Teachings From the Land: Indigenous People, Our Health, Our Land, and Our Children

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In this article we discuss the interconnectivity of Indigenous people, their cultures, and ways of life with the land and the idea that the health and well-being of Indigenous children, their communities, and ultimately their Nations arise from their connection with the land and from a strength of culture that grows from this connectivity. We argue further that these connections, leading to a holistic understanding of health, are intrinsically linked to education.

The premise of this article begins in story. It begins with an idea that we both hold true: that teachings flow from stories, that embedded in the acts of telling and listening to stories there exists virtually unlimited potential for learning. So this article begins with a story that was relayed by Mary Thomas, a Shuswap Elder who is a teacher, a learned grandmother, and a close friend of one of us.

On a warm spring day I went to the mountain with Mary. The twists and turns of the road that leads to the mountain climbed past beautiful homes nestled in trees, and as the road wound upwards, Mary described the way the mountain once looked when there were no dwellings, when the mountain was just home to plants and animals. Finally, the road ended and was transformed into nothing but a thin dirt trail. An eagle soared overhead, and we stood in peace and solitude.

In her quiet voice, Mary described the way it once was on this mountain top when there were only the trees and the lake and the little trails that wound their way up the landscape. Over 80 years ago, as a child, Mary had walked these trails with her Grandmother. Her Grandmother taught Mary about the land, about a forest fire that had crossed the valley, leaving the charred remains of what was once a magnificent forest. When Mary stopped speaking we stood silently. Mary's energy, born of the land, flowed and enveloped me; it touched the very depths of my being.

And when Mary began to speak again, safety and peace emanated from her words. She looked across the landscape, ravaged with change and the imposition of people, and she said slowly: "My Grandmother told me, don't be afraid to cry; it

means you are in touch with the land, and it with you." And the tears followed. Then Mary slowly walked, looking over the land and speaking about plants and all their purposes. She came across a small spot in the tall pine trees, a tiny place littered with pine cone pieces: "See these scattered pine cone pieces?" asked Mary. "If you look carefully, you will find a pile of pieces nearby. Underneath the pile will be a cache of pine cones belonging to a squirrel. The little cones will be arranged in rows with the tops pointed downward. This is what my Grandmother taught me. When I was a little girl, I asked my Grandmother why the cones were all pointed downward. 'Because,' she told me, 'when the winter snows begin to melt, and water drips into the cache, it will run downward off the cones and not wreck the nutmeats inside them.' I asked, 'How do the little squirrels know to do that?' Granny said, 'They learn like we do, and then they pass their knowledge onto us.'"

Many books, articles, lectures, and presentations teach us that particularly for Indigenous peoples, human beings have no ownership over the land. We are simply a part, indeed a very small part, of it. Mary's story brings this teaching home. The story is humbling in its teaching that even the smallest of creatures have truths to offer as long as someone is willing to listen. And if listened to, these stories tell the truth of connectivity to the land and of interconnectedness with the earth.

The purpose of this article as it flows from the example of Mary's story is to discuss the interconnectivity of Indigenous peoples, their cultures, and ways of life with the land. We argue that the health and well-being of Indigenous children, their communities, and ultimately their nations arises from this connection with the land and from a strength of culture that grows from this connectivity. We argue further that these connections leading to health are intrinsically linked to education. There is, then, a holistic relationship between Indigenous peoples, their lands, their health and well-being, and the education of Indigenous children. In order to establish this argument, we begin by broadly charting the various characteristics of Indigeneity. Although we avoid perpetuating problematic treatments of "pan-Indigeneity," which can result in an unhelpful one-solution-fits-all treatment of issues facing Indigenous peoples, we are confident that a discussion about some basic tenets of Indigeneity can serve to ground the discussion. Following our discussion of Indigeneity, we outline some of the systemic marginalizations faced by Indigenous peoples, linking these to issues such as loss of land and culture. We follow this with an exploration of current discussions and evidence that suggest that (re)building cultural capacity and a sense of Indigeneity leads to positive health outcomes for Aboriginal people. From these premises we propose that rebuilding Aboriginal health and well-being begins with education, specifically education anchored in teachings from and of the land and teachings focused on young children.

As we have written elsewhere (Greenwood & de Leeuw, 2006), Indigenous ways of knowing and being are as diverse as Indigenous peoples themselves. However, some commonalities do exist (Little Bear, 2000) that when taken together form a foundational referent from which localized or specific forms of Indigenous capacity are built. Indigenous philosophies are underlaid by a world view that recognizes interrelationships among the spiritual, the natural, and the self. These relationships form the basis of Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and relating to the world and self (Ermine, 1995). A "theology of place" (Cajete, 1999) is often used to describe Indigenous sociocultural philosophies that anchor relationships wherein "the land has become an extension of Indian thought and being because, in the words of a Pueblo Elder, 'It is this place that holds our memories and the bones of our people.... This is the place that made us.'" Indigenous knowledges and ways of being build on knowledges that have passed on intact through generations. These knowledges sit in a context of language and orality and are evident in storytelling, ceremonies, and protocols.

According to Weber-Pillwax (2001), one cannot understate the role of Indigenous languages in the preservation, restoration, and manifestation of new Indigenous knowledges and ways of being or relating with the world. For many Indigenous peoples, stories transmit and teach Indigenous knowledges, and it is thus through stories that cultural teachings are passed on and become embedded in a living history. The foundations of Indigeneity are these: values that privilege the interrelationships among the spiritual, the natural, and the self; a sacred orientation to place and space; a fluidity of knowledge exchange between past, present, and future; and an honoring of language and orality as an important means of knowledge transmission.

If these tenets of Indigeneity are accepted, the question that follows is how concepts of cultural identity pertaining to Indigeneity can relate to the health and well-being of peoples and communities. Maori scholar Durie (2006) has given this question considerable attention, concluding that Indigeneity and health are indeed intrinsically linked. Not unlike other scholars who have considered commonalities between Indigenous peoples, Durie argues that Indigenous peoples share common health determinants that are intertwined with the cultural status of being an Indigenous person. These health determinants include contact with other cultures, often leading to adversity; colonization and urbanization; socioeconomic disparities as compared with broader non-Indigenous society; resource depletion; and lower standards of health. Durie expands on these determinants and distinguishes them from socioeconomic factors, from ethnic minority issues, from demographic variables, and from locality. He demonstrates, for example, that even when socioeconomic factors are controlled, Maori patients are more likely to be admitted to psychiatric

inpatient units (63% vs. 33%) than their non-Maori counterparts. Finally, Durie argues that Indigeneity is indeed an intrinsic health determinant for Indigenous peoples, not necessarily at a biophysiological (i.e., genetic) level, but certainly at (a) a cultural level, due to loss of language, lands, resources, and identity; and (b) at what he terms a *dysfunctional* level that involves the clashing of cultures and the imposition of power by one (non-Aboriginal) over another (Aboriginal).

As we have proposed elsewhere (Greenwood & de Leeuw, 2006), linkages are to be made between cultural capacity and positive health statuses for Indigenous peoples. For example, Chandler and Lalonde (1998; Chandler, Lalonde, Sokol, & Hallett, 2003) have produced strong evidence that cultural capacity and cultural continuity are deterrents to high-risk behaviors including youth suicide. To build and rehabilitate cultural capacity in Aboriginal communities, argue Chandler and Lalonde, requires a variety of infrastructural interventions including settlement (or addressing) of land claim issues; implementation at some level of self-governance; development of educational, fire, health, and police services; and growth of cultural facilities. Similarly, Battiste and Semaganis (2002) suggest that colonization has simultaneously disenfranchised First Nations peoples as Canadian citizens, but disallowed and ignored citizenship in their sovereign First Nations structures. The solution to building citizenship capacity, argue Battiste and Semaganis, is to reclaim and rebuild Indigenous ways of knowing and being, thus producing whole and healthy First Nations citizens. Children, particularly young children, cannot of course be disentangled from the broader families, communities, and Nations that sustain them. Consequently, the process of reconnecting with Indigenous identity and associatively (re)building cultural capacity might be understood as being connected to each of these potential *learning sites* (family, community, and Nation). Integrating aspects of these learning sites into early childhood education and development programs will arguably stimulate an increased level of cultural identity and capacity in young children. This integration might occur, for example, through the incorporation of Elders, people with traditional knowledge, or individuals who embody and live Indigenous ways of knowing and being into early childhood programs.

If Indigeneity as a cultural marker is simultaneously a determinant of health and a component of identity that links Indigenous peoples to space, time, and spirituality in a distinctive and historic fashion, we believe that a unique set of possibilities arises when such tenets are coupled with educating and developing Indigenous children with respect to their cultural identities and strengths. In essence, we argue, as we have argued elsewhere (Greenwood, 2005; Greenwood & de Leeuw, 2006), that in sites of Indigenous early childhood development, possibilities exist to transform the health and well-being of Indigenous children (and by extension

their families and communities) by building cultural capacity and identity linked to Indigeneity. Thus if Indigenous children are to become healthy adults who meaningfully contribute both to their communities and to broader society (in other words, if Indigenous children are to become healthy citizens of their Nations and the world), it is imperative that they be enculturated into the fundamental values of their own specific histories and cultures. Taking into account these fundamental tenets, then, any early childhood program and service for Indigenous children must begin with a premise derived from the collective or community to which children belong and by which they build themselves. This complex transformation of ideas and conceptualizations about Indigeneity into action and grounded practice generates a secondary question: Which practice will lead and which will follow? If we consider the underlying values of Indigeneity as the starting point for conceptualizing early childhood programming for Indigenous children, should we not expect these values to be evidenced in the conceptualization of policy frameworks and implementation? We would then see and feel the ownership collectively felt by the community for a program embedded in the heart of its being, a place where children are nested in their collective and ultimately their Nation. The ultimate goal of early childhood programs would be to foster the development of Indigenous citizenship. The programs would move away, for example, from a more contained goal of ensuring school readiness by focusing on "readiness skills" borne of assumptions, values, and beliefs not embedded in values of Indigeneity, skills that might, therefore, be understood as creating cognitive dissonance in Indigenous children, ultimately fostering a lack of meaning and connection to Indigenous reality.

The question arises, then, as to how these more conceptual and theoretic tenets of a discussion might be concretely actualized or grounded in Aboriginal early childhood education and development settings. There are no quick or easy answers to this pressing question, particularly when the long historic context of colonial process in Canada is considered. In other words, colonial processes have worked diligently for several centuries to erode Indigenous cultures and identities, so it must be understood that equally long expanses of time will be needed to (re)build these cultures and identities. However, some community-based possibilities exist for delivering early childhood programming that is specifically linked to concepts of Indigenous ways of knowing and being and to (re)building cultural capacity. Before program delivery, the development of the programming strategies must be anchored in community consultation. Community consultation cannot end with the development of the program's ideals and mission, however, but must be continually updated, thus reflecting shifting and always growing community senses of Indigeneity and Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Similarly, in pro-

gram implementation there must be ongoing community involvement, from the participation of Elders and community representatives through to curriculum that rests both on local Indigenous knowledges and broader, global, senses of Indigeneity. This might take the form of language instruction, pedagogical teachings on connections to lands and ancestral knowledges, or artistic and creative expressions that link young children to their communities and Indigenous lineages.

Here our argument comes full circle. Stories as key components to education and Indigenous identity are sources of vital teaching possibility. Stories are educational, and in education exists the possibility of building healthy Indigenous children and (associatively) healthier Indigenous communities. It is, as Mary Thomas proposed in her story on the mountain, the process of transmitting information from one generation to the next that will result in healthy stores of knowledge and consequently a healthy tomorrow. This can be learned from the land and from connections with the land and from the stories that Elders tell us about the land and our relationship to it. It rests on us to teach these connections to our children and to future generations. These teachings can be passed on through story, and they can occur in sites of early childhood development and education. We must all hope that from the tiny seeds that are our children grows a future of healthy Indigenous peoples in Canada and worldwide.

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