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Beyond Empathy: *Wiijigaabawitaadidaa Niigaan Izhaayang* (Moving Forward Together) toward Reconciliation through Indigenous Education in Early Childhood Environmental Education

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ABSTRACT

Responding to a growing call for culturally sustaining pedagogy, this article describes a Community of Practice (CoP) project in Minnesota. Guided by two Indigenous mentors, a cohort of 15 Indigenous and Non-Indigenous educators engaged in collective inquiry regarding how Indigenous histories, worldviews, and learning approaches can become part of their work in early childhood environmental education in meaningful, respectful, and equitable ways. Participants and facilitators engaged in the process of knowledge co-creation, which is presented here. We also share our collective reflection on reconciliation through Indigenous education, as well as on the use of the CoP approach for professional learning and capacity-building in the context of more equitable, trauma-informed, and culturally sustaining practices for early childhood care and outdoor learning.

***Keywords*:** reconciliation, Indigenous education, community of practice, capacity-building

Culture is integral to young children's learning and development. As such, national early childhood educator standards include the competency of using "a broad repertoire of developmentally appropriate, culturally and linguistically relevant, anti-bias, evidence-based teaching strategies" (NAEYC, 2019). Similarly, Minnesota (U.S.A.) recognizes this importance, recently revising its *Knowledge and Competency Framework for Early Childhood Professionals* to include cultural responsibility and practice, which they describe as including each family's culture in all aspects of learning (MN Department of Education, 2020). The *Guidelines for Excellence in Early Childhood Environmental Education Programs* also emphasize the need for cultural relevancy (NAAEE, 2016).

In the literature, however, there is a call for moving beyond culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies to culturally sustaining pedagogy. Paris and Alim (2017) describe it as education that sustains the lifeways of communities that have been and continue to be damaged and erased through schooling. While culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies aim to situate learning within the lived experiences of students, culturally sustaining pedagogy frames the outcome of learning as critically enriching strengths rather than replacing deficits, while seeking equity, access, opportunity, and social transformation and revitalization (Paris & Alim, 2017). This is aligned with recommendations from a recently released report, *A New Vision for High-Quality Preschool Curriculum* (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, & Medicine (2024). This vision is for preschool programming that

fosters holistic and healthy development and learning for every child and affirms their full identities, recognizing and building on strengths, while providing the supports needed for reaching their full potential. Among their recommendations are incorporating the perspectives, experiences, cultures, languages, strengths, and needs of a diverse range of children and including rich and meaningful content that centers child engagement and agency.

While culturally sustaining pedagogy pertains to all cultures, our project centered on Indigenous cultures. According to a 2017, 40% of adult American respondents are unaware that Native Americans still exist (Wood-Krueger, 2022). As described by Minnesota's Mdewakanton Sioux Community,

> Native American peoples largely have lived in the shadows of American society. Their relative invisibility remains an ongoing, serious problem. Indigenous Americans are usually an afterthought in American society if they are thought about at all… Most mainstream sources of information still peddle misinformation, stereotypes, and erasure to dominate students' and educators' perceptions about America's first peoples (Wood-Krueger, 2022, p. 6).

In Minnesota, the *Restoring Our Place* initiative of the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community (Wood-Krueger, 2022) aims to improve public attitudes and help all Minnesotans have a better understanding of the history, culture, and current experiences of Indigenous peoples by incorporating more accurate information into Minnesota's education system. Their research suggests many educators are eager to integrate Indigenous perspectives into their work but do not know how to do so. Among their recommendations is high-quality professional development for educators that involves Tribal and Native expertise without being burdensome. The Minnesota Department of Education is also calling for improved professional development to support their *Indigenous Education For All* initiative, which aims to integrate the rich cultural, historical, and contemporary contributions of the Anishinaabe and Dakota people into the curriculum of all Minnesota schools, disrupt the cycle of misconceptions perpetuated by gaps in our education system, and reclaim the narrative of Indigenous history and contemporary American Indian people (MN Department of Education, 2024).

Amid these calls for culturally sustaining pedagogy and high-quality professional development is the day-to-day reality for early childhood professionals – low compensation, burn-out, difficulty in finding substitutes, feeling devalued, and the post-pandemic impacts on children in their care. What often unfolds is minimal levels of training to meet requirements or even setting aside professional development altogether. There also is the challenge pointed out by Day (2020): "Making sure that workers understand the importance of culture can be very hard for people, in particular, white workers who don't have much of an affinity with their own culture…it's hard for people who aren't attached to their own culture to understand that culture really is important, in particular to Indigenous people and people of color" (para. 3).

This backdrop of needs and challenges coincided with the work we had underway locally, which entailed implementing a community of practice (CoP) with 15 Indigenous and non-Indigenous professionals working at the intersection of early childhood education and environmental education (Ernst et al., 2023). A CoP is a "group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 4). CoPs involve situated learning that is socially and culturally constructed, with theoretical groundings in situated cognition (learning occurs in a situated activity that has social, cultural, and physical contexts), social learning (people learn from and with others), and knowledge management theory (knowledge is accessed, created and shared within community) (Blankenship & Ruona, 2007).

A CoP brings educators together around a common domain for collaboration and reflection that is inclusive and ongoing, toward deepening CoP participants' knowledge and skills and improving their teaching practice (Seashore et al., 2003). Beyond growth in knowledge and skills, there is an emphasis on developing an identity as a community member. Learning is viewed not as a process that results in *individuals*' acquisition of knowledge, but as a shared process of becoming a member of a sustained community and what it means to learn as a function of being a part of a community. Becoming knowledgeable and skillful and developing that identity are part of the same process, with the former motivating, shaping, and giving meaning to the latter (Lave, 1991).

During the 2022-2023 school year, these 15 early childhood professionals met monthly to engage with Indigenous perspectives for deepening strategies for fostering young children's empathy. We were intentional with our use of a "Two Worlds" approach (Kapyrka & Dockstator, 2012) for implementing the CoP, as we aimed to expand our collective understanding of practices for fostering empathy by honoring both Indigenous and Western knowledge regarding empathy. Rooted in what was already known from Western science regarding fostering empathy and guided by our Indigenous mentor, the CoP allowed us to work toward a co-created, deepened approach to infusing empathy in early learning settings and the capacity-level outcome of a culture of continuous learning and improvement within our regional early learning community.

While the CoP was effective in co-constructing this approach (Ernst et al., 2023) and translating this learning into changes in their teaching practices (Ernst et al., 2024), two needs have emerged from that work. One was the collective desire for the continuation of the CoP. Secondly, participants recognized the need to undertake steps beyond empathy to engage appropriately and authentically in outdoor learning on and with Indigenous land, as well as with the Indigenous and non-Indigenous children in their care. Empathy was an integral starting point, but more work was needed to build the respectful and reciprocal relationships that ultimately benefit all children in our care and the communities in which they live.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

In this unfolding trajectory of work, we recognized the ongoing potential of the CoP approach for altering the conventional linear relationships through which professional learning often occurs (Buysse et al., 2003). Additionally, a CoP is conducive to honoring the Ojibwe approach of shared learning and knowledge, by which each of us knows something, but none of us knows the whole. With the relationships that had been fostered and trust built during the first year of the CoP, we felt continuation of the CoP could provide a safe space to wrestle with challenging questions that emerged in our previous work, such as how we appropriately connect non-Indigenous children to Indigenous land, the difference between embracing Indigenous ways of seeing the world and cultural appropriation in the context of outdoor learning, and identifying what it means to honor historical trauma in early learning and care settings. We also experienced the ability of the CoP approach to elevate Indigenous voices that are often at the margins in early childhood education. As such, we sought funding to support a second year of CoP to continue our work together, on this northern land of *Mni Sota Makoce* (Minnesota), which has been cared for and called home by the Anishinaabe, Dakota, Northern Cheyenne, and other Native peoples from time immemorial. Our aim was oriented toward reconciliation through Indigenous education.

Reconciliation is complex and means different things to different people. To guide our unfolding work, we used this definition: building and sustaining respectful and equitable relationships between non-Indigenous and Indigenous peoples where non-Indigenous historic settlement has had very serious consequences for Indigenous cultures, languages, lands, families, and communities (Hare, 2022). For this type of relationship to happen, there must be awareness of the past, an acknowledgment of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes, and action to change behavior (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). In an educational context, reconciliation work includes identifying and working to change the structures, ideologies, and pedagogies that create unequal outcomes (Hare, 2022). Thus, reconciliation challenges us beyond empathy and even beyond a deeper awareness and understanding. Reconciliation is a pathway for moving forward together. It is a first step and one that must be in the direction of concrete actions to address the historic, systemic, and ongoing impacts of colonialism and racism.
As we conceptualized this second iteration of our reconciliation-focused CoP, we framed our work as collective inquiry regarding how Indigenous histories, worldviews, and pedagogies can become part of the work we do in outdoor learning with young children in meaningful, respectful, and equitable ways. Our aim was oriented toward culturally sustaining practices for early childhood care and outdoor learning and forward movement along the ongoing journey of shaping a better future for all children. We developed a theory of change (see Figure 1) and a logic model (see Figure 2) to support this work.

We invited the 15 participants from the previous CoP to continue forward into this second year (2023-2024) of participation in our CoP through our local, grassroots collaborative of nature-based educators and caregivers. One

participant had moved, and we invited a new educator who had expressed interest in the prior round to participate. These educators were working at the intersection of children and outdoor learning, at varying points in their reconciliation education journey, and committed to furthering equity in early childhood outdoor learning. These participants were at varying career stages (from pre-service to very experienced educators; non-Indigenous and Indigenous educators; a range of settings from private nature preschools to public preschool and Head Start programs, to nonformal education settings and family in-home providers). Like the year prior, they received a stipend of $1,000 for their participation, as a reflection of honoring the participants as professionals who have much to contribute and from whom we have much to learn.

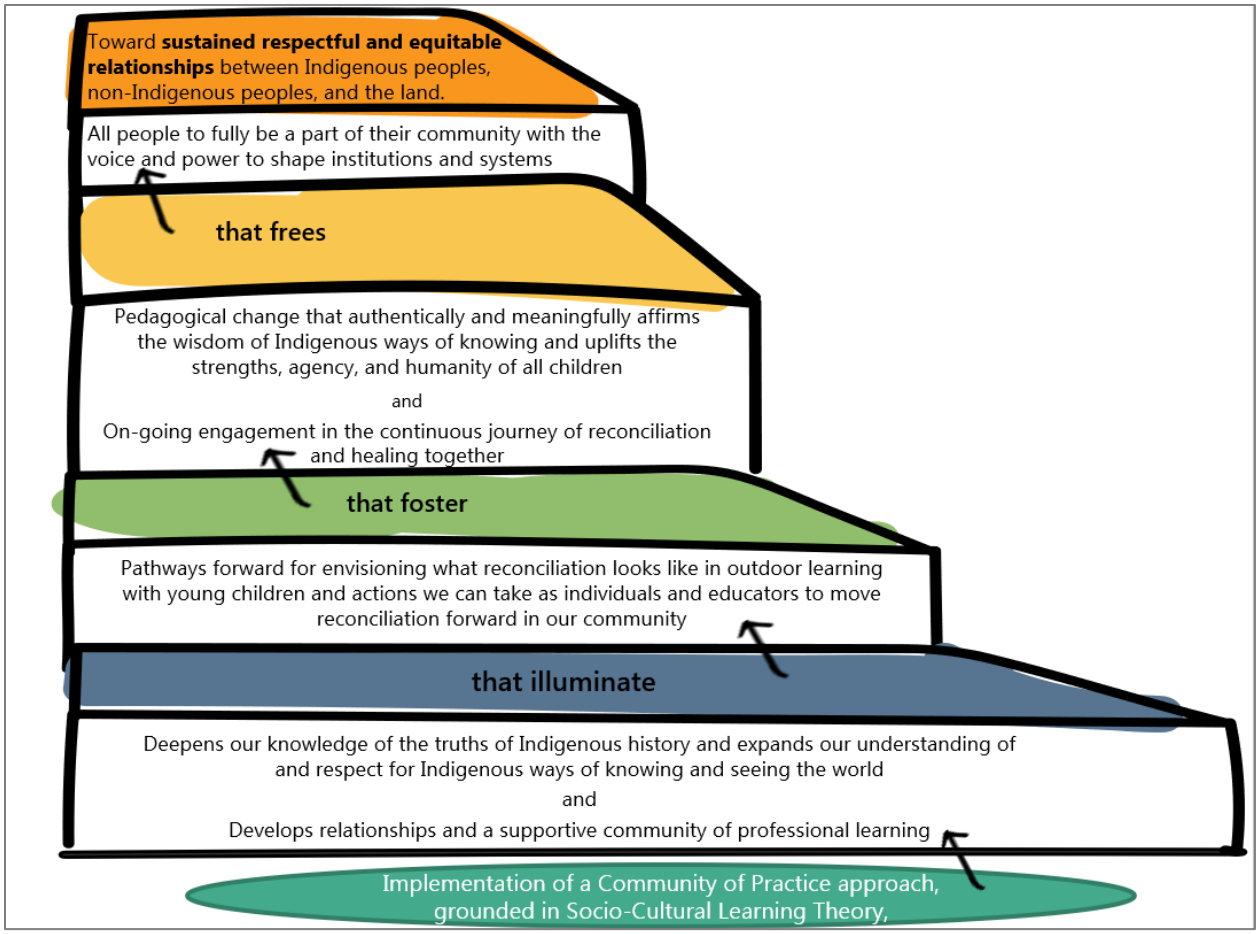

Figure 1. Wiijigaabawitaadidaa Niigaan Izhaayang Theory of Change

Before our first gathering, we invited participants to access the *Reconciliation Through Indigenous Education* course material (a non-credit, open-access online course offered by the Office of Indigenous Education at the University of British Columbia, with development of the course led by Dr. Jan Hare, an Anishinaabe scholar and educator from the M'Chigeeng First Nation in northern Ontario; see https://pdce.educ.ubc.ca/reconciliation-2/). While the course is formally opened three times a year for participation for six weeks, we had sought permission to use this course to ground our CoP and for our 15 participants to engage with and access the materials over the school year, allowing us to engage with each of the course modules for a longer time. The course frames reconciliation as changing institutional structures, practices, policies, and individual beliefs toward strengthening relationships with Indigenous peoples.The course is grounded in the recognition that all learners must be supported in developing their understanding of Indigenous people's worldviews and cultures as a basis for creating equitable and inclusive learning spaces.

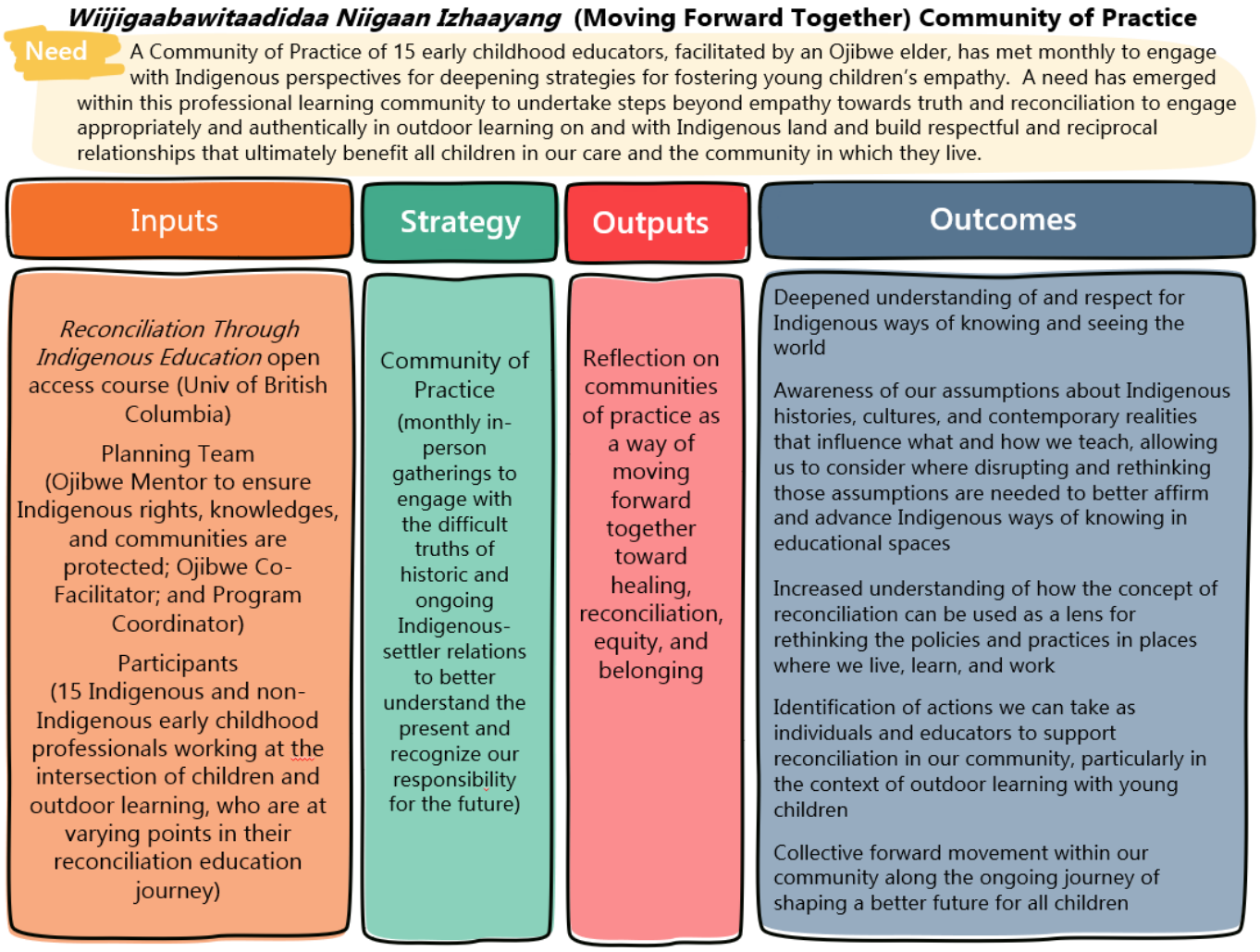

Figure 2. Wiijigaabawitaadidaa Niigaan Izhaayang Logic Model (*Note: The outcomes are grounded in the "Reconciliation through Indigenous Education" course introduction by Dr. Jan Hare)

Our CoP met six times over the 2023-2024 school year. Each session began with one of the Indigenous participants providing the opportunity for smudging. Smudging is a tradition, common to many First Nations, involving burning sage or another medicine gathered from the earth, which helps people pause and center, toward being mindful, connected, and grounded in the event, task, or purpose at hand; smudging allows for a letting go of negative feelings or thoughts and is always voluntary (Indigenous Inclusion Directorate, 2019). We then shared a meal to build community and as a reflection of our grounding in the Two Worlds approach. (Our first session entailed a "working" meal, with discussion questions for participants while they ate; however, our Indigenous mentors guided us away from that practice for the subsequent sessions, as it took away from the Indigenous significance of meal-sharing.) Like our first year of the CoP, each session opened with a Land Acknowledgement and an intentional opening (such as a poem, story, or song), shared by one of the participants, and closed with an intentional closing, also offered by one of the participants.

During our first session, we spent time re-orienting ourselves to the CoP approach and our community agreement from the year prior, which would continue to guide our interactions for this second year of the CoP. We introduced participants to the current project's aims that were shaped by the *Reconciliation through Indigenous Education* course materials. Our aims were as follows:

1. Deepened understanding of and respect for Indigenous ways of knowing and seeing the world;

2. Awareness of our assumptions about Indigenous histories, cultures, and contemporary realities that influence what and how we teach, allowing us to consider where changes in those assumptions are needed to affirm and advance Indigenous ways of knowing in educational spaces;

3. Increased understanding of how the concept of reconciliation can be used as a lens for rethinking the policies and practices in places where we live, learn, work, and play; and

4. Identification of actions we can take personally and professionally, individually and collectively, to support reconciliation in our community, particularly in the context of outdoor learning with young children.

The remainder of our first session centered on the content from the first module, *Introduction to Reconciliation Indigenous Education*, which focused on the range of perspectives associated with the concept of reconciliation and its applications to teaching and learning environments and beyond. This first module also provided opportunities to think about how our understandings of Indigenous peoples (historical and contemporary) have been constructed over time and reflect on our own experiences, values, and assumptions and how they play a role in the ways we, as educators, approach Indigenous content, perspectives, and pedagogies. We also provided participants with suggested resources relating to secondary trauma and self-care, given the weight and difficulty of the topics at hand.

Our second through sixth sessions were guided by course modules two through six. Before each gathering, we invited participants to engage with the course module content. Each module had great depth and extensive breadth. In addition to videos and audio recordings by Indigenous Elders and Indigenous educators and scholars, there were many culturally relevant learning resources to explore on the course module topic at hand; these resources were in support of both informing educational practice as well as moving reconciliation forward and strengthening communities. During our time together each session, and through the guidance of our Indigenous mentors, we engaged with the content further, through small and large group discussions, individual reflection and journalling, storytelling and song, art, and talking circles.

The focus of the second session was course module two, the *History of Indigenous Education*, including ways in which historical experiences have shaped contemporary realities for Indigenous peoples (such as the policies and practices of dispossessing Indigenous people from their lands and eroding their linguistic and cultural links to their identity and livelihood). The module also helped us understand how the forcible removal of Indigenous children from their families and communities, along with residential schooling, has had a profound and ongoing influence on generations of Indigenous families and communities. We also focused on identifying where themes of strength, resiliency, and hope shine through as we intentionally engage with these histories and contemporary realities and as we move forward together. The third session focused on the module, *Learning from Indigenous Worldviews*. Through this module, we explored Indigenous values, such as holistic development, land as a knowledge source, extended family, patience, and the importance of collectiveness, balance, and relationships. The module provided ways that Indigenous worldviews, perspectives, and pedagogies can ground and support curriculum and teaching and examples of Indigenous education frameworks within learning environments, such as the *First Peoples' Principles of Learning* (First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2006/2007), which deeply resonated with the CoP participants and seemed so conducive to the work they do in the context of outdoor learning.

The fourth session drew from module four, *Learning from Story*. We explored how story is a way of knowing; it is how knowledge, history, and memory are shared across the generations. Stories have the power to educate and heal and are an important part of the reconciliation process. The module included stories of residential school survivors that contribute to our understanding of the significance of this history and the intergenerational impacts on families and communities. We also explored protocols associated with Indigenous storytelling and how stories in educational settings can be used by educators to strengthen the identity of Indigenous learners. During this fourth session, we also invited participants to engage in reflection regarding how these stories have implications for responsibility in reshaping a different story of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships in the places we live, work, learn, and plan. We invited participants to draw what that new story could be, or what that new relationship could look like, inviting them to think about what role they could play in that new story (see Appendix A for several

examples). The fifth session, grounded in the course module *Learning from the Land*, helped us more deeply understand how land is not only a source of knowledge, but the basis of Indigenous peoples' identities. We learned how Indigenous values and ways of knowing can be brought to the forefront of teaching and learning through experiential, land-based learning. We reflected on land as teacher (source of knowledge), land as a basis of identity, land as pedagogy, and land as a pathway for reconciliation.

The sixth session was grounded in the final course module, *Engaging in Respectful Relationships*. This module focused on how respectful relationships are so necessary for advancing Indigenous education, ensuring the educational success of Indigenous students, and advancing reconciliation. The module guided ways we can develop trusting relationships through working together, listening to and supporting Indigenous priorities, and authentic consultations. We deepened our understanding of the primacy of respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility. We learned more about what respectful engagement of Indigenous family and community members in schools entails, as well as protocols for including Elders in classrooms. This final session also focused on knowledge synthesis, with participants reflecting individually and then collectively on our growth and learning. This synthesis was integral in terms of helping participants realize the learning that had been unfolding. As one participant expressed, "*I was amazed to see the work and tangible action steps emerge in the last session. It was surprising and exciting to see how much there is to offer the movement from such a quiet, reflective experience CoP experience this year*."

Through the dissemination and sharing of our learning from our first year of the CoP, we had been encouraged to think about non-textual ways of representing our learning, to better reflect a Two Worlds approach and honor other forms of knowledge expressions. As such, we invited a graphic recorder (visual notetaker) to attend this final session and listen to our reflections. Before the session, we provided her with a compilation of our reflections and learnings thus far, so she had that context and grounding. During our time together in that final session, she listened to participants' reflections and built upon a drawing she had started from the compilation that had been shared with her. As she added to the mural, she communicated both the content and tone of the participants' reflections. The mural created is shown in Figure 3. The mural intentionally expresses one of the images that became significant to us throughout the CoP; the hands joined together at the center of the mural express the receiving and passing along of knowledge, representing the learning we have received that is inextricable to the sharing and acting upon our learning.

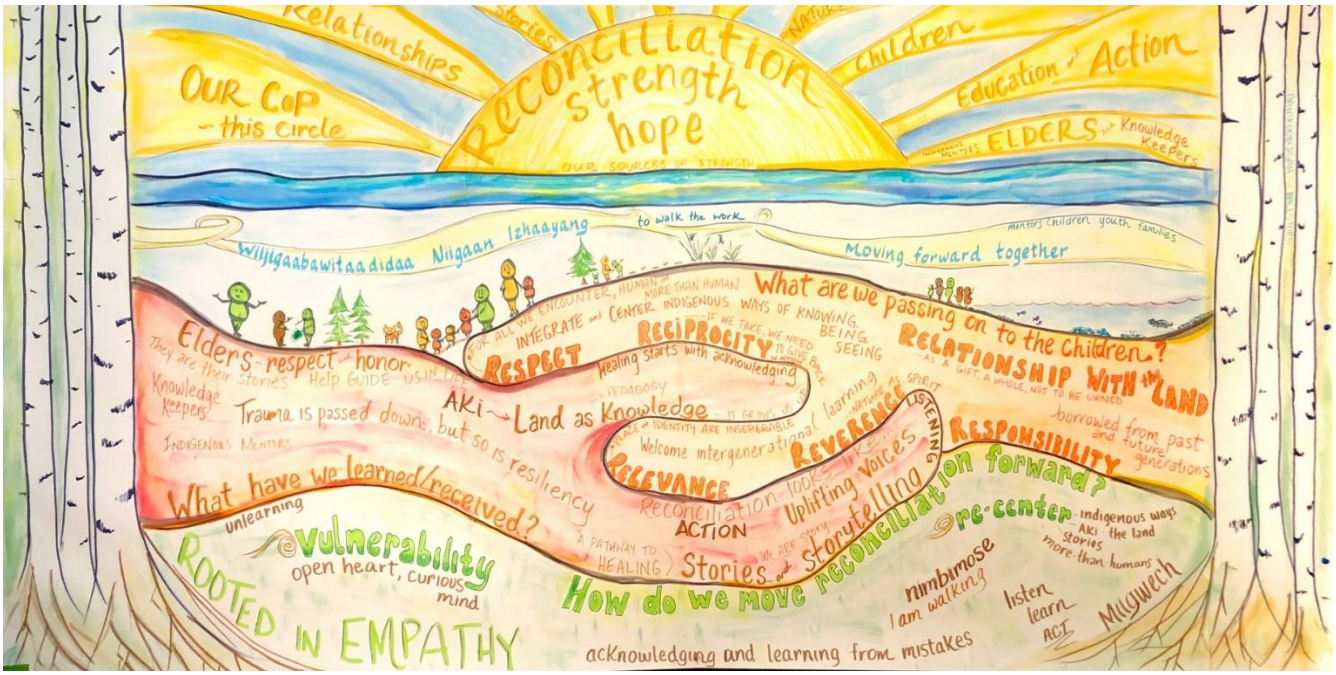

Figure 3. Wiijigaabawitaadidaa Niigaan Izhaayang (Moving Forward Together) Learning Mural
(illustrated by Nelle Rhicard, Reframe Ideas)

Additionally, our learning synthesis is shared in Appendix B; this cumulative synthesis draws from our experiences, reflections, and learning from across the six sessions. It is organized into four sections: What We Learned (Our Growth); How We Can Further Reconciliation in Outdoor Learning with Young Children; How We Can Move Reconciliation Forward in Our Community; and Sources of Strength, Hope, and Resilience as We Move Forward Together. This learning is offered in the spirit of an Indigenous view of knowledge, wherein knowledge flows without end: it is not owned, but shaped by community (Anderson et al., 2017). We offer this work with deep gratitude and respect for the Indigenous traditions we have had the privilege of learning with and from. Our final session concluded with CoP participants presenting our Indigenous mentors with handmade notes and gifts, following the tradition of Indigenous gift-giving to show appreciation for the knowledge exchanged.

REFLECTION ON LEARNING OUTCOMES

Our project evaluation focused on these evaluation questions, which corresponded with our learning outcomes:

- Did our individual and collective understanding of and respect for Indigenous ways of knowing and seeing the world deepen?
- Did our awareness of our assumptions about Indigenous histories, cultures, and contemporary realities influence what and how we teach, allowing us to consider where disrupting and rethinking those assumptions are needed to better affirm and advance Indigenous ways of knowing in educational spaces?
- Do we individually and collectively have an increased understanding of how the concept of reconciliation can be used as a lens for rethinking the policies and practices in places where we live, learn, and work?
- Have we identified actions we can take personally and professionally, individually and collectively, to support reconciliation in our community, particularly in the context of outdoor learning with young children?

The participants' reflections from across the CoP sessions that were compiled and integrated into our learning synthesis (presented in Appendix B) are meaningful indicators of participants' deepened awareness, respect, and understanding, as well as their identification of actions to move reconciliation forward and suggest that our intended outcomes were indeed met. Yet we recognize that this is an ongoing learning journey and that our learning must continue to grow and deepen. There are several points we bring forward here that we have reflected further upon, which may be of interest to others as they consider how a lens of reconciliation might be useful in their work and how Indigenous knowledges, world views, and pedagogies can become part of the work they do in outdoor learning with young children.

One of those areas is regarding our question of how to appropriately and authentically engage non-Indigenous young children in connecting with and caring for land that is not "theirs." Our Indigenous mentors guided us to a place of recognition that, from an Indigenous perspective regarding land (it is not something owned), perhaps of greater concern is land that has and continues to be degraded. They reassured us as to the appropriateness of nurturing Indigenous and non-Indigenous children's connection to nature and helping them develop an ongoing, intimate relationship with the land on which they live, learn, and play. And as part of that, our role can be to help reframe that relationship from one of stewardship (which can feel burdensome or suggest something to be left to experts), to one marked by children's active participation and agency, guided by reciprocity and empathy, and grounded in a deep love and respect for *Aki,* the Anishinaabe word that is often translated to "land" but instead is understood as everything.

Another aspect of our learning we bring forward relates to trauma-informed care in the context of early childhood education. We more deeply recognize that trauma-informed care includes historical trauma, and that historical trauma has the potential to negatively impact a child's long-term health and learning. Particularly through the first-hand accounts of residential school survivors (Native American boarding schools in the U.S. and Canada), we were deeply moved by the profound impact on generations of Indigenous children, families, and communities, including

families in our midst, and especially upon greater understanding of the impact of eroding linguistic links on their cultural identities. We have learned how stories can strengthen the identity of Indigenous children, as can land-based pedagogies. We also recognized the relevance of the *First Peoples Principles of Learning* (First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2006/2007) in the context of historical trauma-informed care: that learning is embedded in memory, history, and story; learning involves patience and time; learning requires exploration of one's identity; and learning supports the well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits, and the ancestors.

We also have greater clarity regarding embracing Indigenous knowledges, worldviews, and pedagogies, and how that differs from cultural appropriation. We have been guided, through our Indigenous mentors and scholars, that Indigenous education is good for all children, and there is a desire to have non-Indigenous educators meaningfully include Indigenous knowledges and pedagogies in their classrooms. Anishinaabe scholar Jean-Paul Restoule offers "We can't achieve our goals alone. We need non-Aboriginal people to understand our shared histories, perspectives, visions, and goals, and to participate in achieving them together. We need non-Aboriginal teachers respecting and using Indigenous perspectives in our classrooms." He explains the fear of appropriation and a lack of confidence among non-Indigenous educators can be addressed through reciprocal relationships. Further, relationships with Indigenous peoples defuse the appropriation issue because one is not speaking for but speaking *with*; instead of asking, 'Do I have the right to teach this material? we should ask 'What is my responsibility?" Equally important is acknowledging traditional sources of knowledge, like how we cite others when writing or in research. This also includes acknowledging when we are using Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy: Who did we learn this from and when did they share it with us? (Restoule & Chaw-win-is, 2017). Restoule further states:

> Indigenous knowledge and Anishinaabek education are meant for everybody. When Anishinaabek share traditional teachings and stories they are meant to reveal the nature of life and human nature, not just Anishinaabek culture. The stories teach us what it means to be alive and anyone can learn from them if they listen carefully. The building of responsibility to self, relations, community and life has never been more significant than this time of ecological crisis that will require us to shift our consciousness ever more to attending to each other's survival, quality of life, and the protection of endangered species and habitats, including our own. Indigenous education is in line with the movement that many are calling the 'great turning'. The time is right for the strengths and gifts of Indigenous education to be embraced by others. To integrate all learners in relation to one another and all life, in the pursuit of full human development is an inclusive education (Restoule, 2011, para 8).

Additionally, we learned through the course resources and our Indigenous mentors that some knowledge is sacred and only shared with permission and/or in certain situations. They have also guided us toward extending beyond the phrasing of Indigenous ways of knowing, to Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and doing, as the "being" and "doing" are just as important as the "knowing."

REFLECTIONS ON THE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE APPROACH FOR CAPACITY BUILDING

Participants completed a final questionnaire that was oriented toward reflecting on the use of the CoP approach in this reconciliation context, and for professional learning and capacity-building in the context of more trauma-informed and culturally sustaining practices for early childhood outdoor learning more broadly. Participants' responses underscored our sense as to not only how conducive this professional learning approach had been in this reconciliation-focused context, but also how impactful it was, with participants describing the learning experience as "life-giving" and "transformative." Their responses also provided insight into why this approach was so effective. For example, one participant expressed:

> *The CoP approach was a beautiful way to build a trusting community and share the stories of our own lives and work while doing some deep personal and community introspective work. We were learning about challenging topics and ideas for system-level reform and the care of humans. The CoP approach helped us learn holistically.*

The theme of this community being a safe space, where trust and vulnerability unfolded through active, authentic engagement, was shared within many of the participants' responses. One described the CoP approach as a way for "*everyone in the group to share, be seen and heard*," which "*seldom happens in professional development, particularly for early childhood educators*." The following are two further examples:

> *The CoP approach is such a great way to do this work. The created community makes it a safe space to learn, share, and take risks. This format has led to far deeper learning than I've ever experienced in a typical PD session because it requires you to think deeper, be an active listener, and engage with the community. The community aspect of this experience also makes you want to come and participate because you get to learn among peers who have become trusted friends.*
>
> *The CoP approach has been so deeply nurturing. It has provided a safe place to learn, share, make mistakes, and grow as an educator. It has been invaluable to share and gather knowledge alongside this group of women under the guidance of our Indigenous mentors and facilitators. We have created a community, one in which we can lean on each other, listen to one another, and cultivate ideas and ways of knowing to then implement in our own settings. I have deeply enjoyed learning this way. The slowness in which we have moved to create this knowledge provides for deep thoughtful reflection and connection. It is this type of authentic connection where deeper learning can occur. I feel like I am part of a movement, a group of educators working together, perhaps implementing individually, to be more equitable, trauma-informed, and culturally competent. In doing so, families feel welcomed and validated. This work ripples outwards.*

It seems that this safe space, this community in which their learning deepened provided an important avenue for developing both self-confidence and commitment toward the aims at hand, preparing them and motivating them for applying their learning in their respective settings and programs beyond the CoP space. As one participant expressed, the CoP *"brings focus and intention and gives me direction in where to start and a goal for where I want to go."* This is further articulated in the following two participant responses:

> *The CoP approach seems to prioritize depth and relationship building, which are both values that benefit the group directly, and benefit the groups that the CoP individuals are connected with. Practicing these values in a safe space with others makes it easier to practice them in settings where others may be less familiar with or open to the approach.*
>
> *The value of the CoP lies in the incredible understanding and vulnerability of every member. I feel more confident that I can do this work even though it is hard and scary, and I may stumble because I have an entire community of teachers walking the same journey alongside me. Hearing the experiences and examples from other programs also helps show me how to move in the right direction one step at a time. Also, there is something about doing this work together that feels more motivating. We are all moving toward building a stronger, more beautiful community by acknowledging the truths of the past and present and committing to intentionally doing better.*

And related to this deepening of commitment, or perhaps fueling it, was a recognition of the importance and relevance of this work, as well as there being hope for a better tomorrow. These sentiments are expressed beautifully through the words of the following participant responses:

> *But when we put into practice the knowledge we have gained and share it with colleagues and community members, it helps to cement how critical this work is. But we as participants are redefining our approaches and values, and what it means to be an educator to all children, all relatives. Year after year we have access to these little, amazing, beautiful, capable children. We can help plant the seeds of empathy and understanding. We help them to create a connection to the land, to help see themselves in both the smaller and bigger stories of this world and their own lives and all our relatives.*

> *Being able to hear others' stories of what they experienced in life and how to process the trauma has deepened my motivation and commitment for teaching children how to care for one another through empathy, reconciliation, and understanding that we are all connected to the land and we need to care for her as she cares for us.*
>
> *Through this process, I feel that generations to come have a better future knowing the trauma that happened and how we can heal and learn from it. Yes, trauma is passed down through generations. But so is resilience and hope.*

Through these insights shared by participants, and as we look ahead to future work, what emerges so clearly is the importance of learning as a social process. As stated in the literature:

> We are coming to understand that learning rather than being solely individual as we have taken it to be is actually also social… People learn from and with others… They learn through practice (learning as doing), through meaning (learning as intentional), through community (learning as participating with others), and through identity (learning as changing who we are) (Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2008, p. 227).

Time and active participation are at the heart of learning in community. Educators were active in their listening, reflecting, sense-making, and sharing. Educators were engaged in collegial inquiry; they had access to expertise in the form of the Indigenous mentors and the course materials, yet there was respect for the internal expertise within the community. As such, we have greater insight into the "inner workings" of this CoP approach, whereby identity, self-confidence, and commitment seem to be important mediators between knowledge and application, and of which time, community, trust, and deep engagement are essential ingredients.

Additionally, as we reflected on this project and the CoP approach, we realized the potential for extending outward to other teachers. For example, one participant described it as so "life-giving" that they wished all teachers could experience it, and another suggested, "*If we could get more educators engaged in deep, trusting conversations, we would all benefit*." One stated her experience in the following way, which suggests the potential for replicating this approach:

> *We shared meals, our own lives, our challenges in our personal journeys, and our educator journeys. We had enough time between sessions to prepare as individuals with the video and other course resources, and then in our group sessions to work through some of the material as a group and tailor that learning to our own community and place. We went from the big picture of how the world history of colonization has affected Aboriginal peoples to how colonization and the Industrial Revolution have changed our local communities (human and more-than-human) and land relationships and worldviews. We were shaping a better future for all children by learning these histories and inspecting the more common (likely predominant) and less common (often systematically erased) views about relationships to land, story, learning, power, trust, family/community, and play.*

Yet at the same time, we recognize how important it was that this reconciliation-focused CoP was not our first learning experience together. Fortunately, this reconciliation-oriented CoP was built upon our prior empathy CoP; thus, we had already developed a foundation of trust, respect, relationship, vulnerability, and safety, from which we could ground repair when mistakes were made. We learned together, but we also unlearned and relearned together. Further, as we reflect on this past year and think about this unfolding trajectory, we are mindful that while the CoP approach can be deeply impactful, it is a professional learning approach that takes time – time for the group to become a community, and time for that trust and deep engagement to unfold. We are also mindful of how deeply place-based this work is, that this work will look different when practiced elsewhere, and how important it is to carry out this work through respectful and reciprocal relationships with the Indigenous peoples where they live, work, learn, and play.

CONCLUSION AND LOOKING AHEAD

Our CoP focused on reconciliation through Indigenous education. Our aim was to *wiijigaabawitaadidaa niigaan izhaayang* (move forward together) toward more equitable, trauma-informed, and culturally sustaining practices in early childhood care and outdoor learning. Both this CoP and our preceding CoP focused on empathy, have been deeply impactful. This past year reflected an "Indigenous pause," a slowing down for intentional listening and reflection; we "sat with" the perspectives, stories (often accompanied by grief), and knowledge shared; and to some degree, action felt premature. By the end of the year, however, participants were expressing readiness to step forward from the foundation built and put our learning into action. One participant expressed it in this way:

> *I thought the CoP approach was effective with this topic in a different way than our first CoP (our Empathy CoP). There was more space for pause, reflection, and listening. It was quieter and held the energy of the group so that we could quiet down and step back rather than gather knowledge and move forward. Because of the shelter of the CoP, I think our community of learners is ready to walk forward with more care, intention, knowledge, and grounding.*

Upon reflection, we realize that just like empathy was integral but insufficient, this work over the past year is also insufficient, and that we must continue forward movement together. An idea that emerged from our final session together, inspired by a concluding talking circle, is the Ojibwe word and concept of *nimbimose*, which roughly translates to "walking." We collectively want and are committed to continuing this slow, intentional learning and forward movement together, toward education that authentically and meaningfully affirms the wisdom of Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and doing, and uplifts the strengths, agency, and humanity of all children. As such, we have submitted a proposal for funding to support this unfolding trajectory. We seek to continue furthering our learning toward planning and implementing site-level projects that deepen young children's relationship with the natural world in ways that integrate reciprocity, agency, Traditional Ecological Knowledge, hope, and a sense of responsibility. With humility, we continue our collective, ongoing journey of shaping a better future for all children through culturally sustaining practices in early childhood learning and care settings.

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