowledge framework. It should be noted that Native Friendship Centres provide various culturally appropriate and respectful services and programs for predominantly urban-based Indigenous youth and community members and supports this research to develop Indigenous peoples' identities as producers of narratives. The Native Friendship Centre adopts a unique community-first approach to welcoming urban-based Indigenous peoples regardless of how much knowledge individuals have about their origins and traditional teachings. Informed by the guidance and wisdom of elders, the Native Friendship Centre offers the Indigenous community distinct programming to foster individuals' sense of identity. The research underscored the Native Friendship Centre's significant role in the community. The paper, therefore, provides the necessary context of the culturally appropriate interviews grounded in Indigenous epistemologies. Moreover, the paper discusses how the outcomes of the culturally appropriate interviews complement the broader socio-political realities as they relate to education. Specifically, how Indigenous students' epistemologies have historically been unrepresented in public education thereby negatively impacting upon their sense of engagement, and how educators themselves can better relate to Indigenous students' learning needs and preferences.

## 2. Discussion

To begin, the research project recognized both the uniqueness of Indigenous methodologies and the challenges they represent for non-Indigenous scholars. For Tuhiwai (1999), it is imperative for Indigenous scholars to adopt the key decolonizing strategies in the process of their research engagement. Tuhiwai underscores the need for Indigenous scholars to account for and understand the assumptions embedded in western paradigms of knowledge as they aim to, instead, focus upon the distinct traditional knowledges, practices, and languages of Indigenous communities in order to promote self-determination (see also, Ahenakew, 2014; Lyall & Borona, 2019).

The Indigenous community leaders that represented the key partners in the research project under discussion directed the course of the investigation to align with Indigenous methodologies in order to honour the participation of the Indigenous community themselves. The research under discussion spoke to the Native Centre's significant and unique role in fostering Indigenous community members' identity, learning, and sense of well-being. The community member participants identified the sense of well-being that the Native Friendship Centre represents to the larger community. They spoke about the intergenerational trauma suffered by Indigenous peoples and communities because of colonial policies and practices, and how the respective programs at the Native Friendship Centre are responsive to these realities. The project honoured and respected the lived experiences of Indigenous community members. Using the Medicine Wheel structure to represent Action, Vision, Knowledge, and Relation, research was conducted in culturally appropriate contexts. The research participants consisted of Indigenous community members that were familiar with the services and programs of the Native Friendship Centre. In various conversations, participants were invited to share their experiences as predominantly urban-based Indigenous peoples. As discussed in other papers and presentations, the Indigenous community participants spoke readily to how the people, programs, and services of the Native Friendship Centre empowered them with a sense of purpose. They suggested that as a result of their participation in the Native Friendship Centre they could more successfully navigate their cultural, spiritual, and social realities while living in mainstream communities. Moreover, they were able to characterize their responses in a manner that recognized their Indigeneity as participants shared, time and time again, that they were acquiring a stronger identity as Indigenous peoples. Participants were drawn to the culturally sensitive programs offered at the Native Friendship Centre that provide responsive and informed perspectives to, in turn, offer a greater degree of assurance to community members' various requests and inclinations. Participants communicated clearly the relevant historical perspectives that continue to be obstacles to achieving self-determination. Among these impediments is education.

Across many of the participant narratives were descriptions of the turbulence they experienced as Indigenous learners in mainstream education spaces. Characteristic of their experiences were moments of social exclusion in public school classrooms. Participants were

troubled by the discriminatory practices they experienced during formal schooling and how these were detrimental to advancing their learning and progress. As Pidgeon (2008) states, and the experiences of these participants attest, the hidden curriculum of schools can in many instances embed harmful social and cultural divides. In this way, schools position Indigenous knowledge in the margins and as a result, contribute further to Indigenous students' marginalization (Cherubini, 2014; 2018; Griffith, 2018). Decolonial educative practices, instead, aim to enhance not only the significance of fair and equitable practices, but also to sustain healthy and prosperous communities.

The project under discussion, therefore, represents a systematic research approach that enhanced the research capacity of Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants alike. It complemented Indigenous research paradigms to shape and define the engagement of all participants throughout the process. The research narratives, both between the key partners and among the Indigenous community participants, provided an extensive and nuanced platform to communicate culturally informed perspectives that have currency across Indigenous communities. The perspective generated mindful discussions of past practices that marginalized Indigenous students in public school classrooms and how some of these traditions remain true today. As the lead Indigenous partners and Elder suggested, school systems and schools need to better recognize the significance of fostering the self-image and Indigenous identity of children and youth. It was implied that this recognition would contribute positively to Indigenous secondary school students' graduation rates and further contribute to their post-secondary aspirations and to the promotion of complete wellness. The challenges of succeeding in public education for Indigenous community members became more apparent as they implied that their difficulties to adapt to mainstream schooling practices and norms were experienced in circumstances of coercion. One may deduce that in these instances participants felt coerced into the very exclusionary practices espoused by the hidden curriculum of schools.

Especially noteworthy to this conceptual analysis is how Indigenous epistemologies continue to be underrepresented in public education, and the need for mainstream educators to better relate to Indigenous students' needs and learning styles. Participants alluded to the growing sense of the consequences when educators lack the necessary understanding and appreciation of Indigenous students' ways of knowing. In turn, it was suggested that educators could improve their pedagogy and practice by confronting the limitations of their own knowledge and making a commitment to how some educative spaces misrepresent the intentions of Indigenous students. By examining their own bias, educators may be better positioned to address the complexities of how they interpret Indigenous students' learning needs and preferences, and how their pedagogy can establish practices and outcomes more conducive to the nuances of Indigenous epistemologies that often remain unaddressed. By exercising a willingness to critically examine their practices and the ideologies that inform the norms of public schools, educators may arrive at a greater understanding of the conceptual and practical tension that exists for Indigenous students as they manoeuvre their differences across the standardized practices of public education. It was recommended that mainstream teachers

be better trained to establish trusting relationships with Indigenous students in the context of their professional roles. In order for Indigenous students to fully engage in mainstream classrooms, teachers themselves need to recognize that their professional relationship with Indigenous students must be sincere and openminded. The Indigenous community participants implied the significance for educators to appreciate certain aspects of Indigenous students' experiences that embody conflict and contribute to their vulnerability as already marginalized students.

### 3. Conclusion

The research partnership honoured Indigenous research practices. The leading partners from the Native Friendship Centre contributed to creating an authentic space that enabled genuine conversation among participants. The respective narratives were hosted respectfully in an environment of positive relations. The experiences shared by the Indigenous community members spoke to the influence of education practices that reveal significant divisions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. These divisions, according to participants, have the potential to further position Indigenous students in the margins. The education system, thus, needs to be held to account. The traditional ways of public schools that still resemble colonial practices must be met with educators' willingness to respond to the tension that exists in these spaces. Educators must inform their work with a greater understanding of Indigenous students' epistemologies. Perception and practice must be driven by an appreciation of equitable and participatory pedagogical practices that invite Indigenous student epistemologies into each classroom. Against the backdrop of decolonial research and education practices, Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators and community members can implement appropriate and reconstructed perspectives that appeal to Indigenous learners.

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