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Josie C. Auger , Janelle M. Baker , Martin Connors  and Barbara Martin

Volume 24, Number 4, November 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1108548ar>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v24i4.7009>

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Publisher(s)

Athabasca University Press (AU Press)

ISSN

1492-3831 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Auger, J., Baker, J., Connors, M. & Martin, B. (2023). Understanding Indigenous Learners' Experiences During the First and Second Wave of the COVID-19 Pandemic. *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 24(4), 64–79. <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v24i4.7009>

Article abstract

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November – 2023

Understanding Indigenous Learners' Experiences During the First and Second Wave of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Josie C. Auger¹, Janelle M. Baker¹, Martin Connors¹, and Barbara Martin²

¹Athabasca University; ²John Hopkins Health System

Abstract

This paper focuses on the experiences of Indigenous learners at Athabasca University. Having access to online education provided a sense of normalcy for students during the global pandemic while many post-secondary institutions and Indigenous communities were closed. The purpose of the research was two-fold: a) to determine the dynamics of reaching Indigenous learners and measuring their adaptability in learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, and b) to understand the effects of the pandemic on the mind, body, spirit, and social environment of Indigenous distance education learners and their families. This research included qualitative and quantitative methods, specifically, a survey, focus group, and individual interviews. We share the results of online research involving Indigenous students during the first and second waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. We concluded that listening to Indigenous students supported their online education while giving them an outlet to express their experiences. This research identified Indigenous student adaptations towards their spirituality in specific ways inherent to their culture given the reactions to COVID-19, their responses, and reflections.

Keywords: COVID-19, Indigenous students, Canada, online education, society, culture, health, well-being

Glossary

When using Roman orthography, we do not capitalize Cree words. The word Cree is a word given by the French to describe nehiyawak people.

nimewêhtên pikiskwasên: This phrase spoken by a student means “thank-you for the conversation”

iyiniw: Indigenous person

nehiyawak: a term used to describe Cree people

nehiyawewin: the language used by Cree people

nehiyaw: an individual Cree person

iyiniwak: Indigenous people

oskiy'siniyiwak: New People (youth)

Understanding Indigenous Learners' Experiences During the First and Second Wave of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Leanne Simpson (2008) has written about the Oshkimaadiziig, the Anishnaabeg word for New People, who were living during the times of the seventh fire. For the eighth and eternal fire to be lit, the responsibility of the New People was to revive the “language, philosophies, political and economic traditions, our ways of knowing, and our culture [to return to] visions of peace and justice” (p. 14). Similarly, oskiy'siniyiwak is the nehiyawewin word referring to the youth who are new people. To respect the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–2032), this paper offers Cree language and cultural concepts in the context of observing and listening to what Indigenous students in an online environment said about the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically the first and second waves.

We all faced challenging times during the ongoing global pandemic. We witnessed widespread advocacy in Canada to address the Wet'suwet'en conflict between hereditary chiefs, and the Coastal GasLink pipeline through northwestern B.C. that delayed construction (McIvor, 2020). Tense global issues between the U.S. and North Korea over missiles were unsettling (Bicker, 2019), and tragedy on an international flight shocked and saddened Canadians who watched the footage of people departing Tehran shot down leaving all 176 of them dead (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2020). The quarantine of passengers aboard ships captured media attention while countries around the world were affected by the first wave of the novel virus. There were stressors in place before people got sick. These challenging times were promulgated on January 30, 2020, when the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a global public health emergency, followed by the February 11 announcement that the coronavirus was identified as COVID-19. It was recognized as a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020). In Canada, First Nations communities began to lock down and create social distancing bubbles at the same time provinces were locking down for the first wave. While Mother Earth herself was less polluted (Tian et al., 2021), the Black Lives Matter movement demanded justice and Indigenous peoples rallied to support this movement.

By May 16, 2021, COVID-19 had officially claimed 3,364,178 lives around the world (World Health Organization, 2021), and there were 24,948 deaths in Canada (Government of Canada, 2021). Canada, the United States, and Mexico are Turtle Island. The southern part of Turtle Island, Mexico, was reported to have the worst observed case fatality ratio of 9.3% (John Hopkins University & Medicine, 2021). Further, a review of Mexican Ministry of Health data demonstrated that Indigenous peoples in Mexico had a higher risk of death from COVID-19, especially outside the hospital, showing they had less access to care during the pandemic (Ibarra-Nava et al., 2021).

Socio-economic factors and lack of adequate housing impacted viral transmission among Indigenous people in Canada (Isaac-Mann et al., 2021). The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Treaty 8 (Alberta) affected Sucker Creek First Nation on April 20, 2020 (Heidenreich, 2020). This paper focuses on the experiences of iyiniwak learners at Athabasca University during the first and second wave of the pandemic.

Athabasca University's main campus is in the town of Athabasca, Alberta, Canada, located within Treaty 6 and bordering Treaty 8. It is the first Canadian university to specialize in distance education. On April 7, 2020, the University's Research Centre issued a special call for proposals to understand the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our research study focused on the Indigenous learner's experience the challenges and

barriers they experienced, and how they adapted amidst rapid health and social change. By addressing the topic areas, we sought to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic affected Indigenous learners regionally and nationally. Therefore, in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action, our role as researchers in this capacity is to seek culturally relevant ways to support Indigenous learners in their pursuit of post-secondary education considering the pandemic triggered historical memory of traumas on Turtle Island and cultural genocide in residential schools. The Calls to Action are a reminder to society and post-secondary institutions of the need for ongoing support of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples. It is an important part of Athabasca University's mandate to break down educational barriers, and this study tried to identify what some of them are and exactly how to approach the problem.

There are approximately 32,000 Indigenous students at post-secondary institutions in Canada (Canadian Federation of Students Ontario, 2021). At Athabasca University, 3,849 iyiniwak students self-identify as First Nations, Métis, or Inuit; 140 iyiniwak students participated in this research study. Josie Auger, Janelle Baker, Martin Connors, and Barbara Martin used multiple methods including an online survey, focus group, and telephone interviews to learn from iyiniwak students.

I, Josie Auger, am a nehiyaw Associate Professor in Indigenous Studies from Treaty 8. I introduce the team. From my worldview, spirit is part of the natural, and I introduce those concepts by recognizing my own thoughts and feelings. Out of respect for the spiritual, certain information is not shared as it is beyond the scope of this paper, and it was not introduced at the outset of the methodology. Together with Janelle Baker, Martin Connors, and Barbara Martin we discussed the methodology. Baker is an Associate Professor in Anthropology whose mother is from the North Battleford Métis in northern Saskatchewan, and whose grandpa had mixed Native American ancestry from North Dakota and Nebraska. Auger and Baker have worked together on previous projects. Martin Connors is of Irish descent and Professor in Space Sciences and Physics who was asked to participate in the research to support its quantitative methodology. In the spirit of solidarity, we worked with Barbara Martin, a graduate research assistant, who identifies as an individual with Indigenous roots of the Tabajaras tribe—an Indigenous community in the northeast side of Brazil. This research was a training/mentoring opportunity for Martin who uploaded the online survey, and worked closely with Auger, Baker, and Connors to analyze the results. Martin worked alongside Auger to collect qualitative information from the Indigenous students.

The results section identifies Indigenous students' views of historical impacts on iyiniwak health, along with their reactions, experiences, challenges, barriers, and adaptations in the online learning environment during the pandemic. Education is one determinant of health (Reading & Wein, 2009) and having access to open online education is particularly important as it provides a sense of normalcy for Indigenous students living within their respective nations and communities, and also contributes to future health outcomes.

Literature Review

The pandemic triggered historical trauma of the catastrophic population decline that began in the year 1492, and “shrank” sovereign Indigenous nations on the American continent “from 112 million to approximately 5.6 million” (Sioui, 1992, p. 3). The cause of the American apocalypse was not only warfare,

but rather the epidemic diseases brought by the newcomers (Sioui, 1992, p 3). It was a major upheaval caused by microbial infections from Europe, (Sioui, 1992, xxiii). By the 19th century, the concept of the vanishing Indian myth emerged. "From the 17th century onwards smallpox, measles, influenza, dysentery, diphtheria, typhus, yellow fever, whooping cough, tuberculosis, syphilis, and various unidentifiable 'fevers' caused illness and death as they spread from person to person and from village to village" (Waldram et al., 1995, p. 44). Epidemic diseases brought by the newcomers led to the American apocalypse (Sioui, 1992). The catastrophic population decline was not entirely due to the battles for the continent.

Indigenous peoples died from smallpox-infected blankets and handkerchiefs passed to them from the British (d'Errico, 2020). After the Seven Years War, there was a siege at Fort Pitt (Pittsburg) by Pontiac after the French bowed to the British resulting in the 1763 Royal Proclamation. Pontiac's rebellion resulted in germ warfare spread by the British to the Indigenous peoples at the fort (d'Errico, 2020).

Infectious diseases continued to spread within colonial institutions Indigenous residential school survivors experienced tuberculosis epidemics because of neglect in Canada's residential schools (Waldram, 1995). The residential school syndrome refers to the experiences of people who attended the government-funded and church-operated schools. According to Brasfield (2001):

For most people who attended Indian residential schools, there is no symptomology other than that similar to other people who have attended a boarding school for an extended period of time. However, for a significant minority of Indian residential school students, there is a symptomology quite similar to post-traumatic stress disorder. More specifically, there are recurrent intrusive memories, nightmares, occasional flashbacks, and quite striking avoidance of anything that might be reminiscent of the Indian residential school experience.

At the same time, there is often a significant detachment from others, and relationship difficulties are common. There is often diminished interest and participation in aboriginal cultural activities and markedly deficient knowledge of traditional culture and skills. Often there is markedly increased arousal including sleep difficulties, anger management difficulties, and impaired concentration. As might be the case for anyone attending a boarding school with inadequate parenting, parenting skills are often deficient. Strikingly, there is a persistent tendency to abuse alcohol or sedative medication drugs, often starting at a very young age (Symptomology section, para. 17 & 18)

Left unhealed, intergenerational trauma affects subsequent generations of Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island whose forebears went to residential schools, as the experience was more than "an extension of traditional diagnostic categories," (Robertson, 2006, p. 8), the experience reflects genocide. In addition to the historical and intergenerational trauma, COVID-19 was a threat to all human life; and for the Indigenous students in this study, it triggered multiple reactions on a personal level and within their families, communities, and nations. The significance of this research was to understand how Indigenous learners felt during COVID-19.

Methods

Tobacco is sacred (Nechi Training, Research, and Health Promotions Institute, 2010). It is a cultural protocol among many Indigenous peoples, including the lead researcher. However, there was no tobacco or other cultural protocol offered for the students' time and sharing experience. The team did not offer tobacco to any Indigenous students because it was not budgeted and it did not fit with the online survey method, but prayers were said for the students and research team. This was Indigenous led research with Indigenous learners and aligned with the principles of Indigenous research methodologies.

While preparing for doctoral research, Shawn Wilson considered spirituality "as a key component of Indigenous peoples' healing" and developed a research question for Indigenous graduate students (Wilson, 2008, p. 29). Considering his discussions with Indigenous scholars, he "form[ed] a stronger relationship with this topic" (Wilson, 2008, p. 32) and with their combined thoughts and advice. As such, Wilson articulated an Indigenous research paradigm in his book *Research Is Ceremony* (2008, p. 32). The book referenced the principles of relationality that included respect, reciprocity, and responsibility (Weber-Pillwax, 2001). When we consider research as ceremony, we respect the sacredness of tobacco and iyiniwak customs based on sacred and natural laws.

Offering and praying with sacred tobacco is a demonstration of "respect for holistic knowledges" (Kovach, 2009, p. 58). "Scholarship on Indigenous science, in one manner or another, references the relationship with metaphysics through creation myths, philosophies on space and time, and an energy source that Indigenous people describe as the sacred" (Kovach, 2009, p. 57). Therefore, Indigenous researchers self-locate in accordance with tribal epistemology in respectful ways with or without tobacco; not all iyiniwak practice the ritual of tobacco offerings (Kovach, 2009).

If spirituality is "being alive well" as Brant Castellano (2018, p. 55) explains, then applying spiritual energy in Indigenous research encourages and supports being alive well. In the context of this research on COVID-19, this was significant for the purposes of asking students to identify how their studies were going during the pandemic and was also important to help us maintain or find peace and balance.

The iyiniwak students from across Canada shared their experiences in confidence and the spiritual energy fulfilled the research. The research started with a survey; the urgency of the pandemic required quick data collection and the budget was limited. Researching and abiding by social distancing measures involved the use of technology. The methodology in an online environment required access to the Internet and/or telephone for participation. The Athabasca University Research Ethics Board approved the research.

To inform students about the research we worked with the Athabasca University Research Centre, which sent e-mails on September 28, October 15, and November 3. Appendix Aⁱ includes questions and results for the online survey. We collected survey data until November 13, 2020. We held meetings every two weeks through Microsoft Teams to review and discuss progress. Connors and Martin extracted and compiled the survey data.

After completing the survey, some iyiniwak students expressed interest in participating in the focus group and individual interviews, and Martin confirmed participation. We wanted to hear what iyiniwak students

had to say within a group and as individuals. Through Zoom, we bridged across geographic regions and time zones. Auger and Martin met with the students on November 17, 2020, Mountain Time. Thirteen people indicated they would join the online session. Seven people participated in it. Field notes supported the data collection in response to the focus group questions (See Appendix Bⁱⁱ). From November 20 through to December 16, 2020, individual telephone interviews were scheduled. Auger conducted 16 interviews. One individual declined and three chose not to respond to e-mails. Appendix Cⁱⁱⁱ includes the open-ended interview questions.

It is important to note the experiences of graduate students within research settings. As a co-author, the graduate research assistant Barbara Martin reflected on her research experience indicating that a well-structured survey, designed questions, an appropriately managed focus group, coupled with well-conducted individual interviews, could lead to proper data collection and analysis of research questions. In this case, the research approach prompted the analysis and understanding of issues that COVID-19 generated amongst the online Indigenous learners.

Relationship

Through e-mail, the research team connected to iyiniwak students who were offered the opportunity to click the link to the online survey. This enabled a connection between the research team and iyiniwak students. The online survey link included a question for consent and an invitation for further participation if they were interested in the focus group, and/or individual interview. We communicated at a distance through e-mail, Zoom, and telephone. Listening is part of the oral tradition of iyiniwak cultures. Listening gave learners the opportunity to express what they were experiencing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers listened to learner's thoughtful and heartfelt experiences of trying to learn and complete their academic programs during the global pandemic. Josie Auger asked them about their individual experiences within the context of their family, community, and nation. Interview participants received follow-up e-mails to confirm that their responses were recorded accurately.

Results

The information gleaned from the focus group, individual interviews, and survey are presented together to give context to the students' experiences. We present the results of the focus group first. To begin, the following is Martin's perspective of what she learned during the focus group:

Indigenous communities were left vulnerable during COVID-19. The pandemic affected the learning of Indigenous students attending online programs. Indigenous communities look after their citizens. Many households were crowded because they were looking after a brother, a cousin, an uncle, or even a neighbor. The number of people sharing the same space doubled the homeowners' work and care, creating a shortage of time for them to study. I remember participants saying that they were taking care of family members, and such acts touched me deeply. Having an Indigenous root, I could understand why my grandma was always looking after us. This research

brought back memories of my childhood and made me wonder how my grandma would behave if she were alive during the pandemic, and how my mom would thrive if she were attending her nursing degree during such times.

Themes included: (a) the effect of the pandemic in the online learning environment; (b) the dark spots, or effects of the pandemic on the learner and family; and (c) coping mechanisms. Before the pandemic, people who practiced their spirituality did so on an individual basis and with other people at ceremonial lodges, but COVID-19 affected the spiritual practices. Indigenous students mentioned that they had to adapt and some started to do more for themselves spiritually because of the social distance requirements.

The pandemic created chaos in the lives of students as they were helping family and nation members. University staff were working from home. More people were at home using the same computer with other family members, and this made Internet access difficult. Students needed to ask for extensions or deferrals. The stress of COVID-19 made it harder for students to absorb the course material. Students had computer fatigue. They were exhausted. There were backlogs at the university. The phone lines were down. E-mail responses were slower. Extensions were costly. Not all students knew that they could get a free extension. Although it was an unprecedented situation, and management could not hardly have been expected to be perfect, the poor response of the university itself resulted in an increase in stress for students.

These were the dark spots mentioned in the focus group and like the dark spots these are short extrapolations from students' experiences. Some students expressed feeling scared and were worried about the health of their children, parents, and family members who oftentimes had other health issues. Social distancing affected friendships as people were discouraged from socializing. Some people experienced employment layoffs. Food security was diminished some people were not able to afford food nor eat properly. The winter was bleak and depressing with very little to look forward to socially. Amidst the turbulence of the pandemic, one student mentioned increasing her Bible study. Another student mentioned the coming of the end of the world. Social distancing requirements affected how people grieved. Normally family and community members support the family of the deceased to pay their respects. Balance and harmony are important to many Indigenous peoples and during these difficult times, it was hard to find a balance. One student identified isolation like "being on an island." To summarize, we added to the described experiences and acknowledged that beneath the water, there is earth, and symbolically we still have a connection to all beings.

From a strength-based perspective, having a supportive partner made a difference to some students. Self-care was important and they took three times the self-care. Facebook and social media replaced in-person socializing. Full homes were sources of happiness, and a student mentioned living with nine people in one household. There was a feeling of solidarity. People were helping one another. People were careful using masks and remaining vigilant. People were proud of their efforts to stay the course. One student enrolled in an online herbal workshop and found that to be a real blessing. One said that it was about turning terrible things into good things through trials and tribulations.

Indigenous students said they wanted to complete their studies. They wanted to go to the ceremonies more often. One student said they stepped up their spirituality by doing ceremonies on their own, and intuitively shifting to a new path. Prayer is powerful. The pandemic helped students focus, read, and study.

During the one-to-one interviews Auger spoke to Elders, leaders, health care professionals, income tax specialists, administrators, essential service workers, child welfare workers, business owners, men, women, parents, expecting parents, grandparents living in urban, rural, and Indigenous communities who were taking courses. Many expressed learning about their culture and carrying it forward through the practice of smudging, gathering herbs, beading, and cooking bannock and wild meat.

The Indigeneity spectrum of students participating in this research was diverse, as expressed in the following comment during a one-to-one interview:

I am visibly white, like I look white. My mom was . . . near full, except for the white blood that comes in the Métis lineage. . . . I grew up in a very traditional home. . . . In those days, I was too Indian to be white. Now that I own a business, I will have my master's degree, and I would say that I am relatively successful. . . . Now I am suddenly too white to be an Indian (laughs). . . . It is funny how people associate, First Nations or Indigenous people with what they perceive we should be. . . . I have a distinct perspective on things, but you know, people expect me to roll up on a horse with bright, long, beautiful braids. . . . The things that people think [are] . . . still very driven by stereotypes.

Coming to terms with one's indigeneity often involves facing trauma, "[My mom's] indigeneity equals trauma to her, and I didn't understand that so now I hear her stories, and I totally get the picture," said another student.

In conversation, some students considered historical diseases like smallpox and tuberculosis as weaponized against iyiniwak people. They identified the stigma of HIV. In academia, we have referred to the distal determinants of health affecting generations of Indigenous people and it is historical trauma (Reading & Wien, 2009; Yellow Horse Brave Heart, 2004). One student shared an experience:

I am from an Indigenous family, of course, and in my mom's family, her dad had 13 brothers and sisters, and he lost 11 of them to tuberculosis. . . . My mom's family were originally from northern Saskatchewan, and the time that the tuberculosis outbreak was happening they had to move closer to Prince Albert to be closer to their kids who were in the hospital, and they ended up getting stuck there because that was when the Indian agent instituted the need to have . . . a pass or whatever to travel around. . . . So, we ended up getting stuck on the reserve that we now call home but that was not their original home. That is where my mom's family lives now, and still to this day other families on the reserves do not consider my family a part of the reserve, because they were not originally from there. But because of what was going on and, you know, residential schools and all that stuff they were required to stay there. They were not allowed to leave.

Not having a sense of belonging, connection, or acceptance to a community of origin because of historical trauma would prevent iyiniwak from being self-actualized human beings. The psychological theory on self-actualization developed by Abraham Maslow originates with Blackfoot tipi teachings (Heavy Head, 2018). The historical impacts are a reminder of the survival experience that Indigenous people must endure with COVID-19, just like everyone else on the planet.

Findings

We now discuss the more important findings of the survey. Some individual responses are aggregated to provide a more meaningful discussion.

Indigenous learners identified that their access to technology worsened in 32.9% of cases after social distancing came into effect, with 56% having very good access before. Addressing insufficient bandwidth in the Northwest Territories would help students in the online learning environment, said one student. In an interview, one student stressed that access to technology should be “made more democratized, or at least more accessible.” To have access to education, Indigenous communities need access to updated technology. A student described his northern Alberta residence as located in “the Bermuda Triangle of non-service of Internet.” Before social distancing, 92.4% of these distance education (DE) students had access to the Internet, which afterwards decreased to 70%. Students stated that, “with everybody working from home, the Internet slows right down” and “you would want to count on getting somewhere with assignments . . . and then oh no, the Internet is not working!”

Before social distancing began, 53.6% of students found they had very good or fairly good access to public buildings like libraries or the band office for studying, using computers, and writing exams. The closure of public buildings made it challenging and difficult for 53.6% of students “to do the work.” Indigenous communities that implemented checkpoints made it difficult for 15.7% of the students to complete assignments. A First Nations leader and student added:

Our community went into a lockdown in the middle of March. It immediately closed when they declared it a pandemic. . . . We did not have any kind of protocol in place; or a pandemic response plan. It was developed during the pandemic.

The first wave of the pandemic prompted immediate responses from all sectors. Athabasca University closed their buildings, re-located staff to work from home, and shut their phone lines—all at a time when Indigenous students needed to communicate. These actions affected students in several ways; 52.2% of students indicated phone line closure, and 33.6% identified staff working from home affected their ability to complete assignments, confirm enrollment required for financial loans, and talk to someone. There were mixed responses from annoying to favorable regarding the closure of university phone lines. Students adapted by using social media as a source of information. “I think everybody was scared,” said a student.

The majority of Indigenous students' households, 63.6%, were not only competing for Internet and computer use, but other factors also made it challenging or difficult to complete assignments. Major factors included lack of childcare (48.6%) and overcrowded homes (63.6%). Lesser factors were Elders/seniors coming home from institutions (21.4%) and inability to manage financially (14.3%). Financial fluctuations affected the majority (53.6%). On a spiritual level, the pandemic affected mind, body, and emotions—34.3% were unable to manage, or for 57.14%, holistic management fluctuated. Many said they were not motivated.

The mantra “we are all in this together” expressed the sentiment for society to adapt and get through the pandemic, but during the first and second wave, adaptation was not unanimously apparent. On an individual basis, 37.1% of Indigenous students' attitudes completely adapted; 57.9% adapted partially, with

5% indicating they could not adapt. Behaviorally, 56.4% of Indigenous students experienced a complete change related to the social distancing measures; 40% had some change; and 3.57% did not change. Indigenous students commented on their families' attitudes as follows: 43.6% had a complete change, 51.4% had some change, and 5% had no change. They also responded that regarding their family's behavioral change to social distancing measures, 45.7% had a complete change, 50.7% had some change, and 3.6% had no change.

Discussion

We made three attempts to reach all the Indigenous students who volunteered to participate in this research. To accept the link to the survey required technology and an Internet connection. Some students may not have had access during the pandemic to participate.

Learning about Indigenous peoples and cultures is a way to translate knowledge and inform society that we, as Indigenous people, are adapting. Like other human beings across Turtle Island and around the world we reacted, responded, reflected, and faced our feelings about COVID-19 and the impacts together through online Zoom meetings. Hand-written notes captured the main points.

Although we did not have the opportunity to present cultural protocol in the focus group or individual interviews to ask the Indigenous students questions, the research was still conducted with respect, and spiritual energy was infused. The issue of following cultural protocols should become a point of discussion. Should a university enable Indigenous researchers to follow cultural protocols when engaging in research with Indigenous people? Do all tribes follow the customs of protocol and offer tobacco? If not, then what? Another question for universities, governing bodies, and Indigenous peoples: Should tobacco be offered in all Indigenous research contexts when an Indigenous research paradigm is followed? What happens to the culture when brought into a Western research setting? Indigenous sovereign peoples identified solutions to complex problems. Canadian government guidelines on research ethics have stated that such guidelines on ethical conduct are "offered in a spirit of respect. [They are] not intended to override or replace ethical guidance offered by Indigenous peoples themselves" (Government of Canada, 2022, para. 5).

We posit that listening is not a health innovation, but during a crisis, it is an innovative service for anyone suffering. An important premise of this research was applying spiritual energy to Indigenous research in the face of COVID-19, as it helped to establish the relationality to Indigenous students, and it helped the researcher to maintain or find peace and balance. During the pandemic, we were required to social distance, which destroyed hopes for social interaction. If we consider the view of Brant Castellano (2018) "spiritual health is a communal affair, and it is undermined by anything that assaults community vitality" (p. 55) then online research provides a space like a sharing circle for discussions that allow Indigenous students to express their feelings and share experiences.

Baldwin (1994) identifies the power of one circle as an ancient space where "leadership rotates, responsibility is shared, and each participant agrees to trust that there is something present that's larger than all of us" (p. 29). This virtual space was like a sacred circle of squares, a term Dr.'s Josie Auger and

Melissa Jay described in online support meetings with Indigenous students at Athabasca University after they located unmarked graves of Indigenous children at residential schools in British Columbia and thereafter. Furthermore, since holistic health, encompasses the “physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions,” and four dimensions have “become a mantra in the discourse on Aboriginal well-being,” (Brant Castellano, 2018, p. 55) then it is natural for iyiniwak to embrace their spirituality and customs.

Since Athabasca University uses a tutor model to engage directly with students through online forums, e-mails, and the telephone, these mechanisms provide opportunities for listening to students. Through this research, we obtained information and created dialogue on historical life and death impacts, as well as learners' reactions to current situations, experiences, challenges, barriers, and adaptations, as they pursued post-secondary education in the online learning environment.

McLoughlin and Oliver (2000) discussed the need for cultural localization with Indigenous peoples in Australia, “which means incorporating the local values, styles of learning and cognitive preference [and] going beyond surface level design considerations, to achieve culturally inclusive constructivist learning environments” (p. 58). Based on cultural conversations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who experienced educational inequity in higher education in Australia, Reedy (2019) recommended the following:

- Education developers, academics, and others involved in online learning design should consider the impact of culture when making learning design decisions.
- Educational equity for Indigenous learners may be enhanced through the use of the learning design model and preliminary design principles proposed in this article.
- Non-Indigenous researchers may consider “yarning” as an ethical and culturally appropriate method for engaging in research with Indigenous people. (p. 132)

While culture is an important consideration for educational equity, it is recommended to use ethical and culturally appropriate methods for engaging in research with Indigenous people to discuss online learning design.

Symbols of animals figure prominently in Indigenous cultures in Canada, and Indigenous scholars use the animal symbols to share symbolic logic based on ancestral practices. Ottmann (2017) identified Indigenous access to Canadian post-secondary education institutions as the spirit of the new buffalo as explained by Stonechild (2006):

In the past, the buffalo met virtually every need of the North American Indian, from food to shelter; this animal was considered to be a gift from the Creator, intended to provide for the peoples' needs. Today, elders say that education, rather than the bison needs to be relied upon for survival. (pp. 1–2).

Jacqueline Ottmann (2017) referred to the complexity theory of access, which is a discovery “that holds the potential for profound discoveries in the midst of time—past, present and future—that is definitely not linear” (p. 96). She drew attention to the gap that Indigenous students experience from elementary to post-

secondary, such as barriers that are systemic and have systemic roots. Ottman (2017) described how complexity theory is a “liminal space” (p. 96) where ideas for post-secondary education can benefit Indigenous learners.

Education is the pursuit of knowledge, and research using Indigenous research methods holds vast potential. Furthermore, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) explained, educational research supports self-determination:

Self-determination in a research agenda becomes something more than a political goal. It becomes a goal of social justice which is expressed through and across a wide range of psychological, social, cultural and economic terrains. It necessarily involves the processes of transformation, of decolonization, of healing and of mobilization as peoples. (p. 116)

Without access to online post-secondary education, caused by the pandemic, the exposure of Indigenous undergraduate and graduate students to Indigenous research methods was lowered.

Lack of access to technology in remote locations during the pandemic made educational access and participation difficult. In this study, the students' responses varied. Some were able to complete their studies while others asked for extensions or dropped out. Understanding their unique needs during the stressful times was important not only for Athabasca University, but for Canadian society-at-large, because we are slowly fulfilling the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation (TRC) Calls to Action across this country.

Conclusion

We return to what Simpson (2008) wrote about the roles of New People and settlers. We as Indigenous and settler researchers stand in solidarity to demonstrate support for the New People during the COVID-19 pandemic, by listening to what Indigenous learners in distance education had to say about what they were experiencing. The survey methods we used here were Indigenous in nature to help revive language, philosophies, politics, and culture. Indigenous people have a worldview that allows Indigenous researchers to seek knowledge, interpret it, and explain it from their unique perspective. Indigenous people are maintaining the sacredness of that knowledge and reviving it, to acquire “visions of peace and justice” (Simpson, 2008, p. 14). As healthcare systems around the world are under strain, people are sick and dying, and families and communities are under duress, how would it be possible to find peace and justice? The universe heard the loud cry for justice for Black and Indigenous Lives Matter. Still, we return to the prophecy explained by Simpson (2008).

The spirit and intent of the prophecy requires settlers “to decolonize their relationships to the land and the Indigenous people, in order to build a peaceful and sustainable future” (Smith, 2008, p. 14). We continue to stand in solidarity with this prophecy. The Elders spoke about the prophecies and through those teachings we hope to find peace.

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ⁱ Appendix A: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1f6xqoqx2Q9NQZhy8D5kG3t62k_Ya6CiY/edit

ⁱⁱ Appendix B: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1f6xqoqx2Q9NQZhy8D5kG3t62k_Ya6CiY/edit

ⁱⁱⁱ Appendix C: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1f6xqoqx2Q9NQZhy8D5kG3t62k_Ya6CiY/edit