Relational Education: A Way Forward Together

Submitted by:

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Land Acknowledgement   
 Respect and gratitude is given in acknowledgement that the subject of this research paper is situated in in the traditional territories of the Indigenous People of Turtle Island, specifically the Blackfoot, Neheyiwak, Metis and The Dene Tha.   
 The researcher resides in and acknowledges with respect and gratitude the traditional territories of the First Nations of the West Kootenay and Boundary regions: the Sinixt (Lakes), the Syilx (Okanagan), the Ktunaxa, and the Secwepemc (Shuswap) peoples.  
Epoché Statement   
 This ‘epoché statement’, is included with the intention of transparency outlining my position and cultural background as researcher and my assumptions preceding the research (Griffin & May, 2017:519). While referencing Indigenous educational approaches and methods, I do so respectfully and with the understanding of the diversity of approaches, communities and peoples within the term *Indigenous*. Whenever possible, I have attempted not to generalize, but to be specific regarding systems of education and the people that practice them. Also acknowledged is that traditional Indigenous education methods were not only practiced in the past but are practiced in the present and need to be recognized by the western world with respect for the complex educational systems that they are and the values they teach. I recognize myself as a researcher who is a nonindigenous woman born third generation in Canada with European ancestry, currently living in a small town in eastern British Columbia. I have not spent time in community for this specific research, but have conducted this research from written documents. I am a researcher who is middle-class, educated and a mother of two. In studying anthropology, and Indigenous studies, I am allied with the Indigenous perspectives and value protecting our ecosystems. I have environmentalist values that position me in opposition to extremes of resource extraction and abuse of ecosystems, but with an agreeable understanding towards sustainable use of natural resources.  
Introduction  
 *Colonial* and *decolonial* are two of the many perspectives guiding education, not just in Canada but on a global scale. One is object-based and colonial and the other, relational and decolonial. The later perspective includes an approach to education that highlights the concepts of invitation and hospitality. Object-based colonial thinking leads to categorizing and grouping aspects of the world in hierarchies and classifications (Pirbhai-Illich & Martin, 2019). This includes creating hierarchies towards ways of thinking as a dominating power over other ways of approaching ideas and concepts. Indigenous approaches to education, such as those used by the Blackfoot, Neheyiwak, Dene Tha and Metis are foundationally built upon the importance of family, place and relationship. These concepts when used in teaching and learning empower people to be connected to each other, living nature, the land and the spirits. By learning to be connected in relationships to everything around us we can encourage values such as reciprocity and respect. This will ultimately lead to a future where humans understand they are part of nature in a reciprocal relationship, not one that they dominate and destroy. Relational learning is a complex Indigenous approach to education that needs to be recognized, valued and incorporated into mainstream teaching methods for the benefit of all relationships within the living web of this land.  
Relational Education  
 Using a relational approach to education can move us forward in a direction that is more compassionate and understanding by learning together how to overcome a Eurocentric model of education based on power, separation, hierarchy and judgement. This is a way of thinking that comes from Europe and is not the only way to approach understanding our world. There are other ways of knowing that are not foundationally a *yes/ no* and *either/or* (Pirbhai- Illrich & Martin, 2019:3). Indigenous ways of learning and knowing were devalued and discredited systematically. Respecting and valuing Indigenous methods of education is imperative for the future as a foundational step towards positive change (Cote-Meek, 2020). Non-Indigenous educators have a responsibility to promote, hold awareness, and value Indigenous approaches to education, not merely as an additional cultural unit, but as a way of co-teaching, co-learning and co-experiencing knowledge on all levels of the relationship between teacher, student and their shared co-created world.  
Blackfoot  
 For the Blackfoot, education and relationships are entwined and woven together in a system that is reciprocal, ethical and respectful. Knowledge is localized and shared in appropriate settings when in right relations with the living web around them. This approach to learning is having ‘engaged awareness’ and encourages truly seeing the world and living beings with compassion (Hernandez, 1999). A culturally relational educational approach is used when instilling, “*aoksisawaato’p* (visitng/ renewal of relations), *aokakiosiit* (be wisely aware; pay attention), and *aatsimaak’ssin* (responsibility to balance giving/ taking reciprocity)” (Dwayne, Glanfield, Sterenberg, 2011). This approach can be promoted for the benefit of all learners and teachers to create a more respectful understanding of the living world that we are a part of.   
Neheyiwak  
 The Cree word *miyowichitowin*, translates to “a healing energy or medicine that is generated when we are actively together with the intention of honouring and respecting the relationships we are enmeshed within” (Dwayne, Glanfield, Sterenberg, 2011). The Neheyiwak peoples teach that the earth is sacred and a family relationship. This concept of family is embedded in the approach to teaching and learning as well as being reciprocal. This relationship with the land is special and is honoured in ceremony by demonstrating appreciation, gratitude and communication with the spirits and creator (Cardinal & HIdebrandt, 2001:12). Ceremonies are a way of connecting in relationship with each other, the land, and the ancestors. It is in this relational way that knowledge can be shared and preserved through song, dance, art and language. Strict protocols ensure that the important details are carried on from one generation to the next. With each ceremony, the community learns and is reminded about the expected ways of getting along with one another, the animals, the land, and the spirits. This form of communal learning is an approach to education that is grounded in the value of maintaining positive relationships. The values of respect, relationship and reciprocity can be used in mainstream education as approaches to learning how to live harmoniously with our world.   
Metis  
 Using the foundational values of family was a way to ensure peace and create a sense of belonging. Marriages between families could function as a way to prevent conflict. When another family or person was connected by a family line, it meant that a peaceful sharing and lifestyle of cooperation could be enjoyed by both parties. It was socially and spiritually unacceptable to harm or wrong a family member, therefore by bringing others in to this relationship structure, peace was allowed to flourish. This strategy was practiced for strangers coming in to the area as well. A person could be adopted in to a family if they did not have one. This practice created not only a sense of belonging, but also made clear the framework of behaviour and expectations for the individual. A person’s responsibility was understood through a lens of contribution and cooperation. The established rules of conduct within communities were modelled after this concept of family. Being Metis, “… is not so much about your individual ancestry as it is about sharing in the common heritage of the people to which you belong” (Chartrand,2007:8). When family and kinship relationships are a foundational aspect of a culture and community, it permeates into ways of being including education.  
 Bouvier-Lemaigre (2022) explains the Cree term *asonimakewin*; passing on what we know, as a way of teaching in a land-based and relational way, instilling an understanding of relations with place. She recounts how in *Sakitawak* Saskatchewan her great grandparents and grandparents were multilingual speaking Cree, Dene, French and English. In this area a rich Metis culture developed along with the Michif language based on a mix of Cree and French during the fur trading years of the 18th and 19th centuries. Today the Michif language is still used and taught in schools in hopes of maintaining the knowledge of language and in recognition of how knowledge can be gained through language itself and the relationship with the land. *Sakitawak* meant a meeting place where it opens and was a hub of the fur trade. The Europeans renamed this land Lac Ile a la Crosse, Island of the Cross. The relationship with the land and language holds all of history. When learning is shared through story and oral tradition there is a connection with the land, the ancestors and the history of knowledge sharing practices. This relational approach to understanding connects us within the web of the world in a subjective and personal way.  
Dene Tha  
 For the Dene Tha, relational education was taught through storytelling, sharing, and ceremony. Using the oral tradition as an educational model allows for repetition and participation. The Dene can learn lessons about the ways of life and behaviour through the stories and rules of ceremony. Their communities are family based and people can have many educators throughout their lives consisting of family and kin relationships. Lessons on the land can be shared during appropriate times and in relationship with the seasons and the patterns of nature. Dene education is relational not only in teaching methods, but also in ways of being and the subject of the lessons. Some lessons will not be taught and information will not be shared if right relations are not in place first.   
Relational Approaches  
 Williams and Snively (2019) outline the following potential cultural principles in learning science from an Indigenous relational perspective. Elders are keepers of Knowledge. Learning is a community activity and is holistic and relational. Learning is carried in language and is rooted in home place. Learning is experiential and is ecological. By applying these principles in the mainstream classroom, a more harmonious and compassionate learning experience would be encouraged as well as a sense of place and belonging in the world.   
 Part of the relational model of education is recognizing that all involved are both learners and teachers. The person who is in the ‘student’ position is recognized within a relationship of all of their relations such as family, community, and previous knowledge, not just as an individual. Getting to know each other holistically instead of situationally allows for this relational understanding of the context in which we live in the world. Lowering the power differential by taking on the roles more of a host and a guest, instead of student and teacher encourages a tone of both people being recipients of knowledge. “Relational ways of knowing are based on the premise that everything and everyone is related and inter-connected in dynamic, inter-active, and mutually reciprocal relationships” (Cajete, 2000).  
 With an intention of decolonization and respect to Indigenous education methods, Barakas & Gladwin (2021), explore the ways that talking circles and other Indigenous pedagogies and methodologies of education are effective approaches when wanting to change the power dynamic and privilege stance of current teaching methodologies in western classrooms. These relational approaches to learning are effective, holistic and subjective, creating a space for sharing that encourages qualities of compassion and empathy through an active and open listening. Bringing Indigenous ways of knowing into the classroom has far reaching positive implications beyond learning the immediate topic of study. “Such approaches increase intercultural awareness for homogenized and heterogenous groups of participants, promoting diversity and intercultural competencies, as well as developing non-cognitive qualities often neglected in Eurocentric educational contexts, such as somatic or emotional intelligence” (Barakas & Gladwin, 2021:21). By using a relational frame not only as a model for education, but also as a model for connecting with learners and a way of understanding our place in the world, a more positive and reciprocal future can be imagined by empowering learners to seek and value connection.   
 Mainstream education is built on a model of teachers talking and presenting subjects. By using the circle as a framework for learning, we can all focus on and value listening to each other. This places the emphasis on the group or a communal learning as opposed to the current importance placed on the individual. A circular understanding instead of a linear one, creates cooperation and equality instead of opposition and division. “The path toward systemic social change involves valuing relationships as a primary focus, with respectful listening as a fundamental practice, rather than the symptoms or the sum of the individual parts” (Barkaskas & Gladwin, 2021:30).   
 Wortham and Jackson (2012) highlight how western Eurocentric education models are developed to enhance and grow an individual, separate from their world and relationships within it. This type of education is based on hierarchies of knowledge and decontextualizes topics of study from each other. Separate units of study encourage alienation and objectification of learning. New approaches to education need to be proposed and promoted including the need to think beyond the human individual as the unit of measurement; to recognize that all processes of life are relational (2012:5). “Central to a decolonial approach to education is therefore an understanding of invitation and hospitality as elements of an ethical, reciprocal educational relationship in which teacher and student can be both host and guest, on a joint process of exploration, finding answers to shared questions that are authentic, the answers to which emerge from the relation and thus cannot be known in advance.” (Pirbhai- Illrich & Martin, 2019:7).   
 A relational approach comes with responsibilities. Entering into a relationship of learning and sharing means we all must be accountable, trustworthy, genuine and authentic. Vine Deloria, Jr., a Lakota scholar (1986) noted that all relationships have a moral component because all of the interconnectedness of the universe is personal (as cited in Colorado, 1988:52). Our relationship with the world and each other is dependant on having a compassionate and giving connection with the natural environment. This is a value that can be encouraged, learned and promoted through a relational model to education. *A coming to know* is learning from the inside about the external world by being in harmonious relationship with that world (Williams & Snively, 2019; Cajete, 2000; Colorado, 1998; Peat, 1994). Following Indigenous principles of education will help everyone to learn how to be in this important harmonious relationship. True change can occur starting with education. Educators and students can benefit from a relational approach to education when it is presented mindfully and respectfully; where sources are discussed, protected and not appropriated (Barkaskas & Gladwin, 2021:22).   
Conclusion  
 Relational approaches to education are important today because of the values that are learned through this complex Indigenous education model. This approach needs to be incorporated into mainstream education for the benefit of all relationships and the environment. Indigenous education can develop qualities and values in students such as modesty, generosity, resourcefulness, integrity, wisdom, courage, compassion for others, and living harmoniously with the environment (Williams & Snively, 2019). These are qualities that are needed now to take care of the people, animals, and land that have been abused since colonization. Western educational models can change to being more invitational, localized, subjective and personal through relational awareness. This change in position and bearing can allow for more perspectives to be in the conversation about knowledge structures and educational legitimacy (Pirbhai- Illrich & Martin, 2019:4). By educating with a relational approach, our interdependency can be deeply understood, positive reciprocal relationships can be built and we can seek out harmony and balance as goals for our future with nature.

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