

# **The Niichii Project: Revitalizing Indigenous Language in Northern Canada**

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*Abstract: Two Anishnabek kindergarten teachers discuss four principles of Indigenous pedagogies in a project with a university researcher that created a context for children to engage in activities to learn their Anishnabek language and culture, and create positive identities. The university researcher sent a rabbit puppet named Niichii (Friend), who was assigned the role of an Anishnaabek child whose family was from their Indigenous community but had moved away. Taking the role of Niichii's Kokum (Grandmother), the university researcher asked the child to teach Niichii the community's language and traditional ways. The teachers describe and interpret the learning activities of the Niichii project in terms of four elements of Indigenous pedagogies: intergenerational learning; experiential learning; spiritual learning involving interconnections with the land; and learning about relationality. Implications for other bilingual and multilingual contexts include creating role play contexts where children are positioned as teachers and helpers to support an imaginary character's language and cultural learning, building on children's funds of knowledge and highlighting cultural connections to the local community.*

*Keywords: Indigenous pedagogies, Indigenous language revitalization, children's Indigenous identities, intergenerational learning, experiential learning; oral tradition, land-based pedagogies, spirituality in learning, relational pedagogical processes*

## Introduction

Among the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) is a recognition of Indigenous languages as fundamental to Canadian culture and society with an accompanying responsibility, on the part of governments and all Canadians, to ensure that Indigenous communities are supported in leading initiatives to revitalize their ancestral languages. These Calls are meant to redress a long history of colonization and assimilation of Indigenous peoples in Canada that has resulted in English being the language spoken in the homes of Indigenous families. Residential schools, in operation from 1880 to the latter part of the twentieth century (the last school closed in 1996), had the greatest impact on Indigenous language loss in Canada (Hare & Anderson, 2010). Their “sole purpose was to ensure generations of young Indigenous children would conform to ways of encroaching settler societies” (Hare, 2015, p. 198). The consequences have been devastating in terms of damage to Indigenous children’s development of self-esteem and cultural pride, to family relationships, and to continuity of language and culture (Battiste, 2008). The Niichii Project (in Anishnaabemowin, the language of the Anishnaabek people, *niichii* means *friend*), which took place in the classrooms of two of the authors of this paper, responds to these calls.

The project draws on findings that successful early childhood initiatives are those involving local community members, whose knowledge and experience are respected and honoured (Elek et al., 2020), and that integration of family-centered practices enhance early childhood assessment programs for children with linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds (Keary & Kirkby, 2017). Conversations that are part of everyday family activities (Cairney, 2003), and family members’ reminiscing about past events (Neha et al., 2020) provide a rich foundation for children’s language, literacy, and all learning. Valuing family and community members’ knowledge and creating spaces for collaborative knowledge-building is important to providing a culturally safe space for learning in classrooms (Fleer, 2004; Flückiger et al., 2012). The project also draws on what has been learned from locally developed Indigenous language revitalization initiatives in Canada (e.g., First Peoples’ Cultural Council, 2016; Indigenous Language Research Network, n.d.). Although these programs have been created for adolescent and adult language learners,

many of the language teaching practices are transferable to our Niichii project (e.g., integrating language teaching with cultural practices of the community).

The project's goals are to support young Anishnaabek children's learning of Anishnaabemowin and their Anishnaabe culture, and their development of a strong, positive sense of Indigenous identity. Underpinning the project is a recognition that Indigenous children in Canada, like Māori children in Aotearoa New Zealand (Rameka, 2011), need to "develop a strong and secure sense of identity that emphasizes their connectedness to their ancestors, the universe and everything in it, and the spirit world" (p. 254). The effects of generations of assimilative practices are their reality, as English is spoken in many of their homes.

We believe that what we have learned from the Niichii Project can be applied to other classroom contexts, such as those of *TESOL in Context's* readers, where young children are learning English as an additional language. Supporting children's language learning through experiential, culturally appropriate pedagogies, is important in all language-learning contexts. Additionally, Indigenous perspectives offer great promise for more equitable early childhood education in mainstream, as well as Indigenous community contexts (Fleer, 2004; Hare, 2015), particularly bilingual or multilingual education for children of recent immigrants or refugees (Elek et al., 2020).

In this paper, we report on our analysis of video recordings of Niichii Project activities, using Hare's (2015) Indigenous pedagogies model, to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which these practices supported children's language and cultural learning and their identity construction. These research questions guided our study:

1. In reflections on their planning and implementing of the Niichii Project practices, what features do two Indigenous kindergarten teachers identify as important to Indigenous children's language and cultural learning?
2. How do these features align with Indigenous pedagogies?

### **Indigenous Pedagogies**

We draw on Hare's (2015) definition of Indigenous pedagogies as "the learning practices and processes that transmit a system of knowledge reflecting Indigenous experiences and worldviews" (p. 199). These practices are not uniform across Indigenous

communities, as they are adapted to the experiences of community members within their particular environments, reflecting knowledges embodied in lived experiences, values, and perspectives of generations of community members (Battiste, 2008). Elders and Knowledge Keepers have important responsibilities to transmit cultural knowledge and provide spiritual and emotional support.

The 18 participating Indigenous and non-Indigenous early childhood educators in Aboriginal Head Start programs, First Nations community-operated childcare, and Aboriginal preschool in western Canada in Hare's (2015) interview-based study gave examples of the important contributions of experiential and intergenerational learning and of spirituality to support young children's language, literacy, and all school learning. Family and community involvement were deemed to be highly influential to children's development of positive Indigenous identities and learning success. Critical findings from this study included seven Indigenous pedagogies identified by participants: intergenerational learning; experiential learning; oral tradition; modeling; learning from and about land; spirituality; and relational processes—connecting to family and community. Indeed, Indigenous family members who analyzed videos of children's interactions with family in their homes emphasized the need for educators to consider all family members who take an active role in caring for and teaching Indigenous children in the home, rather than parents only (Fleer, 2004). They explained that Indigenous children should be viewed as part of a family, "bound together within the fabric of the family through obligation and trust" (p.61), as family members are responsible for the child's learning and care. These seven pedagogies and the centralisation of family in children's lives are key to our research and following the methods sections, we discuss the two Indigenous teachers' decision-making, interactions with children, and reflections on how the Niichii Project has contributed to young Indigenous children's language and cultural learning, in terms of the seven Indigenous pedagogies from Hare's research.

### **Participants and Context**

Two authors of this paper, Yvette and Jacinta, are both living and teaching in their community of Wiikwemkoong First Nation in northern Ontario, Canada. Wiikwemkoong Nation, with a

population of approximately 3,500 people, is the only Unceded Anishinabek Nation and one of the largest Indigenous communities in the province of Ontario. The community can be accessed by road, located less than 200 kilometres from a major urban center. Anishnaabemowin and Anishnaabek culture are central to the kindergarten program in the community's elementary school, although the language of instruction in all subsequent years in both the elementary and high school is mainly English. Kindergarten is offered for two years prior to starting compulsory schooling in grade one. Because children may enroll in kindergarten during the year they turn four years old, the children in Yvette's and Jacinta's classrooms are between four- and six-years of age. Since 2020, all four kindergarten classes are Anishnaabemowin Immersion classes where the teachers speak the language throughout the day and use Indigenous land-based pedagogies. Children can sing songs fluently in the language and they show understanding by responding to the teacher's language. They use the language amongst themselves throughout the day, especially for routines. The children understand the concept of "stolen words" – that Anishnaabemowin was stolen from their community as a result of the residential schools and other assimilationist policies. They understand the need to revitalize their language. A handful of children use the language at home, especially if they live with their grandparents.

Within the community, the Elders greet each other and converse in the language. Community members know who can speak the language. For example, the Elders know that Jacinta and Yvette speak the language, so they also speak Anishnaabemowin amongst each other.

Yvette is an Anishnaabe Kwe, a Nookomis (Grandmother) and educator. She has a feeling of having come full circle as she stood in the same classroom when she was eight years old. She thought about her teachers who helped her learn Anishnaabemowin in her primary/ junior level of schooling. The students she has taught also have the ears of understanding and will use what they have learned at school, that has been shared with their parents. Her teaching path started in 1993. She has taught most of the grades, including high school, and now has returned to the primary school, teaching kindergarten. Yvette was born and raised in a mining town in northern Ontario along with her five siblings. She discovered she was an Indian from the discriminatory

slurs she was exposed to at a young age. She was eight years old when her dad moved his family back to his ancestral land, Wiikwemkoong, after the mine had closed. Her dad moved them into a one room home, with no running water or hydro, but recalls the closeness as a family - no rooms separated them. She found herself enrolled in a grade three class, attending an Anishinabek Elementary School for the first time. It was a culture shock, seeing children darker than her and being called white. She heard a language she did not understand, and heard her parents use this language and speak more freely, no longer in a whisper. She met her grandparents, all her relations, great aunties and great uncles, aunties, uncles, and numerous cousins who spoke Anishnaabemowin. It was her grandpa who taught her the importance of family as he took her out visiting with the team of horses, taught her about hauling well water, gathering firewood, planting a garden, as he passed along his teachings. It is where she found her sense of belonging and her identity. The language she heard from her all her relations, now she is understanding more from listening and asking what was being said if she did not understand certain words and made connections to the language she learned at school. Today she speaks what she knows, and her ears are fluent to the language.

Jacinta is also an Anishnabe Kwe and teacher. She lived with her Nookomis and Mishomis (grandfather) from infancy. After Jacinta's birth, her mother went across the road to look after children for a police officer who lost his wife while giving birth to their eighth child, just 10 days after Jacinta was born. He needed to provide for his children, so he continued to work. It takes a whole community to raise a child and it is part of our culture to help our community members and so off her mother went. The police officer and Jacinta's mother married and had three children together while Jacinta continued to live with her Nookomis and Mishomis. She feels very fortunate to have been immersed in Anishinaabemowin early in life, as this was the language spoken in her home. She was also immersed in Anishnaabek culture, planting and harvesting apples, and picking berries when they were in season. She and her grandparents lived off the land. Her Nookomis and Mishomis prepared her before she began school by speaking in English to her. She remembers them giggling when they heard her repeating what they were saying in English. Sadly, Nookomis passed and Jacinta moved in with her mother and her

husband in a house full of 11 children. From then on, Jacinta was immersed in English with only some Anishnaabemowin spoken in her home. She retained her language, however, because she found others in her community to converse with. Jacinta also benefited from initiatives to revitalize Anishnaabemowin through school competitions. Her grade two essay won the top prize, even though she was competing against students up to grade eight. This experience inspired and motivated Jacinta to maintain her language.

In their kindergarten classrooms, Yvette and Jacinta follow important Anishnaabek teachings: first, it takes a whole community to raise a child, and second it is important to consider the whole child, as the Medicine Wheel teaching shows us that a child's spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical well-being must be nurtured. Both educators view their teaching role as including the responsibility of the children's Nookomis (grandmother) to teach traditional ways, a responsibility that they took up during the Niichii Project. Teaching children about ancestral ways while connecting to creation as part of everyday activity, is a culturally expected role of the Nookomis. Teaching Niichii, who knew very little about who he was as Anishnaabek, about his community and his language because he had never before been on his ancestral land, was an exciting and yet stressful undertaking for Yvette and Jacinta. Additionally, because the school has a mainstream cultural structure and the Niichii Project focuses on teaching Anishnaabemowin and Anishnaabek culture in culturally appropriate ways, Yvette and Jacinta recognized that teaching and learning activities would stretch assumptions about what teaching and learning look like in school (e.g., the children would be learning about spirituality and the "classroom" would be the outdoors).

### **The Niichii Project**

The idea for the Niichii Project was shaped at a meeting of kindergarten teachers and school board administrators, as well as consultants from an Indigenous education service provider and Shelley, the non-Indigenous university researcher, who is a co-author of this article. We are all part of a larger, multi-year partnership project, Northern Oral language and Writing through Play (NOW Play).

We gave a rabbit puppet an identity as Niichii, an Anishnaabek child whose family was from the community but had moved away

to a non-Indigenous northern town that was hundreds of kilometres away from Anishnaabek First Nation. The Niichii puppet would accompany children to their homes and to various places and events in the community as part of their kindergarten program. Alongside the kindergarten children, Niichii would learn the community’s language and culture. Shelley, taking the role of Niichii’s grandmother (Nookomis), sent a letter to each kindergarten class, asking the children and their teachers to help Niichii learn Anishnaabemowin and Anishnaabek culture. Niichii’s Nookomis asked the children to document what they and Niichii were learning about their community’s language and culture to send to her.

When the Niichii puppet and letter arrived, Yvette and Jacinta read it to the children in English and in Anishnaabemowin (see Figure 1). Jacinta and Yvette then planned activities that would teach the children and Niichii their language and culture. The Niichii puppet accompanied the class wherever they went in the community, and children took turns bringing Niichii home to experience daily life in Wiikwemkoong.

*Figure 1. Letter from Niichii’s Nookomis (in English and Anishnaabemowin)*

<p style="margin-left: 40px;">Aanii,</p> <p style="margin-left: 40px;">I am Niichii’s Nookomis. Niichii has been living in Sioux Lookout but is from Wikwemikong First Nation. Niichii would like to learn the language and culture of your community and looks forward to making new friends. Please take or draw pictures when you bring Niichii with you and write about what you and Niichii are learning.</p> <p style="margin-left: 40px;">Miigwech for welcoming Niichii,</p> <p style="margin-left: 40px;">Niichii’s Nookomis</p>
<p style="margin-left: 40px;">Aanii,</p> <p style="margin-left: 40px;">Nookomis Niichii n’dow. Wikwemikong Niichii g’doonjiiibaa. Sioux Lookout noon goon g’bimadiz. Niichii obdek g’keandon Anishnaabemowin Wikwemikong Ski niichquewag obdek g’wabmek. Maaziinteschegun g’ziinbiigeh miigo wehnish Niichii g’biizhaa. G’ziinbiigeh wehnish giinwe miinwa Niichii g’keandwak.</p> <p style="margin-left: 40px;">Miigwech g’niichquewendaa Niichii.</p> <p style="margin-left: 40px;">Niichii e’ Nookomis</p>



Children communicated with Niichii's Nookomis about what they and Niichii were learning through drawing, writing, and scribbling about their experiences (see Figure 2).

*Figure 2. Niichii Puppet with Children's Interpretations of Story about Sweat Lodge*



### **Data Collection and Analysis**

In February and March of 2020, Jacinta recorded, using an iPod, five video clips ranging from 1.5 minutes to 14.5 minutes of children and the Niichii puppets engaged in Indigenous cultural practices with community members (e.g., at the sugar bush where a community member showed children how the maple trees are tapped for their sap and how the sap is gathered in buckets, etc.). Yvette used the iPod to photograph children engaged in drawing, writing and circle activities related to the Niichii project. She included 35 photographs in our data set. Shelley analyzed Yvette's and Jacinta's written reflections on the video recordings and photographs, and on their decision-making and observations of Niichii Project activities. She used four elements of Indigenous pedagogies generated in Hare's (2015) research:

1. *Intergenerational learning involving the passing on of teachings, is essential to children's Anishnaabemowin learning – children learn ancestral ways and world views from family members and from community members who take up Nookomis and Mishomis roles*

2. *Experiential learning, involving adult modeling and child listening, watching, and doing, is foundational to children's Anishnaabemowin learning* – children create understandings through direct experience as they watch and listen to adults who use Anishnaabemowin while carrying out Anishnaabek cultural practices
3. *Spiritual learning, including interconnections with the land, is vital to children's Anishnaabemowin learning* – Children learn ancestral knowledge about the land: the interconnectedness of all living things and about *Gchi Manitou*, the Creator.
4. *Learning about relationality creates a sense of belonging, which is essential to children's Anishnaabemowin learning* – social practices within the community facilitate family and community connections and children's sense of belonging and identity creation

Yvette and Jacinta, who were not familiar with Hare's seven elements before carrying out their reflections, read and revised the analysis so that the interpretations more closely reflected Indigenous perspectives of teaching and learning. In the analysis process, we found an overlapping of some of the seven elements within Hare's Indigenous pedagogies framework and thus, reduced the seven elements to four elements. The following report of our analysis reflects what we learned about the ways in which Indigenous pedagogies contributed to children's language and cultural learning in the Niichii Project:

*Intergenerational learning involving the passing on of teachings is essential for children's Anishnaabemowin learning*

Jacinta and Yvette agreed that the older generation has an important responsibility to pass on ancestral teachings to children. The residential school system and other assimilationist and genocidal policies and practices have led to the marginalization and, in many cases, the erasure of Indigenous knowledge, values, and ways of teaching children (Hare, 2015). Yvette's reflections on her childhood underscore the destructive impact of these policies: "When teaching the children Anishnaabemowin, I thought about my parents, remembering them speaking the language in closeness, so as not to be heard. It wasn't until years later that I asked why I was not taught Anishnaabemowin. My dad's answer was quick. He did not want what happened to him (being punished for speaking

Anishnaabemowin, in residential school) to happen to me.” Having to learn the language outside her home, Yvette knew firsthand the need for intergenerational language and culture revitalization initiatives. She wrote: “We are a healing nation that has suffered a near loss of language, and traditions. I have been given these gifts (teachings) that I hold dearly to me and I feel that it is my responsibility to share these gifts with students. These gifts are the language, traditions, values and beliefs, as well as daily practices. She explained further: “As an Anishnaabe teacher I believe I can be a part of the healing process and make a difference in our educational system by implementing the Seven Grandfather Teachings (see Figure 3), which are at the center of intergenerational teaching and learning, as they have been passed down through the generations.

Figure 3. Seven Grandfather Teachings

***Seven Grandfather Teachings***

*Nbwaakaawin* (Wisdom) – to have wisdom is to know the difference between good and bad and to know the results of your action.

*Gzaagidwin* (Love) – unconditional love to know that when people are weak, they need your love the most, that your love is given freely, and you cannot put conditions on it, or your love is not true.

*Mnaadendiwin* (Respect) – respect others, their beliefs and respect yourself. If you cannot show respect, you cannot expect respect to be given.

*Aakdenwin* (Bravery) – to be brave is to do something right even if you know its going to hurt you.

*Gwekwaadziwin* – Honesty, to achieve honesty within yourself to recognize who and what you are, do this and you can be honest with all others.

*Dbasendizwin* – (Humility) – humble yourself and recognize that no matter how much you think you know, you know very little of all the universe.

*Debwewin* (Truth) – to learn truth, to live with truth and to walk with truth, to speak truth.

The Seven Grandfather Teachings represent cultural knowledge about living in a good way that had been passed on orally and through example from generation to generation in Anishnaabek First Nation. Ruptures in the intergenerational learning process occurred when children were removed from their families and all traditional ways were prohibited in residential schools. Yvette elaborated on her role in repairing the ruptures: “It is important to me as an educator to be a role model and to pick up those gifts that have been cast aside and make them relevant to nurture our children.

Both Yvette and Jacinta described the language, Anishnaabemowin, as a gift to be passed from one generation to the next; a gift that “was sent to us from Gzhe Mnidoo. It is our first language, and it is at the tip of our tongue. We need to speak our language.” The Niichii Project, which created a context for Niichii to learn alongside the children, served as a vehicle for passing the gift of the language to children in their kindergarten classrooms.

*Experiential learning, involving adult modeling and child listening, watching, and doing, is foundational to children’s Anishnaabemowin learning*

In order to learn a language, as Jacinta explains, children “need to be immersed in it and live it. Everything must be learned in context in order to understand it.” In their kindergarten classrooms, both she and Yvette speak Anishnaabemowin as much as possible throughout the day. They expect that when children hear adults model ways that the language can be used in real-life situations, they will be more likely to understand and eventually use the language. Yvette wrote: “I glow with pride as I hear Anishnaabemowin from the children and observe their understanding of the language when spoken to. One day a child called out to another student after I gave instructions and the other student wasn’t following them: ‘She is telling you to sit quiet, to listen, and eyes on the teacher.’ To hear that the children are understanding Anishnaabemowin brings joy to my heart.”

Both teachers found ways for Niichii and the children in their kindergarten classes to learn Anishnaabemowin by hearing and using the language while engaging in cultural experiences on the land. Niichii and the children in Jacinta’s kindergarten classrooms were immersed in the language when they went out into the community to learn about land-based practices during the

Niichii project. Jacinta describes one experience:

Niichii and the children learned about tapping Ninaatigook (maple trees). This was done by tapping a spile (spigot) into the tree and hanging a bucket off the spile. Niichii and friends ran around from tree to tree checking buckets for sap. As the buckets were emptied into one large barrel, the sweet, clear liquid was boiled in large steel pans over a hot fire and transformed into a dark, thick, smoke-flavored syrup in the sugar shack. Some of the liquid was warmed up to boiling point and put into a teapot with teabags. Niichii had never had such a good cup of tea before. What better way but to learn off the land. Mother Earth is life. Even her trees provide more than clean air for us.

The language is alive in the community, although children overhear it when people meet each other. In everyday life in the community, they do not hear the language directed at them. The everyday life experiences are changing as a result of these school initiatives that are supported and driven by the Band Council.

Explaining that children were learning from the community when they took up community cultural practices on the land, Yvette's class took Niichii for a walk in the bush. Yvette describes the experiential learning and the important teachings that came from the experience:

The children picked up a stick that spoke to them. This stick served as a talking stick. Back in the classroom, the children decorated their talking sticks with deer hide, shells, beads, etc. The day ended with children standing in a circle and each child took a turn sharing what they had learned that day. Every morning afterward, the class sat in a circle and used my talking stick, taking turns talking about what was on their heart. I encouraged children to use Anishnaabemowin words that they knew, such as *Gzhe-Mnidoo*, *Gazaagin* (love). The talking stick teaches respect for one another, as they listen to what others have to say.

The Niichii Project drew upon family resources, as well as community cultural resources. At the end of each day, Niichii went home with one of the students. As Jacinta explains:

Niichii was immersed in a variety of cultures when he went home with the students. I say a variety of cultures because

every family has different practices and customs, but they are all relevant to what Niichii needed to learn about who he was as Anishinaabek. Some families took Niichii to *Dawegamgoong* (the community store) while others took Niichii to learn about *Zigoos* (auntie), *Zhishehn* (uncle) or *Mishoomsag* (grandparents) depending upon what the families did to introduce Niichii to the community.

Through introducing Niichii to family members and to important places in the community that were part of children's everyday lives, children were highlighting aspects of their Anishnaabek identities and building a common memory, connecting them to the Creator, Spirit, and his creation.

*Spiritual learning, including interconnections to the land, is vital to language revitalization*

Inherent within the Anishnaabemowin language is the sense of spiritual connection to the land and to all living and non-living things. In Yvette's class, spiritual connections were reinforced daily through engaging in ceremonial practices such as smudging (burning sage or other sacred herbs in a *Migis* (shell) and allowing the smoke to cleanse and purify), showing appreciation and asking for guidance from *Gchi Manitou* (Creator). Yvette taught Niichii and the children that "we are at the center of the Medicine Wheel, being surrounded by all the gifts given to us by *Gchi Manitou* (Creator) which are all our relations."

Niichii and the children learned about spiritual connections to the land as they walked to a nearby river and hugged a tree, listening to its heartbeat. Yvette shared teachings about "the spiritual connection to the land, trees, water, and air and a stewardship of the land. This is all connected to our language, our culture and who we are as Anishinaabek." In her reflections, Jacinta also highlights the centrality of spirituality to children's language and cultural learning and their identity construction:

Language provides us with not only spirituality, but also a strong sense of identity. With a strong sense of identity, we carry respect for ourselves and one another and the snowball effect is we have fewer social problems and we can continue to contribute to society.

Throughout the Niichii Project, the two teachers placed spiritual connections to the land and all creation at the center of

children's learning of Anishnaabemowin. They used the medicine wheel teachings to ensure that the whole child, including the child's "inner being, their Spirit," was nurtured. Ancestral teachings were important community resources for learning the language, and through the language, learning *Bimazwin* (to live a good life).

*Learning about relationality creates a sense of belonging that is essential to children's Anishnaabemowin learning*

The need for Indigenous children to feel a sense of belonging and to feel connected to their community was the underlying motivation for the Niichii Project. Because family and community relations were severed for generations of Indigenous children while residential schools were in operation (Hare, 2015), a sense of belonging to their Indigenous community and extended family is especially important. Yvette writes about growing up away from Anishnaabek First Nation, an experience that she and Niichii share:

I could totally relate to Niichii coming home to his people; not understanding who he was as an Anishnaabe *binoojiinh* (child). Niichii brought back many memories of being raised off the reserve, feeling displaced, not knowing who I was as an Anishnaabe *binoojiinh*. My mind raced back to my own childhood when I attended public schools, being raised off reserve. I wondered if Niichii had experienced racism. Did he hear 'you dirty Indian' in his childhood as I did? When my parents moved us back to the reserve, I met and got to know my grandparents, aunts, uncles, and numerous cousins. It was there that I felt the connections to all my relations.

Learning Anishnaabemowin connected Niichii and the children to their community in enduring ways. Jacinta explained that embedded within the words and the ways of interacting with others using the language are understandings about what it means to be a member of the community. As a result, hearing and speaking Anishnaabemowin connected the children and Niichii to the experiences and understandings of many generations of their family and community.

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### **The Niichii Project: Conclusions and implications for children’s language learning**

As in previous research (e.g., Fler, 2004; Flückiger et al., 2012), our findings, which center on Yvette’s and Jacinta’s reflections on the Niichii Project, highlight the important role of family and community members’ knowledge and experiences to support children’s language learning and their creation of positive identities. Underpinned by Indigenous worldviews and pedagogies (Battiste, 2008; Hare, 2015), the Niichii Project contributes a new way of thinking about community and family members as resources for children’s language learning. Learning activities within the Niichii Project, for example, connected children to the



knowledge passed on from many previous generations and showed a valuing of the spiritual connections to the land and all living and non-living things (Rameka, 2011). Language learning took place through immersing children and Niichii in concrete experiences in the world beyond the classroom. Children learned language through watching and listening to teachers and community members while engaged in cultural practices of the community. They heard and used language in context. Jacinta and Yvette used the Anishnaabemowin language whenever possible in everyday interactions within the classroom, a practice identified in previous research as important to fostering children's language and literacy learning (Cairney, 2003). They also joined community and family members in using Anishnaabemowin while carrying out community cultural practices.

The underlying goals for the Niichii Project, to create a sense of relationality and belonging to the community through teaching Niichii and the children their ancestral language and cultural practices, were developed with a recognition that cultural meanings and worldviews are embedded in the language (Battiste, 2008). Yvette drew on personal experience, similarly documented by many Indigenous Canadians as a tragic outcome of assimilative government policies (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), of feeling cut off from her community when she grew up without hearing Anishnaabemowin and without knowing her extended family. The content of the cultural teachings, the stances that the teachers took up (as each child's parent and grandparent), and the experiential, holistic, relational ways of teaching in the Niichii Project reflected *Aadiziwin*-Anishnaabek way of seeing, doing and being.

### **Bringing our learning from the Niichii Project to other classrooms**

Niichii Project activities and goals, which reflect Indigenous pedagogies, can inform teaching practice in other bilingual and multilingual contexts where children are learning the dominant language, rather than their ancestral language. In the Niichii Project, Anishnaabemowin and Anishnaabek culture were acknowledged and legitimated, creating linguistic and cultural connections across generations of community members. These intergenerational connections can be created in other classrooms by recognizing the important contributions of children's ancestral

language to their learning of another language and creating spaces for children to use both languages.

In the Niichii Project, a context was created where children learned alongside an imaginary character whose Anishnaabek cultural and linguistic knowledge was nascent. This positioned children as teachers and helpers—powerful roles that supported positive identity development. Another influential feature of the Niichii Project was the sharing of the teaching role with community members. Interactions with children using the target language were contextually grounded. Language was intertwined with cultural activity and children came to see themselves as connected in a holistic way to the community through experiencing its cultural practices and learning its language. In classrooms where children are learning the dominant societal language, cultural connections to the local community can also be highlighted through bringing children into the community to participate in cultural activities and events unique to the local community. In this way, children can develop a deeper sense of belonging to the local community while they are learning the language.

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*Jacinta Manitowabi* born and raised on Wiikwemkoong Unceded Territory, was fully immersed in her Anishinaabemowin language and culture as a child. She left her community to gain Early Childhood Educator qualifications and worked in a variety of capacities, including Student Liaison at Cambrian College's Binoojiiyag Kinoomaadwin Early Childhood Program and Supervisor in a Daycare in Constance Lake First Nation, where she was asked by the Education Director to teach Kindergarten. She then became a qualified teacher. She decided to give back to her community and moved home to work as a resource teacher in the community daycare. Currently, she is an Anishinaabemowin Immersion Kindergarten Teacher. She has been given the gift of Anishinnabe language and feels it is her duty to pass it along to children within her community.

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