

# Land-Based Learning

A case study report for  
educators tasked with integrating  
Indigenous Worldviews into classrooms



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## Land-Based Learning

**A case study report for educators tasked with integrating Indigenous Worldviews into classrooms**

*With practical applications from the H'a H'a Tumxulaux Outdoor Education Program of B.C. School District No. 20 (Kootenay-Columbia)*

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Founded in 1891, the Canadian Education Association (CEA) is a network of passionate educators advancing ideas for greater student and teacher engagement in public education. CEA does this by conducting research and spreading useful ideas through its *Education Canada* Magazine, professional learning events, website and social media channels; supporting education systems to be more adaptive to the rapidly changing needs of all learners in an effort to reverse the trends of students 'tuning out' of their learning opportunities.

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# A Note to Educators and Administrators

## Key challenges in leading educational change



Launching a new school program and gaining the support you need to keep it off the ground is an uphill challenge. The roadblock standing between you and the change you want to see can appear so insurmountable that all you can do is launch more proposals hoping that at least one of them will be convincing enough to overcome the hurdles

of the school system. Given the numerous obstacles standing in the way of **change in education** – mindsets, lack of resources, curriculum demands, social challenges, and the education system itself – it can be discouraging to seek out change when it seems like all forces are against you.

## Learning from top-performing education programs as a basis for innovation

Intrigued by stories of courage and passion to offer Indigenous and non-Indigenous students a learning experience from a First Nations perspective, the Canadian Education Association (CEA) interviewed over forty individuals – teachers, administrators, community members, parents and students – to understand how one school community put their minds together to bring innovation in Indigenous education to the forefront. The CEA understands: you are looking to teach students valuable skills, you want to make an impact, and you want the right team and mentors who will support and push you when the going gets tough.

To succeed in your own mission, we propose to you the following when reading this case study research report: put yourself in the shoes of the H'a H'a Tumxulau Outdoor Education Program team as we guide you through their ups and downs – their challenges and successes – and take note of what could work in your own school community. The capacity of this case study in getting your own innovations to stick, of course, depends on context. Unique school cultures, student demographics and Indigenous communities will each require a different approach. That said, we hope that this case study report will, as much as possible, provide insights and amplify what a top-performing, Indigenous-centred education program looks like in practice.

## For More Information

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# I. Executive Summary

## About the H'a H'a Tumxulau Outdoor Education Program

The H'a H'a Tumxulau Outdoor Education Program is a land-based project of the Kootenay-Columbia Learning Centre in Trail, B.C. 'H'a H'a Tumxulau' means "Sacred Land" in the language of the Sinixt people, who claim lands in the West Kootenay region of B.C. as their traditional territory, amongst other Nations.<sup>2</sup> The program is offered in an alternative educational setting and is targeted towards students ages 12-15, many of whom experience a variety of social, emotional and mental health challenges, and who have either tuned out and/or dropped out of conventional school programming. About half of the students in the program identify as First Nations and Métis, drawing roots from a variety of Indigenous communities. The program has both in-class and outdoor learning components, the latter of which takes place each Friday at nearby wilderness sites in B.C.'s Kootenay Region. This land-based approach

to teaching and learning has proven effective in fostering a sense of community – a "family-like" atmosphere that is experienced by staff and students within the program – easing anxiety and depression symptoms, and improving student retention. Three educators instruct the program: a certified teacher, a Child and Youth Care Worker, and an Aboriginal Education Support Worker. Indigenous cultural content is offered through a pan-Indigenous lens; in other words, the program integrates the Worldviews of an array of Indigenous Nations from across Canada. The Kootenay-Columbia School District has put in place strategic objectives for refining alignment with the core competencies, learning outcomes and guidelines<sup>3</sup> for the implementation of Indigenous Worldviews and Perspectives in the classroom,<sup>4</sup> as outlined in B.C.'s redesigned curriculum as of the 2016-2017 school year.



## The selection process

The H'a H'a Tumxulau Outdoor Education Program was selected amongst 47 program applicants from across Canada to participate in the 'Indigenous Innovation that Sticks' Case Study Program. A panel of Indigenous education scholars selected the program based on two distinguishing features: its demonstrated ability to engage *both* Indigenous and non-Indigenous students while bridging cultures through Indigenous pedagogy, and its potential to be replicated in view of it being a teacher-driven initiative. Members of the 'Indigenous Innovation

that Sticks' Selection Committee also found the program to be a practical example of how non-Indigenous educators can acquire the cultural competencies necessary to engage in an Indigenous-centred education program. For these reasons, the H'a H'a Tumxulau Outdoor Education Program was given a \$10,000 contribution courtesy of initiative sponsor State Farm Canada, which was matched with an equal contribution from the Kootenay-Columbia School District. These contributions serve as support for the continued refinement and expansion of the program.

## Key challenges in Indigenous Education

This program is a timely response to the sense of urgency generated by national calls to action, evolving curriculum requirements and continued disparities in educational outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. In 2015, the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was released, calling for the integration of Indigenous Worldviews into Canadian classrooms, including lessons on the legacies of the Residential School System. Simultaneously, numerous ministries of education are putting forward redesigned

curricula, mandating that an Indigenous perspective be brought to all aspects of schooling. Furthermore, gaps in educational attainment between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students persist, with numerous studies suggesting that restoring traditional Ways of Teaching and Learning can offset this trend. On this basis, Canadian educators and administrators are confronted with the challenge of reforming their practice while filling-in missing pieces of knowledge on Indigenous histories, cultures and Worldviews.

## Key recommendations

This case study report examines how three key components of an Indigenous-centred program – land-based learning, spirituality, and the Medicine Wheel – have created a template for heightened student engagement and

retention. Through these components, this report proposes the following recommendations for educators and administrators tasked with integrating Indigenous Worldviews into the classroom:

1. **Foster relationships with the First Peoples of your school or school district's region**, and involve them in your program's development and operations to ensure that Indigenous histories, cultures, ceremonies, languages and protocols are taught and practiced in a manner that respects their cultural and spiritual integrity.
2. **Develop programming with the premise that Indigenous knowledge and values are relevant to all students – both Indigenous and non-Indigenous**. The concept of living in harmony with nature, for example, is universally beneficial and has broad, far-reaching applications that are relevant in a 21<sup>st</sup> century context.
3. **Create a learning experience that is land-based, hands-on and experiential**, as these are essential components of Indigenous pedagogy and are integral to gaining a genuine understanding of Indigenous Traditional Knowledge.





## II. Contemporary Context of Indigenous Education in Canada

### Working towards renewed educational practices to support reconciliation

With the release of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 2015, the vital role that a renewed education system can play in arriving at reconciliation – and moreover in repairing the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples – has been highlighted. On this note, the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* states that, “Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner

appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.”<sup>5</sup> According to the TRC, this right is essential to overcoming the legacy of residential schools.<sup>6</sup> The TRC also affirms that any efforts of system reform “must recognize the importance of education in strengthening the cultural identity of Aboriginal people and providing a better basis for success,”<sup>7</sup> and must “provide the necessary funding to post-secondary education institutions to educate teachers on how to integrate Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods in classrooms.”<sup>8</sup>

This U.N. Declaration and the calls to action of the TRC are a response to the imposition of European methodologies of education and policies of assimilation upon Indigenous peoples, which have led to the demise of language and culture. Such policies and practices have not promoted high levels of educational attainment amongst Indigenous peoples in Canada, and moreover continue to negatively impact the socio-economic conditions of Indigenous communities.<sup>9</sup> According to the 2011 National Household

Survey, of the Indigenous population aged 25 to 64, 28.9% did not have a high school diploma, in contrast to 12.1% of non-Indigenous peoples.<sup>10</sup> Data and personal testimonies have established a sense of urgency to improve the educational outcomes of Indigenous students in Canada, and to ultimately close the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples not only in terms of education, but also across multiple areas relating to employment, healthcare and treaty rights.<sup>11</sup>

## Overview of curricula expectations for the integration of Indigenous Worldviews

Ministries of education across Canada have mandated the integration of Indigenous Worldviews into classrooms through revised curricula. With the objective of closing gaps in educational attainment, provincial and territorial governments have proposed numerous key initiatives, such as:

### British Columbia:

1. In 2015, the B.C. Ministry of Education released the document [Aboriginal Worldviews and Perspectives in the Classroom](#), reflecting its goal of “embedding Aboriginal perspectives into all parts of the curriculum in a meaningful and authentic manner.” Developed in consultation with regional First Nations leaders and Knowledge Keepers, this resource clarifies curriculum expectations for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners, defines key characteristics of Indigenous Worldviews and perspectives, and offers guidance for modifying teaching practices accordingly.<sup>12</sup>
2. This document reflects a shift to the implementation phase of the [Tripartite Education Agreement \(2012\)](#), which establishes a commitment by the province, the [First Nations Education Steering Committee \(FNESC\)](#) and the [First Nations Schools Association of British Columbia \(FNSA\)](#) to improve the educational outcomes of Indigenous students through various educational initiatives, including curriculum development.
3. As demonstrated in [B.C.’s new curriculum](#), requirements for the integration of Indigenous perspectives are found across all subject areas and grade levels.

### Ontario:

1. In 2014, Ontario’s Ministry of Education released the [Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework Implementation Plan](#):<sup>13</sup> an implementation strategy based on policies elaborated within its 2007 [policy framework for Indigenous education](#).<sup>14</sup>
2. As of autumn 2016, Ontario’s [Indigenous Education Strategy](#)<sup>15</sup> will further advance the shift from policy to practice by supporting the system-wide integration of Indigenous perspectives into the provincial education system in cooperation with Indigenous partners.<sup>16</sup>

### Manitoba:

1. Since 1995, Manitoba Education has [requested that all provincial schools integrate Indigenous perspectives into curricula](#), particularly in light of Manitoba and Winnipeg being determined as having the highest proportion of Indigenous peoples in Canada.<sup>17</sup>



2. This has led to the release of several teacher resource guides for K-12 students, including the 2003 document *Integrating Aboriginal Perspectives into Curricula: A Resource for Curriculum Developers, Teachers, and Administrators*.<sup>18</sup>

### Northwest Territories:

The Northwest Territories' Department of Education, Culture and Employment has in place **two curricula** to guide students' learning of Indigenous cultures, Worldviews and languages. The first is called 'Dene Kede,' encompassing the Worldviews of the five Dene Nations, while the second is called 'Inuuqatigiit,' focusing on Inuit Worldviews. Educators are expected to implement the respective curriculum that is appropriate to their school community.<sup>19</sup>

### Alberta:

1. In 2007, the *Promising Practices in First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education* case study report was released by Alberta Education. This case study is part of ongoing work to provide practical insight into how Albertan schools are implementing teaching practices in support of improved educational outcomes for Indigenous students.<sup>20</sup>
2. In 2014, the Government of Alberta presented the *Expression of Reconciliation* to members of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In addition to its commitment to integrate Indigenous Worldviews into curricula, the Expression affirmed the inclusion of "mandatory content for all Alberta students on the significance of residential schools and treaties."<sup>21</sup>

While many of these provincial and territorial initiatives are works in progress, they nonetheless represent a concerted effort from within the education community to address the sense of urgency generated by dismal data on educational outcomes and the calls to action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

## Engaging Indigenous students through culturally relevant Ways of Teaching and Learning

According to sociologists Thomas DiPrete and Micheal Hout, "Education plays a dual role in intergenerational transmission of advantage. It is both: the main channel for socio-economic reproduction and the main avenue for socio-economic mobility."<sup>22</sup> In other words, forging a new path in Indigenous education – one that is marked by improved graduation rates and improved access to post-secondary education – can lead to sustainably improved socio-economic conditions for Indigenous peoples. As the TRC highlights, this can be achieved by providing Indigenous students with an education that is culturally relevant and culturally significant – one that is guided by Indigenous Ways of Teaching and Learning.<sup>23</sup>

On this basis, the CEA has been exploring the issue of Indigenous student engagement through its events and

publications. The CEA's 2016 national symposium entitled *First Nations Schools First!* convened a wide variety of stakeholders – including students, teachers, school administrators, academic scholars, business leaders, Indigenous leaders, Elders and policymakers – to highlight the variety of ways by which the challenge of Indigenous student engagement can be met.<sup>24</sup> While teaching and learning methods can differ across academic disciplines and contexts, one of the key objects of consensus that transpired from this symposium was the importance of consultation with Indigenous peoples, as well as the need for educators to have a strong understanding of the past and recurring issues that impact Canada's First Peoples.<sup>25</sup>

The CEA's network of education experts have also asserted the significance of integrating Indigenous-centred

programming into the classroom as a means to not only engage Indigenous learners, but also to build cultural bridges between Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff and students. In particular, three recent recipients of The

CEA's Pat Clifford Award for Early Career Research have studied, developed and implemented practical ways for educators to heighten overall student engagement through Indigenous pedagogy.



- **Dr. Michelle Hogue (2012 CEA Pat Clifford Award recipient, University of Lethbridge)** suggests that, “Story and narrative, hands-on practical application and learning by doing are traditional Aboriginal cultural ways of knowing and coming to know or learn.” Through her research with high school students on the Blackfoot Reserve in Southern Alberta, Dr. Hogue has found that drama and theatre – disciplines that require practical application to achieve proficiency – could be extended to teaching practices to engage hands-on learners in the mathematics and sciences.<sup>26</sup> On this basis, she concludes that the underrepresentation of Indigenous students in STEM disciplines could be reversed by shifting away from what she refers to as a “formulaic teaching methodology” of students “sitting in rows and solving problems from a textbook.”<sup>27</sup>



- Conversely, **Dr. Sean Lessard (2015 CEA Pat Clifford Award recipient, University of Alberta)** narrows in on effective ways to engage urban Indigenous students in Regina, whose experiences have been marked by socio-economic and socio-cultural challenges. As Dr. Lessard notes, poverty, homelessness and issues surrounding self-identity in the transition of youth from Treaty territories to urban Regina have exemplified the urgency to better understand individual learner needs. His suggestion is to bring these issues to the surface by creating conversational spaces for Indigenous students, so that curriculum, teaching practices and policies can respond in ways that are culturally and socially relevant to them.<sup>28</sup>



- In addition, **Dr. Gregory Lowan-Trudeau (2014 CEA Pat Clifford Award recipient, University of Calgary)** has identified gaps in curriculum content on Indigenous treaty rights, land claims, and policies and practices of colonization and assimilation. Dr. Lowan-Trudeau offers that contemporary conflicts, such as public policy debates surrounding resource development, often result from a lack of information or misunderstanding of Indigenous Traditional Knowledge and past events that have shaped today's relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. As he suggests, this knowledge could be transmitted to present and future generations of learners within Canada's public schools.<sup>29</sup>

The works of Dr. Michelle Hogue, Dr. Sean Lessard and Dr. Gregory Lowan-Trudeau – as well as the lessons learned by CEA's network of Indigenous educators – are reflective of growing scholarship that supports Indigenous-centred pedagogy as a way to improve the educational

outcomes and life chances of Indigenous students, while providing non-Indigenous students with a comprehensive perspective on historical and contemporary issues impacting Indigenous peoples.

# III. Case Study Analysis: The H'a H'a Tumxulaux Outdoor Education Program

## Program founding

The H'a H'a Tumxulaux Outdoor Education Program – a teacher-driven initiative of the Kootenay-Columbia Learning Centre (KCLC) in Trail, B.C. – aims to prevent early school leaving amongst at-risk youth through land-based, hands-on, Indigenous-centred pedagogy. Responding to the growing proportion of students aged 12-15 recommended for B.C. School District No. 20's alternative education pathway, the Learning Centre's principal – following conversations and consultation with the district's senior administrators, tasked educational staff with creating a program specific to the needs of younger learners. In view of the improved academic and social performance of students aged 15 and above in KCLC's 'Take a Hike' program – an adventure-based education program with three branches in British Columbia<sup>30</sup> – a teacher-facilitator

of this program proposed that a similar approach be extended into a new initiative. The new project would support the specific needs of KCLC students who identify as Indigenous, upon the recommendation of a school district Aboriginal Education Support Worker who would come to be assigned to the project. In particular, the program would focus on ethnobotany – the study of plants and animals as they relate to the traditional practices and knowledge of a society and culture<sup>31</sup> – through multidisciplinary activities that incorporate physical activity, the arts and STEM. The program provides a pan-Indigenous perspective to its activities, integrating the perspectives of various Indigenous Nations from across Canada. A Child and Youth Worker was also assigned to the team to support students coping with social, emotional and mental health issues.





## Student demographics: tackling early school leaving

Set in the context of alternative education, the idea of assigning a Child and Youth Worker to the program was driven by the need to meet the circumstantial and mental health challenges that students may not have been able to cope with in a mainstream school setting. This comprehensive approach to teaching and learning was adopted from the ‘Take a Hike’ program, which integrates clinical therapists into its activities.<sup>32</sup> The current student cohort is comprised of adolescents with a variety of **mental health issues**, including anxiety and depression symptoms that can be linked to ADHD and autism, and/or to circumstantial challenges including poverty and dysfunctional family relationships.<sup>33</sup> Prior to the implementation of the program, students also expressed distrust towards adults – whether caregivers or educators – whom they felt were unable to provide a safe and welcoming home and school environment. Their educational experiences were marked by feelings of exclusion and punitive measures that did not promote their desire to attend school.

Dr. George Sefa Dei (2016 CEA Whitworth Award co-recipient, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education) in his 2015 article **“Reflections on ‘Dropping Out’ of School”** for CEA’s *Education Canada* Magazine, stipulates that early school leaving is not to be viewed solely as the result of individual responsibility. Rather, it is to be viewed as the outcome of teaching practices that lead to unwelcoming school environments resulting from curricula and pedagogy that are unreflective of students’ social differences, notably in terms of their culture, history, identity, social class, gender, sex and disability status. Dr. Dei’s suggestion of the term “push out” in lieu of “drop out” reflects the idea that ensuring student

retention is a matter of collective responsibility, and that the institutional practices of schooling – as seen, for example, through grading practices that favour test-taking over oral knowledge – can effectively “push out” students from school.<sup>34</sup> This perspective on early school leaving has been mobilized within the H’a H’a Tumxulau Outdoor Education Program, where the mosaic of student identity and experiences is praised, individual learner needs are attended to, and knowledge can be expressed in multiple, unconventional ways.

The inclusion of an Aboriginal Education Support Worker in this land-based education program is furthermore reflective of concerted efforts to honour students’ identities and experiences, especially given the numerous students in the program who identify as Indigenous, the majority of whom are of Métis descent. The current student cohort traces roots to various Indigenous communities across B.C., hence the program’s pan-Indigenous approach to its activities. Prior to the implementation of the program, Indigenous students expressed feeling uninformed and disconnected from their Indigenous culture and heritage, while students of non-Indigenous ancestry demonstrated an unawareness of the traditional inhabitants of the region in which they grew up, including the history and hardships experienced by Indigenous peoples more generally. In shifting away from conventional ways of teaching and learning, the H’a H’a Tumxulau Outdoor Education Program therefore seeks to promote student success by not only filling-in knowledge gaps on Indigenous issues and perspectives, but moreover by using Indigenous pedagogy – which is by nature experiential and hands-on – to engage kinaesthetic learners who have tuned out from traditional schooling.

## Unique contextual challenges

The Kootenay-Columbia School District finds itself in a unique and challenging position, being one of the only school districts in B.C. that is situated in a region with no formally recognized Indigenous Nation. In 1956, the Government of Canada under the Indian Act declared the Sinixt extinct, and as such there are no reserves, band offices or Indigenous Friendship Centres in the region. The

Sinixt Nation – the language from whom ‘H’a H’a Tumxulau’ derives its name – is, however, recognized south of the B.C.-Washington State border as part of the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation.<sup>35</sup> In 2008, a land claim by a group of self-identified Sinixt was filed over territories in the present-day West Kootenay Region of B.C.<sup>36</sup> To date, the region remains a disputed territory, with multiple

Indigenous groups staking claims.<sup>37</sup> For a school district striving to incorporate Indigenous Worldviews into the classroom, the lack of a formally recognized Indigenous Nation in the local region poses numerous challenges.

With no local reserve, band office or Indigenous friendship centre within the zones of the Kootenay-Columbia School District, one of the greatest challenges the school district has faced is determining which Indigenous individuals or associations to partner and consult with, especially in regards to determining which pieces of Indigenous culture and history from the local area to promote within the

learning program. This can impact numerous components of an Indigenous-centred, land-based education program, such as determining how to make an appropriate acknowledgement of traditional land, integrating the knowledge of Elders, or teaching traditional protocols on ceremonies. This is another reason for which the program follows a pan-Indigenous approach that incorporates the protocols and teachings of various Indigenous Nations from across Canada: to overcome the unique challenge of not having a formally recognized hub of Indigenous know-how.



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## Key stages in building the program

Although the H'a H'a Tumxulau Outdoor Education Program operates in a single school, its implementation process followed a number of key steps that many organizations use when undergoing large-scale change or innovation.<sup>38</sup>



### 1. Identifying a need and establishing a sense of urgency

- The need to respond to changing student demographics:** The principal of the Kootenay-Columbia Learning Centre identified the need to create a new program in order to adapt to changing student demographics. At a time when the number of students aged 12-15 was increasing, the principal tasked staff to develop proposals for a program that would engage this specific age group, especially given that current outdoor programs did not cater to younger students.
- The need to integrate Indigenous Worldviews:** In addition, current initiatives did not adequately integrate Indigenous Worldviews, although many of the new attendees to the school identified as Indigenous. Furthermore, new curriculum mandates from the B.C. Ministry of Education to incorporate Indigenous perspectives into the classroom were in the midst of coming into effect.
- The urgency to prevent early school leaving:** In the context of alternative education, working with students who are at-risk of dropping out requires the ability of educators to continuously meet unique learner needs and circumstantial challenges. Citing these demographical changes and the risk of early school leaving had effectively established a sense of urgency to do things differently.







## 2. Creating a guiding coalition: encouraging and supporting staff collaboration

- Assigning staff to the guiding coalition:** The principal put together a team that had the skills, experience and passion to lead a successful Indigenous-centred, land-based program. Each educator on the guiding coalition – the core team that would lead and facilitate the program – possessed a speciality that, when all brought together, would contribute to meeting each student’s unique needs. The approach of the program would be holistic in that it would consider the mental, emotional, physical and spiritual aspects of the individual student. As such, a certified teacher and outdoor education enthusiast was assigned to the project, who had both experience and passion to facilitate the project. A Child and Youth Worker was also assigned to the team to provide guidance on meeting students’ mental and emotional needs. An Aboriginal Education Support Worker would tend to the cultural and spiritual components, ensuring that Indigenous perspectives would be woven into the program. The guiding coalition set the foundation for shifting from idea to practice.
- Promoting teacher collaboration:** Following the creation of the guiding coalition, KCLC’s leadership continued to maintain an environment conducive to educator collaboration. The Learning Centre has a history of encouraging collaboration. On Fridays, unless it’s a planned out-trip day, students attend school in the morning, and the staff use the afternoon for debriefing, collaborative planning, meeting with outside agencies, etc. Furthermore, educators were given the trust and liberty by school district administration to take risks and to determine how the program would take shape.





### 3. Developing a vision and strategy

- The team developed a vision to guide their implementation efforts, which will evolve with changing student needs and curriculum requirements. This was their initial vision:

*The vision driving our school's reprogramming efforts is simple. We want to maintain consistency and stability in the lives of our students while allowing them to feel empowered in their place as members of a community, which many of the students do not receive at home. This is a large goal, but we know based on our experiences leading an outdoor education program for youth and that, with our respective specialties, this goal is achievable if we all work together. Achieving this ambitious objective will require that we engage our Indigenous students in culturally-relevant activities, and that the gap in Indigenous knowledge be bridged to our non-Indigenous students for whom the values of respect and healthy relationships are highly relevant. We sincerely believe that we can achieve this change if we work together with members of Indigenous communities, and in the process create an education program that will be admired by fellow staff, parents, students and communities.*





## 4. Establishing buy-in and commitment to innovation

- Establishing school district support:** The Kootenay-Columbia School District has a vested interest in the program and is crafting a strategic plan to refine its vision in ways that reinforce students' 'core competencies' and literacy and numeracy foundations, in line with B.C.'s new curriculum as of 2016.<sup>39</sup> School district support for the program was given early-on, in light of the evident relationship between outdoor education and improved student success, as well as the clearly articulated need – and Ministry requirement – to integrate Indigenous perspectives into the curriculum. This school district is also working to determine ways to integrate Indigenous pedagogy into already-existing outdoor education programs in more of its schools.
- Establishing financial commitment:** The principal of the Learning Centre was the key change agent who found creative ways to support the program financially through the reallocation of existing funds and resources. For example, the Learning Centre already had in place a school breakfast club, from which a portion of funding could be reallocated towards purchasing wild meat and other traditional foods for the land-based program. In relation to outdoor equipment for program outings, resources could be shared with the school's already-established 'Take a Hike' outdoor education program. The principal also supports educators in searching and applying for grants, as was the case for the program's application to the 'Indigenous Innovation that Sticks' case study grant. Moreover, the Kootenay-Columbia School District supports the program through the B.C. Ministry of Education's 'CommunityLINK'<sup>40</sup> fund for vulnerable students, in addition to a \$10,000 grant courtesy of the District itself.
- Communicating the vision to the school community:** Resistance presented by stakeholders from within the school community was mitigated through clear communication of the program's vision. In order to prevent the program from being perceived as elitist – only being offered to select students within the Learning Centre – it was consistently communicated to staff that the program filled a specific need for a specific age group. Furthermore, in exceptional cases, students who are not of the required age group but who would otherwise benefit from the program are admitted. These actions empowered other staff members to act on the vision, and for the facilitators of the pre-existing 'Take a Hike' program to be motivated to share resources and best practices with the newly-launched initiative.



## Key components of the program

Equipped with the support of the school principal to craft an outdoor, Indigenous-centred program specific to unique learner needs, the core team of educators organized their activity plans into a structure with three main components: land-based learning, spirituality and the Medicine Wheel.



## 1. Land-based learning

Land-based learning is, in particular, a large component of Indigenous pedagogy, serving as the basis of oral stories, ceremonies and customs. According to Dr. Marie Battiste of the University of Saskatchewan in her 2010 article [“Nourishing the Learning Spirit”](#) for the CEA’s *Education Canada Magazine*:

“Life is a journey of our spirits that are in a relationship with Creator [...] Families, communities, places, and ceremonies nurture the spirit in informal learning environments and in more formal environments, where it is expected that schools will validate the existing knowledge base of the students and provide an environment, experiences, and knowledge, where students may work toward fulfilment of their gifts and purposes in accordance with the laws of Creator, passed down through the collective stories, traditions, customs, and identities of Aboriginal peoples [...] All Indigenous peoples have, then, a land base and ecology from which they have learned, and it is there that they honour the spirit of that land in ceremonies, traditions, prayers, customs, and beliefs. These, then, are the core foundations of Indigenous knowledge, learned within a language and culture.”<sup>41</sup>

In view of the indelible relationship between Indigenous knowledge and the practice of land-based teaching and learning, Indigenous pedagogy is characterized as holistic, experiential and, as Dr. Battiste stipulates, “learned within a language and culture.”<sup>42</sup> In effect, an Indigenous-centred education program would incorporate these traits, while engaging with the land as its foundation.





## Practical Applications:

The H'a H'a Tumxulau Outdoor Education Program incorporates the traits of land-based learning in the following ways:

- **PROMOTING HANDS-ON LEARNING:**

The program is built on the premise that academics and land-based learning are complementary. From this perspective, students not only read about outdoor bush skills and traditional ceremonies; they also take part in them directly. For example, a class activity where students conduct online research on animal species and habitats is complemented by a drum journey ceremony through which students are assigned spirit animals. Students can then partake in written reflections or oral presentations on how their own character traits and lifestyle are like that of their spirit animal. This assignment can then be extended to an outdoor physical activity, where students act as preys or predators in a variation of “tag,” underpinning lessons on animal life cycles. Using the learning outcomes established by the **First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC)**, land-based activities are integrated into classroom learning in a variety of ways.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, student knowledge is evaluated in unconventional ways, including the use of oral presentations, the arts and guided conversation through sharing circles. The program follows a similar hands-on, multidisciplinary approach to all its activities in a way that offers Indigenous Ways of Teaching and Learning in a 21<sup>st</sup> century context.

- **TEACHING CULTURE THROUGH EXPERIENCE AND INTERACTION:**

To equip non-Indigenous educators with adequate know-how regarding Indigenous ceremonies, values and customs, cultural competency training has followed a hands-on approach emphasizing first-hand experience. Training takes place outdoors, with educators learning alongside students from the Aboriginal Education Support Worker. To do this, the Kootenay-Columbia Learning Centre encourages collaborative inquiry,<sup>44</sup> meaning that educators take part in ceremonies that are led by Indigenous Knowledge Keepers themselves, so that they can experience and ask questions about how traditional values are put into practice within an educational setting.<sup>45</sup> The presence of an Indigenous resource person within the program also allows for an Indigenous perspective to be brought to the collaborative process of developing lesson plans. This also serves as an opportunity for non-Indigenous staff to fill gaps in their knowledge base.





## 2. Spirituality

Spirituality is an integral component of Indigenous pedagogy, holding significantly relevant teachings for students in the areas of personal development and healthy relationship building. As Dr. Blair Stonechild (Professor of Indigenous Studies, First Nations University of Canada) stipulates in his column **“Bringing Spiritual Teachings into Education”** for CEA’s *Education Canada Magazine*, “Aboriginal spirituality is not about religious dogma, but rather is about establishing healthy relationships with all things, including one’s relatives, one’s nation, and the natural environment.” Through traditional ceremonies and practices – such as reconciliation circles and meditation – Indigenous spirituality teaches and emphasizes essential values for maintaining healthy personal and interpersonal relationships, including respect, honesty, humility and life-long learning. Restoring spirituality in education would in turn transmit such values, while its non-religious nature would make Indigenous spirituality relevant to all students.<sup>46</sup>



### Practical Applications:

In viewing Indigenous spirituality as a source of knowledge and a tool for learning, the H’a H’a Tumxulaux Outdoor Education Program integrates spirituality in the following ways:

- **DEMONSTRATING GRATITUDE TO THE LAND:**

Each outdoor session begins with a prayer of thanks to the land, water and Ancestors. Led by the Aboriginal Education Support Worker, sacred tobacco is presented as an offering before any program activities commence. Students and staff also acknowledge the traditional territory of the Nation or Nations of the region. The value of respect is highlighted in this practice, exposing students to the concept of stewardship towards nature, including the importance of acknowledging the First Peoples of the land and their traditional values.

- **MAKING SACRED OFFERINGS TO NATURE:**

Students are exposed to the practice of offering sacred tobacco to living beings found in nature as a way to show respect and gratitude to all life. When materials are collected outside for class projects, students make an offering to trees and plants by asking permission, meditating or praying for a brief period, and laying down tobacco. Often students will make their decision of whether to collect from a certain plant or tree based on its visible conditions, such as whether the tree appears too young or too old. This practice emphasizes the value of reciprocal relationships – the process of give and take.

- **MAINTAINING THE SPIRITUAL INTEGRITY OF CEREMONIES:**

The program incorporates numerous ceremonies into its outdoor activities, carried out in consultation with local Elders and Knowledge Keepers. Ceremonies include smudging, drum journeys, traditional fire making, gratitude songs and traditional dance. As ceremonies differ according to Nation, receiving direction and support from local Indigenous communities is key to maintaining the spiritual integrity of ceremonial practices. Connections to local Elders and Knowledge Keepers was achieved by the Aboriginal Education Support Worker, although it is also possible for non-Indigenous educators to start conversations with local Indigenous associations, tribal groups and/or governing councils.

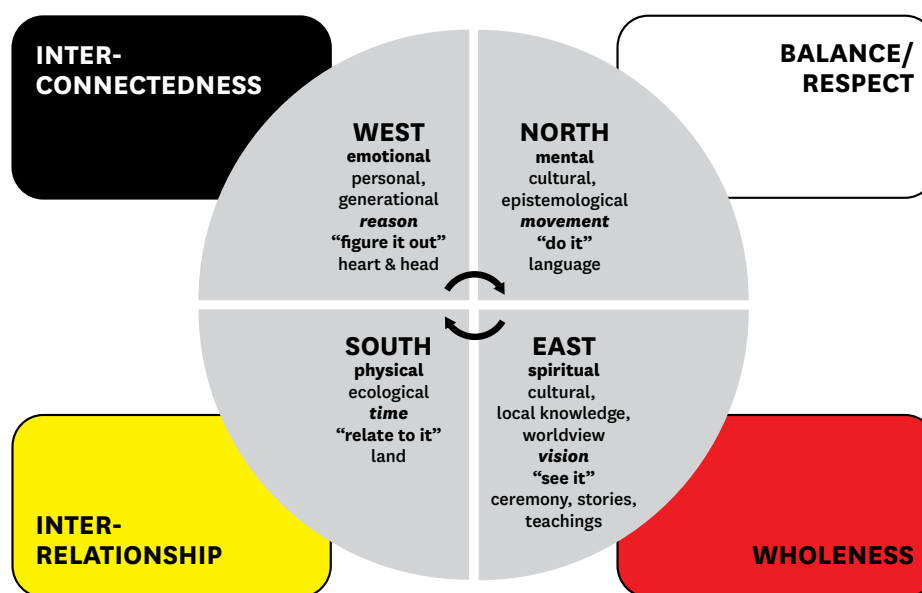




### 3. The Medicine Wheel

A key component of many Indigenous cultures – and thereby of Indigenous-centred pedagogy – is the teachings and holistic approach to learning offered by the Medicine Wheel. As Dr. Nicole Bell (Assistant Professor of the University of Trent School of Education) suggests in her 2014 article **“Teaching by the Medicine Wheel”** for the CEA’s *Education Canada Magazine*, “While there is some variation in its teachings and representations, the underlying web of meaning to Medicine Wheels remains the same: the importance of appreciating and respecting the ongoing interconnectedness and interrelatedness of all things.” This common understanding – represented by a circle – is therefore fundamental to Indigenous Worldviews. As the concept of interconnectedness implies that all living things are co-dependent for survival,<sup>47</sup> teaching this to children would provide them an important perspective on national and global issues, such as environmental sustainability.<sup>48</sup> On an individual level, the Medicine Wheel’s four quadrants, or four directions, imply that it can be a tool for personal reflection. With each quadrant representing an aspect of well-being – the mental, spiritual, physical and emotional – the Medicine Wheel provides a holistic perspective in reflecting on oneself and on one’s relationships with others. Given its broad applications, the medicine wheel can be used in a diverse range of educational settings,<sup>49</sup> for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

**Figure 1:** The Teachings of the Medicine Wheel\*



\*Note. Reprinted from “Teaching by the Medicine Wheel,” by Dr. Nicole Bell, *Education Canada*, Canadian Education Association (CEA), June 2014.





## Practical Applications:

The Medicine Wheel is a template for the H'a H'a Tumxulaux Outdoor Education Program that guides all activities from curriculum planning to program evaluation, as demonstrated through the following:

- **A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO LESSON PLANNING AND PROGRAM EVALUATION:**

As a symbol of holistic well-being, the Medicine Wheel can be used in a variety of educational settings for both planning lessons and evaluating the effectiveness of teaching practices. When educators come together to collaborate on lessons plans for the program, they evaluate how activities contribute to students' mental, spiritual, physical and emotional well-being and development. For example, when planning an outdoor lesson on plant and animal species, educators ensure that academic content is intellectually stimulating (the mental), that connections to the spiritual attributes of living things are made (the spiritual), that experiential and physical activity is integrated into the lesson (the physical), and that opportunities for inquiry and reflection through sharing circles are inclusive (the emotional). Inversely, in debriefing program outings, educators re-evaluate their activities according to the four quadrants. This holistic approach allows the educators to ensure the quality of their activities, to maintain student engagement and to meet individual learner needs.

- **AN EMPHASIS ON THE VALUE OF RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIPS:**

With the Medicine Wheel as a template for the interconnectedness and interrelatedness of all things, behaviour management within the program is built on the premise that all students' actions impact the well-being of others. This communal approach to behaviour management takes the shape of the 'Behaviour Code of Conduct': a non-penal set of rules that focuses on safety and reward. In a program that incorporate activities that require chopping wood, building fires and being in close proximity to bodies of water, students must prove – through willingness to learn, following directions and role modelling safe behaviour – that they can be trusted. As in a friendship or relationship, greater trust is followed by greater responsibility. Similarly, students are given additional privileges – such as being allowed to light fires or use an axe to chop wood – based on consistent compliance with program rules. Effectively, students become “Junior Leaders,” who are given the responsibility of modelling these skills to new students. This method of collaborative student learning reinforces the reciprocal give-and-take nature of healthy relationships, including the responsibility that comes with being a role model.

- **RESOLVING CONFLICT THROUGH RECONCILIATION CIRCLES:**

The Reconciliation Circle is a conflict resolution model built on Indigenous paradigms,<sup>50</sup> and it is used within the program to maintain a communal, family-like atmosphere amongst students. When a conflict arises between two students, or a group of students, a Reconciliation Circle is called to session where the entire class sits in a circle to discuss the event. A talking stick is used to ensure that each of the students in the dispute has the chance to explain their point of view. Peers can also request the talking stick to provide suggestions for resolving the conflict. Once an agreement is reached, the whole class is responsible for providing encouragement and accountability to uphold the decision that was made. This model is based on a whole-community perspective to resolving conflicts, where the entire social network – the entire class – is informed of the outcomes, and is responsible for maintaining social cohesion. The Reconciliation Circle puts an accent on the importance of maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships: an important skill in contexts that extend beyond schooling.







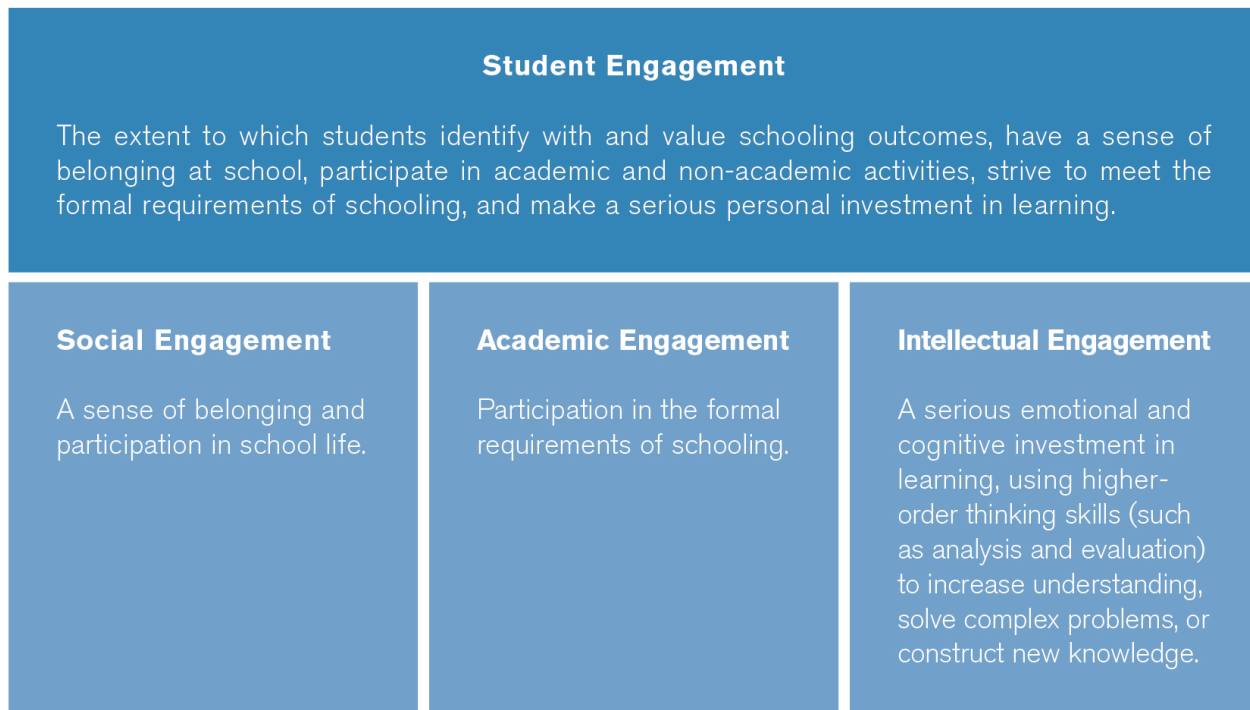


## IV. Impacts of Land-Based Learning: The Example of the Kootenay-Columbia Learning Centre

### Impacts on student engagement

Since its implementation, the H'a H'a Tumxulaux Outdoor Education Program has displayed evidence of the potential to increase student engagement. At this stage, it is difficult to determine whether overall test scores and graduation rates will improve as a result of students'

participation in the program. However, testimonies from staff, administrators and students have affirmed the positive social, academic and intellectual transformations students have experienced since attending the program.

**Figure 2:** CEA's three dimensions of student engagement <sup>51</sup>

\*Note. Reprinted from *What did you do in school today? Transforming classrooms through social, academic, and intellectual engagement (First National Report)*, by Willms, J. D., Friesen, S. & Milton, P., Canadian Education Association (CEA), 2009.

### Social engagement

Students have expressed a heightened sense of belonging and desire to participate in school activities. The family-like atmosphere of the program – created through the inclusion of team-building activities, sharing circles, and a concerted effort by staff to attend to the emotional, social and spiritual aspect of students' lives – has provided a sense of community for students who once struggled to find social acceptance in mainstream schooling. Practices inspired by Indigenous paradigms – such as Reconciliation Circles – have further served to resolve conflict and maintain social cohesion.

### Academic engagement

The hands-on, experiential approach of the program has spurred greater participation of students in lessons and assignments. This approach to engaging kinaesthetic learners has been followed by significantly improved attendance rates: a school requirement that students had struggled with while in mainstream schooling. Furthermore, the program is not an extra-curricular activity; rather, it is an academic program for which students receive credits towards their school diploma. The educators facilitating the program have also placed a strong emphasis on unconventional evaluation methods, and as such students who were once ashamed of their ability to read and write came to feel empowered to express their knowledge through oral presentations, drama skits, visual arts and storytelling.

### Intellectual engagement

The outdoor component of the program places an emphasis on critical thinking and collaborative inquiry. Critical thinking is developed through survival skills training, which challenges students to create artistic and everyday objects using materials found outdoors. An approach to learning driven by collaborative inquiry has allowed students to direct their learning goals in ways that are relevant to them. For example, at the beginning of the term, educators engage directly with students to craft lesson plans through a process of discussion and compromise.

## Student testimonials

In their own words, the students of the H'a H'a Tumxulaux Outdoor Education Program shared their stories of transformation:

- *"I had zero friends at my old school. I spent most of my time wandering the schoolyard during recess because no one wanted to hang out with me. At one point, I broke down and I told my mom that I couldn't do school anymore, and so we started looking for other opportunities. I transferred to this school and joined the H'a H'a program. I couldn't be happier. I didn't know anybody here when I first arrived, but I now feel that I have some pretty good relationships. We go on breaks and we joke around while waiting for the bus. We also do really fun drama skits, which gives everyone a good laugh."* (Student, 11 years old)
- *"My old high school wasn't working for me and my grades were plummeting. The classes were long, we would be asked to sit down, fill in a sheet, and bring it back in 45 minutes. The H'a H'a program was a last effort before dropping out. Here, we go outside, the teachers pick your brain, and you don't even realize you're learning. I am Indigenous and I have found my spirituality here, in a sense. I'm not really spiritual at all, but I now find inner peace whenever I come to school. My classmates are valuable to me: I see them for who they are, and I see that even more when we go outside. Overall, I treat a lot of other things in my life with a lot more respect thanks to the H'a H'a program."* (Student, 16 years old)
- *"I got kicked out of my old school after two weeks of being there because I wasn't showing up to class. I have a learning disability so I learn slower than everybody else. My teachers would write questions on the board and expect me to answer them, but what I needed was for my teachers to breakdown the questions and explain them to me. The H'a H'a program made me want to keep coming to school because they actually help me here, and when I ask for help they explain to me every detail. I really like the outdoor activities when we get to go out on the land and learn things that are useful, like building fires. I'm Indigenous and I learned that plants could be used for a lot of traditional things. I didn't know that before."* (Student, 13 years old)
- *"This past year with the H'a H'a program, my attendance has skyrocketed because the outdoors aspect really fits me. On one of the days that we went outside, we talked about things that we wanted to learn, and my classmates listed things like survival skills and ethnobotany. I actually get to set my own goals when I'm out there and not just try to achieve them, but actually do them. I'm actually progressing. Of course, there are basic rules: respect your teachers and peers, listen and cooperate. You have to earn the privileges of holding an axe, chopping wood or lighting a fire. You can become a 'Junior Leader' who is trusted with these kinds of privileges, and who can demonstrate them to the rest of the group. When I see a 'Junior Leader' demonstrating a skill, I change my attention from student-teacher towards student-student. I enjoy learning from my classmates."* (Student, 12 years old)
- *"Offering sacred tobacco to nature is about being kind, generous and asking permission. It's about being connected spiritually to the rest of nature and to other people. It's based on something like a gut feeling when you're asking a tree permission to take a branch from it. You ask, and you think quietly to yourself. If you don't feel so great about it, then you don't take from the tree. But if you get a warm and fuzzy feeling, then it's okay. Maybe a tiny tree would need that branch to live or to do other things. Maybe it can't grow older with a missing branch."* (Student, 11 years old)
- *"When we did the drum journey, I wasn't able to come up with a spirit animal for myself, but my teacher helped me with that. She said that I'm a red fox because I support my classmates and follow instructions well. We later did research on our spirit animals and I found out that I have a lot of the characteristics that red foxes have. I really liked this activity because I learned that there aren't many red foxes left in the world, and that makes me want to protect them because they are special animals."* (Student, 11 years old)

# Conclusion: Recommendations for Replicating this Program



Improving equity in the educational outcomes of Indigenous students is a pan-Canadian challenge, yet it requires context-specific remedies. As the H'a H'a Tumxulau Outdoor Education Program demonstrates, factors such as unique learner needs, local landscape and local culture will impact the types of activities that are offered within a land-based program. The philosophy of land-based education, however, does not change, and implies teaching and learning that is hands-on, experiential, guided by traditional spiritual values and built upon the Medicine Wheel as a template. It can be inspired by local Indigenous cultures, be built upon pan-Canadian

Indigenous paradigms, or combine both approaches. In light of the broad applications of Indigenous Worldviews and spirituality, Indigenous-centred pedagogy is relevant to all students – both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. The holistic approach of the Medicine Wheel can also be used to ensure student well-being beyond academic performance, making it a strong tool for heightening student engagement. Overall, there is no one-size-fits-all recipe for crafting a land-based education program, but the foundational philosophies of land-based learning can nevertheless guide and inspire unique initiatives.



In learning from the challenges and experiences of the students, staff and administrators of the H'a H'a Tumxulaux Outdoor Education Program, the following guidelines are recommended for crafting and leading a land-based program:

### 1. Foster relationships with the First Peoples of your school or school district's region.

- **Recruit an Indigenous educational resource person to join the program's guiding team by inquiring about the types of resources that are available at the school district level.** This resource person can provide direction on the integration of Indigenous perspectives into program activities, and can form connections between the program and local Indigenous communities.
- **Inform yourself as to the culture, protocols and Worldviews of local Indigenous communities by contacting local Band/Hamlet Offices, Native Friendship Centres or Indigenous associations.** Begin a conversation about your program's objectives by setting up a meeting and taking the time to build relationships.

### 2. Develop programming with the premise that Indigenous knowledge and values are relevant to all students – both Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

- **Determine ways to integrate traditional practices into a 21<sup>st</sup> century school context by consulting with your school team, principal, and Traditional Knowledge Keepers.** Begin with the idea of a traditional practice, followed by collaborative inquiry that ensures both contextual fit and spiritual integrity. This includes allotting professional development hours to developing and refining the program, including time for cultural competency training where needed (attending ceremonies, consulting with Elders, etc.).
- **Facilitate land-based learning programs in urban centres by bringing nature indoors.** There are numerous ways achieve this, such as growing a garden on school grounds, laying out rocks, plants or fountains in the classroom, or setting up floor lamps to adjust indoor lighting.
- **Create practical connections between traditional Indigenous paradigms and classroom practices.** For example, resolve conflicts using the Reconciliation Circle as a model, or manage classroom behaviour by developing a set of rules that emphasizes the interconnected, whole community consequences of actions and behaviours.
- **Develop partnerships with pre-existing school programs to share resources and lessons learned.** This is especially important if adequate financing has not yet been secured, and in the case that another school program could benefit from the broad applications of Indigenous Worldview perspectives.

### 3. Create a learning experience that is land-based, hands-on and experiential.

- **Foster partnerships with local Indigenous communities to provide students with an authentic cultural experience.** This would facilitate the inclusion of community-driven activities such as guest visits and field trips with ceremony leaders, Elders and storytellers, while ensuring that traditional practices are implemented in a respectful manner.
- **Create a guiding team that has the skills to foster students' mental, spiritual, emotional and physical well-being in an outdoor context.** This would include an educator with a high interest in physical activity and outdoor education, an Indigenous resource person or community member with Indigenous Traditional Knowledge and, depending on individual learner needs, a Guidance Counsellor, school therapist or Child and Youth Worker.
- **Develop lesson plans using the Medicine Wheel as a template.** Evaluate the quality of program activities in engaging students by considering the four components of the self: the mental, spiritual, emotional and physical. Conduct debriefs with fellow educators after land-based outings to reassess the program's effectiveness in meeting the four components.
- **Incorporate creative, unconventional ways of evaluating students' knowledge during land-based outings.** This can include allowing students to express their knowledge on ceremonies, Indigenous history or the spiritual significances of plants through oral presentations, the arts or guided sharing circles.

# Endnotes and Further Reading

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