

# Exploring Indigenous pedagogies connected to experiential learning in relation to Mother Earth

*Elder Brenda Mason opens with teaching that supports experiential learning in relation to Mother Earth, grounded in Indigenous pedagogies.*

“Taking the children to play outside is one of the best ways for them to experience their physical senses and learn at the same time. To touch the tree’s bark with their hands will allow them to feel the differences among the trees that they too are different, to smell its branches, needles or leaves will give them the knowing the trees smell too. To hear the tree as it moves with the wind—it creaks and the child’s bone may do so too are some of the examples that the children can get the sense the trees are just as alive as they do. The other one that can help the children to know this is telling the children how the trees drink water and the trees need water to live, to grow their branches, leaves, and to grow tall just like the children. And the trees are happy as the rain falls on top of them just as the children scream in delight when the rain falls on them.” (Elder Brenda Mason, June 10th, 2020).

In understanding Elder Brenda’s teaching, the ways of being and knowing with the self and natural world is intimately connected to the culture of the Indigenous peoples in Canada. It is vitally important that children have opportunities in their daily lives to connect with the environment and experience ways of knowing and being that support their health and cultural well-being. Mother Earth provides experiential learning connected to spirit, allowing for the children to learn directly from the land as their first teacher. This is what Indigenous pedagogies bring to children’s outdoor play.

Essential questions for educators to reflect on, that will support Indigenous pedagogies in early learning that include experiential learning with Mother Earth are:

1) How can we be one with nature to allow us to engage with our senses? For example, it is very important that we engage our senses by touching the leaves and following the stems right back to the branches and the roots of trees to explore the deeper connections each tree, plant and leaf has to Mother Earth.

- 2) How can we connect physically and spiritually with nature? We need to remember that the body we are given is meant to explore and be one with nature. As Brenda shared, we relate and we find connections to ourselves in the tree’s life cycle.
- 3) How is the land alive? For example, it has its pulse – the Earth has bloodlines in the rivers, creeks and streams, and in how the roots of trees are connected and support each other by providing nutrients.
- 4) What can we show/teach the children about how to take care of Mother Earth?

Indigenous pedagogies include one must never take more than they need from the land because it disturbs the balance of nature. What we do has ripple effects because everything is interconnected. Indigenous people give thanks for all life, which supports humans living in harmony and balance. A key understanding is that Indigenous worldviews are “conveyed via stories, symbols, models, and metaphors and expressed unconsciously or consciously through family, community, art, the media, spirituality, and educational institutions; all of which guide the people in respectfully caring for each other and all their relations” (Snively & Williams, 2016, p. 33).

We conclude our piece by welcoming and highlighting two programs in Ontario: Biigtigong Nishnaabeg Children & Family Learning Centre and Waabogonee EarlyON Child and Family Centre. Indigenous early learning programs and their educators are motivated to try innovative models and approaches to design new outdoor spaces that include Indigenous pedagogies.

## **Biigtigong Nishnaabeg Children & Family Learning Centre**

Boozhoo, my name is Stephanie Michano-Drover, Program Supervisor of the licenced childcare centre. I am an Ojibway from Biigtigong Nishnaabeg, a First Nation community situated on the north shore of Lake Superior, northeast of Thunder Bay,

Ontario. My First Nation community has approximately 1200 members, with 500 physically living in the community.

The outdoor space at Biigtigong Nishnaabeg Child Care Centre provides children with opportunities for experiential learning from the land, their first teacher. The cultural teachings support Indigenous children's overall wellbeing by fostering positive Indigenous identity. From the entranceway of our building, to the pathway of our playground, we have tried to create a very welcoming and home-like environment for our families and children. We want to provide the children with the many possibilities to have that connection to the land and spirit by allowing for opportunities for children to engage with the natural materials, gain the knowledge of the traditional territory, and to be outside in the elements. The outdoor space is not limited to just the fenced-in playground; the vision of supporting land-based teachings is "connections" that involve participating in activities that reflect the community identity and history - whether it is fishing in the Pic River; picking wild blueberries, or attending community harvest activities. The educators also have explored and taught the children the life cycles of butterflies and setting them free, worm composting, and gardening. Gardening has included planting flowers, and many projects have included growing vegetables for the Centre - over the years they have planted stack tire potatoes and used portable greenhouses. Children and staff tend to the gardens together and the children have a large role in planting the seeds, watering and weeding, etc.

This year the Centre has extended to a permanent greenhouse to support the teachings of growing their own food for the Centre and living sustainably. The large greenhouse will support community and healing with intentions to share vegetables with Elders, and families. The staff see the same empowerment in the young children when harvesting the food to share after tending to the garden.



Greenhouse and gardening centre Photo by Stephanie Michano-Drover (2020).

Within the playground, one will see traditional structures, a willow wigwam and tipi that are used by children and educators to gather and play, and silhouettes of the Seven Grandfather teachings. The Seven Grandfather teachings: Eagle - love, Buffalo - respect, Bear - courage, Sabe (sasquatch) - honesty, Beaver - wisdom, Wolf - humility and Turtle - truth, are connected to living a good life, as the Grandfather teachings provide guidance and wisdom for individuals own actions in life and how to treat others. As well, a set of painted rocks representing the Seven Grandfather's to support storytelling and art are in the playground.



Wigwam. Photo by Stephanie Michano-Drover (2018).

There are so many values, traditions and experiences that our children gain from being on the land as well as the spiritual connection to our Mother Earth. The staff provides a wide variety of experiences and opportunities that will further enhance the children's strengths as well as support those areas of growth. These experiences will help to build connections to the being, spirit and land.

Submitted by: Stephanie Michano, RECE, Program Supervisor, Biigtigong Nishnaabeg Children & Family Learning Centre, Pic River First Nation, Ontario

## Waabogonee EarlyON Child and Family Centre

Waabogonee, translated, means a flower that wakes up in the morning and blossoms throughout the day. Waabogonee EarlyON Child and Family Centre provides environments that engage parents and caregivers as co-learners and leaders in influencing positive child, family, and community experiences and outcomes. The vision of the Thunder Bay Indigenous Friendship Centre is supporting children and their families in learning, growing and connecting through programs that are culturally responsive and that strengthen relationships and

communities. Given that a sense of identity is necessary on the path to wellness, cultural elements are essential deliverables of the program. These include land- and water-based learning with cultural knowledge keepers, incorporating traditional songs, stories, crafts, foods and historical perspectives on raising children, parenting skills, and community development. Waabogonee EarlyON provides an outdoor space for traditional learning and teachings and sharing the language. Waabogonee EarlyON Centre is located in a public school with an outdoor space backing into the surrounding bush lines, which provides opportunities for families to gather, explore and connect to the land. The Centre provides weekly drop-ins outdoors. This allows children and families to learn, respect and understand the gifts that Mother Earth and the Creator provide. We have a responsibility to protect the land, and the land will protect us. By exploring and learning more about the environment, individuals can stay connected to the land. The belief is everything is alive with spirit and all things have a sense of purpose.

Submitted by: Rhonda Turbide, RECE, Child and Family Services Program Manager, Thunder Bay Indigenous Friendship Centre, Thunder Bay, Ontario

The deepening of knowledges, histories, and pedagogies of the Indigenous people will create transformative changes connected to experiential learning and the relationship to Mother Earth. Indigenous educators have an important role in sharing their lived experiences and stories to move conversations and theories forward. This short piece aims to make clear the value of partnering with Elders and Indigenous educators in teaching children land-based learning in early childhood education. We trust we all will continue to come to know and support play and place in an Indigenous context in Canada.

Miigwech, Meegwetch, Thank you to our readers.

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*On behalf of the Guiding Committee on Truth & Reconciliation, Lori Huston led this submission providing insights and collaborations with Elder Brenda Mason and other Indigenous educators.*

#### References:

Snively, G., & Williams, Wanosts'a7., L. (2016) Knowing Home: Braiding Indigenous Science with Western Science, Indigenous Education, Book 1. Victoria BC University. Retrieved from <https://greatbearrainforesttrust.org/wcontent/uploads/2018/05/Knowinghomebook1.pdf>