

**Beyond Strategies: Infusing Empathy and Indigenous Approaches in the
Elementary Classroom**

By

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Abstract

This study examines fostering empathy and Indigenous perspectives in the classroom and highlights the natural connections and applications that occur between these approaches. The purpose of this research is to provide insight and inspiration to educators who wish to foster empathy in their classroom and are looking to naturally infuse and integrate Indigenous perspectives in a deep and meaningful way into their teaching. This is a qualitative research project whereby a literature review and interviews were conducted to answer the question: What can we learn from the personal stories of elementary teachers who purposely create opportunities for empathy and Indigenous approaches? Through their personal teaching experiences, and through a review of literature, this research project looks at how educators can move beyond teaching strategies to infuse empathy and Indigenous perspectives effectively in their classrooms.

Keywords: empathy, Indigenous, Aboriginal, Native, elementary, infuse

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Beyond Strategies: Infusing Empathy and Indigenous Approaches in the Elementary Classroom

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Research Study

Connecting with and incorporating Indigenous perspectives in a deep and meaningful way in classrooms is central to the pedagogy of some teachers. However, not all teachers take a holistic approach to their teaching practices. Incorporating teaching strategies that use, for example, beads, blankets, art, talking sticks and circles into course studies, as a way to bring Indigenous perspectives into the classroom, does not necessarily provide opportunities for deep and meaningful connections for students. This study looks into what can occur when teachers infuse teaching strategies that focus more fully on Indigenous and empathetic approaches. I will argue that when educators begin to see teaching strategies as connected to, and part of a greater whole, they will experience a much more holistic understanding of themselves, their students and the world.

Holistic education is based on the premise that “each person finds identity, meaning, and purpose in life through connections to the community, to the natural world, and to humanitarian values such as compassion and peace” (1997, Miller). Aikenhead and Mitchell note the holistic lens Indigenous peoples use in viewing their world and comments on their approaches to science: “the parts of nature have meaning only in terms of their interrelationships with the whole of nature” (2011, Aikenhead & Mitchell, p. 77). An example would be looking at a deer in its natural settings to understand and learn what it eats as opposed to dissecting it and solely looking at the contents of its stomach to gain understanding. What it eats is more fully understood when it can be examined as a whole. “First Nations people view themselves not as custodians, stewards or having

dominion over the Earth, but as an integrated part in the family of the Earth” (2007, CCL, p. 2 as cited in Kulnieks, 2013, p. 104). Similarly, the use of strategies can become more meaningful if and when we choose to see them as interconnected to ourselves, others and the world around us. Striving to be empathetic teachers by taking on the thoughts and perspectives of others will change the way we teach and incorporating Indigenous perspectives can in turn change the way we connect and make meaning through our pedagogy. Holistic and Indigenous views lend most naturally to empathy; seeing ourselves as integrated wholes, and not as separate from our peers or world are at the root of these approaches. We cannot fully comprehend each other if we do not see ourselves as interconnected. By grounding my research in what is already known about empathy and Indigenous approaches I will attempt to answer: What can we learn from the personal stories of elementary teachers who purposely create opportunities for empathy through Indigenous approaches? And, how can we move beyond isolated teaching strategies to infuse empathy and Indigenous approaches effectively in the classroom?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose for this research is to tell the personal stories of exemplary teachers who incorporate Indigenous methods to teach and foster empathy. I hope to shed some light on how they developed and continue to develop their approach and to highlight and document the best practices of these teachers to be shared with their peers, Canadian educators. The implications of my research will be to provide insights to educators who are new to Indigenous perspectives and are looking to integrate this into their pedagogy. My hope is that this study will also empower non-Aboriginal teachers to incorporate Indigenous perspectives in their classroom. I anticipate that empathy can be yet another

avenue and entrance point for teachers to incorporate and infuse Indigenous teachings into their classroom.

Research Topic/Questions

The principal question that I will be addressing in my research is: What can we learn from the personal stories of elementary teachers who purposely incorporate and infuse empathy and Indigenous approaches in their classroom? In addition I will also be addressing the question: how can we move beyond strategies and infuse empathy and Indigenous approaches effectively in the classroom?

Background of the Researcher

As a future elementary school teacher I find it difficult to know how to truly and effectively prepare my students for a world in which education and technology is changing at such a rapid pace. By the time my students have moved on to high school and the workplace, the world will be an immensely different place. However, what I feel most passionate about and worth investing in, is fostering empathy in and among my students. No matter where the world takes us, my hope is that my students will be community members that can deeply connect with each other and our world, as they will be aware and sensitive to the feelings, thoughts and experiences around them. I have been involved with teaching and teaching related activities for 15 years in different parts of Ontario, Quebec, overseas to Banaue, Philippines and two years in Bangkok, Thailand. Reflecting back on these various teaching and volunteer experiences, I can see how empathy has or could have played an integral role in my classroom teachings. As a Canadian-born, Caucasian female, I believe that I am part of the majority of elementary teachers in Canada. However, my experiences both in Canada and overseas have led me to be a

strong advocate of utilizing multiple perspectives and approaches within my classroom. Learning about Indigenous approaches in the first year of my teacher education program here at OISE/UT has inspired and broadened my view of our world. The Indigenous approaches have led me to view teaching through this lens, as I believe it lends itself so naturally to the teachings of empathy.

Overview

Chapter 1 includes the introduction and purpose of the study, the research questions, as well as how I came to be involved in this topic and study. Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature that focuses on both definitions and studies of empathy and Indigenous approaches to education. Chapter 3 provides the methodology and procedure that will be used in this study, including information about the sample participants and data collection instruments. In Chapter 4 the findings from the interviews are divided into four themes that all three participants shared. While the four themes needed to be isolated for the purposes of the paper, they in fact are all interconnected to each other. This is central to this study - the ways in which everything interconnects. A discussion of the findings can be found in Chapter 5 as well as implications for further studies. References and a list of appendixes follow at the end.

Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Empathy

There are many definitions for the word empathy. For the purposes of this research paper we will utilize the following definitions from the Oxford Dictionary: empathy is defined as “the power of projecting one’s personality into (and so fully comprehending) the object of contemplation” or “the ability to understand and share the feelings of another” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2013). The latter resonates with the focus of this research study on empathy as being fostered in an elementary classroom. Hoyt provides an alternative definition as follows: “empathy is the ability to interpret signals of distress or pleasure with effortful control (as cited in Boyer, 2010, p. 13). To understand and share another’s feelings, one must first become self-aware. Self-awareness is one of the first steps to becoming empathetic. Miller (1999) states that students should connect with their deep sense of self, which he argues is the source of their wisdom and compassion. As teachers, we need to nurture this deeper sense of self in our students. As an Ontario Ministry of Education document (2008) states, “quality education includes education of the heart as well as the mind” (Finding Common Ground, p. 2). It goes on to say that we need to prepare our students to be citizens who have empathy and respect for others in our increasingly diverse communities (FCG, 2008.) Furthermore this ministry document states that qualities such as empathy “are best nurtured through relationships that cross the lines that often divide people in our society” (FCG, 2008, p. 17). The Ontario Curriculum for Social Studies (2013) also has empathy as a central attribute in its Citizenship Education Framework (p. 10). Inclusiveness, equity, empathy and interconnectedness are just some of the key terms used in this education framework. One

of key phrases at the core of the “Attributes” section of the framework is that students should “demonstrate self-respect, as well as respect and empathy for others” (Ontario Curriculum, Social Studies 2013, p. 10). Parents and/or educators may question the relevance of empathy and the other attributes listed in this framework, however, “the combination of the citizenship education framework and the knowledge and skills in the curriculum expectations brings citizenship education to life, not only in social studies, history, and geography, but in many other subjects as well” (Ontario Curriculum, Social Studies 2013, p. 10). Empathy is an attribute that could and should be nurtured in the classroom. It is considered a 21st Century skill and a report by Michael Fullan (2013), Special Advisor to the Premier of Ontario, affirms this as empathy appears in two of his six key qualities for 21st Century skills in Ontario education – Character Education and Collaboration (2013, Fullan, p. 8,9). Some educators argue, “empathy is the most important of skills we should be imparting to students as we prepare them for life and work in the 21st century” (2010, McKenzie, para. 1). It does not require us to give up our own perspectives but rather to integrate others’ perspectives with our own (2013, McKenzie, para. 2). Before empathy can be fostered among students– it must start with the teacher.

Empathetic Teachers

Boyer (2010) comments that “Literature indicates that an ethos of caring deeply and empathically about children and their welfare has been identified as being at the heart of purposeful teaching, vital to personal happiness and daily attitude renewal, and essential to inspiring children to care about their own learning” (p. 313). As an educator I feel this resonates deeply with me – the fact that at the heart of purposeful teaching is

caring deeply and empathetically about children. I believe empathy starts with the teacher. Pre-service education allows opportunities to reflect often and deeply on teaching practices and this often brings thinking to the feelings and perspectives of our students (Boyer, 2010). I believe the best teachers are those that try to understand their students beyond the classroom walls and see that their students are people who bring different strengths and backgrounds into the class. Boyer argues that as teachers we need to question how our responses and actions affect other human beings (2010). I believe if we practice this we will be able to foster this approach in our students as well. Sumara sums up this position when he argues, “good teachers understand that they are not just teaching students, nor are they merely teaching subject matter. Instead, they are helping to create conditions for noticing, making and using knowledge that profoundly affect how learners and teachers identify themselves and one another” (Sumara 2002 as cited in Boyer, 2010, p. 320). When we notice different things about our students from a distance, and then move toward, “walking in their shoes,” it is like “feeling the metaphorical pebbles in their lives” (2010, Boyer, 2010, p. 320). As teachers we can read, attend lectures and analyze case studies, but in order to encourage the development of empathy in our students, and ourselves, Cruz (2005) argues that we need to engage in hands-on, experiential learning (p. 43). McKenzie (2010) states that “empathy is not something we teach, it is something we instill. This can be done “by modeling, coaching, facilitating, moderating and promoting it across all areas of the curriculum” (para. 9). Holistic approaches, like spreading an idea across all areas of the curriculum, are what I believe to be the best ways to engage and experience life and empathetic learning.

Indigenous approaches to education are holistic in their nature, hence a great pedagogical lens to view empathetic approaches from.

Indigenous Education

Indigenous education and learning occurs mainly through observation, doing and “interacting over long periods of time with knowledgeable Elders and the natural environment” (P. Bates, P., Chiba, M., Kube, S., & Nakashima, D. 2009, p. 6). P. Bates et al note that the learning process is so subtle and unobtrusive that even the learners themselves do not recognize it as learning (2009). This is a major difference when compared to Western ideas of education which leans towards learning through instruction, reading and by retaining abstract knowledge which can later be applied in real-world situations (P. Bates et al, 2009). Dr. Nicole Bell, Professor of Education at Trent University and Consultant to the Deepening Knowledge Project at OISE, identifies six pedagogies as Indigenous: metaphor, storytelling, dreaming, circularity, starting with self, role playing and expert groups (Bell, 2013, Deepening Knowledge Project/OISE). Most of these are very familiar to educators as they are pedagogies that are practiced on an ongoing basis in the classroom. Identifying them as Indigenous can and should assist educators to see how natural it is to make the appropriate connections to Aboriginal perspectives in their classroom. I believe that the Indigenous approach to education brings out strong lessons of empathy in that the constant interaction with different members of the community and the natural environment allows learners to see how they are connected to others in the community and the natural world. Aikenhead and Mitchell note the holistic lens Indigenous peoples use in viewing their world and comments on their approaches to science: “the parts of nature have meaning only in terms of their

interrelationships with the whole of nature” (Aikenhead, Mitchell, 2011). Being aware of the relationships amongst their community and nature helps students see where they are in the world (self-awareness) and how they are connected to the earth as whole. An example of seeing how we are connected can be viewed in the justice system in some Aboriginal cultures. Baskin notes that the judicial system is focused on restoring peace and balance within the community (Baskin, 2002). The offended and the offender sit together in a circle and reconcile with each other. They voice how they feel about what has happened and both parties try to understand the responsibility they have in restoring what has been broken (Baskin, 2002). Understanding the position of the offender points clearly to empathy – thus trying to understand the thoughts and feelings of another. We can learn many things from Indigenous approaches to empathy.

Native Spirituality

Further to the educational approaches from an Indigenous perspective mentioned above, I also wanted to draw from some of the beliefs and practices that come from Native American Spirituality. The book, “The Sacred Tree” was created by the Four Worlds Development Project, a native American inter-tribal group, “as a handbook of Native Spirituality for Indigenous peoples all over the Americas and the world” (Lane, P. Jr., Bopp, J., Bopp, M., Brown, L., & Elders, 1989). One of the beliefs held in terms of “wholeness” is that “all things are interrelated. Everything in the universe is a part of a single whole. Everything is connected in some way to everything else. It is therefore possible to understand something only if we can understand how it is connected to everything else” (Lane, P. et al, 1989, p. 26). When we are empathetic and take on the thoughts and feelings of another, we must first connect within ourselves, which will lead

to seeing how we are connected to everything. Once we see this relationship, I believe we are better able to understand the thoughts and feelings of the person or thing we are trying to connect with. The medicine wheel was mentioned by two of the three participants in this study. The medicine wheel is “an ancient and powerful symbol of the Universe. It is a silent teacher of the realities of things. It shows the many different ways in which all things are interconnected. Beyond that, it [medicine wheel] shows not only things that are, but also things that could be” (Lane, P. et al, 1989, p. 32). It is usually shown as a circle with four equal sections. Each section is full of significance and meaning. The viewer is encouraged to view themselves as being in the center – not assigning themselves to one of the four sections – but seeing themselves as drawing from all four parts of the medicine wheel. This is key to understanding some of the statements made by the participants in this study. Each person who looks at a medicine wheel will see things in a slightly different way. This is because it is believed that the “Creator has made each of us to be a unique human being, and given to each of us a special combination of gifts to be used to further develop ourselves and to serve others”(Lane, P. et al, 1989, p. 35). Further to this, it is believed that “no two people will see exactly the same things when they look deeply into the mirror of the medicine wheel. Yet everyone who looks deeply will see the tree of their unique lives with its roots buried deep in the soil of universal truths” (Lane, P. et al, 1989, p. 35). These beliefs and perspectives resonate with the three participants and the stories they share. It is important to have at least a basic understanding of some of the approaches and beliefs in Native culture before moving further into this study.

Non-Aboriginals Teaching Aboriginal Perspectives

Dr. John (Jack) P. Miller, Professor of holistic education and spirituality in education at OISE/UT, believes that one of the best ways to foster earth connection is to read Indigenous peoples' literature (Miller, 1999). He writes, "once, when visiting a Catholic elementary school, I observed a classroom of students sitting in a circle. In the center was a copy of the Bible and a book entitled *Earth Prayers*, which contains different statements on the earth, including those by native peoples" (Miller, 1999). Sitting in a circle, where everyone can see each other and is "equal" is one of many Indigenous approaches classroom teachers use everyday without knowing its origin. Cruz (2005) mentions that many educators have turned to multicultural education because of its inclusive curriculum and uses it as a way to prepare future teachers to be able to effectively teach their culturally pluralistic classrooms. An assistant Aboriginal Professor at OISE/UT, Jean-Paul Restoule (2011) states:

We cannot achieve our goals alone. We need non-Aboriginal people to understand our shared histories, our perspectives, our visions and our goals, and to participate in achieving them together. This means we need non-Aboriginal teachers respecting and using Indigenous perspectives in our classrooms.

Many teachers have a fear when it comes to teaching from another perspective other than what is their own. He says he has encountered two types of resistance: "the fear of appropriation and a lack of confidence" (Restoule, 2011). He suggests the best way to approach this is to build relationships with Aboriginal people since speaking *with* and not *for* is a way to defuse the appropriation issue (2011, Restoule). Building and maintaining relationships with Aboriginal peoples "can lead to meaningful classroom activities and deep friendships" (Restoule, 2011). When working in a relationship like this, one cannot help but see themselves in another person's shoes. Learning different perspectives is one

of the many ways to foster empathy in your classroom. You do not have to be an expert. Instead of googling information you do not know, Restoule suggests that teachers develop strong relationships with community members (Restoule, 2011). Some of these community members are Elders, Knowledge Holders, Language Keepers, Council Members and Indigenous Historians. The Indigenous way of seeing ourselves as connected as a whole and not individually can allow for many classroom activities, discussions and experiences towards empathetic teaching.

Holistic Education

Indigenous approaches, as we have seen, are holistic in nature. This leads to another type of education - Holistic education. Ron Miller, one of the leading pioneers in the field of holistic education, states it is based on the premise that “each person finds identity, meaning, and purpose in life through connections to the community, to the natural world, and to humanitarian values such as compassion and peace” (Miller, 1997). Robin Ann Martin describes this further by stating, “At its most general level, what distinguishes holistic education from other forms of education are its goals, its attention to experiential learning, and the significance that it places on relationships and primary human values within the learning environment.” (Martin, 2000). Empathy is seen clearly in this approach as connections to school subjects, members of the school and to self are very much reflected in holistic learning (Miller, 1999). Seeing yourself as connected to “the whole” resonates strongly with Indigenous and Holistic education and philosophy. Bates et al advocates that taking a holistic approach and drawing on Indigenous methods is one of the most successful models. (Bates et al, 2009,p. 27). Seeing yourself as a part of “the whole” is one of the most natural ways to becoming empathetic.

Based on these insights and observations from the above literature, we will continue to explore the questions: What can we learn from the personal stories of elementary teachers who purposely incorporate and infuse empathy and Indigenous approaches in their classroom? How can we move beyond strategies and infuse empathy and Indigenous approaches effectively in the classroom?

Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY

Procedure

The nature of this research is qualitative in nature and includes a literature review that examines such terms as “empathy”, “Indigenous” and “Holistic” as they pertain to education. I acquired three participants to participate in this study and conducted face-to-face interviews with all three of them. All three participants are elementary teachers who currently teach in Canada – two from Toronto, Ontario and one near Quesnel, British Columbia. The style and approach of this qualitative will be narrative as I wish to capture and share the personal experiences of all three Canadian teachers.

Instruments of Data Collection:

Interviews are one of the more popular areas of interest in qualitative research (Turner, 2010). As my hope was to approach this qualitative research study by implementing a narrative methodology, interviews provided the best avenue to obtain “in-depth information pertaining to participants’ experiences and viewpoints” (Turner, 2010, 754). Informal interviews of about 10-15 questions in about thirty to eighty minutes were conducted with each of the three participating teachers. Some examples of interview questions were:

1. Do you feel that there is a strong connection between the concept of empathy and Indigenous knowledges? If yes, why?
2.
 - a) What in your career has led you to fostering empathy in your classroom?
 - b) What in your career has led you to incorporating Indigenous knowledges in your classroom and teachings?
3.
 - a) What, if anything, has surprised you about your students’ responses in regards to empathy?

b) What, if anything, has surprised you about your students' responses in regards to Indigenous knowledges?

A full list of interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

Participants

I researched this topic in a Canadian context by interviewing three elementary teachers: one from British Columbia and two from Ontario. Between the three participants, two are male, one is female and one is Aboriginal and two are Caucasian.

The following criteria was used in selecting the participants. They must:

1. Be currently teaching or have taught in Canada for at least four years;
2. Value empathy and see it as one of their main teaching focuses;
3. Incorporate Indigenous knowledges in their class in a consistent manner.

The reason I wanted the participants to be practicing teaching in Canada was because more Canadian-based literature is needed in education research. Almost all the current research I came across was American-based and it was important to me to find and highlight Canadian teaching practices in order to share ideas in a Canadian context. I also wanted to focus on the story of Non-Aboriginal teachers as I wanted to highlight how Indigenous practices can be utilized by anyone – not just Aboriginal teachers. Since this research project is to highlight the best practices of teaching empathy and Indigenous knowledges, I wanted each participant to either acknowledge his or herself, or be known by others, as being teachers that purposely fostered empathy and Indigenous approaches in a consistent manner in their classrooms.

Data Collection and Analysis

The three interviews conducted were recorded with consent from the participants. These audio recordings were transcribed and I began the analysis by reading and rereading the transcribed interview data. Key phrases and words were highlighted and noted along the margins. I focused on the ways in which the two key words “empathy”, and “Indigenous” were discussed and also on the experiences and beliefs they held. The interviews were organized into these four findings: 1) an importance placed on the practice of creating deep, meaningful connections and relationships with ourselves and others; 2) opportunities for meaningful connections were both sought after and encouraged; 3) empathetic and Indigenous knowledges and approaches were seen as daily and foundational practices, not add-ons; 4) teachers who incorporate empathy and Indigenous approaches note that it came naturally to their pedagogy because it was a part of who they were as people.

Each of the participants responses were then colour-coded to see where common themes appeared and to make it easier to see which participant stated what once their insights were copied and pasted under the four key findings.

Ethical Review Procedures

For this research paper we were assigned Faculty Supervisor who worked one-on-one with us in our second year as we researched and developed our thesis. As Master of Teaching (MT) students, we are approved by the Research Ethics Board (REB) to conduct and follow through with our research. Together with the CTL7006: Reflective Teaching and Research and CTL7015: From Student to Professional courses I was enrolled in, the assistance of Faculty and my Research Supervisor at OISE/UT and being

accountable to the REB, I followed the ethical review approval procedures for the Master of Teaching program, University of Toronto. Prior to the interview, I received email consent from the participants and then sent the participants a consent form (see Appendix B). I made myself available by email in case the participants had any questions or concerns regarding the consent form. We chose a date for the interview to take place and I met with them at the location that suited them best. Two of the interviews took place inside their classrooms and one interview was recorded over Skype. The recorded sessions will be deleted once transcribed and the transcribed data will be kept protected on my personal computer. My participants will have access to the findings I gathered from their interviews and will be sent the final copy. Their names and schools will remain anonymous throughout the entire research process and final submission.

Limitations

There are two main limitations to this research study: small sample size and lack of student perspective. While this research study aims to share the Indigenous and empathetic approaches different Canadian teachers implement in their classroom – only three Canadian teachers participated in this study as per the Master of Teaching Research Project guidelines. Another limitation is the lack of student perspective. The Master of Teaching program at the University of Toronto requires students to complete their research study by conducting face-to-face interviews with teachers and other educators but does not allow observations or interactions with students. This constraint allows for only a teacher's perspective thus the voice of the student is not heard. However, further research in this topic could and should include a student's perspective and experiences to

better reflect the impact of participating in class activities that foster empathy and Indigenous approaches.

Chapter 4: FINDINGS

Introduction to Findings

The findings collected for this study have emerged from the three interviews that were conducted for this study with experienced teaching professionals. All three participants incorporate empathetic and Indigenous practices in their classroom and were willing to speak genuinely about their experiences. Provisions have been taken to ensure that participants remain anonymous. As a result, participants have been given pseudonyms and the names of institutions have been left out. This chapter will provide a thorough overview of the data that I have collected as a result of the three interviews. These interviews were central to the study findings because they provide insight to the personal experiences of practicing Canadian teachers. I will begin with a brief explanation of the participants and then discuss the key findings of my research.

Background Information on Participants

Three elementary teachers in Canada were selected to take part in the interviews. Two are non-Aboriginal and one is Aboriginal. One teacher is from British Columbia and two teachers are from Ontario. The elementary teacher from British Columbia is a Caucasian male who teaches Grades 2 to 6 at a rural school and who has expressed that empathy is at the heart of his philosophy of teaching. Through the physical set up of his classroom to the ways he models and implements his lessons— empathy is a daily focus. He teaches a mainly Aboriginal student population and incorporates Indigenous knowledges and practices daily. The pseudonym I will be using for him is “Luke.”

One of the elementary teachers from Ontario is a Caucasian female who has taught Kindergarten to Grade 4 students at an urban school in Toronto. She expressed

that empathy is one of the main focuses of the school. Through Indigenous stories, other holistic practices and guests, empathy is modeled and implemented as a main focus in her class and school. Indigenous knowledges are also infused into her daily practice. The pseudonym I will be using for her is “River”.

The third interviewee is an Aboriginal male elementary teacher here in Toronto who teaches Grades 5 to Grade 8 at an urban school with a large population of Aboriginal students. He infuses Indigenous knowledges in everything he does and sees empathy as an important piece in regards to connection in the classroom. The pseudonym I will be using for him is “Peter.”

All three participants have had experience incorporating empathetic and Indigenous approaches in their classrooms. The key findings shared in my research will reflect themes that have been extracted from the responses provided by my participants.

Key Findings

After close analysis of my three interview transcriptions, I was able to identify four key themes. Despite the findings being divided into four themes, they are very much intertwined and connected to each other. For the purposes of this research project, they will be discussed separately. The central findings will be discussed in the following chapter as a way of sharing the insights, stories, and experiences as they reflect empathetic and Indigenous approaches in the classroom. The two approaches will be discussed together as well as separately throughout the findings as they constantly intersect with each other. The three teachers shared these four common beliefs when it came to empathetic and Indigenous approaches:

- 1) An importance placed on the practice of creating deep, meaningful connections and relationships with ourselves and others;
- 2) Opportunities for meaningful connections were both sought after and encouraged;
- 3) Empathetic and Indigenous Knowledges and Approaches were seen as daily and foundational practices, not add-ons;
- 4) Teachers who incorporate empathy and Indigenous approaches note that it came naturally to their pedagogy because it was a part of who they were as people.

Finding #1: An importance placed on the practice of creating deep, meaningful connections and relationships with ourselves and others

All three participants placed importance on deep, meaningful connections being made in their classrooms and this was clearly shown in the examples of their practice as well as in their discussions in the interview. All three made a distinction between connecting to oneself and connecting to others. We will explore these two distinctions below.

Connection to Self. As mentioned earlier in Chapter 2, Miller states that we must first become aware of our self before we can connect to and with others. He goes on to say that teachers need to nurture a deep sense of self within their students, as he believes it is the source of both their wisdom and compassion. All three participants echoed similar sentiments to Miller and each one can speak to Miller's comments quite pointedly.

Peter commented that knowing yourself is a very Aboriginal approach to learning. He observed that people often think Aboriginal education is about beading and blankets, but really, it is about knowing yourself, "I always stress the fact about knowing yourself."

He offered an example of what Aboriginal education could look like. He explained, for example, that it could be having a Muslim student in your class and encouraging that student to know as much about themselves as a Muslim-- and embracing themselves as much as possible. "That's what Aboriginal education is," he asserted. Again, if we can change our perspectives on what Aboriginal education and Indigenous approaches is and can look like, we move away from becoming fixated on things like "beading and blankets" as he mentions. Both Luke and Peter teach to a majority of Aboriginal students and they found that encouraging their students to connect to themselves and their culture is a rewarding experience. Peter states:

The most rewarding thing has been to watch my students grow and to watch them advocate for themselves and to become more confident and become loving of their culture, just being, embracing everything it is about being Aboriginal and really living it and not just coming to learn it but taking what I teach them and incorporating it in everything that they do.

Luke also speaks to this when he expresses:

I think with Indigenous Knowledges and teachings, it's both empowering the students to be able to carry their culture on and be able to add to their culture. In order to do that kids kinda need to be activated learners and have pride and confidence in themselves and where they come from instead of feeling shame and guilt and a lot of things that do come with the package of where we are at presently.

River repeatedly mentioned in her interview that in order to connect with other people, children had to first connect with themselves. She argues that "...getting them to know how they feel and recognizing their experience, and understanding it from that point of view" is the first step before they can understand someone else's point of view. In the context of empathy, River talks about how free play and being outdoors allows for openness and freedom and how it:

allows for children to become leaders or feel what they have to offer and to express and I think that's part of them getting to know themselves and what they have to offer in the world. I think that's an important part.... I think it has to do with empathy because if you know what you have to offer then you can understand another person who has something to offer.

She goes on to describe that we need to:

get children to first of all be empathetic to themselves, that's the first thing, then to understand their own feelings of if they are angry, to understand why they are angry. Because you can't go anywhere with the child unless you have the system to get children to own and understand and take responsibility for their behaviours.

Luke affirms the idea of connecting to yourself first and furthers River's point of knowing your emotions when he comments:

specifically working with students to give them tools on how to self-regulate their emotions and their anxiety, you know, another piece of empathy is...you have to know yourself and you have to be able to handle yourself in a lot of ways and be confident enough before you can really show empathy to other people.

Not only do students need to connect with themselves, Luke notes that we as teachers need to connect with ourselves as well. It helps us to be aware of our perspectives and enables us to be more able and willing to connect with others, but it is a great model for the students to see. He offers a great personal example of this:

[When I am] having a crummy day, letting people know that and asking them the same, if you're having a crummy day, tell us, 'cause you know if you're exhausted, let us know. We can get up and get a bed for you, you don't have a lunch, remember we're here to help you, if you need to just play with lego in the corner that's what you're here to do today, that's ok. But, giving kids an opportunity to be safe, I think lends itself to feeling empathy to other people and that has worked well, just being natural, being ourselves and consistency.

Connection to Others. After a personal connection is made, the three participants shared the belief that students can then move forward in making and creating deep connections and relationships with those around them. In the classroom, these

connections and relationships can be seen amongst both students and teachers. Luke shared about his experience teaching overseas and how the teachers who were able to be empathetic and take on the thoughts and feelings of those around them excelled, and the ones who did not – did not last very long. He shared that he:

watched people come and go and some people, worked to honour culture there, and I watched their success and their relationship with people and how they were received and how their teachings were received, it worked! And I watched people that went over there and held on as tight as they could to their system of beliefs and their culture and their views to budge, and they generally didn't last very long which was interesting.

What worked for the successful teachers was that they made the effort to learn from and take on the perspectives from another people and cultures. Luke found that making yourself available to others is an exceptional way to form meaningful relations. One of Luke's final statements and words of advice to teachers was to be:

real with people, being honest with people and putting other people ahead of yourself, taking that time to be empathetic to yourself everyday, making that more of a priority over photocopying, or marking. Making yourself available everyday goes a long way for people in their lives.

Peter and Luke both mentioned how the Aboriginal students in their class empathized with other people in the world who suffered similar situations. Luke speaks to:

letting kids discover that they're not the only ones, because some kids out here don't get that part, that there are a variety of cultures all over the world that lots of people have done through challenges and that surprises a lot of them. A lot of kids just come here thinking, it's just me, that's it, I'm the only one that's like this.

There is power in making a connection with someone else or another people group and noticing that there are similarities. It allows one to view the world through another perspective as it allows a connection to be made on a similar level. Peter found his

students to be empathetic to the same kind of people Luke mentioned. Peter feels his students are empathetic to people who are:

suffering the same kind of you know, colonization, or whatever you know something where there are displaced or whatever, they'll be more empathetic to those group of people if it's similar to what their group of people had gone through, then they will feel very empathetic for those people.

He mentioned that there was little to no empathy in his students, however once a connection was made to someone else, or another people group, it assisted in a greater sense of empathy in the students. Peter explained that his students continue to have a difficult time connecting with the staff from the school where he currently teaches as they continue to have little to no empathy for the teachers who are not Aboriginal. But being able to connect with and see themselves in other people around them is definitely a positive start.

River adds to the conversation of effectively connecting to others by talking about arriving at the root of why a child behaves in a certain way. She continually attempts to understand the reasons behind a child's actions. For example she says:

instead of a child saying "he hit me, she hit me" and I know there's kind of a dynamic, I [say] "were you leaving her out?" ... "did you leave this child out?" Because I think that's the root of it, of her hitting you." So it's kind of understanding where the kids are coming from too.

Luke furthers this idea when he shares that when his students "act the way they do and they're screaming and they throw their desk across the room" - he has to filter it. He comments that he has to remember the circumstances that surround their behavior. . He does not have to go home with them at the end of the day. He believes that is "pure inspiration" for empathy for him, knowing what some of his students have to deal with in their home life, he cannot help but feel and act empathetic to them when they arrive to

school the next day. He mentions that if he was in a different community, one where he and his students could go unnoticed, it would be different. But the community is small and he makes the effort to be in it and meet with people. He explains that further by saying, “I can see where my kids come from every day and it’s in my face. It’s absolutely easy for me to [have empathy].”

As mentioned previously, these three teachers clearly exude a strong belief in fostering meaningful connections and relationships between their students. All three spoke very confidently and shared their awareness that by first fostering empathy in ourselves, we can then be empathetic to those around us. These observations and stories from the teachers come from them seeing opportunities to make connection in their everyday experiences. All three teachers seek out and create meaningful opportunities for moments of empathy to take place. This leads to my next finding.

Finding #2: Opportunities for meaningful connections were both sought after and encouraged

Opportunities to foster empathy and incorporate Indigenous knowledges were created and encouraged through outdoor experiences, sharing circles, engaging in discussions and other practices to further the practice of making deep and meaningful connections.

In Class. All three teachers commented on opportunities that surfaced quite naturally inside the classroom that allowed for empathetic and Indigenous approaches to teaching.

For Peter, empathy surfaces in his practice almost daily through readings, discussions and real life. He indicates that they “do a lot of readings about residential

schools and we do a lot of talking and discussion.” While he does not purposely plan for the discussion or reading to lead to sharing about or experiencing empathy, he is open to these opportunities. He further explains this below:

But again though, these things aren’t specific to empathy where I said oh, I went to the library and said “oh, what are the empathy books? I’m going to read them to my kids this month.” That why I was saying it’s like an ongoing thing, those resources come from everything, come from situations that are happening in the classroom, it can happen with something that happened with one of their teachers from their other classrooms you know, and through discussion. So it comes up anywhere. But most of the time I think it would be from real experiences that we talk about empathy.

Luke identifies everyday experiences in his class such as “ one-on-one with children...spending a lot of time in circles, a lot of time with food, all the things that help the medicine go down.” He sees and creates opportunities for empathy throughout the various activities of the day. He mentions that at lunchtime, the students often observe another student without a lunch and share without being asked or told – they are aware of what it is like to arrive to school without a lunch. Moments like this are seen as opportunities to discuss and talk about empathy. He also mentions that it is very much a part of their Aboriginal culture; to share food when someone needs it.

In River’s class, both empathy and Indigenous teachings immerge from stories. She asserts, “we do a lot of storytelling...we tell stories every day.” She explains that she chooses Indigenous stories, Western stories, heroes, and sages from around the world. She views it as an opportunity to communicate to students about nature, flowers and says it is a “bridge for the kids between the natural world and their connection, because if you tell the story they are automatically more curious or more interested.” She implements stories as a way to bring students in-- and the activities they participate in, when

outdoors, “are to get them to observe or become more interested, [a] way to be curious, to have some wonder.”

Outdoors. River and Peter shared experiences they have had outdoors with the students that allowed for deep, meaningful connections. Empathy and Indigenous Knowledges were a prevalent part of these outdoor experiences. Both teachers acknowledged the outdoors as a beneficial place in which to experience both empathy and Indigenous knowledges as it encourages relationships between the students and the natural world.

River shares that her schools’ outdoor education approach is:

based on connecting the kids to the earth and getting to know the being-ness of whatever is out there...so from a Kindergarten point of view it’s that they’re touching, feeling, experiencing water, mud, sun, wind – all the elements...You kind of get a sense of the natural world by just being in it. And then by that you get to know, it’s like getting to know someone, it’s relationship building. That’s how I see it.

She explains the idea of being-ness and the Indigenous knowledge tied to that below:

...if you’re dealing with nature, from Indigenous points of view...if you walk into a traditional culture typically they see the rocks as having a being, a spirit being, or trees, the flowers, and being able to understand the character or the being-ness of a flower or a tree in itself so that relationship, to understand, you have to build a relationship. So that’s what we do with the repeated visits, you can’t just land in a place and expect to have built a relationship so that’s, I think that’s a huge part of connecting to nature is that. In a traditional culture, they’ll have names for the rocks, they’ll have ways of walking around it and respecting, honoring or having alters...that’s an Indigenous approach and understanding...I think if you have that relationship then you’re likely typically not to take advantage with the environment. That’s kind of our goal, if you have some kind of connection. So you can call it empathy, or connection. We don’t usually use the word empathy in that context.

Though she preferred to use the word “connection” rather than “empathy” in this context, she further explains that the opportunity to go outdoors allows students to “actually

experience how to develop interpersonal empathy”. The reason she believes this is because the students “have so many opportunities to work together as teams or to have conflicts and solve them, how to bring people into it again.” She mentions that being “stuck in a repetitive classroom situation” does not allow for opportunities to “hit upon empathy.”

Luke echoes Rivers sentiments in regards to viewing the outdoors as an opportunity for empathy and relationship building. He has planned and led students on multiple-day canoe trips for the past few years, something that they are not used to doing. Many of them have never experienced swimming or being in a canoe so these trips provide opportunities for students to develop a lot of trust and an inner awareness of who they are. The trip encourages them to connect with themselves and others. Luke shares about one of his students’ experiences and the impact it had on him:

One guy eventually found out that he had ADHD and went for years without a diagnosis and he [student] told me... “I think about that canoe trip all the time and I remember how hard it was for me to get in that canoe, well I did it, and that’s what keeps me in school...that keeps me going because now I know I can face things that are hard and do it.”

Outdoor experiences provide an opportunity for the students to learn about nature and themselves in an experiential way. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Bates et al comments that Indigenous education and learning occurs mainly through observation by interacting with elders and the natural environment (P. Bates et al, 2009, p. 6). This example of this young man’s experience shows this view and approach of learning as he came to an awareness of himself in a natural environment.

Whether in the classroom or outdoors, other common findings shared between

these teachers was that they viewed empathy and Indigenous Knowledges and Approaches as daily and/or foundational to their teaching.

Finding #3: Empathy and Indigenous Knowledges and Approaches as Daily and Foundational

All three teachers saw the practice and of empathy and Indigenous knowledges as daily and/or foundational. This was mainly revealed through the fact that there is no specific lesson planning or resource – the approaches are truly woven and infused in their program and pedagogy.

For Peter, both empathetic and Indigenous knowledges were an integral part of his every day. The Indigenous approaches and knowledges were more prevalent and purposeful, but empathy was experienced daily in his class. In regards to Indigenous knowledges he says “that’s everyday...every day I’m referring to Indigenous knowledge or an Indigenous way of learning.” In regards to empathy he says:

I can’t say that I knowingly say “ya I’m going to you know teach the concept of empathy as part of this curriculum.” I think that’s just something that’s kind of like an ongoing character attribute that I just refer to in different instances with the students. So I wouldn’t say I plan specific to empathy.

For Peter, opportunities for empathy to be fostered usually occur when a conflict arises between two or more students. Below is his example of how he deals with the situation and encourages empathy:

Usually what I do is that I find out what happened...I’ll let both kids speak to me about their version of what happened. And then at that point I try to turn the kids thoughts around to thinking what the other kid’s views are or try to get them to see the perspective of the other kid so that they understand why the other kid might have reacted that way. Then I try to figure out who was at fault throughout the process, but it’s important for me to see how the other kid can see it from the other kid’s perspective. That’s what the most important thing is for me.

The ability to take on the thoughts and feelings of another is a key learning to Peter in

these types of situations, more important than who was at fault.

For Luke, he views Indigenous teachings and empathy as being a part of his philosophy of teaching, which is rooted in empathy. For him, “it’s not something we sit down, ok, twenty minutes for empathy today, it starts from the very beginning of the day...throughout the day, all day long.” He elaborates further by saying:

...without empathy, it's not going to work. It'll be a failure day for them everyday. So... without empathy, the whole thing just falls apart. I still get paid, I can still show up, collect my pay cheque, but I can't sleep at night with that, that's not good enough for me.

Empathy has a foundational place in Luke’s class – it holds everything together. In regards to Indigenous approaches, he places a high value on it and tries to encourage both the approaches and cultural values in any way that he finds works well. He meets with Elders and is in constant communication with his community and the Native Support Worker in his school. The circle and all that it encompasses is central to his day to day teaching and he expresses that a lot of his “instructional delivery is based around teaching in circles.” An Elder once shared with him that “a lot of other cultures use the triangle and our culture uses the circle – in a triangle, someone is always higher than someone else, something is always more important than something else.” He went on to say that “we’re kind of here to serve a purpose...I’m not better than anything else...” He further explains the need for animals to survive, sun in the day, the trees for shade, the water in the drain – all of these elements are important and he asked “who am I to think that I’m more important than those things up here on this triangle? Because if you take any of those away and all you had left were people – I don’t think any of us would survive.” He

says that he brings this approach learned from the Elder into his classroom. It is not about him “taking [his] power of office everyday.” He says:

it’s about building trust which exists here, rather than commanding trust, it’s about relationships and it’s about all of us coming to that classroom and being equal, and being able to help each other. And that has really helped to foster empathy as well, looking at it that way.

Empathy and Indigenous knowledges are very much intertwined, daily and foundational to Luke’s approach to teaching.

For River, it was difficult for her to pinpoint where Indigenous approaches began and ended in her day. “It’s just so part of the curriculum, our whole outdoor curriculum can be based on Indigenous approach...it’s hard to trace the beginning.” She further explains that any of her school’s practices can be traced to Indigenous knowledge and approaches and if anyone was teaching in an Indigenous school, “they would feel a connection” and a “similar approach” but she does not claim that they are an Indigenous school by any extent. In regards to empathy, River comments that it is something that is encouraged and fostered in any of the relationships that are made throughout the day. She says,

...in any of the relationships you’re just teaching the kids to understand how other people feel. And getting them to know how they feel and recognize their experience and understanding it from that point of view.

Since relationships are part of an everyday class experience, empathy is encouraged daily through the relationships and natural conversations that occur.

The last finding looks at the “why” in regards to one of the possible reasons behind these teacher’s daily and foundational attitude towards fostering empathy and

incorporating Indigenous knowledges. All three teachers spoke to approaching teaching and learning in this way as a part of who they were as individuals.

Finding #4: Teachers who incorporate empathy and Indigenous approaches note that it came naturally to their pedagogy because it was a part of who they were as people.

Fostering empathy and incorporating Indigenous practices were a natural part of all three teachers and they shared how certain situations and people in their lives assisted them in becoming the teachers they are today. Their personal experiences of empathy and Indigenous knowledges are integral to what allows these teachings to be so natural for them. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Sumara (2002) notes that “good teachers understand that they are not just teaching students, nor are they merely touching on subject matter...they are helping create conditions for noticing, making and using knowledge that profoundly affect how learners and teachers identify themselves and others” (as cited in Boyer 2010, p. 230). These three teachers exemplified this reflection.

When Peter was asked what led him to incorporate Indigenous knowledges in his class, he answered, “...it’s just basically my own – the way I was brought up. The way I live as a, you know, an Aboriginal.” His personal experiences and the way he lives have a large impact on how he teaches in the class. Peter referred to the model of a tree to illustrate his teaching philosophy. He explained that the students are “the root or trunk of the tree where they are centered in the middle of the trunk.” The student is placed at the center of the community and he mentions that “that’s the way Indigenous people educated their children before, they were the center, they were our future.” For Peter, the teachings of the medicine wheel about being balanced in their spiritual, emotional,

physical and mental well-being is his “primary goal”. The way he was brought up as an Aboriginal strongly influences him as a person and his teaching practice when it comes to incorporating these beliefs and knowledges. When asked what led Peter to fostering empathy in his classroom, he shared this: “I’m empathetic to my students because that’s who I am you know, those little kids, those little Native kids are me, so I am empathetic to those kids because I’ve already been in their shoes.”

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Boyer notes that walking in someone else’s shoes is like “feeling the metaphorical pebbles in their lives” (2010, Boyer, 2010, p. 320). Peter understands his students on a much deeper level because he was very similar to them when he was young. Empathy comes from such a deep place in this specific situation. The challenge for non-Aboriginal teachers is how to meaningfully connect to Aboriginal students if they do not share what Peter so deeply shares with his students. What if it is not a part of who we are as teachers? Peter suggests reading the Royal Commission of the Aboriginal peoples, the Indian Act and “actually understanding the Indian Act”, and the “history of the child welfare system and how it was developed with the 60’s scoop.” He observes that a lot of non-Aboriginal teachers say they do not know how to teach Aboriginal Education because they were never taught and they “feel guilty”. He says “you guys just need to get over it because you guys don’t feel guilty about teaching about the Holocaust or anything like that.” Peter suggests non-Aboriginal teachers connect with their Aboriginal students through more Professional Development (PD). He says PD that does not just focus on “beading and art” but “focusing on the real issues on what’s happening to our people...a lot of them think incorporating Indigenous Knowledge is using a talking stick, it’s a lot deeper than that.” His advice is to “acknowledge that

they're different and embrace their diversity. Make it something new for them, wonderful for them.”

For Luke, he states that, “ultimately empathy is something kind of part of who you are right? If you're seeking to be empathetic, I don't know, I certainly can't turn it off, it's a part of what I do throughout the day.” Empathy has been and is a part of who he is and it naturally shows itself in and through his teaching. In regards to the value he places on Indigenous knowledges and approaches Luke shares:

I lived in a community that was extremely racist and [had] some very derogatory and racist attitudes towards the Aboriginal people that lived there. There were very few Aboriginal students in my school and that always really bothered me, and as I grew up and started asking questions, you know, “why do the people around me talk like this about Aboriginal people?”. All of a sudden I realized I was surrounded by people that were Aboriginal. I didn't see them. My eyes were closed to them. As I got older...I started reading books, I started getting to know people, I started to really value different ways of thinking...

Luke adds that his past experiences have had a large influence on who he is as a person today, and what he values. He also shares that some of his family members were a part of the Residential Schools and this has had an impact on his belief in justice, which he says has always burned in him. The injustice done to the Aboriginal cultures in Canada disturbs him greatly. He is influenced and moved by “elders, survivors of residential schools, people who were extremely successful artists, people who are just coming into rehab, a variety of folks who all have definitely poured into [his] life.” He is constantly looking to people in his community for wisdom and guidance so that his students can learn and know their own culture and community.

When River was asked about what is rewarding in terms of teaching empathy to her students she responded, “I just don't know any other way....” Through different

schools she has been a part of, books she has read, courses she has taken and through her personal experiences, empathy has been a natural part of learning in her classes. She goes on to say that she is comfortable where she is currently teaching, she “feel[s] at home.” She cannot pinpoint what it is about what she does, but she knows when she is comfortable and when she is not comfortable. Her current school places an importance on empathy and it naturally fits into what she does and how she approaches learning. In terms of Indigenous knowledges, her current school “started off with things like Grandfather teachings and stories and “Keepers” and “Coyote Guide” so they’ve been foundational...and if you look at any of our practices you can probably trace it back to Indigenous knowledge and approaches.” She feels at home now because what she believes in as teacher, and on a personal level, is reflected in the school where she is currently working.

The above responses highlight the way in which teachers teach who they are. Incorporating Indigenous knowledges and empathetic approaches occur at a much deeper level when its source is from a deep place in the hearts and minds of the teachers, and when they seek out opportunities to engage their students in empathy experiences.

Chapter 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter will be utilized as an opportunity to summarize the main focus of the study and the ways in which it can be connected to the four key findings. It will continue with a discussion of how the findings can be linked to literature in the field. This will be followed by a reflection on how this research has influenced my thinking and practice, and the implications it has for me as an educator. I will then discuss the broader implications of this research and suggest areas of interest for future research. Finally, I will discuss the successes and limitations that I found with this project and draw conclusions in my final thoughts.

Summary

As stated in Chapter 1, the main purpose of the study was to look at the personal stories and experiences of elementary teachers who incorporate empathetic and Indigenous approaches in their classroom. The intention was to highlight and document the best practices of these teachers, to provide insights to educators who are new to Indigenous perspectives, and to empower Non-Aboriginal teachers to incorporate Indigenous perspectives in their classroom. The four key findings of this study revealed that the three participants shared similar views in that: 1. an importance was placed on the practice of creating deep, meaningful connections and relationships with ourselves and others; 2. opportunities for meaningful connections were both sought after and encouraged; 3. empathetic and Indigenous knowledges and approaches were seen as daily and foundational practices, not add-ons; and 4. they noted that empathetic and Indigenous approaches came naturally to their pedagogy because it was a part of who they were as

people. I argue that these insights have assisted in revealing these approaches and strategies as connected to and just a small part of a much deeper whole. Educators need to begin to see themselves as integrated wholes, and not separate from their peers or the world - this mindset is at the root of empathetic and Indigenous approaches to learning.

Connections to Literature

Connections to Literature: Finding #1

An importance placed on the practice of creating deep, meaningful connections and relationships with others and ourselves. The insights from the participants in this finding reflect the findings in literature mentioned in Chapter 2. All three participants expressed in different ways and examples, the importance of creating deep, meaningful connections and relationships. Through their stories, the ideas presented in the Ontario Ministry's Finding Common Ground document (2008) that states that qualities such as empathy "are best nurtured through relationships that cross the lines that often divide people in our society," were clearly embraced and practiced by all three participants (p. 17). The examples shared in this first finding also reflected Aikenhead and Mitchell's (2011) observations of the holistic lens Indigenous peoples use in viewing their world in that "the parts of nature have meaning only in terms of their relationships with the whole of nature" (p. 77). All three participants shared connections they developed and encouraged with and through their students that assisted them in seeing themselves in relation to others and the world through in class and outdoor experiences. River commented specifically on being aware and knowing what to offer yourself before you can see what others have to offer you in regards to their perspectives and gifts. One of the greatest insights of the medicine wheel, for example, is that "all

human beings can acquire gifts in all of the symbolic directions” of the wheel (Sacred Tree, p. 63). Being aware of the gifts you have been given and have to offer the world assists you in seeing the gifts that others have been given. The beliefs and values focused on connecting with yourself first, then with others, was reflected in both the literature as well as the participants’ teaching practice.

Connections to Literature: Finding #2

Opportunities for meaningful connections were both sought after and encouraged. The three participants intentionally and purposefully created meaningful connections and saw opportunities in many teaching situations to nurture these relationships. As mentioned in Chapter 2:

good teachers understand that they are not just teaching students, nor are they merely teaching subject matter. Instead, they are helping to create conditions for noticing, making and using knowledge that profoundly affect how learners and teachers identify themselves and one another (Sumara 2002 as cited in Boyer, 2010, p. 230).

All three participants shared the ways in which they created these “conditions for noticing” in their practice as they saw ways to incorporate deep connections both in the classroom and outdoors. As teachers, all three showed that they reflected “often and deeply on [their] teaching practices and this often [brought] [their] thinking to the feelings and perspectives of [their] students” (Boyer, 2010). They also modeled thinking about the feelings and perspectives of someone else to their students. Boyer (2010) argues that “as teachers we need to question how our responses and actions affect other human beings” and these three teachers both modeled this and encouraged it in their students through the different opportunities they made sure to take advantage of throughout the day. The three participants responses echoed Cruz’s (2005) sentiments

mentioned in Chapter 2, “in order to encourage the development of empathy in ourselves and our students...we need to engage in hands-on, experiential learning” (p. 43). This was evident through the practice and examples of all three participants and once again shows the natural connection that empathetic approaches have to Indigenous knowledges. One of the key components to Indigenous education as previously mentioned in Chapter 2 is experiential learning, which, as noted by Cruz, is one of the best ways to encourage the development of empathy.

Connections to Literature: Finding #3

Empathetic and Indigenous Knowledges and Approaches were seen as daily and foundational practices, not add-ons. The value that was placed on both empathy and Indigenous knowledges was clearly seen by all three participants in Finding #3. Because these were such core values and beliefs for the three participants they were rarely, if ever, add-ons to the curriculum or teaching moments in the classroom. As defined in the book, *The Sacred Tree* (1989), “Values are the way human beings pattern and use their energy. If there is not a balance between ourselves and our values concerning others, we cannot continue to develop our true potential as human beings” (p. 18). The daily and foundational practice of both empathy and Indigenous knowledges were, I argue, a product of the value system all three teachers shared. They valued these approaches themselves and in turn encouraged their students to as well. As mentioned in *The Sacred Tree*, this helps develop true potential. Their approach was holistic in nature, as it did not try to compartmentalize empathy or Indigenous knowledges. As stated in Chapter 2, Robin Ann Martin (2000) discusses what differentiates holistic education. She notes, “its goals, its attention to experiential learning, and the significance that it places

on relationships and primary human values within the learning environment.” Indigenous education and approaches to our world as described as holistic and these three participants truly showed this type of practice in and outside their classroom. The empathetic and Indigenous approaches were daily and foundational, not add-ons, because they were approached in a holistic manner.

Connections to Literature: Finding #4

Teachers who incorporate empathy and Indigenous approaches note that it came naturally to their pedagogy because it was a part of who they were as people. As seen in Finding #4, all three participants shared that both empathy and Indigenous approaches and knowledges were a part of who they were.

Literature indicates that an ethos of caring deeply and empathically about children and their welfare has been identified as being at the heart of purposeful teaching, vital to personal happiness and daily attitude renewal, and essential to inspiring children to care about their own learning. (Boyer, 2010, 313).

The participants reflected the above ethos in that their natural ability to care deeply and empathetically towards their students was because of who they are. They were able to model these approaches because, as mentioned in Finding #4 of Chapter 4, they lived it themselves - it was a daily attitude and approach for them as people, which in turn made it a daily attitude and approach for them as teachers. Peter mentioned that at the core of his teaching philosophy are the four aspects of nature, the physical, the mental, the emotional and the spiritual. For him, his goal was to encourage a balance of these in his students. The Sacred Tree (1989) talks about these four aspects as “seeds...they have the potential to grow into powerful gifts” (p. 13). I argue that one of the gifts that these teachers offer to their students is a personal model of these four aspects. Since empathy and a respect and implementation of Indigenous knowledges were a part of who they

were as people, it could naturally come through in the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual aspects of their teaching. As stated in Chapter 2, an Ontario Ministry of Education document (2008) argues that, “quality education includes education of the heart as well as the mind” (Finding Common Ground, p. 2). These three participants truly displayed that they worked towards educating both the heart and mind of their students.

Reflection and Evaluation

Through my research it has become evident that true and meaningful education does not solely entail a list of best-practice strategies that educators incorporate in lessons each day. Strategies are indeed a way to implement and attain certain learning goals in a classroom, but relevant learning experiences are produced through meaningful connections and relationships. As I reflect back on the type of information I anticipated receiving from the participants, I realize I was provided with insights that were not expected. In a thirty to eighty minute interview I expected “quick tips” and best-practice strategies on empathy and Indigenous approaches that could be shared with other educators. Instead, I was gifted with beautiful insights into the hearts of these three teachers. All three provided an in depth look at how and what these approaches look and feel like in their classrooms, and why they lead to such meaningful learning connections. They demonstrated that true learning and meaningful connections are not accomplished solely on certain strategies or certain key resources. They modeled the empathetic and Indigenous approach to teaching and learning. They consistently took on the thoughts and feelings of others in order to see and feel connections in themselves, others and our world. The strategies of educators should stem from the foundation of putting ourselves in our learners’ hearts and minds. Empathy and seeing the connections in our world and

ourselves is key in creating meaningful learning experiences for our students. This connection that naturally exists between empathy and Indigenous approaches have profound implications to our education system.

Implications

The results of my research both support the findings that empathy and Indigenous knowledges share a natural connection but also introduces new ideas and documented stories from three current Canadian teachers. While the connections between empathy and Indigenous knowledges can be seen in various literatures, this project has explicitly discussed the two approaches together. I argue that it has introduced the idea that empathy, when seen through the lens and worldview of Indigenous knowledges, can create a meaningful way for teachers to incorporate and infuse Indigenous perspectives in the classroom. As mentioned in Chapter 2, empathy is a 21st Century Skill and there are large implications to fostering empathy in the classroom. As stated by educator Walter McKenzie (2010), empathy:

takes on a heightened role in an age where we are gradually merging to form a single global community. The Information Age is only going to bind us more tightly together as people, nations and economies. Empathy does not require us to give up our own perspectives, but to be able to integrate others' perspectives with our own.

Our students must experience and see empathy as modeled by their teachers in order to be able to effectively “communicate, collaborate, create, innovate, problem-solve and transform” (McKenzie, 2010). Paul Ekman, a psychologist and world expert on emotions, speaks to “compassionate empathy” – empathy that “not only validates another’s background, experience and perspective, it also prompts a response – a call to action – that necessitates that we reach out and connect with others where we can jointly make a

difference in our world” (McKenzie, 2010). Educators must see the importance and place empathy has in our classroom. This is why relying solely on strategies is not enough; linkages to the bigger picture must be made. Teachers, who are apprehensive to incorporate these perspectives or are simply using the go-to strategies that are offered to them in this area, need to actively reach out. Strategies are both practical and useful, but educators tend to isolate them and in turn miss out on the deeper, more meaningful connections that could take place. Educators must reach out and make ongoing connections to various members of the community. Community partners are an important resource for classrooms. As the Ontario Curriculum document for Social Studies (2013) states, “various partners can provide valuable support and enrichment for student learning.” As previously suggested, some community partners to reach out to and aid in fostering Indigenous perspectives are Elders, Knowledge Holders, Language Keepers, Council Members and Indigenous Historians. These community members can effectively inform our teaching practice. Indigenous ways of knowing and learning already exist in our practice and pedagogies as highlighted previously by Dr. Nicole Bell. Educators need to acknowledge this and make the connections for themselves and in turn their classrooms. This will result is a holistic way of learning and knowing about our world and ourselves.

Further Study

Though my research furthered and expanded on many of the findings from my literature review, the analysis of the interview data revealed three areas that I believe should be explored further in future study opportunities. One area is exploring empathy as an avenue and entrance point for teachers to incorporate and infuse Indigenous

teachings in their classroom. Since the connections in literature and practice are there, this is an area that I feel could potentially lead Canadian teachers to feeling more at ease and comfortable with incorporating Indigenous perspectives in their classroom. Many teachers are familiar with and knowledgeable in the area of empathy – it is one of the character focuses in many schools across Ontario – and it is a term that most people understand. Starting with this familiar attribute could be one of many ways to introduce the idea of connectedness, which is a foundational perspective in terms of Indigenous knowledges. Empathy as an entranceway to incorporating Indigenous perspectives into the classroom could offer meaningful insights, strategies and new knowledges to teachers and the field of education.

Another area that would be worth exploring further would be empowering and encouraging non-Aboriginal teachers to incorporate Indigenous perspectives in their classroom. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Jean-Paul Restoule (2011) states that:

We cannot achieve our goals alone. We need non-Aboriginal people to understand our shared histories, our perspectives, our visions and our goals, and to participate in achieving them together. This means we need non-Aboriginal teachers respecting and using Indigenous perspectives in our classrooms.

This call for action to both respect and implement Indigenous perspectives in the classroom could not be clearer. Further research and findings on how this can be achieved are definitely needed. This leads to the last area of suggestions for further research.

I would suggest from the findings in this project that the type of Professional Development teachers are receiving, both in pre and post teacher education settings, in regards to Aboriginal perspectives, be expanded. As suggested by the participant Peter, real and meaningful Professional Development for teachers to learn about Aboriginal

history and worldviews in a real and meaningful way is much needed. A critical analysis of what type of Professional Development is being implemented currently in both pre and post teacher education is also needed. This means looking critically at the pedagogical gaps - despite the current Professional Development opportunities. A further discussion into this area could potentially assist with the successful implementation of Indigenous perspectives in the classroom. .

Successes and Limitations of the Research Process

Through this research project I believe that I have gained a number of meaningful insights that have contributed to my overall understanding of how I wish to approach my teaching practice as a future educator. The purpose of my research was to learn from the personal stories of elementary teachers who incorporate empathetic and Indigenous approaches in their classroom and I feel this was met with success. A deeper understanding of the value that can be found through the implementation of these approaches was also revealed to me.

Though the findings from this research project were insightful and were successful in both starting and continuing a conversation of the two approaches, no research project is met without limitations. Limitations of this study included the small sample size, the limited timeframe of two years and the lack of student perspectives. Not including student perspectives was the result of the ethical procedure that needed to be followed for this project. Also, once I reflected on the participant's questions, the connections they personally revealed, between empathy and Indigenous approaches, were less clear. Although the question of the linkages between the two approaches was part of the interview questions, the results reveal that the wording of the question was not clear

and therefore this meant that the interviewees were unable to address this inquiry in the kind of depth that may have provided further insight into this area. Had this question been one that was more explicit in the interviews, the teacher's personal understandings of the connection between empathy and Indigenous approaches might have provided further insight for this study and future studies. Lastly, my biases as a researcher in terms of my own values and beliefs, as well as my intentions for this project, played a part in how I analyzed and interpreted the data. I did my best to capture the essence of what the participants shared, and felt that I stayed true to their responses. I provided context where needed, however, the biases of the researcher will always be present in any study.

Conclusion

This research project has been an incredible process for me as an educator and researcher. The process of collecting, analyzing and presenting data is a journey that I am grateful to have experienced. The insights from the three participants in regards to the subject matter both challenged my mind and moved my heart. As mentioned earlier, I feel that I was gifted with beautiful words of wisdom that came from deep within the teacher's hearts. My hope is that the reader can find and experience more than just teaching strategies and best-practices through this research project. I thought I would leave with that, but was left with so much more. Deep, meaningful connections can and are being made in classrooms. Empathy and Indigenous approaches are just a few of many ways in which this can happen and my hope is that this study serves as an introduction to these approaches, and will inspire further conversations by educators in the future.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview



Letter of Consent for Interview

Date:

Dear _____

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying incorporating Indigenous knowledges to teach empathy for the purposes of investigating an educational topic as a major assignment for our program. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the process this year is Dr. Susan Schwarz. My research supervisor is Dr. Rose Fine-Meyer. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of a 40 minute interview that will be tape-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you. I can conduct the interview at your office or workplace, in a public place, or anywhere else that you might prefer.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications.

This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the tape recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy.

Please sign below if you agreed to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Researcher name: Rebeka Ly

rebeka.ly@mail.utoronto.ca

By signing below, you are indicating your willingness to participate in the study, that you have received a second signed copy of this letter for your records, and that you are fully aware of the conditions above.

Printed name: _____ Signed: _____

Date: _____

Initial if you agree to have your interview recorded _____

Appendix B: Interview Questions



Appendix A: Interview Questions

Main Research Question:

What can we learn from the personal stories of elementary teachers who incorporate Indigenous knowledges when teaching empathy?

Introductory Questions

1.
 - a) How long have you been teaching?
 - b) What grade do you currently teach?
 - c) What grades have you taught in the past?

2. I've asked you to be a participant because of your interest and experience with teaching empathy and incorporating Indigenous teachings and knowledges in the classroom.
 - a) Do you incorporate Indigenous Knowledges in other areas of your practice? If yes, what subjects and/or areas?
 - b) Do you use teach the concept of empathy with other parts of the curriculum? If yes, does it always include Indigenous knowledges?
 - c) Which of the two (if any) are more prevalent in your teaching practice?
 - d) Do you feel that there is a strong connection between the concept of empathy and Indigenous knowledges? If yes, why?

3.
 - a) In a typical school week/month - how often would fostering empathy be a part of what you do?
 - b) In a typical school week/month - how often would you incorporate Indigenous knowledges as a part of what you do?

Training and Resources

4.
 - a) What in your career has led you to fostering empathy in your classroom?
 - b) What in your career has led you to incorporating Indigenous knowledges in your classroom and teachings?
 - c) Does your personal teaching philosophy incorporate empathy as central to education teaching? If yes, in what ways?

d) Does your teaching philosophy incorporate Indigenous knowledges as central to educating students? If yes, in what ways?

5. What do you find about these approaches (separately or together) that work best for you and your students?

6.

a) How has being at _____ School changed or developed or inspired your understanding and practice of teaching empathy?

b) How has being at _____ School changed or developed or inspired your understanding and practice of incorporating Indigenous knowledges in your classroom?

7.

a) What resources do you use or are available to teachers in regards to empathy?

b) What resources do you use or are available to teachers in regards to Indigenous knowledges teachings?

In the Classroom

8.

a) What specific strategies do you use to foster empathy in your classroom?

b) What specific strategies do you use to foster indigenous knowledges in your classroom?

9.

a) What, if anything, has surprised you about your students' responses in regards to empathy?

b) What, if anything, has surprised you about your students' responses in regards to Indigenous knowledges?

10.

a) What are some of the challenges you face when it comes to teaching empathy?

b) What are some of the challenges you face when it comes to using Indigenous knowledges?

11.

a) What has been the most rewarding thing about teaching empathy to your students?

b) What has been the most rewarding things about using Indigenous teachings with your students?

Thank you for your time and input!