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REDISCOVERING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE IN CONTEMPORARY CANADA

Abstract

This article is concerned with examining the process of rediscovering Indigenous knowledge in contemporary approaches to education in Canada. It begins with a brief account of Native people's recent efforts to regain control over their own learning and teaching and it proceeds to the discussion and clarification of a tremendously important cultural phenomenon, namely decolonization of Aboriginal pedagogies. The next part is devoted to a review of particular aspects of Indigenous knowledge and philosophies that seem especially enriching and beneficial not only for today's educational system, but also for the society's attitude to life in general. The final part enumerates and discusses in detail the most important Native educational tools and practices, which appear to find the greatest application in the classroom environment.

Résumé

Cet article porte sur l'examen du processus de la redécouverte des connaissances autochtones dans les démarches contemporaines relatives à l'éducation au Canada. Il commence par un bref compte rendu des efforts déployés récemment par les autochtones pour reprendre le contrôle sur leur propre apprentissage et sur l'enseignement et il procède à la discussion et à la clarification d'un phénomène culturel extrêmement important, à savoir la décolonisation des pédagogies autochtones. La partie suivante est consacrée à un examen des aspects particuliers de la connaissance et des philosophies autochtones qui semblent particulièrement enrichissantes et bénéfiques non seulement pour le système éducatif d'aujourd'hui, mais aussi pour l'attitude de la société envers la vie en général. La dernière partie énumère et examine en détail les plus importants outils et pratiques éducatifs autochtones, qui semblent trouver la plus grande application dans l'environnement scolaire.

In spite of many-year-long colonizing aspirations and the existence of dozens of “damaging myths about Aboriginal cultures, languages, beliefs and ways of life” (Battiste, “Maintaining...” 194), non-Aboriginal Canadians of the 21st century appear to manifest an ever growing inclination towards acknowledging the importance of Indigenous philosophies in the contemporary world. It is a widely recognized truth that Native people have an indispensable right to live in accordance with their cultural traditions and values, which reveal themselves in the unique character of Indigenous approaches to pedagogy and education. Although thus far not ubiquitously reflected in all school curricula in Canada, elements of Aboriginal worldviews and teaching techniques are being currently integrated into a lot of educational programs. These practices contribute not only to the growth of young Indigenous people’s cultural awareness and the quality of their spiritual development, but they also encourage non-Native students to broaden their horizons and learn to accept and respect diverse viewpoints, notwithstanding the fact of their being different from or even contradictory to the generally approved ways of thinking.

1. Indigenous People’s Control over Their Own Education

After years of social and cultural discrimination and traumatic experiences caused by residential school system and drastic Child Welfare programs, Native people of Canada became eager to liberate themselves from the yoke of colonialism, which deprived them of the right to contribute to the creation of laws concerning them and to decide about their own future. From this long-withheld frustration emerged the readiness to fight for the introduction of serious changes into the national laws regarding Aboriginal education. One of the earliest documents which guaranteed that Indigenous approach to education was valuable and legitimate was the 1972 policy paper *Indian Control of Indian Education* established by the National Indian Brotherhood¹ (Kirkness 7). The document recognized Indigenous philosophies as being essential for Native children to develop harmoniously and its two major principles were parental responsibility, which enabled parents to decide about their children’s education, and local control, which required local administration of “Indian controlled schools” (12). The paper underwent a revision in 2010 and is now known as *First Nations Control of First Nations Education*. The 2010 paper promotes lifelong learning as being valid and it addresses such aspects of Indigenous education as “language immersion, holistic and culturally relevant curricula, well-trained educators, focused

¹ National Indian Brotherhood was replaced by the Assembly of First Nations in 1982.

leadership, parental involvement and accountability, and safe and healthy facilities founded on principles that respect First Nations jurisdiction over education” (*First Nations* 3).

Nevertheless, despite the existence of such documents, the quality of Aboriginal education is still in need of reforms and many improvements and Indigenous people continue to be forced to fight against omnipresent stereotypes and discrimination. Fortunately, a great number of affirmative actions and positive initiatives is being undertaken by many cultural organizations², which aim at promoting Aboriginal worldviews and perspectives on education and community life. Moreover, the Canadian government engages in numerous debates concerning the introduction of Indigenous subject matter into regular classroom practice, which so far resulted in the implementation of Native Languages and Aboriginal Perspectives classes at elementary and secondary schools in British Columbia (*Shared Learnings*), Alberta (Donald), Manitoba (*Integrating Aboriginal*) and Ontario (*Aboriginal Education Strategy*).

It is common knowledge that people of Native origin are becoming ever more significant and vital for the development of Canadian society and economics. Therefore, providing them with quality education, which not only enables them to embrace their cultural heritage and traditions, but also recognizes their voice in the process of nationwide curricula creation, should be one of the most fundamental concerns of the Canadian government. Even more importantly, as previously implied in the second chapter of this thesis, including Aboriginal perspectives and teaching approaches in the contemporary educational system may prove to be truly beneficial for the process of recovering from the intergenerational trauma to occur, as non-Native people educated in Indigenous philosophies might evince a more understanding and compassionate attitude towards Native people’s experiences and affairs.

2. Decolonizing Aboriginal Education

In order for the aforementioned healing process to take place and the complete revitalization of Indigenous perspectives in education to follow, Aboriginal people, as Bill Mussel argues, “must take positive control over their lives as individuals, families and communities” (4) and make an attempt at decolonizing their education and their relationship with the world in general. In the most basic terms, what is understood as ‘decolonization’ is involving in

² The Native Friendship Centre, The First Nations Confederacy of Cultural Education Centres and The First Peoples’ Cultural Council being cases in point.

the process of recognizing and comprehending the mechanisms of colonization, which in turn leads to the reclamation of one's traditional culture, values and identity (4). Marie Battiste labels these two components of decolonization as 'deconstruction', that is the ability to understand the limitations and inadequacies of colonialism, and 'reconstruction', which enables Indigenous people to reconstruct and reclaim their traditional knowledge and restore spiritual balance and mental health ("Perspectives").

Adopting decolonizing pedagogies in contemporary Canadian educational system seems to be one of the most important approaches, mainly because it "enable[s] Indigenous people and all people to be educated in a way that honours identity and culture." (Munroe 331) On the one hand, it helps Native people to overcome their colonial legacy and become aware of the significance of their cultural heritage, while on the other, it contributes to the development of non-Native people's cultural consciousness and discrimination elimination (Mussel 5). Nevertheless, one should bear in mind that, as argued by Munroe, "moving towards decolonization requires extensive transformation of education where learning is rooted in Indigenous knowledges rather than treating these knowledges as an 'add-on' or 'other' way of knowing" (320). This is one of the reasons for the importance of including Indigenous perspectives in school curricula.

It seems justified to argue that for decolonization to proceed successfully, both teachers and learners need to actively participate in conducting this transformation of education, as they are the core elements of the knowledge giving and gaining process. The following sections discuss the importance of proper teacher education and the reasons why Indigenous perspectives and pedagogies may have an advantageous influence on learners.

2.1.THE IMPORTANCE OF PROPER TEACHER EDUCATION

Teachers, alongside with learners, are the most essential parties for the educational process to occur. The traditionally Eurocentric understanding of teacher's roles demonstrates an image of a distanced mentor and specialist, who presents the students with information and ready-made conclusions.³ There is no dispute that in the Aboriginal approach to education the teacher is also a central knowledge-providing figure. However, what seems to be the most considerable difference is the special character of the teacher-learner

³ Such a strict view of a teacher is certainly not universal and characteristic for all teaching methods, especially since approaches to education have changed in recent decades from teacher-oriented to more learner-centered attitudes; however, it remains a fact that a substantial amount of education at schools is held in a teacher-fronted, writing-dependent manner.

relationship, which, according to Indigenous beliefs, should be one of cooperation and mutual trust. The learner is not merely a recipient of the teacher's instructions but, quite the contrary, he or she is an active and deeply committed co-creator of the learning, which makes education a knowledge-exchange process, rather than just an either knowledge-giving or knowledge-gaining one. This, in turn, leads to the blurring of the boundaries, a process which enables a person to be simultaneously a teacher and a learner and continue their lifelong learning in a harmonious and balanced way.

Decolonization of Aboriginal education might prove to be impossible without first decolonizing the teachers' outlook on Indigenous pedagogies. Hopefully, as research shows, most of the educators recognize the urgency to make a "shift in [their] understandings of Canada's colonial history, in decolonizing their own understandings about relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, and in approaches to pedagogy" (Dion, Johnston, and Rice 35). They acknowledge that, in the light of these necessary changes, adopting new patterns in teacher training programs and courses is prerequisite for the ability to create healthy and quality learning conditions for all students, regardless of their social and cultural background (Sanford et al. 19). Including Indigenous perspectives on education in these programs, especially in the Canadian environment, would facilitate teachers' professional, as well as personal, development and would enable them to provide the learners with a complete and multidimensional vision of the world.

2.2. THE LEARNER PERSPECTIVE – WHY IS INDIGENOUS EDUCATION VALUABLE?

From the learner's perspective, introducing elements of Aboriginal knowledge and philosophies into common school curricula may positively contribute to young people's holistic development and their overall perception of the community and the world they live in. It seems obvious that Native and non-Indigenous students will benefit from such a naturalized education in various ways and to different degrees. However, notwithstanding these differences and learners' diverse cultural backgrounds, it is possible to admit that rediscovering and including Aboriginal pedagogies in the teaching process is working mostly, if not only, to the students' advantage.

Due to the introduction of Indigenous perspectives in education, Native people's traditional ways of teaching and learning can be honored and respected in the official school setting. This can contribute to the creation of an accepting, supporting and facilitating learning environment, which encourages the students to work in the most optimal and favourable conditions. Finding a connection between what is taught at school and what they learn at home may prove to be truly helpful when trying to determine

their cultural identity and reaching a balance between different social roles they have to perform. Furthermore, acknowledging the existence of multiple learning styles and specific educational needs of Aboriginal students might turn out to be conducive to the improvement of their learning achievements and the quality of their future lives, both professional and personal.

When considering non-Native students and the influence of presenting them with the elements of traditional Indigenous approach to education, it seems possible to assume that they would benefit greatly from the exposure to Indigenous teaching content. Not only would they be encouraged to decolonize their view of Aboriginal people and culture, but they would also learn to value and have regard for other worldviews and traditions. Becoming aware of some alternative lifestyles and attitudes would contribute remarkably to the understanding of their own society and other people in general. Moreover, through gaining new perspectives and a more comprehensive outlook on reality, non-Native learners would be far more likely to manifest tolerant, open-minded and unbiased attitudes, which could improve their relationships not only with Indigenous people, but essentially with the whole community.

On account of these arguments, it seems justified to claim that rediscovering Indigenous knowledge in today's approach to education may bring positive outcomes for both Native and non-Native students. Both Aboriginal and Western cultures have a plethora of quality values and aspects to offer and their representatives can learn a lot from each other. However, one should remember to apply common sense when deriving any inspirations from another culture's traditions in order to avoid such negative phenomena as, for instance, cultural appropriation (Restoule).

3. Indigenous Worldviews in Contemporary Education

3.1. THE HOLISTIC APPROACH AND LIFELONG LEARNING

One of the most crucial characteristics of Indigenous knowledge and approach to education is holism, which can be understood as the balance between an internally harmonious individual, the society and the environment. The notion of holism laid the foundation for what is commonly known as holistic education, which, according to Scott Forbes, "focuses on the fullest possible development of the person, encouraging individuals to become the very best or finest that they can be and enabling them to experience all they can from life and reach their goals." (qtd. in Hare 3) Holistic education may be characterized by four main features, all of which can be traced back to the traditionally Aboriginal understanding of holism. First and foremost, it

emphasizes the importance of a person's balanced development, including their "intellectual, emotional, social, physical, creative or intuitive, aesthetic and spiritual potentials." (Hare 3) Secondly, it highlights the value of a person's relationship with the community and the surrounding environment (3). Furthermore, it promotes perceiving education as "[being a] growth, discovery and a broadening of horizons" (3), rather than as a strictly formal, in-classroom process. Finally, it enables people to develop creative and critical thinking, as well as cultural, moral and political awareness (4).

Holistic education is a widely recognized approach in many countries around the world and it is gaining ever more appreciation in Canada as well. One of the most significant initiatives connected with this approach is the Canadian Council on Learning's project aiming at introducing the Holistic Lifelong Learning Models, which are designed to aid the creation of a new framework for measuring Aboriginal learning and educational success.

It is believed that in order for an individual to obtain the internal balance, natural harmony and understanding of interconnectedness of all things, it is essential to follow the teachings of holism throughout all stages of a person's life. This implicates that the notion of learning as an ongoing lifelong process is inextricably linked to the holistic approach to education. The learning process can be perceived through the metaphor of journey, which begins as early as in childhood, continues through youth and adulthood and finishes only with the last day of a person's life (*The State of Aboriginal* 31). Thus, it seems absolutely justifiable that Indigenous perspectives on education should be introduced not only to university curricula, but also to kindergarten, primary, secondary and even tertiary education, as, according to Native philosophy, at a certain stage in life an individual is ready to acquire only so much knowledge and so many teachings. Therefore, the nature and subject matter of education should be adjusted to the learners' physical, mental, emotional and spiritual maturity.

The concept of learning as a lifelong process has inspired numerous educational institutions to adopt the strategy of promoting lifelong and holistic learning, resulting in such valuable projects as Lifelong Learning Programme in Europe⁴, Lifelong Learning Plan in Canada⁵ or The Global University for Lifelong Learning⁶ operating internationally. While the projects may present various agendas and emphasize different aspects of learning, what they seem

⁴ The Lifelong Learning Programme in Europe finished in 2013, but its activities and beliefs continue under the new Erasmus+ Programme. For more information see website: www.ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/index_en.htm.

⁵ For more information see Canada Revenue Agency's website: www.cra-arc.gc.ca/tx/ndvdl/tpcs/rrsp-reer/lp-reep/menu-eng.html.

⁶ For more information see website: www.gullonline.org.

to have in common is the recognition of the importance of both formal and non-formal education, understanding learning as a continuous and inherent motivation to develop oneself and appreciation of the significance of the relationship between individuals and communities (Barker 5).

3.2. THE ROLE OF FAMILY, ELDERS AND COMMUNITY

While it is common knowledge that relationships exert an undeniably great influence on individuals' development and well-being, the concepts of family and community play an even more important role in the lives of Native people. At the same time, one has to bear in mind that the Aboriginal understanding of family differs significantly from the current Western model of this basic social unit. The concept of an Indigenous family can be usually reflected by the Eurocentric term 'extended family' and it "signifies not only parents and their children, but a broad network of grandparents, uncles and aunts, and cousins." (McCue, *The Learning... Ages 8 to 11* 21) Parents and other family members are the first teachers and mentors for children and it is their responsibility to create quality life and learning conditions, in which a child thrives and grows to be a healthy and balanced individual. Aboriginal families develop a deep relationship with their offspring, which is based on mutual respect and trust, by means of treating them as part of the whole community and providing them with the knowledge of traditional beliefs, values and customs.

Involving families in their children's formal learning process at school proves to be genuinely enriching for both parties. On the one hand, "involving parents in their children's education strengthens their interest in their children's educational success" (McCue, *The Learning... Ages 8 to 11* 22), as well as contributes to the increase of parental confidence about institutionalized schooling (*The State of Aboriginal* 19), while, on the other hand, it is responsible for the increase of student motivation, to which "higher attendance and graduation rates" (Moniz 20) can be attributed. Such parental involvement might include participating in storytelling and skill-sharing classes, preparing learning materials, taking part in school trips and other social events and cooperating with teachers and school authorities (McCue, *The Learning... Ages 8 to 11* 22).

Acknowledging the importance of parents and other family members in their children's educational process is vital not only for Indigenous people, who in this way would be able to provide their children with cultural continuity, but may also prove beneficial for people of non-Native origin, as it would enable them to redefine the sole concept of family and rediscover the enriching influence of familial relationships.

While discussing the importance of relationships and family engagement in the process of an Aboriginal person's education, it is necessary to highlight

the significance of the elders, who function as the community's representatives and most respected members. The elders are "the primary source of all the knowledge that has been accumulated by their communities, generation after generation; they are the keepers of spiritual ceremonies and traditional laws that have sustained First Nations through thousands of years" (McCue, *The Learning... Ages 8 to 11* 37) and for these reasons it is impossible to exclude them from Indigenous children's learning. They provide young people with communal wisdom, guidance and advice, simultaneously fostering their cultural development and self-esteem (Moniz 21).

Inviting the elders to cooperate with the schools may prove to be extremely beneficial for both Aboriginal and non-Native students and teachers. "Transmit[ing] the community's culture through parables, allegories, lessons and poetry" (*The State of Aboriginal* 20) enables the creation of a culturally relevant environment, which allows Indigenous students to find a connection between formal and informal teachings they receive, while reminding non-Native people to appreciate seniors, their knowledge and experience. It is, however, crucial for the teachers to remember that showing ultimate respect and regard is fundamental in contacts with the elders, which means that following proper protocols when approaching and requesting them to share their wisdom is required (*Native Studies* 23).

3.4. LANGUAGE AND CULTURE-BASED EDUCATION

Language can be perceived as being one of the most elementary components of a culture. It is the most basic means for communication and daily interactions, passing on and obtaining information, learning and teaching. For Indigenous people, learning is "indelibly rooted in their ancestral languages, traditions and cultures." (*The State of Aboriginal* 25) Gaining access to this traditional wisdom might become considerably difficult, if not completely impossible, without the knowledge of Native languages. Not only do they enable Aboriginal people to transmit their cultural values from one generation to the next, but they also "encode unique ways of interpreting the world" (*The State of Aboriginal* 25), which contribute immensely to the formation of Indigenous people's sense of cultural identity and belonging.

According to the 2011 Language Census in Canada, there exist over 60 Aboriginal languages, which are grouped in 12 different language families ("Aboriginal Languages" 1). Unfortunately, due to certain historical perturbations, Indigenous people experienced a substantial decline in use of their languages during past decades, which so far resulted in the extinction of at least ten once flourishing languages and the endangerment of many more (Norris 8). While the primary responsibility for reviving and protecting Aboriginal languages belongs to Native families and communities and should

principally take place at homes, introducing them as subjects in the school environment proves to enhance the process of language revitalization. A number of initiatives aiming at rediscovering Indigenous languages is being developed, among others the Indigenous Language Immersion programs, the Pre-School Language Nest Program, the Master Apprentice Language Learning Program and the Ministry of Education's approval for introducing fourteen different Native languages to sixteen school districts' curricula in British Columbia (Huang).

As Mary Jane Norris aptly observes, "although loss of language doesn't necessarily lead to the death of a culture, it can severely handicap transmission of that culture" (8). This indicates that by losing the ability to understand and communicate in a language, it would become impossible to grasp the essence of one's culture, not to mention conveying it to one's descendants. Including Aboriginal languages in common teaching programs and, thus, enabling them to undergo a process of revitalization seems to be one of the most important methods of preventing cultural decline and rediscovering Indigenous knowledge and worldviews in contemporary Canada.

As aforementioned, language, along with religion, traditional customs and ceremonies, social habits, cuisine, music and arts, is one of the components which constitute a much broader concept, namely the overall culture of a particular group of people (Zimmermann). It has been numerously emphasized in this thesis that learning about and remaining in contact with one's cultural heritage and traditions "helps Indigenous children, youth and adults build a strong ethnic identity, cultural pride and confidence in their own abilities." (*The State of Aboriginal* 28) Being able to participate in the life of one's community, which then results in sharing common experience, is said to remarkably contribute to the development of one's sense of belonging and cultural attachment, simultaneously enriching and deepening one's spiritual and mental self.

The strategy of introducing culture-based content to Canadian schools and social education appears to be the most natural way of providing both Aboriginal and non-Native people with culturally and historically relevant knowledge (Moniz 17). For learning to become a complete, valuable and effective process it is indispensable to recognize Indigenous worldviews and philosophies, especially in the Canadian context (Charleston 15). By creating a culturally responsive classroom environment, which consists in incorporating Aboriginal teachings about historical events, ceremonial traditions and social customs, as well as employing some specific Indigenous teaching methods and practices, it is possible to facilitate students' learning process, make it more meaningful and authentic (Moniz 18). However, it is very important for the teachers and educators, particularly those of non-Native origin, to remember that certain aspects of Aboriginal knowledge require to be

conveyed only by authorized members of a group, in order to be truly valid. Therefore, it is essential for schools and other educational organizations to cooperate with students' families and communities, so that the cultural content presented formally is consistent with what is taught at home (18).

3.5. PLACE-BASED EDUCATION AND THE IMPORTANCE OF ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS

One of the sources of Indigenous knowledge and education is insightful study of nature and empirical observation of the surrounding environment. This spiritual and inherently sacred relationship between Aboriginal people and the Earth, along with the importance of community, language and culture, constitutes the core of traditional Native teachings and practices (*Our Words* 16). The Earth is believed to be the Mother of all living things, the provider of ancestral wisdom, natural balance and priceless gifts, such as food or medicines (Moniz 11). Therefore, it is essential to treat the land and all of the goods it creates with proper respect, care, appreciation and humility. Realizing that everything that exists is closely linked and interdependent allows Indigenous people to understand that they are one of the elements of a dynamic and constantly floating circle of life, death and rebirth (11) and that protecting the land without claiming ownership to it forms the basis for maintaining a harmonious and renewable environment (*Integrating Aboriginal* 8).

Raising people's environmental awareness and promoting ecological education prove to be one of the most important and pressing issues, especially in the contemporary world of omnipresent industrialization and pollution. It seems possible to state, deducing from the observable evidence in nature, that the Western strategies of protecting the environment appear to be unable to fulfill the task of counteracting the ecological destruction and the consequences of natural resources exploitation. The solution to this problem may lie in the adoption of traditionally Aboriginal approaches to ecology, which would not only prevent the Earth from experiencing further damage, but may also contribute to the elimination of the environmental harm that has already been done. Introduction of what is known as Traditional Ecological Knowledge⁷ into Canada's environment protection programs might prove truly

⁷ According to the Convention on Biological Diversity's definition, Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) "refers to the knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities around the world. Developed from experience gained over the centuries and adapted to the local culture and environment, traditional knowledge is transmitted orally from generation to generation. (...) Traditional knowledge is mainly of a practical nature, particularly in such fields as agriculture, fisheries, health, horticulture, and forestry." (qtd. in *Traditional Ecological Knowledge*)

helpful “in regard to sustainable use of renewable resources” (Freeman) and maintaining biological diversity in particular ecosystems (Klein 5).

The need for preserving environmental sustainability and protecting the land, as well as providing future generations with the necessary “wisdom and tools to strengthen their relationships to the land and continue to decolonize their communities and Nations” (Simpson 23), resulted in the creation of an educational approach known as place-based learning, which can be understood as highly localized environmental education (Clark 3). It aims at developing ecological awareness, while simultaneously including historically, culturally and socioeconomically relevant content, by means of which students are able to restore their relationship to the land and deepen their connection with the community (5). Moreover, place-based education promotes learning through personal experience and interaction with others, which means that most of the teaching takes place outside the classroom (3). It is a yet another approach to education which, by recognizing Aboriginal worldviews and perspectives, presents immense benefits for both Native and non-Native students and communities, as it fosters taking responsibility for one’s actions and encourages to engage in the process of building a healthy environment and conscious society (9).

4. Aboriginal Practices in the Classroom

There can be little doubt that the total amount of Native teaching techniques considerably exceeds the number of aspects discussed here. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to provide an analysis of such Aboriginal educational practices by means of which it is possible to convey the widest array of different teaching contents and, therefore, the main criteria for their selection were their universality and adaptability.

4.1. THE MEDICINE WHEEL AS AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL

The historical origin, elementary structure and fundamental meaning of the medicine wheel construct have already been discussed in detail in the first chapter of this work. Abounding with symbolic meaning, the medicine wheel is one of the most important Aboriginal tokens and may be subject to in-depth contemplation and various interpretations. This ambiguous but simultaneously universal quality establishes the medicine wheel as an incredibly valuable educational tool that promotes interdisciplinary teaching and facilitates the learning process in general. It might be used to present specific subject matter in the classroom, as well as to foster self-reflection, positive atmosphere and cooperation between students.

There is a great number of different teachings that educators may transmit through the medicine wheel model at practically all stages of the educational process. First and foremost, it may serve as a means of conveying knowledge about the interconnectedness and equal importance of all aspects of life, which should remain in a state of balance and cyclical harmony (Verniest). Focusing on the holistic and multidimensional nature of the medicine wheel may enable the teachers to introduce the students to the world of Indigenous philosophies, beliefs and traditions (McIntosh). Understanding that the medicine wheel reflects Native worldviews and values since time immemorial and that its teachings are still valid and respected may contribute greatly to the students' cultural and spiritual development (*Integrating Aboriginal* 9).

Apart from presenting culturally relevant content, the medicine wheel symbol may be used to provide information and reinforce teaching of some specific school subjects. Being a graphic representation of Indigenous wisdom, the wheel may be integrated into Visual Arts class lesson plan, inviting the students to create their own models of the medicine wheel, which can then be exploited during other classes (Brunet). In Geography classes the teachers may use the wheel to teach students about the environment and all its interdependent aspects, such as four directions, seasons, climate and weather conditions, natural elements, resources and phenomena. Biology teachers might focus on explaining the significance of all living organisms and the correspondence between them, their place in the food chain, the continuity of lifecycles and the need for biological diversity. The medicine wheel can be also used to teach history, explain cause and effect patterns and how historical events and the present intertwine with each other. During Social Studies classes the wheel may help the teacher to discuss the differences and similarities between human races, cultural groups or even family members and address such issues as politics, technological development, socioeconomic situations and the question of gender.

The medicine wheel model proves to be an excellent and versatile teaching tool not only in regard to particular school subjects. In a broader sense, working with the wheel may also contribute to the development of healthy, stable and self-reflective human beings, aware of their feelings and capable of contemplating on them. The medicine wheel teaches that "in order for an individual to be healthy, he or she must have a balance of the four aspects [physical, mental, emotional and spiritual] within him or herself." (*Integrating Aboriginal* 10) The teachers should guide students through the process of self-contemplation, enable them to focus on themselves and make education more personalized. Referring particular quadrants of the medicine wheel to four stages of life encourages learners to reflect on the events from their childhood, their present adolescent life, their plans for adulthood and hopes for life in older age (Brunet). This way they gain a deeper understanding of themselves,

which, in turn, leads to the acknowledgement of emotions in the educational process, increasing motivation levels and establishing a friendly classroom community (Frederick 202).

4.2. STORYTELLING AS A MEANS OF CULTURAL EDUCATION

The tradition of passing on Indigenous knowledge by means of verbally transmitted stories and teachings is a very important part of Native people's cultural heritage. This oral tradition "contributes to the uniqueness of Aboriginal perspectives and behaviour" (*Integrating Aboriginal* 8), preserves the community's perennial legends and histories and enables whole generations to participate in the creation of their people's collective memory. In order to convey the teachings of their ancestors, Indigenous people engage in a communal activity of storytelling, which "documents history, cultural traditions and values, spiritual beliefs and philosophy." (*Native Studies* 32) The stories may take the form of narratives, dialogues, poems, songs or plays and are usually based on specific themes that are characteristic for a particular community (*Shared Learnings* 36). It is essential to remember that, though most of the stories are entertaining in nature and not devoid of humorous elements, their primary goal is to educate, instruct and guide young people (McCue, *The Learning... Ages 4 to 7* 3).

It is certainly possible to admit that adopting the Native tradition of storytelling into the contemporary classroom practice may facilitate students' cultural education, as well as their general social development. By listening to authentic histories and primeval legends the learners are exposed to a meaningful and culturally relevant content, which makes learning a spontaneous and almost unconscious process. Some of the stories, in order to be complete, can be shared only by certain capable local storytellers at a specific time or place, often using ceremonial language and traditional symbols (*Native Studies* 32), which means obtaining an even deeper understanding of Aboriginal history and culture. The practice of storytelling encourages students to work on their listening and speaking skills and contributes to the development of such qualities as patience, tolerance, inquisitiveness and humility. Finally, listening to Indigenous stories stimulates students' thinking process by enabling them to draw conclusions and discover the story's hidden meaning on their own, as not all of the narratives contain explicit fable-like morals. Owing to such an open-ended subtle construction, "the goals or morals of the story reveal themselves to the listener, as his or her maturity and life experiences develop" (McCue, *The Learning... Ages 4 to 7* 3), which makes learning a truly lifelong process.

4.3. SHARING CIRCLES AND RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

While the main purpose of storytelling is to educate people and provide them with knowledge and teachings of a particular Aboriginal community, the concept of sharing circles focuses primarily on engaging the emotional self of an individual. In the traditional understanding, sharing circle is a small-group gathering during which, as the very name suggests, people arrange the seats in a circular shape, which represents the medicine wheel and guarantees equal and unbiased treatment (*Mi'kmaw Spirituality*). Sharing circles are usually organized for the participants to share their feelings, thoughts and experiences, discuss a particular topic or find a solution to a specific problem or conflict between people. The organizing principle of sharing circles is to create a safe and neutral environment, in which people can express their sincere opinions without being criticized, judged or laughed at (Lane Jr.).

There are several guidelines that should be obeyed in order for the sharing circle to function properly and fulfill its roles. The ground rule is that only one person is allowed to speak at a time (Lane Jr.). It is a common practice to use a special token that symbolizes the privilege of speech, usually a feather or a stick, which is handed over from one person to another so as to avoid confusion and interruptions (*Mi'kmaw Spirituality*). Furthermore, it is very important for the participants not to be afraid to speak their minds and express emotions, though deciding to refrain from speaking is also acceptable. For such honesty to occur, it is essential to establish a sense of mutual trust, respect and support inside the circle. While it is the group leader's responsibility to facilitate the discussion and maintain peaceful and non-judgemental atmosphere, the most important role seems to be that of the listeners, who should express an attentive and respectful interest in the speaker's confessions (Lane Jr.).

In the classroom environment, the participation in sharing circles may contribute greatly to the development of students' emotional maturity. By following the aforementioned protocols, the learners acquire the most fundamental Native teachings and gain appreciation of such Aboriginal values as respect, love, bravery, wisdom, humility, honesty and truth (Toulouse). They learn to identify and talk about their own emotions and acknowledge the existence of contrasting viewpoints and alternative opinions (*The Sharing Circle's*). Participation in sharing circles enables the students to become more self-aware and to manage and control their emotions in a natural and comprehensive way (*The Sharing Circle's*). As the atmosphere of honesty, trust and understanding surrounds those engaged in the discussion, sharing circles help students to create healthy and valuable relationships with each other, which stem from communication and empathy (*The Sharing Circle's*). Thus, the practice of organizing sharing circles in the classroom may prove

indispensable when discussing ambiguous or controversial topics or trying to solve a conflict between classmates.

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