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# Growing Our Roots
## Exploring the Home Language and Literacy Environment within the Context of Indigenous Ways of Knowing and Being

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Résumé de l'article

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# *Growing Our Roots: Exploring the Home Language and Literacy Environment within the Context of Indigenous Ways of Knowing and Being*

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*Abstract*

Learning to read and write is crucial for children's success in school and in life, yet many Indigenous children encounter risk factors linked to lower school achievement. This study explored Indigenous perspectives on early language and literacy through surveys and interviews with 22 participants using Indigenous methodologies. These perspectives were compared with mainstream views to highlight cultural mismatches that lead to misinterpretations of Indigenous children's abilities. Findings emphasize the need for culturally sensitive pedagogical practices, development of self and cultural identity, the preservation of cultural traditions, and the acknowledgment of intergenerational trauma in supporting early language and literacy.

## *Introduction*

Learning to read and write is foundational for success in school and in life. Indigenous children in Canada, however, disproportionately encounter risk factors that can impede their language and literacy development, leading to widening academic achievement gaps (Ball & Lewis, 2014; Kuchirko, 2019). Ball (2012) points out that this may be due, in large part, to "cultural dissonant learning environments" that Indigenous children and families encounter in preschool and grade school which are a "striking mismatch" from the early learning experiences and practices in their homes and communities (p. 286).

Western-centric models frequently guide educators, clinicians, policymakers, and the development of language and literacy curriculum and assessment methods, often overlooking the rich Indigenous traditions of knowledge, language, and cultural practices. This oversight can lead to deficit-focused approaches that may not only be misaligned with Indigenous children's needs but could also undermine their cultural identity (Ball, 2012; Kuchirko, 2019; Sam, 2011). Indigenous families often feel their traditional practices and perspectives are devalued, especially when evaluated and interpreted through a Western, middle-class lens.

Aiming to bridge the cultural divide, this study brings voice to Indigenous experiences exploring how Indigenous families conceptualize and support language and literacy development amidst the challenges posed by historical and ongoing realities faced by Indigenous peoples in Canada. This research aims to foster a more inclusive

understanding that respects and integrates Indigenous wisdom and practices in supporting children's early learning. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are characteristics of Indigenous parent-child language interactions at home and in the community?
2. What are Indigenous parents' traditional perspectives, beliefs and values on early childhood language and literacy development in the home?
3. What are some challenges faced by Indigenous families when supporting their children's early learning and language development?

### *Positionality*

We are non-Indigenous researchers and approach our inquiry as cultural outsiders. Conducting cross-cultural research necessitates deep reflexivity, and critical examination of our own positionalities (Manohar et al., 2019). This process demands vulnerability and readiness to face discomfort in confronting the realities uncovered through our research. Central to cross-cultural research is relational accountability (Wilson, 2008), involving a personal commitment to building trust and fostering relationships through humility and reciprocity to bridge cultural divides. This commitment underpins our approach, striving to honor the complexities, intricacies, and processes involved in engaging meaningfully with Indigenous communities.

## *Literature Review*

### *Emergent Literacy*

Emergent literacy (EL) skills are foundational to children's reading and writing development, encompassing early experiences with oral communication, alphabet sounds, print, and writing tools (Anthony & Lonigan, 2004; Rohde, 2015). This critical period from birth to five years of age is marked by rapid brain development, and facilitated by interactions with others (Rohde, 2015; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of child development highlights that EL skills grow through engaging with knowledgeable others, such as adults in the home, community, and broader cultural environments. Mainstream EL theories often emphasize discrete skills, such as phonological awareness (PA) and vocabulary development, due to their strong predictive relationships with later reading ability (Iyer et al., 2019; Piaget, 1962; Sénéchal et al., 2017), overlooking the significant influence of family, community, and culture.

In contrast, the view of literacy as a cultural practice (Gee, 2001) illuminates diverse developmental paths across cultures. Indigenous perspectives, for example, view children as integral community members who form their "communal identity" and understandings through observing and imitating the way people in their environment live and behave in everyday activities (Ball, 2012, p. 288). As Rinehart (2000) explains, Indigenous "language, culture and, the home environment tell children who they are and how to construct their learning" (p. 136). Research shows that Indigenous social interactions are often marked by non-verbal, gestural communication, listening, and quiet personal reflection including respectful reverence during ceremonies (Ball & Lewis, 2014; Muir & Bohr, 2019). In a Canadian study including 65 self-identified Indigenous Elders, grandparents, and parents, many noted that parents often did not give explicit verbal instructions or detailed explanations when guiding their children (Ball & Lewis, 2014).

Similarly, a study of Inuit language patterns among 24 Inuit mothers showed that some mothers valued silence, gauging their child's language skills not by how well they spoke, but by their listening ability and their capacity to follow oral directions (Crago et al., 1993).

Assertations that sharing print-based books and explicitly teaching EL skills is an integral part of early language and literacy experience may not be consistent with Indigenous ways. In many Indigenous circles, learning is done primarily through oral traditions of stories and songs, as well as experiential/land-based learning where print materials and explicit teaching do not often play a significant role (Ball, 2012; Simpson, 2014). In her seminal ethnography, Heath (1983) described the varying 'ways with words' of families from Black and White communities of different socio-economic levels. For example, children from a working-class community that valued listening, observing, and hands-on, practical activities were more likely to be marginalized at their mainstream middle-class dominated schools. In contrast, more talkative home environments that explicitly taught literacy skills using books and other materials were more highly valued.

Indeed, Indigenous children can have unique needs and paths toward language and literacy skills which can be exacerbated by speech-language difficulties (Ball, 2007; Peltier, 2017). Gillon and Macfarlane (2017) collaborated with community Elders to develop a culturally inclusive approach to advancing a child's PA called a "Braided Rivers Approach" which integrates Western, science-based models of PA skill acquisition with Indigenous language and tribal knowledge. This bi-linguistic approach supports a young child's idea that their heritage language is important and valued, which, in turn, enhances pride in their cultural identity and builds resilience (Gillon & Macfarlane, 2017; Lothian et al., 2020).

There are various tools to measure aspects of EL, administered by teachers, clinicians, or parents, with differences in questions, scales, and validation procedures. The literature (Maplethorpe, 2023; Peltier, 2014; Sam, 2011) suggests biases in defining and measuring EL, often excluding Indigenous realities. Children from homes without readily available books or writing tools may lack familiarity with these skills. Diagnostic reading tests often assess storytelling in linear sequences, whereas Indigenous storytellers often follow a more circular structure of converging and diverging events where it is up to the listener to hear all of the story and put it together in their own way (Peltier, 2014). For example, Peltier's (2014) study revealed that Indigenous Elders value storytelling features based on elements of traditional Anishinaabe orality such as humor, voice animation and emotion, and reference to family or community relationships over more 'conventional' story dimensions such as introduction/setting, character development, and logical sequencing of events. Children accustomed to non-linear storytelling may score lower on such assessments, not due to a lack of understanding, but due to different cultural approaches. These variations among cultures are often seen by teachers, clinicians, and researchers as evidence of *deficits* and dysfunction rather than as *differences* in approaches and values (Kuchirko, 2019; Peltier, 2014).

The Early Development Inventory (EDI) is a teacher-completed measurement of kindergarten school readiness in various developmental aspects with predominately mainstream interpretations of language and literacy skills and the home environment (Janus & Offord, 2007). Muhajarine et al. (2011) examined the EDI in measuring school readiness for Indigenous versus non-Indigenous children and found that, on average, Indigenous children received "significantly lower ratings from teachers" across all domains (p. 307)

with a higher proportion of scores in the "at-risk" category in all subdomains (p. 311). The authors explain that teacher bias is "most often unconscious and difficult to determine" and concede that Indigenous children may be "given lower EDI scores on average as a result of teacher assumptions regarding their abilities rather than the actual skills, behaviours, and/or characteristics of children holding such ancestry" (Muhajarine et al., 2011, p. 302-303).

While there appears to be a growing research base that attempts to incorporate more critical and sociocultural theories into the realm of early learning and development, exploring and incorporating Indigenous ideas of knowing seems to be lacking (Adair, 2010; Ball, 2010). Sam (2011) and Ball (2010) caution against the recklessness and harmful transfer of normative concepts such as 'at risk', 'targeted', 'deficit' or 'vulnerable' into communities which must be avoided as it comes at the expense of those already marginalized and misunderstood. In the case of kindergarten entry, a 'thriving' child is often defined, at least in part, by their speaking ability, print awareness and phonological awareness abilities. However, what if the definition were expanded to include, at least in part, the ability to 'read' the signs and symbols on the land, to be perceptive to non-verbal communication, or to be attentive and reflective of oral story teachings (Sam, 2011; Wark et al., 2019)? As we build cultural bridges, sensitivity to the potential impact of key terms and concepts is important (Sam, 2011).

*Home Literacy Environment*

The home literacy environment (HLE) includes everyday parent-child interactions, parent literacy practices and beliefs, and opportunities to engage in literacy activities and supports the development of early language and literacy skills (Ball, 2010; Myrtil et al., 2019). One aspect of the HLE is the physical environment, which includes the variety and types of books available in the home, visits to libraries or bookstores, designated areas for reading and writing, and educational materials like games or puzzles, as well as the parents' language and literacy habits, beliefs, and practices (Burgess, 2002; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Scarborough and Dobrich (1994) found that parents who frequently read and possess more books are more likely to read to their children. Some researchers indicated that children from homes with lower socio-economic status (SES) and often lower educational levels inherently face risks of reading failure due to limited access to resources, reduced literacy activity engagement, and 'lower quality' HLEs (Fernald et al., 2013; Hart & Risley, 2003; Hoff, 2003; Lonigan, 2004; Petrill et al., 2005).

However, a closer examination of home literacy practices suggests that the activities families engage in significantly impact children's language and literacy achievements more than their SES (Peltier, 2017, Purcell-Gates, 2000; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). This is especially true in unique cultural contexts where traditional approaches and expectations may not align with mainstream discourses. For instance, in the daily lives of young Indigenous children, conventional interactions with storybooks, writing or everyday conversation may be overshadowed by learning literacies of the land (knowledge of local flora and fauna) and developing acute perception and listening skills for oral storytelling or hunting participation (Ball, 2012; Peltier, 2017; Simpson, 2014).

Another aspect of the HLE involves parent-child interactions and parents' beliefs about their role in early language and literacy learning. Studies show that active parent-

child interactions, such as posing questions, highlighting print concepts, discussing story plots, retelling stories, engaging in story extension activities, and directly teaching EL skills and vocabulary, significantly bolster EL skills, setting the stage for advanced skills by school age (Baroody & Diamond, 2012; Iyer et al., 2019; Koohi, 2016; Weigel et al., 2006a; Weigel et al., 2006b). These findings contrast with a non-interference style of Indigenous parent-child interactions, where a more indirect, observational approach is favored. Parents respect the child's own agency to experiment and learn independently, encouraging trust in their own instincts without adult imposition of views (Muir & Bohr, 2019; Wark et al., 2019).

This study seeks to shed light on how Indigenous families perceive and experience early language and literacy and to further contrast how Indigenous understanding of language and literacy differ from mainstream approaches. This research aims to foster a more inclusive understanding that values and integrates Indigenous wisdom and practices in supporting children's early language and literacy learning.

## *Method*

### *Context*

This study was grounded within an Indigenous research paradigm which prioritizes tribal knowledge that has been practiced and passed down through generations (Kovach, 2009) as well as relational accountability where respectful and reciprocal relationships are nurtured through attentiveness and openness (Archibald et al., 2019; Wilson, 2008). Researcher reflexivity is also an important aspect of Indigenous methodology (and qualitative research) which requires the researcher to develop a critical reflexive lens through self-awareness and self-reflection (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012). Reflexivity is about being open to challenge and critique and about disrupting the dominant discourses to make room for alternative, but equally legitimate and valid ways and perspectives (Smith, 2012). Indigenous research is about "holding space for others' realities," and finding that space within ourselves (Wilson et al., 2019, p. xv).

The study took place at an Indigenous preschool in semi-rural Alberta through a research partnership with community-embedded Elders, educators, parent representatives, and administrators. The preschool is a federally funded program available to children who are identified by their parents as having Indigenous heritage. The preschool runs four days per week where children, aged three to five years, attend either the morning or afternoon classes twice per week with approximately 10 children in each class. There is also a Parent Participation Program (PPP) which operates within the preschool where parents of children between birth and three years of age attend the preschool classes alongside their child. This helps prepare for eventual preschool attendance and parents receive mentorship and encouragement in positive cultural and child guidance.

This study followed a community-based collaborative approach where research was conducted *with* (not *on, for* or *about*) First Nations, Metis, and Inuit (FNMI) Peoples which involved local Indigenous stakeholders and right holders as full and equal partners (First Nations Information Governance Center; FNIGC, 2023). This involved building trusting relationships and tobacco offering, a local cultural protocol in the form of a tobacco pouch (loose tobacco tied in a square of cloth) to each community member who became part of an Advisory Circle to guide the study (see Figure 1). As is consistent with Indigenous ways of knowing, consensus was reached through respectful, equitable

discussion (Wilson, 2008) where the Advisory Circle had the final say in how study results were analyzed, interpreted, written, and shared to ensure they remained true to the voices of participants, true to cultural values, beliefs, and ways of knowing, that contributions were acknowledged and credited (collective or individual), and that scared knowledge remained protected. As well, all aspects of the research project were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards set out in the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS, 2022).

*Figure 1.* Tobacco Pouches as Cultural Protocol

*Participants*

The study participants involved those who self-identified or identified their preschool child as FNMI, and who parented at least one child between three to five years of age (see Table 1). A total of 22 participants were included in this project; 13 parents, 1 grandparent, 1 guardian, 4 foster or kinship parents, 1 early childhood educator, and 2 Kokums (Elders). One of the educators, who was a parent of one of the preschool children, was also a study participant. Nineteen participants completed the survey, and six participants completed an individual interview. Participants identified their children as First Nations, Metis, and sometimes more specifically as Cree, Ojibwe, Haida, or Mikmaq. English was the primary language spoken in the home for all participants where some noted that the Cree language was spoken minimally, such as using some Cree words or phrases. Permission was given by the participants to use their initials to anonymize the data.

Table 1
*Demographic Information of Study Participants (N=22)*

| Participant Acronym | Caregiver Type | Child's Ethnic Identity | Language(s) spoken at home | Survey Completion | Interview Completion |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| CK | Parent and ECE | FN | English | Yes | Yes |
| CL | Parent | FN, Cree | English, some Cree | Yes | No |
| SS | Parent | FN | English, some Cree | Yes | No |
| SC | Parent | FN, Scottish | English, Chipewyan | Yes | No |
| SD | Parent | Metis, Cree | English, Cree, Michif | Yes | No |
| SB | Parent | FN | English, Spanish | Yes | No |
| MG | Foster Parent | FN | English | Yes | No |
| CP | Parent | Metis | English | Yes | No |
| KE | Parent | FN, Greek, German | English | Yes | No |
| PO | Guardian | Metis, Ukrainian | English | Yes | No |
| BH | Foster Parent | FN | English | Yes | No |
| RS | Foster Parent | FN | English, Tagalog | Yes | No |
| DW | Grandparent | Metis | English | Yes | No |
| CJ | Foster Parent | FN, Cree | English | Yes | No |
| MW | Parent | FN, Caucasian | English, some Cree | Yes | No |
| AW | Parent | Metis, FN | English, some Cree | Yes | Yes |
| HA | Parent | Cree, Ojibwe, Haida, Mikmaq, European | English, some Cree | Yes | No |
| AP | Parent | Metis, Cree | English | Yes | No |
| MM | Parent | --- | English | Yes | Yes |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| AM | ECE* | -- | -- | No | Yes |
| KM | Elder* (Kokum**) | -- | -- | No | Yes |
| KR | Elder* (Kokum**) | -- | -- | No | Yes |

**Note.* Participants did not complete the survey.

***Note.* 'Kokum' is a Cree word for grandmother, which can be used in a general sense to refer to an elderly person sharing her wisdom and love with others. A Kokum may be an Elder but not all Elders are Kokums.

Recruitment of participants was approached with careful consideration of levels of trust within the preschool community. The trusted preschool staff, which included the director and two full-time educators, became the 'front lines' of communication about the project, providing genuine support, encouragement, and gentle follow-ups with parents during informal daily interactions or through the familiar preschool cell phone. Besides promotional signs and posters, personalized letters of invitation were also sent home to each family. Each consenting participant was presented with a tobacco pouch (see Figure 1) to humbly request the sharing of knowledge and to express gratitude for participating in the research. All participants were treated with the same level of respect as one would an Elder, regardless of their age, cultural status or formal (or informal) educational attainment (Archibald et al., 2019). This gesture appeared to be well-received by the participants as it showed respect for their cultural traditions and honored their personal knowledge and experiences.

*Data Collection*

Within an Indigenous research paradigm, data collection methods must be grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing and being (Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). The first method used in this study was active participant observation, where the principal researcher spent many afternoons over many months at the preschool where the study took place, observing while actively participating in the environment (Wilson, 2008). The aim of active participant observation is to "gain a closeness or familiarity with the group through taking part in the day-to-day activities over a long period of time" where the researcher observes and analyzes while simultaneously engaging with the group (Wilson, 2008, p. 40). Instead of sitting (in)conspicuously in a corner, recording field notes on an intimidating clipboard, the researcher took on a role of humble but enthusiastic co-player and classroom helper and would later reflect on these experiences through journaling. The researcher also attended family events outside of class time to build further relationships with the children and extended family members. This format emphasizes learning by watching and doing, building relationships, sharing daily experiences, and reflection, which are important aspects of ethical Indigenous research (Wilson, 2008). The active participant journaling data were integrated with other study data which added depth and understanding to the study findings.

A parent survey was also conducted. The survey content evolved through extensive discussion among the Advisory Circle which led to the rewording of many questions so they would be perceived as understandable, relatable, relevant, and respectful to

Indigenous parents, educators, and Knowledge Holders. Key discussion points included honoring tribal knowledge alongside Western university credentials and recognizing oral stories, cultural songs, and land-based learning as legitimate literacy practices. Open-ended questions rather than multiple-choice or scaled response questions were used since Indigenous ways cannot be defined through checkboxes where "the quality of the interaction is more important than ticking boxes or asking close-ended questions" (Smith, 2012, p. 138).

A sub-group of six participants were invited to individual interviews based on their survey responses. Interviews were chosen for their ability to gather information directly from the participant's point of view and use narrative storytelling to "weave deeper shared understandings…seeking the meaning within a community" (Archibald et al., 2019, p. 11). Eleven interview questions were developed based on ideas gleaned from the survey responses and were revised through the Advisory Circle's discussion to avoid academic terms (e.g., embedded, impart, insight) and ambiguous terms (e.g., values, traditional, ethnicity). As these and many other examples illustrate, questioning formats can often reflect Western ideas, values, and experiences and, as one Advisory Circle Member explained, if this is not the lens through which you view the world, "You do not get the opportunity to shine because the light is not cast in your direction." The Advisory Circle also requested that the interviewer inquire if each participant was 'in a comfortable space' once the interview was finished, in case any emotional upset was experienced while sharing their personal (sometimes traumatic) stories. This is similar to the way many Indigenous sharing circles end their time together as it provides the opportunity to leave the gathering 'in a good way' (harmonious balance of mind, body, and spirit) and lean into the support of local Elders or other caring community members, if needed. The principal researcher audio-recorded each interview where full transcriptions were shared with each participant with an opportunity to revise or add to their ideas.

*Data Analysis*

The survey and interview data were analyzed using a general *inductive coding* approach to derive key concepts, categories, and overarching themes which could emerge organically from the raw data, "without the restraints imposed by more structured methodologies" (Thomas, 2006, p. 238). The research questions provided a focus of relevance for the coding and allowed the raw data to be condensed (not reduced) to make it more conceptually understandable without losing the essence or nuances of the participants' individual voices (Elliott, 2018; Saldana, 2021). Within this process, it becomes a purposeful gesture to "craft a narrative using the collective voices of The People" (Pavel et al., 2015, p. 16).

Through close reading of the raw data texts, categories were identified by highlighting and annotating recurring terms or phrases in different colors (Saldana, 2021). Codebooks for the survey and interview data were developed with category descriptions and verbatim responses from participants (in vivo codes) which conveyed the core essence of each code or category (Saldana, 2021; Thomas, 2006). For the more detailed interview data, an abridged version of manual coding called the "long-table approach" was conducted where verbatim transcription passages were written on color-coded sticky notes which answered each of the three research questions (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 132). The sticky notes were positioned under each research question across a long table and were then re-

positioned and reorganized as the iterative coding process unfolded. For example, sometimes a passage appeared to respond to two questions at the same time which required a refinement of the themes and codes for each question.

To bolster credibility, reliability, and rigor, we utilized NVivo 12, a qualitative data analysis software by QSR International (2020), as a secondary coding mechanism. This advanced tool allowed us to digitally translate insights and reflections derived from manual coding into structured categories (nodes) and detailed subcategories (codes). To further solidify the coding process's reliability and ensure transparency, we engaged a research assistant (RA) to perform coding crosschecks, serving as a measure of inter-coder reliability (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). In analyzing survey data, the RA developed an "independent parallel coding framework" from their interpretation of the raw data, which was then juxtaposed with the principal researcher's framework, as suggested by Thomas (2006, p. 244). Regarding the more extensive interview data, the RA executed a "check for the clarity of categories" (Thomas, 2006, p. 244), evaluating pre-established categories provided by the principal researcher and mapping text segments from three out of five data transcripts to these categories. This procedure facilitated a comparison and dialogue between the two coding schemes. The inter-coder reliability exercises revealed substantial agreement in coding approaches, yet they also prompted critical refinements to the names and descriptions of categories and codes, reflecting the distinct insights of both the RA and the principal researcher.

To further ensure the trustworthiness of data interpretations, we conducted stakeholder confirmability checks with the Advisory Circle, assessing the revised codebooks against their experiences and perspectives (Thomas, 2006). This step led to minor adjustments, enhancing the coding process' credibility and cultural accuracy. Implementing multiple intercoder reliability checks increased theoretical sensitivity and analytic reflexivity, helping to uncover biases and cultural insensitivities (Reay et al., 2016). Detailed participant descriptions strengthened the qualitative analysis' validity and credibility, confirming the conclusions' robustness (Charmaz, 2014; Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). Through triangulation, we synthesized survey and interview data into four main themes that addressed the three research questions. This synthesis ensured parsimony, indicating that an excessive number of themes might require further refinement (Thomas, 2006). This streamlined approach contributed to focused and relevant findings.

## *Findings*

Four interconnected themes underscore the significance of culturally sensitive pedagogical practices and assessments, the reinforcement of crucial developmental skills, the preservation of cultural traditions, and the recognition of intergenerational trauma (see Table 2).

Table 2
*Triangulation of Themes by Research Question (RQ)*

| Research Question | Theme | Theme Description |
|---|---|---|
| RQ1 | **One:** Early Language and Literacy Skills | Oral language development in English and heritage language<br>Speech language concerns<br>Oral traditions<br>Role of picture books |
| RQ2 | **Two:** Relational Skills, Self Esteem, Agency and Identity | Model relational qualities like respect, love, kindness, honesty<br>Self-esteem, self-love, self-respect, self-regulation, and resilience though modelling and respect of agency<br>Self-identity and cultural identity |
| | **Three:** Cultural Practices and Resurgence | Practice, celebrate and preserve cultural traditions, ceremonies, language<br>Pride in cultural roots<br>Embodied Knowledge (role modeling, storytelling, nature-based learning)<br>Family and community ties and belonging |
| RQ3 | **Four:** Intergenerational Trauma | Disruption of family and community relationships<br>Cultural and language disconnection<br>Mistrust in the education system-bullying, stereotyping, colonized curriculum, lack of teacher understanding of Indigenous histories/ perspectives |

These themes are intricately discussed and interpreted, weaving together compelling participant quotations, interpretations, and pertinent literature. Together, they narrate a profound story of distinct Indigenous interactions, viewpoints, customs, obstacles, and hopes in nurturing their young children's growth. This narrative not only illuminates the unique cultural contours of Indigenous education but also contributes to a deeper understanding of how these communities envision and enact early childhood guidance.

*Theme One: Language and Literacy Development*

Theme one, addressing the first research question, emphasized the importance of supporting oral language development in English *and* in one's heritage/cultural language,

which was expressed by many participants. As Heath (1983) and Battiste (2000) suggest, language shapes the way people perceive the world and how they describe it, where learning one's cultural language has been associated with developing a cohesive cultural identity. One study participant made this connection when she said, "If we have our language, we won't lose the culture, our teachings. I think it ties them together" (AM, Interview). Incorporating common words or phrases into everyday interactions at home and school was often shared as a valuable way to learn and preserve cultural language (often Cree). Parents expressed a strong desire to reinvigorate their cultural language and learn with their children, as evidenced in MW's words, "learning Cree words at preschool is awesome because I'm learning too" (Survey).

Another aspect of theme one was the importance of honouring Indigenous approaches and practices when supporting oral language and literacy development. This includes recognizing the practice of 'less talk' over more mainstream practices such as overt questioning tactics and constant daily discourse. While rich send-and-receive conversation is beneficial in building oral language skills (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998), it is important to realize and appreciate the unique funds of knowledge that Indigenous children may have such as acute listening and perception skills, quiet self-reflection, and the importance of gestures (Alberta Education, 2017; Ball, 2012). During researcher participant observations, it was often noticed how relatively quiet it was at the Indigenous preschool as seven or eight children and a few educators would play and interact together, compared to the constant chatter and commentary that is often observed in a mainstream preschool classroom. The Indigenous educators talked to the children, asked some questions, and commented on happenings but did not try to squeeze words out of the children when they were not forthcoming.

One additional aspect of theme one was the importance of valuing oral storytelling practices alongside the mainstream practice of sharing picture/story books. Some participants spoke of 'reading the pictures' and not focusing on the printed text, as this allowed for more open-ended development of a unique storyline and telling one's own story. Other participants described how their child's level of interest and engagement was higher when sharing an oral story than a print-based storybook, such as AW who explained, "…I just told [my daughter] a story and the energy in it…I could see that she was listening …and following along. With a storybook, I just don't see the connection for her. I learned a lot from my grandmother's stories" (Interview). Participant-educator AM built on the importance of oral traditions when she spoke of "…our teachings from our Elders and connections with our grandparents" which alludes to the personal and reciprocal connection between storyteller and listener, enhancing the teachings and cultural/familial identities within the stories (Ball & Lewis, 2014; Peltier, 2014). MM's words show how passionate many parents are about keeping the oral tradition alive with their little ones, "what gets me going is learning the traditions through the oral stories...so much wisdom. You'll find your place in the stories" (Interview).

In addition, mainstream story-sharing practices often prioritize active questioning (Koohi, 2016) which may be culturally inconsistent when compared to Indigenous ways of knowing (Ball, 2012). For example, asking direct, close-ended questions (e.g., What color is the sky?) can be confusing for Indigenous children because Indigenous ways of knowing often model that it is inappropriate to respond to questions that would demonstrate something obvious, that an adult would already know (Ball, 2012). Furthermore, since

modesty and humility are also valued traits in Indigenous ways of knowing, children may be even less forthcoming with comments or ideas during the story to avoid the perception that they are flaunting or boasting about what they know (Ball, 2012; Ross, 2006). Therefore, an Indigenous child may seem less engaged or responsive during the story sharing which can cause misconceptions for educators where they interpret (assume) the child is not paying attention, is not engaged in the story, does not know the answer, or is even being belligerent.

The researcher's participatory observations at the preschool revealed that sharing storybooks and asking lots of questions while reading was not a common occurrence in daily routines. It was much more common to go for extended nature walks or playtime outside, collecting branches or rocks, studying the sky, investigating animal prints in the snow/mud, talking to trees, rolling down hills, planting seeds, or examining a colorful leaf that had floated into the play area.

*Theme Two: Relational and Intrapersonal skills*

Theme two, addressing the second research question, highlighted how participants perceived the importance of their children learning relational skills like respect and kindness as well as intrapersonal skills like self-esteem, self-respect, self-regulation, identity, and resilience. Of particular importance was building positive *self-esteem* and confidence in Indigenous children who often seem to have an engrained inferiority complex (Sam, 2011). As educator-participant AM explained, "some of our little people have…broken spirits and we are trying so hard to build that back up…we really need to heal so that our children can grow up with self-confidence and be the best that they can be" (Interview).

In Indigenous epistemology, *modeling* is the primary mode of teaching and learning within carefully nurtured family and kinship relationships (Peltier, 2017). Traditional Indigenous practices honor and respect the child's agency and encourage them to explore and make their own decisions (Pazderka et al., 2014; Wark et al., 2019). The idea of parents and educators as models, and not direct, explicit teachers appeared at all stages of the study. Elder Edna Manitowabi describes traditional Indigenous learning as "wearing your teachings" where each person interprets ideas in their own way and as part of their unique lived experience (as quoted by Simpson, 2014, p. 11). The holistic, natural rhythms of one's being is the developmental path that children follow, regardless of (western) normative age-stage checklists, and parents respect and honour this customized timeline that their children dictate for themselves (Muir & Bohr, 2019; Wark et al., 2019). As one participant said, "It's about honouring the growth process that [my child] is going through and respect them in that way" (MM, Interview).

Related to self-esteem and non-interference guidance is the traditional Indigenous belief that mistakes and missteps in life are part of the learning process, not to be punished or shamed, but an indication that the child, "simply has more learning to do" (Ross, 2006, p. 92). This belief supports child-agency in that it gives children the freedom to explore and experiment knowing that their mistakes will be accepted as part of the learning process.

Based on Indigenous ways which often favor more active, hands-on activities, less direct teaching and wider freedoms, some participants worried that their child may have trouble conforming to more regimented mainstream school expectations of self-regulation skills, such as sitting still at a desk/table and participating in adult-directed activities. One

participant expressed their concern about others imposing on her son's agency and crossing personal boundaries explaining, "I don't want him to ever feel like anyone forced him" (MM, Interview). This idea of not being imposed upon and respecting (and protecting) personal boundaries and self-determination may be related to the historical oppression of the residential school era, when it wasn't just an imposition, it was fully dictating every aspect of children's lives, including what language they could speak (TRC, 2015). As a result, many Indigenous parents seem fiercely protective of their own agency and their children's agency.

Resiliency flows naturally from a respectful, loving, agentic approach and is a valuable trait given the historical traumas that Indigenous people have experienced (Pazderka et al., 2014). Building intrapersonal skills paves the way for developing a strong self-identity and cultural identity. Pueblo Indian scholar, Gregory Cajete (2000), describes self-identity among Indigenous peoples as 'finding one's face' which means finding out who you are and where you come from. This is evidenced in one participant's goal for her children to "incorporate a sense of understanding of who we are as a people and a connection to the land…to help reconnect to heritage and a grow sense of identity" (MM, Survey). As educators and caregivers, it is important to be cognizant of these complex historical and cultural contexts in our interactions with children and parents.

*Theme Three- Practice and Preserve Cultural Traditions*

Theme three, the most commonly cited theme in the data set, responds to the second research question by highlighting the critical role of learning, practicing, celebrating, and preserving cultural traditions, ceremonies, and cultural languages as well as taking pride in one's cultural roots. Activities such as smudging, attending powwows, feasts and sweats, and hunting were mentioned by many parents as important cultural activities to expose their children to. Some parents lamented that they did not have a strong understanding of their Indigenous cultural traditions but expressed a strong desire to learn and appreciated the Indigenous preschool's efforts to provide opportunities for this growth, both during preschool programming and through frequent community cultural events. For example, Figure 2 illustrates an Elder modelling Bannock making with a preschool parent at a weekend community event organized by the preschool staff.


*Figure 2.* Modelling Bannock Making (used with permission)

Theme three also included recognizing and living embodied knowledge and practices such as oral storytelling and nature/land-based learning. The powerful connection between land and culture (and language) cannot be underestimated in Indigenous ways of knowing and participants shared many ideas related to this connection. For example, CK commented, "I feel like children learn more in nature than they would in school. In school, you have to sit down and learn it, but in nature, they get to go look at lady bugs and talk to lady bugs" (Interview). Simpson (2014) describes the idea of "land as pedagogy" as learning *from* the land and *with* the land in the context of family, community, language, and relations, where "if you want to learn about something, you need to take your body onto the land...get involved and get invested" (p. 17-18). Researcher participant observation at the preschool revealed ample, daily outside play and programming where they observed and discussed animals and seasonal changes, examined tree bark and rings, picked berries, talked to trees, and categorized stones as just a few examples. Found nature items were frequently gathered and brought into the classroom to be used in games and art activities, such as tipis, drums, rattles, hoops, rain sticks, or dream catchers, where the oral cultural histories and significance were always explained to the children in ways they could

understand. Cultural teachings that come alongside doing cultural activities or exploring cultural artifacts help teachers maintain a spirit of *appreciation* versus *appropriation* (Madden, 2015). One study participant solidified this teaching when she wisely said, "there's no such thing as appropriation when there is an opportunity to educate" (MM, Interview).

Theme three was also about relationality through family and community ties, and the importance of building a strong sense of belonging. Family ties are the ties that bind. Extended family is traditionally very highly regarded, interconnected, and involved in an Indigenous child's life. 'Family' or kin includes the nuclear family, the extended family, and the community family, often connected by historical bands, tribes, treaties, or settlements that stretch (well) beyond blood relations (Muir & Bohr, 2019). One participant explained, "having that family tie…where it doesn't matter if you're an uncle, auntie, cousin, or nephew. We are all family, and we take care of each other" (CK, Interview). The wide definition of family and relations among Indigenous groups brings more opportunities for a network of meaningful relationships to form a supportive community around the child. As AM said, "Without the community, we wouldn't have anything to hold us together" (Interview).

Family, culture, and language are inextricably linked together. Participants often spoke of the importance of practicing their cultural traditions together with their families and building "strong cultural roots" (AW, Survey). AM explained, "I think [family] is what connects us to our culture. It gives you a baseline of culture" (Interview). MM connected this sense of belonging to cultural pride, "I think that is what Truth and Reconciliation is working towards is being able to give our differences a chance to shine...this is a great opportunity to celebrate [our cultures] ...be proud of who we are versus that fear of judgement" (Interview).

*Theme Four- Intergenerational Trauma*

Theme four, addressing the third research question, reflected personal, familial, and cultural challenges because of intergenerational trauma from Canada's devastating colonial history; a history marked by centuries of assimilationist policies, including Indigenous children being forcibly removed from their families, stripped of their culture and language, and subjected to abuse and neglect during the residential school era (TRC, 2015). These traumatic experiences continue to have lasting effects on Indigenous families and communities through what some refer to as blood memory (Simard & Blight, 2011). Indigenous Knowledge Holders often say that memory is in the blood and bone of their people and that cultural stories as well as trauma that were experienced by their ancestors, are not only passed on verbally but also through a kind of genetic memory or DNA (Simard & Blight, 2011). AW acknowledged the idea of blood memory: "the fear and the trauma…is deeper than just knowledge…it's just part of you, it's just who you are, who your background is, so it is hard to forget and push past it" (Interview). This is why hurtful and dismissive attitudes such as those in the expression, "Just get over it," can be very damaging to many Indigenous people.

Theme four also addressed mistrust in the education system stemming from fears of bullying, judging, and stereotyping, as well as biased curriculum and assessments. For example, AW shared, "I just fear the influence of other kids that can have a negative impact. I don't want anyone to dim [my daughter's] light through negative criticism and

bullying" (Interview). Some participants worried the teacher and school may not be sympathetic to troubled histories, such as CK who said, "When you don't know, you don't know" (Interview). Many participants hoped that their child's future teachers would be patient, gentle and knowledgeable of the troubled histories such as AM who suggested, "be gentle with them, be kind to them" and later added "...slow down and listen...rather than just assuming and judging" (Interview, p. 7 & 10). Educators can mediate and respect these cultural realities through building trust and strong teacher-child and teacher-family relationships early on. Meaningful relationships require educators to become aware of their own world view/culture through critical self-reflection and how these perspectives influence thoughts and actions. Strong home-school partnerships require educators to learn about the families, and the unique histories, cultural language, and traditions of the children they teach. It is important for schools and educators to provide ample space and flexibility for Indigenous parents and children to transition into the school routines and build child confidence and independence. Pushor (2015) describes this relationship building and learning as walking alongside children and families and adopting a position as a co-learner rather than an expert, being responsive and open rather than trying to control the situation and being an active listener (and observer) rather than one who dominates the narrative (Gillon & Macfarlane, 2017).

### *Study Recommendations*

Based on research findings, a comprehensive list of recommendations for supporting Indigenous language, literacy, and cultural learning are shared. Staying true to an Indigenous paradigm where the child is perceived as whole, capable, and unique and at the center of a broad ecology of Indigenous history, culture, family and community, the recommendations are nested within these contexts (see Figure 3).

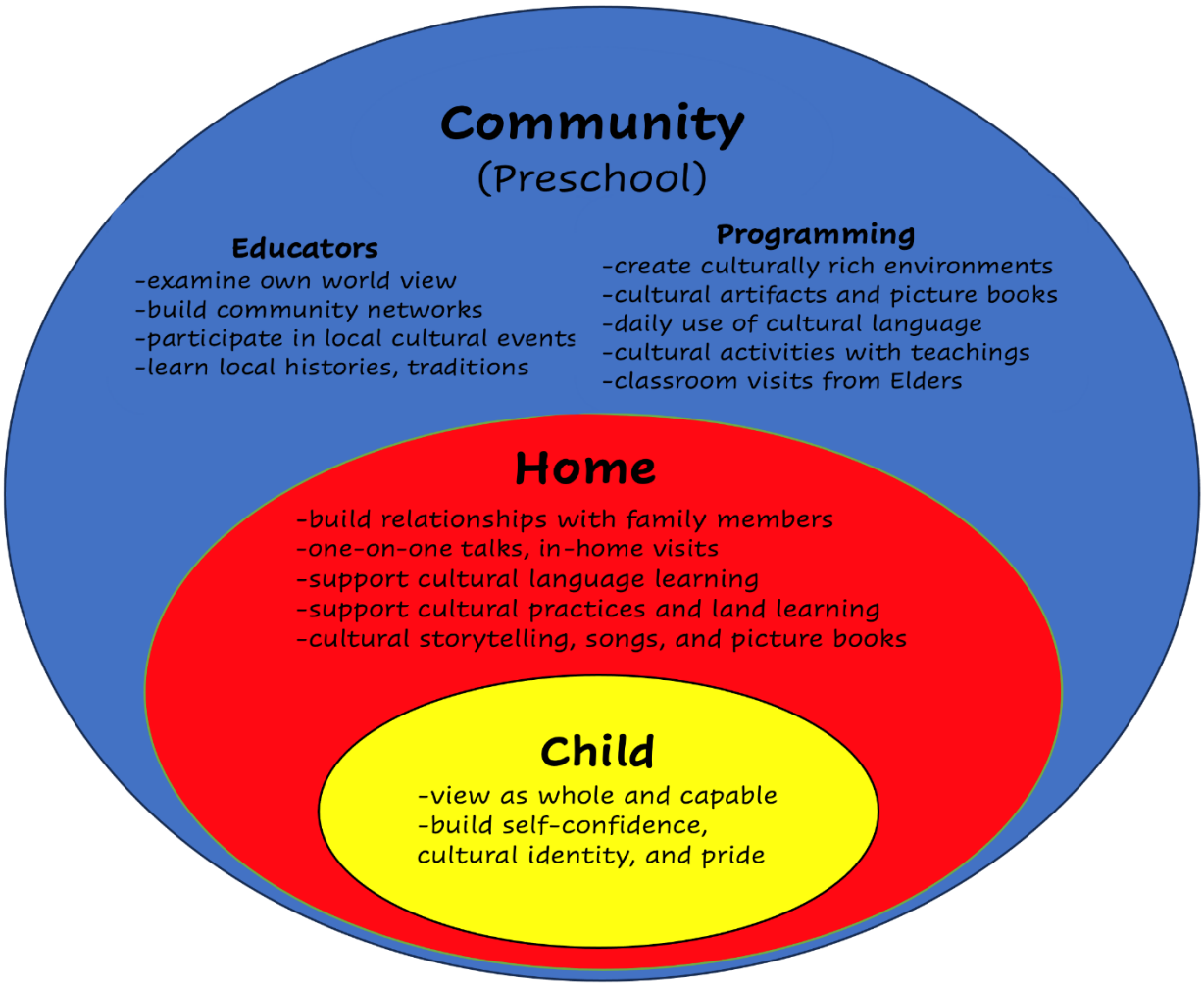


*Figure 3.* Recommendations for Supporting Indigenous Culture

1. *The Whole Child:* Educators view children as whole and capable and recognize each child's funds of knowledge including heritage language, land literacies, and other cultural knowledges/skills. Support children with kindness and generosity in building self-confidence and self-identity including knowledge of and pride in cultural heritage. In child interactions remember aspects of humility, less talk, and child agency and cognizance of the impacts of intergenerational trauma that children may carry with them. Children have ample opportunity to learn about, share, and practice cultural traditions and language.

2. *The Home Environment:* Educators make time to build meaningful, reciprocal relationships with (extended) family members and caregivers to help build confidence and further capacity to support early language and literacy development in English and cultural language(s). This may include in-home visits and periodic one-on-one conversations at school/care where educators walk alongside families and are cognizant of Indigenous histories which can be traumatic and unsettling. Support families in

attending local cultural celebrations, ceremonies, and events, as well as sharing traditional oral stories and songs alongside reading picture books with their children at home. Support families in co-learning and practicing their cultural language, focusing on key phrases and common words, as well as accessing digital language applications, dual language books and other culturally consistent materials that aid in language and cultural learning in the home, including outdoor land-based learning.

3. *The Community Environment (including preschool and care environments):* Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators build their own capacity for cultural sensitivity through community-based, culturally informed preparation. This begins with positioning oneself within one's own world view through critical self-reflection and an open, generous heart and mind to make room for different world views.

   Educators honour the importance of Indigenous relationality through building positive relationships with children, families, and the cultural community that is free of judgement/deficit thinking with space for a genuine sense of acceptance and belonging.

   Educators build a network of local cultural connections, which may include finding a key community contact, that keeps them informed about community events (e.g. powwows, feasts, beading lessons, ribbon skirt making, cultural language classes, information seminars, etc.) where they share these events with families and attend themselves, when possible, to gain personal experience and genuine appreciation for the culture. Educators learn about local history, cultural language, and traditions to build a foundation for culturally sensitive language and literacy programming.

   Educators create culturally rich learning environments including cultural wall displays, Indigenous-authored picture books/dual-language books, as well as authentic Indigenous artifacts to enhance dramatic play. Use cultural language words and phrases contextually in daily activities and share them with parents through memos or newsletters. Research local cultural art activities, games, and ample outdoor activities (literacies of the land) which accompany accurate teachings about Indigenous culture and history and are incorporated into everyday planning, not as an add-on or token. Extend invitations to local Elders, Knowledge Holders, Medicine People, artisans, musicians/dancers, parents, or grandparents to share expertise and knowledge in the classroom, being sure to follow local protocol (gifting) procedures.

## *Implications*

This study explored Indigenous perspectives regarding home language and literacy practices and highlighted the richness and diversity of Indigenous ways of knowing, how love, respect, generosity, humility, land, and agency shape their interactions with all living things. It also illuminated the incredible resilience and perseverance of Indigenous children, families, and communities in resisting colonialism over generations and keeping their language and culture vibrant. This study also contributed to understanding important considerations when engaging in community-based, reciprocal research with Indigenous communities as non-Indigenous researchers.

*Community Benefits of Research*

When engaging in community-embedded research, it is important that benefits flow directly back to the people and communities who have contributed to the research (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). Benefits to the study participants included an opportunity to reflect on their cultural identity and experience a renewed and strengthened pride in their heritage such as AW who said, "I enjoyed being part of this survey because it makes me wonder what more I can do for [my daughter] to have strong cultural roots and traditions/values.....thank you for the opportunity" (Survey). Community-level benefits included building capacity among the Preschool Advisory Circle in conducting collaborative research as well as a tangible benefit in the form of a collection of cultural picture books and an authentic child-sized cradle board and moss bag that were gifted to the preschool to enhance cultural dramatic play (see Figure 4). Carefully chosen picture books were purchased and gifted to each family at the preschool (see Figure 5).


*Figure 4.* Child-sized Moss Bag, Cradle Board, and Picture Book

*Figure 5.* Preschoolers Choose Picture Books to take Home (used with permission)

### *Limitations*

We acknowledge some key study limitations such as the generalizability of study findings beyond the geographical and cultural area where the study took place. While there is rich diversity among tribal practices, knowledge, beliefs, and language across the country (and the world), Indigenous people appear to share some commonalities in their worldviews where general transferability beyond the context of place or nation is reasonable (Kovach, 2009). Variations in coding frameworks and interpretations are inherent in qualitative research and may have influenced the trustworthiness of the findings, especially given the outsider stance of the researchers. The sample size could be expanded to further enrich the scope and depth of perspectives captured.

### *Further Research*

Further research is needed to continue exploring Indigenous perspectives about early language and literacy and child guidance practices to develop broader definitions that honour and embrace cultural values and beliefs among diverse Indigenous groups. This includes exploring ways to enhance cultural language learning, land-based learning, and cultural dramatic play in the home, school, and communities. More empirical research is needed which examines and challenges cultural biases and assumptions inherent in assessment/screening tools and interventions, incorporating recognition of cultural and linguistic funds of knowledge and authentic cultural contexts. Further research and policy creation must follow a decolonizing agenda based on equitable and reciprocal community-university-organization partnerships where all contributions are heard, valued, and considered and where the research results are written and presented in formats that are

accessible, relatable, and interpretable by all interested stakeholders at all levels, especially the community where the research originated (Smith, 2012).

### *A Way Forward*

It is vital that we work together to cast a wider light which values and validates Indigenous ways of knowing to further understanding and avoid misconceptions, deficit thinking and devaluing of Indigenous ways of knowing. As cultural outsiders, we must strive to understand our precarious role, which is often wrought with colonial baggage and invisible privilege and that we proceed with humility, respect, generosity, and gratitude. These situations must be approached with openness and humility, and we must all find the courage to 'get comfortable with being uncomfortable' and risk vulnerability. It is so important to notice, to listen, to reflect, to put relationships first, and to make space for other ways of viewing the world. Instead of being one who directs and determines, we need to move into positions where we ask and listen (Bjartveit & Kinzel, 2019). On our shared journey to reconciliation, we must continue to co-research, educate, understand, and celebrate our differences, where celebration is 'a way of spreading the light around.'

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