

Learning from Shi-shi-etko's Story:  
Indigenous Approaches for a Healthy School

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## **Indigenous Approaches for a Healthy School**

We want to begin this journey of sharing what we have learned from people who are committed in the work of Indigenous teaching and learning by referencing a story by Nicola I. Campbell of Interior Salish of Nle7kepmx (Thompson) and Nsilx (Okanagan) ancestry on her mother's side and Métis from Saskatchewan on her father's side (Campbell & LaFave, 2005). The story is about a little girl named Shi-shi-etko, which means “she loves to play in the water”, who has only four days left before she is taken away from her home to attend residential school. “Shi-shi-etko’s people have always lived in North America” and have always understood their relationship as one with nature and their responsibility to the land. In this community, children are loved and raised together by parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters and Elders. As the day to leave comes near, Shi-shi-etko’s sense memories of the land, like the smell and texture of wet soil after rain or the sound of her mother’s singing carried by the wind flowing through the valley, high up with the eagles, are all that she will be able to take with her to school.

Shi-shi-etko’s story is about a journey of learning through one’s heart, mind, body and spirit. Using her story as inspiration, we will explore the topic of Aboriginal health by providing an overview of relevant literature and Indigenous epistemology and by suggesting principles for making health a priority in an Aboriginal-focused school. Our paper briefly explores the effects of colonization on Aboriginal health (Kelm, 1998), suggests a decolonizing approach to promoting health (Wazyatawin, 2005), reviews the Medicine Wheel as a framework for whole-person health (Bopp, Bopp, Lee, & Lane, 1989; Four Directions Teachings.com, 2006), introduces the Circle of Courage (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990), considers the importance of creating an extended-family community (Standing Bear, 1933; Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990; Ross, 2008; Wazyatawin, 2005) and nurturing the Learning Spirit (Anuuik, Battiste, & George, 2010) for

lifelong health and well-being. The paper concludes with suggested principles to guide the practice of weaving health into all aspects of school life.

### **Revisiting the Past and Decolonizing Spirit, Heart, Body and Mind**

Shi-shi-etko's story is a powerful reminder of a dark period in history when Aboriginal people in Canada (and the United States) were separated from their families, their land, and their communities (Campbell & LaFave, 2005; Waziyatawin, 2005). "Indian" children were removed from all that they had known growing up and taken to attend residential schools (Campbell & LaFave, 2005; Kelm, 1998). The residential school experience, along with many other actions of the colonizers, caused much pain and suffering amongst Aboriginal communities, the effects of which are still being felt today (Campbell & LaFave, 2005; Kelm, 1998).

Before the arrival of settlers, Indigenous people across North America were strong and healthy: in spirit, heart, body and mind (Campbell & LaFave, 2005; Kelm, 1998). Complex social and cultural structures, connection to the land, knowledge of healing, and wisdom passed orally from generation to generation helped to ensure the existence of thriving communities across what is now Canada and the United States (Kelm; Waziyatawin, 2005).

Using British Columbia as her case study, Kelm (1998) provides a comprehensive overview of the health of Aboriginal people before colonization. She also explores the various health impacts of attempts to assimilate Aboriginal people: how the creation of reserves limited food sources including traditional hunting, fishing, and harvesting; how the fishing industry negatively affected individual and community health on many levels; how disease caused death and illness at staggering rates; and how the (sometimes forced) introduction of Western foods into the diet of Aboriginal people helped to create communities of sick and weakened men, women and children. Kelm provides a compelling

example of the impact of restricted resources on an Aboriginal community by quoting Chief William of the Shuswap Nation in 1879:

I am an Indian Chief and my people are threatened by starvation. The white men have taken all the land and all the fish. A vast country was ours. It is all gone. The noise of the threshing machine and the wagon has frightened the deer and the beaver. We have nothing to eat. My people are sick. My young men are angry. (p. 28)

Understanding the history and processes of colonization and the effects on health and well-being (using a holistic model of health) is an important starting place when considering how to ensure current and future generations of Aboriginal youth will thrive as their ancestors once did (Waziyatawin, 2005). Using a decolonizing lens to explore health and well-being in present day, we can identify ways to create healthy schools and communities that nurture rather than do harm. Waziyatawin and Yellow Bird (2005) define decolonization as “the intelligent, calculated, and active resistance to the forces of colonialism that perpetuate the subjugation and/or exploitation of our minds, bodies, and lands” (p. 5). Considering how to create a school that will not only nurture all aspects of health, but also help to decolonize the spirit, heart, body and mind is a challenge: the education system is seen by some to be an agent of colonialism (Grande, 2004; Kovach, 2009).

Nicola Campbell (Campbell & LaFave, 2005) states that “The effects of the residential school system continue to hurt native people today. It is said that it will take seven generations for our people to heal.” However, if Shi-shi-etko’s great-grand children were to attend a school that helped them to understand their grandmother’s experience and how it might have affected the health of their family and community, and then actively engaged and empowered them as Indigenous youth to find ways to improve their own health and that of their family and community by learning and incorporating appropriate traditional health practices for their spirit, emotions, body and mind, then this would be an act of decolonization and may help to return some of what was lost. In order for the healing to take

place, we need to first remember. We need to remember the teachings and the wisdom, what was lost, and what can be regained by reaching one hand back and one hand forward (Elder Vincent Stogan, referenced in Archibald, 2008).

### **Learning from the Medicine Wheel**

For Shi-shi-etko, the day begins with the sun dawning in the East; and so it has been for All Our Relations since the beginning of time. According to the Medicine Wheel teachings which have been passed down through generations of wisdom across North America, all life begins in the East (Bopp, et al., 1989). Infancy, the first stage of life for all humans, is represented by this direction, as is the spiritual self (Bopp, et al., Four Directions Teachings.com, 2006). Each direction has gifts to offer to those who are willing to learn; the gifts of the East include renewal, hope, and illumination, among others (Bopp, et al.).

Understanding Medicine Wheel teachings can help us to know the importance of balance, holism, connection and community (Bopp, et al, 1989; Four Directions Teachings.com, 2006.); however, this is only the beginning of the meaning behind this powerful and oft-times simplified symbol of life and health. Two excellent resources for starting to learn Medicine Wheel teachings# are *The Sacred Tree* (Bopp, et al.) and *Four Directions Teachings.com*.

Why is the Medicine Wheel often used to represent health and well-being for Aboriginal people? Is it simply because it offers an intuitive model of whole-person health? Or is there more to learn, reflect upon and understand about this symbol? Elder Mary Lee (Four Directions Teachings.com, 2006) says “The old people will tell you it is life itself.” Thus, we have chosen the Medicine Wheel as a powerful tool and starting place for considering the health of our children and of our schools.

Let us continue “our journey around the wheel” (Bopp, et al., 1989, p. 41). From the East, we move to the South and encounter the emotional side of our being; this is the place of

childhood and of preparation (Bopp, et al.). The South symbolizes the love we feel for others as well as the negative emotions we must learn to express in a constructive way: “The development of emotional capacities for love, loyalty, generosity, compassion and kindness on the one hand, and our capacity to be angry at injustice and repulsed by the senseless violence, are important lessons to be learned in the South.” (Bopp, et al., p. 50). The gifts of the South include artistic expression, determination, and passion (Bopp, et al.).

Moving round the circle, we come now to the West. The direction of the setting sun, the West symbolizes adulthood (Bopp, et al., 1989; Four Directions Teachings.com, 2006) and the physical self (Bopp, et al.). Two important gifts of the West are power and prayer or meditation (Bopp, et al.). Power comes from within and can manifest as: “Power to heal. Power to protect and defend. Power to see and to know” (p. 53). Prayer and meditation are important lessons of the West, as is recognizing ourselves as both physical and spiritual in nature: “The greatest lesson to be learned from the (symbolic) teachers of the West is to accept ourselves as we really are; both spiritual and physical beings, and to never again cut ourselves off from the spiritual part of our nature” (p. 58). The West gives us the gifts of ceremony, dreams and humility, among others (Bopp, et al.).

Our symbolic journey in the circle of the Medicine Wheel takes us now to the North. The North is the direction of wisdom and the mental or intellectual aspect of our being; critical thinking and reflection, story sharing, and problem solving are all gifts of the North (Bopp, et al.). The direction of the cold, snow and ice, the North symbolizes old age and is a place of honour for Elders (Bopp, et al., Four Directions Teachings.com, 2006). However, we cannot simplify the teachings of the North to intellectual abilities alone, at least not in the way that many of us have been taught to think of knowledge as something that can be possessed (Sfard, 1998). Learning is an ongoing process of life that continues from birth to death, and perhaps beyond. We can learn about ourselves and our world not only from books

but also from dreams, from nature, from stories, and many other sources (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2009).

Learning the four directions of the Medicine Wheel, and the four aspects of self: spiritual, emotional, physical and intellectual, are just the beginning of the wisdom we can gain from this powerful symbol of life (Bopp, et al., 1989; Four Directions Teachings.com, 2006). When we reflect upon the health and well-being of ourselves, our community, our children, and our schools, there are other important elements to consider.

The Medicine Wheel represents balance (Four Directions Teachings.com, 2006; Bopp, et al., 1998). Elder Mary Lee believes that in our modern world we focus too much on the intellectual and physical aspects of our being and not enough on the spiritual and emotional. “As Cree people, we were given the gift of being named for the four parts of human beings. Nehiyawak, we were called. It means being balanced in the four parts that are found in the four directions of the Medicine Wheel” (Four Directions Teachings.com, 2006). In our schools, we need to nurture all aspects of a child’s development, not just their ability to read, write and understand numbers. If we focus solely on the development of intellectual capacities, then our children will be out of balance. Equal consideration and focus needs to be given to the spiritual, emotional and physical development of our children.

The Medicine Wheel represents the importance of a holistic approach to life and learning (Four Directions Teachings.com, 2006; Bopp, et al., 1998). A circle can exist only if it has no beginning and no end: a continuous loop that encompasses all aspects of self. So, while you can focus energy on having more balance in all four aspects of your being, these aspects cannot and do not exist independently of one another. The whole is infinitely more than the sum of its parts. Let us not deconstruct ourselves to try to understand; instead, we need to look at the whole person, the whole school and the whole community when considering the health and well-being of our children.

The Medicine Wheel represents connection (Bopp, et al., 1998). “All my relations” is a common phrase used by Aboriginal people. This phrase recognizes the connections we have to one another, to nature, to all of the beings in the world including the rocks, the mountains, the rivers, the animals, the fish, the birds, the insects, etc (Thomas King, cited in Archibald, 2008). Each of the directions of the Medicine Wheel has symbolic teachers such as the mouse and the eagle in the East, the cougar in the South, and the bear and turtle in the West (Bopp, et al.). These animals, and all aspects of nature, are connected: “Everything is connected in some way to everything else. It is therefore possible to understand something only if we can understand how it is connected to everything else” (Bopp, et al., p. 26).

The Medicine Wheel represents community. When you stand in the centre and look outward in all four sacred directions, you will see the other people and beings (animals, plants, and others) who together comprise your community (Bopp, et. al, 1989). Building a sense of community in a school is important for the health and well-being of the students who attend each day. This community of teachers, Elders, parents and other children form an integral component of the school’s curriculum. It is through community that we learn; just as Shi-shi-etko would have learned from her extended family and community members.

### **Creating a Circle of Courage**

Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern’s (1990) Circle of Courage reflects the teaching of the four directions of the Medicine Wheel by proposing four fundamental values for nurturing children in balance and harmony. In contrast to the traditional Western Dominator# values of individualism, winning, dominance, and affluence, the Circle of Courage considers the Partnership values: Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity (Brokenleg, 1998).

The spirit of Belonging reflects an Indigenous worldview of cultural and family attachments. For example, the Lakota people believe in a culture of love and care, treating

young people with respect and dignity, and encouraging courage instead of coercing obedience from a punitive system. Brokenleg's aunt, Ella Deloria, describes the Native American spirit of belonging is to relate to each other as kin which would lead to developing strong human bonds nurtured by a network of relationships based on trust and respect. People who are without families are included in this greater circle of relationships. The sense of belonging is also extended to nature as people are part of creation: all aspects of creation are interrelated and interdependent.

The spirit of Mastery draws on supporting learning, so the child's inner desire for learning is nurtured and the child is able to cope with the real world. Children are taught with patience and gentleness. Self-control and self-constraints are one of the first lessons learned in front of parents and other adults. They gain wisdom from learning to listen carefully through oral traditions and from observing elders. While competence is developed through creative games, opportunities for serious work are provided to cultivate a sense of responsibility and self worth. Mastery is achieved with the confidence of being good at something and the resilience of being able to manage adversity - the child finds purpose in life.

The spirit of Independence focuses on nurturing the child's free will by teaching and giving responsibility over time, so the child is able to develop a sense of autonomy to make responsible decisions and a sense of power over their own actions and their own environment. To be taught responsibility, children must first learn to be dependent, to respect and value elders, and to understand the desired behaviours and why are they desirable. Children are to be treated with maturity and dignity to allow them to work things out in their own ways. Punishment or harsh words or rewards are never used, because these behaviours weaken the spirit. Instead, kindly lecturing is a strategy used as soon as children are able to communicate to explain why certain behaviours are unacceptable. Modelling, group

influence, discussion, and positive expectations are used to encourage a sense of responsibility, autonomy and belonging.

The spirit of Generosity looks after the child's character by nurturing his/her concern for others, so the child has a purpose in life. Children develop respect and concern and learn not to be selfish, but recognize their roles and responsibilities to show care and reciprocate their learning. Children are encouraged to share generously. As they care for others, they learn not to be self-centred and their sense of self-worth is enhanced.

An environment that fails to nurture the four spirits may be detrimental to the children's well-being. Brokenleg and Van Bockern (2008) explain that lacking a sense of belonging, children may become angry, guarded, or withdrawn. Without nurturing the spirit of mastery, children may see themselves as failures. Lacking independence, children may develop a sense of helplessness and a victim identity. Lacking a spirit of generosity, children may become egocentric, selfish and exploitative. Thus, if we consider a child's needs to develop their whole being, we must ensure that schools are safe, welcoming and healthy communities that nurture the four aspects of their being.

### **Building an Extended-Family Community**

Like Shi-shi-etko's family, children in many Indigenous cultures are surrounded by the love and care of their whole community. Standing Bear (1933) gives the testimony that all babies, including himself, of the Lakota tribe are cared for and brought up with great attention given to keeping growing bodies healthy and well-formed. Babies are rubbed and cleansed with buffalo tallow by the fire, wrapped in soft warm clothing made from buffalo calf skin, and laid on a stiff rawhide board to keep the back straight and allow the neck to grow strong. Even though a mother is the primary caregiver of her child, the grandmother also plays a significant role in a child's life. Grandmothers are holders of wisdom and experience and are skilled in preparing food. Children almost always run to grandmother first

for food. Standing Bear (1933) praises his mother and all his caregivers for showing great gentleness and for not displaying anger or speaking crossly at him because of his failures or shortcomings.

Many traditional kinship systems follow the extended-family model, which strives to make sure that every child is raised by many mothers, fathers, siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles. In other words, grandparents, siblings of one's parents, cousins, and the larger circle of other adults in the community all participate in child rearing (Brokenleg, 1998; Brendtro et al., 2005). Children are taught to relate themselves to people who they see regularly and children are shown great respect when they reciprocate the love and care received from their extended-families (Brendtro et al., 2005). Therefore, relating to and treating others as related creates powerful bonds that nurture a sense of belonging, motivate people to show respect and concern for others, and to live a life with purpose.

These kinship bonds are extended to nature as well (Brendtro et al., 1990). Nature and people are interdependent and thereby related in this extended-family community. As Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern (1990) remind us, "All are related, and one's actions impinge on the natural environment. Maintaining balanced ecological relationships is a way of ensuring balance in one's own life" (p. 6). Knowing one's place of belonging and one's place (who we are and where we are from), one is prepared for their future responsibility to the land since babyhood. Just as Shi-shi-etko's family tries to pass on their knowledge of the land and their traditional practices of songs, dances, and healing, Ross (2008) of the Pomo and Coast Miwok people of Sonoma and Marin counties describes how her family spent time to making sure children knew their responsibilities and skills to carry them out, such as "how to walk a rocky shore and navigate the slippery intertidal zone", "how to see with one's hands underwater", and "how to take life with care" (p. 202). Ross remembers these lessons were given with patience and laughter and gave her confidence in carrying out her

responsibilities and in providing for herself and her family. Ross also shares that the sense memories that come with these lessons not only give her confidence and a source of strength, but also that the intimate knowledge and connection to a specific ecosystem anchors her to the place where she came from.

Circling back to the teaching of the Medicine Wheel, the connection to nature and all its beings is not merely physical; it is also spiritual. Waziyatawin (2005) explains that Indigenous Peoples believe

...that part of our spiritual responsibility as human beings is to maintain respectful relationships with all of creation. For some of us this might mean singing to the corn, offering prayers to plant and animal beings, or harvesting in a sacred manner. These culturally and spiritually significant actions nurtured us as well as the spiritual beings we encountered. The resulting foods then fed our bodies and our spirits. (p. 75)

Thus, there is reciprocity in our relationship with nature. As we nurture, so shall we be nurtured. Bringing nature into the pedagogy and curriculum of a school is critical for the health of the students and the community as a whole. For example, community garden projects that stress learning traditional food practices and how to nurture nature is one way to “restore a sense of well-being and interconnectedness with the rest of creation” (Waziyatawin, 2005, p. 78).

### **Nurturing the Learning Spirit**

Aboriginal Elders, cultural resource people, and Indigenous scholars regard all learners as on a lifelong journey discovering and understanding their learning spirit, who guide the learners in search of purpose and vision through their hearts, minds, bodies and spirits (Anuik, Battiste, & George, 2010). In other words, the learning spirit is believed to be embodied by the learner, travels with the person throughout life to guide and nurture the person, and keeps the learner on track as s/he fulfill her/his life purpose. Knowing the learner’s path well, the learning spirit is drawn toward certain experiences and elements

needed to complete the learning journey. The learning spirit “keeps going until it achieves its final vocation and life purposes” (Cajete, 2000, as cited in Anuik et al., 2010, p. 68). Anuik, Battiste and George (2010) urge educators to recognize that the learners are part of creation and to use an holistic approach to support them as they engage with their learning spirit. They refer to Hill’s (1999) definition of an holistic approach that

... embraces the qualities and characteristics necessary 'to become a whole person.' A whole person denotes a human being who is capable of balancing his/her mental, emotional, physical and spiritual human capabilities both internally within oneself and externally in societal interaction with all life forms present throughout Creation (as cited in Anuik, Battiste, & George, 2010, p. 67)

This holistic approach encourages educators to find ways to recognize and nurture learners’ spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical capabilities and create a learning environment that will enable learners to find their “heart, face and foundation” (Anuik et al., 2010). Anuik, Battiste and George (2010) define “The heart is the passion that engages their life purpose, the face is their identity, and the foundation is the skills needed to put their passion to work” (p. 67).

Shi-shi-etko’s people are a community with heart, face and foundation. They engage their life purpose as an extended family living as part of nature and looking after the land. They honour their reciprocal relationship and responsibility to the land, so they know their face: who they are and where they belong. They also carry on their traditional knowledge in food gathering, storytelling, medicinal healing, songs and dances, and they pass on this knowledge to the next generation. Like everyone else, Shi-shi-etko has a life-long journey of learning. All the teaching she has received from her extended-family community nourishes her learning spirit and her learning spirit will guide her on a path back to her people, her community, and her land.

**Conclusion: Weaving Health into all Aspects of School Life**

A recurring theme in our literature review on Aboriginal health is viewing health as a process, not a product: health as a process of decolonizing spirit, heart, body and mind; health as a process of nurturing the whole person and the learning spirit; and health as a process of creating community. Lifelong learning and lifelong health are connected; the role of the school is to not only to help students to be healthy as children, but also to grow into healthy adults who belong to healthy communities. As such, health needs to be woven into all aspects of school life. While at times, it may be appropriate to teach specific health topics, it is more important that health is a consideration in all decisions made about the school, its teachers and its students.

Considerations for health should be part of all curricula, social and community gatherings, and administrative decision-making. To aid in this goal, we propose the adoption of seven principles for creating a healthy Aboriginal Focus School:

1. Health is interwoven into all aspects of school life.
2. Health is addressing the needs of the whole person: spiritual, emotional, physical, and intellectual.
3. Health is decolonizing the spirit, heart, body and mind.
4. Health is nurturing The Learning Spirit.
5. Health is creating a safe and welcoming community for everyone.
6. Health is embracing one's relationship and responsibility to nature.
7. Health is building an extended-family community.

As Shi-shi-etko prepares to leave her home, her grandmother gives her “a small bag made from soft, tanned deer hide and sinew” (Campbell & LaFave, 2005). Shi-shi-etko places sprigs of trees, dried berries, roots, leaves and flowers into her bag to help her remember the importance of her home and her family. In her bag, there are also songs, dances, stories, prayers, and memories that she has learned by heart and she will look for them to soothe and strengthen her spirit when facing adversity (Tousilum, 2012). Before leaving for school, she leaves the bag tucked at the roots of a fir tree and asks the tree to keep

her memories and her family safe until spring. We do not know whether Shi-shi-etko returns for her bag in the spring. We do know that Grandfather Tree kept her memories safe: what Shi-shi-etko knew to be true of family, nature, community and life has not been lost. We can still learn from Elders, from traces left behind, from dreams and from Mother Earth. We can choose to incorporate these teachings into the work we do as educators so that the children seven generations from today will continue to know their “place, face, and foundation.” These principles for a healthy school are like Shi-shi-etko’s memories tucked safely at the base of a big fir tree: everything we need is there if we only choose to remember.

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