



# Zaagi'idiwin: Reflections on Love, Indigenous Teaching Practice, and the Hoop Dance Project

## Zaagi'idiwin : réflexions sur l'amour, la pratique de l'enseignement autochtone et le projet de danse du cerceau

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# Zaagi'idiwin: Reflections on Love, Indigenous Teaching Practice, and the Hoop Dance Project

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**Abstract:** This paper reflects on an elementary school hoop dance project organized by a white music teacher, taught by an Indigenous hoop dancer, and guided by the Anishinabek goodlife teachings. It suggests that the hoop dance project, and specifically the hoop dancer's teaching approach, allowed students to experience new, unique, and beneficial learning that engaged the first goodlife teaching: Zaagi'idiwin (love). Furthermore, the experience was a valuable example of Indigenous educational practice, centering relationship and participation. The research argues that current educational realities can impede these best practices and run counter to healthy, holistic and culturally based learning.

**Keywords:** truth and reconciliation, hoop dance, Indigenous methodology, Indigenous education, goodlife teachings

## Introduction

To respond to the legacy of harm inflicted by the Indian Residential School system in Canada, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada released ninety-four calls to action on December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Call to action 10 iii. states:

We call upon the federal government to draft new Aboriginal education legislation with the full participation and informed consent of Aboriginal peoples. The new legislation would include a commitment to sufficient funding and would incorporate the following principles: ... iii. developing culturally appropriate curricula. (TRC Calls to Action, 2015, p. 2) .Call to action 63 iii. states:

We call upon the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada to maintain an annual commitment to Aboriginal education issues, including...iii. Building student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect. (TRC Calls to Action, 2015, p. 7)

Lauren Hill's dissertation research, upon which, in part, this paper is based, aimed to respond to these calls to action by organizing and analyzing a hoop dance instructional unit within a mainstream, publicly funded elementary school. Grounded in Anishinabek goodlife theory (Toulouse, 2008, 2011, 2013), this hoop dance unit sought to implement culturally appropriate music and dance curricula within a classroom, fostering understanding, empathy, and respect among students of different backgrounds. It was also a case study of the interactions between an Indigenous performer named Beany John, a white teacher (Lauren), and a group of grades six and seven students. Lauren (she/her) identifies as a cis-gender, straight woman of settler ancestry, and Beany John (she/they) is Plains Cree and Taino, hailing from Kehewin Cree Nation. She is an award-winning hoop and grass dancer and identifies as Indigiqueer/Two Spirit (John, n.d.). The research was conducted on the Treaty 20 and Williams Treaty territory of the Michi Saagiig Mississauga Anishinabek, located within 70 kilometers of Curve Lake, Hiawatha, Alderville, and Scugog First Nations. While employing Truth and Reconciliation calls to action 10 iii and 63 iii, the overall goal was to use the transformative power of the arts to begin the journey towards reconciliation in one classroom. This paper presents partial results from this research and suggests that the hoop dance project, and specifically Beany's teaching approach, allowed students to experience new, unique, and beneficial learning that engaged the first goodlife teaching: *Zaagi'idiwin* (love). Furthermore, the experience was a valuable example of Indigenous pedagogical practices. It argues that local educational realities including standardized testing and large class sizes impede Indigenous pedagogy and run counter to healthy, holistic, and culturally based learning. Please note that this paper is co-authored by Beany John and Lauren Hill. For clarity, it is written in the third person, with the names of the respective authors used when relevant.

## **Theory**

Theoretically, the hoop dance project was organized around the Anishinabek goodlife teachings: *Zaagi'idiwin* (love), *Gwayakwaadiziwin* (honesty), *Minaadendamowin* (respect), *Aakode'ewin* (bravery), *Nibwaakaawin* (wisdom), *Dabaadendiziwin* (humility), and *Debwewin* (truth). These seven traditional teachings were a meaningful basis upon which to build the project, not only because they are central principals of local Anishinabek culture (Toulouse, 2008, 2011, 2013), but also because frequent reflection and referral to the teachings helped remind the researchers to remain connected to the higher purpose of the research throughout the project, which is to further the reconciliation process in Canada. This paper examines the findings around *Zaagi'idiwin* (love), which is the first of these teachings. The authors would also like to convey that the ideas presented here reflect personal understandings of this teaching and cannot fully illuminate the depth and complexity of Anishinabek traditional knowledge. The paper is offered with humility and gratitude.

## **Methodology**

The research project was shared with 27 students in grades 5 and 6, ages 11-13, at a small rural Catholic elementary school in Ontario. The students included individuals from both the

local town and a nearby Anishinaabe First Nation, representing diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Prior to this project, the students had not experienced hoop dance instruction, although some students carried Indigenous cultural knowledge from their own families and communities. The teachers at the school were non-Indigenous and demonstrated enthusiasm and support for hosting the project. Over approximately two months, the researchers visited the school once a week, spending afternoons with the students. These sessions involved dancing, hoop creation, hoop dance teachings, and arts-based reflection activities.

Arts-based research is a methodological approach that aligns with the objective of fostering discourse about relationships and the pursuit of reconciliation in the classroom (Leavy, 2015, 2020). The integration of music, dance, drama, and visual arts into education research methodology is increasingly prevalent, as researchers strive to enhance empathy, improve mental health, and convey unique learning experiences (Cahnman-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2018; Herron & Skinner, 2022; Kara, 2020; Leavy, 2015, 2020; Martin & Colp, 2022). Furthermore, arts-based creative endeavors have effectively promoted anti-racism, community building, and inclusivity (Fonseka et al., 2021; Mikkonen et al. 2020; Sanders-Bustle, 2020). Leavy discusses the evolution of the qualitative methodological paradigm, which has been influenced by critical theories from the late twentieth century, to include approaches such as arts-based research (2015). She asserts that the shape of arts-based research adeptly captures aspects of the human condition by engaging with emotional elements. Leavy contends that arts-based research possesses a unique capability to access emotions, offer holistic personal stimulation, convey fresh insights and learning, challenge stereotypes, and generate impactful experiences for both participants and observers (2015).

Drawing from her own experiences as a performing musician and educator, Lauren is aligned with Leavy's stance and further asserts that arts-based experiences offer a direct route to profound learning and expression. In her teaching, she prioritizes grounding units in musical creation and performance, and as a result, has observed students undergoing transformative shifts in behaviour and attitude when participating in artistic creation and group performances. Post-performance, they forge stronger class bonds, exhibit a broad spectrum of emotions, and eagerly communicate their feelings. Lauren's performance career yielded similar outcomes, inviting profound connections with fellow musicians and audiences. She understands these arts-based experiences to be shortcuts to emotion, expression, relationships, and communication. In the context of the hoop dance project, the arts truly guided learning, both in the dance itself and in the creatively inspired reflection activities.

Beany is a critically acclaimed powwow performer, hoop dancer, and educator, and her contributions as an Indigenous performing arts expert and knowledge holder were central and necessary to the delivery of the material to the students. Beany's instruction combined demonstration, history, story, and student practice. At the culmination of the unit, the students performed for an enthusiastic school and parent community. The data collection strategies included questionnaires, interviews, talking circles, class discussions, visual representations, and creative writing. The variety in these methods facilitated a multidimensional and complex

dialogue around culturally informed learning, while also giving students with diverse learning styles and literacy preferences the ability to communicate their learning and opinions as effectively and naturally as possible.

The analysis phase utilized constructivist grounded theory analysis, employing codes, categories, and themes to analyze student reflections and products, with the resulting data shaping the research findings (Creswell, 2012). The merger of constructivist grounded theory with Indigenous philosophy proved compelling, given their congruent assumptions that knowledge is subject and valuable (Kovach, 2009). The qualitative nature of constructivist grounded theory analysis was adaptable enough to harmonize with arts-based research and Indigenous theory (Leavy, 2015, 2020; Toulouse, 2008, 2011, 2013), all while preserving their distinctiveness. This confluence of approaches fosters a synthesis that yields a comprehensive reflection.

It is important to note that the principal of the school was fully supportive of this project and that prior to the commencement of these research activities, the research plan was examined and approved by the relevant School Board Ethics Committee, University Ethics Board, and local Aboriginal Ethics Committee. Parental feedback was welcomed throughout the process and parents were involved as audience members on the day of the final performance. To ensure the anonymity of the students, pseudonyms are used in the forthcoming discussion.

### **The Hoop Dance**

Although the hoop dance can also be associated with a healing dance of the Pueblo people of the American Southwest (Browner, 2004, 2009), it was chosen as the instructional dance medium for this project because of its historical and contemporary significance to the Anishinabek People. In his book *The Manitous: The Spiritual World of the Ojibway* (1995), Indigenous scholar Basil Johnston discusses the origin story of the hoop dance in Anishinabek culture. He explains that the Manitou Pukawiss (who is the brother of Nana'b'oozoo), is a sensitive and creative child. However, his gentle and artistic temperament is a disappointment to his father, and he is disowned. As he matures, he adopts a traveling lifestyle, and becomes interested in exploring and enacting human struggle and emotion. His talent for dance and drama wins him fame and popularity amongst the people, and he invents several healing dances. One of these healing dances is the hoop dance, in which willow hoops are transformed into the layered troubles of the dancer. As the number of hoops increases, the troubles are multiplied. The dancer asks for assistance from various spiritual beings (who are also represented by hoops) but finds that they are uninterested in helping. Finally, the dancer struggles to twist his body through each hoop and in doing so overcomes each trial on his own (pp. 27-35). As contemporary Anishinabek dancers create their own hoop dances, they are, in fact, participating in this process of struggle and healing. These dancers are enactors rather than actors, experiencing joy and connection on the stage, and performing in the transformative circle of life (Johnston et al., 2009).

## Findings and Discussion

“I’m so happy to get to do this, it’s really fun” (Jamie, student).

Anishinaabe professor Pamela Toulouse, who extensively addresses the significance of goodlife teachings within the education system, offers the following perspective on love:

In Anishinabek teachings, love is described as an action word. Love is the first goodlife teaching that is presented to children, and it is at the heart of all things (Buswa & Shawana 1992). Love includes daily interactions with the world and behaviours that contribute to a sense of peace (Benton-Banai, 2010). Love also includes acts of kindness – to both others and the earth. Engaging in acts of kindness toward all beings is the beginning of a person’s self-development. It is the baseline for committing selfless acts to help others. Love is not about seeking praise or rewards. These acts of kindness are intrinsically motivated. Share this teaching with students before implementing any of the suggested teaching strategies. (Toulouse, 2011, p. 42)

It is challenging, however, to discuss love without considering other positive emotions. Numerous emotions elicit smiles and a desire to prolong an activity, and among these emotions, clear intersections exist. For example, “I loved our field trip,” might be restated as “I had fun on the field trip,” “I was excited to go on the field trip,” or “I was happy during our field trip”. While there are certainly more specific definitions for these positive emotions, this paper will take some liberty in allowing them to coexist under the broad umbrella of love. Happiness theorist Nel Noddings states that “Teachers should not define happiness for their students and, although I clearly prefer a complex description of happiness, I have tried to leave the concept open to continued exploration” (2003, p. 3). Borrowing Noddings’ sentiment allows the concepts of love, friendship, fun, and happiness to remain somewhat open, intermingling in a variety of ways. For example, love of fellow classmates can appear as friendship, which in turn, contributes to a sense of belonging. When combined with a love of the material being taught, these emotional experiences are pleasurable and fun, and students who are having fun may also describe their time as happy. Toulouse’s definition requires that love ultimately contributes to a sense of peace, but within that realm of peace, there is also room for friendship, belonging, fun, and happiness.

Love, as encompassing these sentiments, emerges as the category of phrases and words that occurred most frequently throughout the student data collection process. Noddings states “I have noticed also that children (and adults too) learn best when they are happy” (2003, p. 2). The research reveals that all 27 students, at some point in their written or oral reflections, expressed sentiments of enjoyment and fun. Many students also included interactions with friends as being one of their favourite parts of the project. The hoop dance unit, as an inclusive, experiential movement-based, and creative project, and as a learning event that endeavored to create a sense of belonging, provided an opportunity for students to learn in an environment and in a way that was different from many of their daily learning opportunities and thus encouraged an array of positive emotions. This unique learning allowed students to engage with the material in a

particularly rich way, potentially bringing them closer to the prospects of tranquil moments, decolonized experiences, and instances of reconciliation.

### **Love**

Toulouse's definition characterizes love as an action word (2011). It is possible to delve deeper into the action-oriented outcomes of love, which, according to Toulouse's definition, involve generating a sense of peace and participating in acts of kindness. How do students come to a place where they themselves feel peaceful and are therefore able to spread this peace? What do students need to feel in their own hearts, to be moved to act kindly towards others? Student reflection activities revealed the themes of fun, friendship, belonging, connection to the teacher, and happiness. These feelings may be the components of students experience that make space for them to walk the path of love. Students who are having fun are in a positive mindset that allows them to be open to positive action and less inclined towards negative action. Students who feel a sense of belonging are more likely to welcome others, and students who feel a sense of friendship are more inclined to be good friends themselves. A connection to the teacher contributes to the sense of belonging, and the feeling of happiness reinforces activities as being positive and valuable. Thus, students who experience happiness, fun, connection, belonging, and friendship are likely to be kind and to contribute to an overall sense of peace.

### **Fun**

"This first class was really fun" (Finley, student).

From the very first reflection, which took place after the initial session with Beany, this student was already having fun. Teachers are aware that the first class can have a significant impact on the success of a project, as initial negative or *boring* experiences can be difficult to overcome. The first class also carries with it a fair bit of pressure, as students are often quite excited to start something new and have high expectations, which are sometimes difficult to fulfill. In this case, the first class consisted of making hoops and involved minimal verbal instruction. Prior to the beginning of this project, students knew that they would be participating in a hoop dance project, but they did not have the details. They knew that there would be a special guest artist, that they would be dancing, and that they would be working with their hands. Overall, these were exciting prospects, and a sense of anticipation permeated the room in the days leading up to the start of the unit. When Beany showed students how to create the hoops and then promptly let them proceed, it enabled them to channel their accumulated excitement directly into the creative process of making the hoops.

"The hoops were really fun to make!" (Skyler, student).

"I now can decorate the rest and have a lot of fun!" (Lennon, student).

"I am done all three of my hoops. They were fun to make" (Landry, student).

Critical theorist Sara Ahmed explains that happiness is generated not from within, but rather, in relationship to objects that create affect. She states:

I want to consider happiness as a happening, as involving affect (to be happy is to be affected by something), intentionality (to be happy is to be happy about something), and evaluation or judgement (to be happy about something makes something good). (2010, p. 29)

In this case, it appears that the students were affected by their hoops, thus creating fun moments, and, with some semantic liberty, happy moments. Throughout the hoop building process, students treated their hoops with care, showing them to their friends with great excitement, and becoming eager to use them in dance and movement. Some students named their hoops and several were very keen to explain why they chose their colours and patterns. As Ahmed said, they were affected by their hoops, evaluated them and found them to be good. What resulted were moments of fun and happiness.

All 27 students successfully crafted their own hoops, which were of high quality and were visually impressive. There was no hierarchy, real or imagined by the students, between hoops or between quality of hoops as each hoop was unique and aesthetically pleasing. When students expressed the fun they had making the hoops, what emerged beneath and beyond their words was a sense of pride and self-confidence.

“Today was really fun and I really liked it!” (Charlie, student).

The enjoyable momentum of the project continued into subsequent lessons, and students continued to report having fun and enjoying the process throughout the reflection activities. This is notable because as the unit progressed, the dancing began which can be uncomfortable for some students. Also, the dance moves became increasingly difficult, and the practices required a good deal of repetition. Nonetheless, many students continued to report having fun.

“Today was very fun and I think we are improving every day” (Sage, student).

Sage is feeling optimistic that the class is improving with every additional practice. Their use of *we* as opposed to *I* is notable. Sage is viewing the progress and the success of the dance as a group concern, which may be contrary to how they are accustomed to thinking at school, as many assignments are individualistic in nature.

“I’m so happy to get to do this, it’s really fun” (Briar, student).

Briar also writes about fun and expresses a sense of gratitude for being part of the process. Fun is a term that can encompass or pair with other emotions and feelings such as gratitude and teamwork. Just as a student who complains that they are bored is likely feeling a much more complicated palate of emotion, so too a student who exclaims that they are having fun could be using this term to include a broader spectrum of feelings.

“We went through the dance a few more times and it was fun” (Basil, student).



“We did it in the music room, so it was a smaller room and me and Jack kept on bumping into each other, but it was fun to practice” (Skyler, student).

Although students may sometimes feel excited at the beginning of a project and again near the end and during the performance, the middle section, or the *grind* of the learning can show a real dip in interest. This is the part when everyone is a bit tired, repetition is necessary, difficult material becomes evident, and logistical problems can emerge. One of these problems occurred during a session when the gym was not available for practice so the whole group had to work in the music room. Students named this as the least enjoyable part of the project, largely because they were forced to work in cramped and hot conditions. Regardless, the students continued to have fun, showcasing resilience likely bolstered by prior enriching experiences and Beany’s pedagogical skill. Beany’s pedagogical expertise is deeply rooted in cultural insights and encompasses a strong focus on fostering relationships, experiential learning, choice, and responsibility. This pedagogical approach will be elaborated upon further in the subsequent section dedicated to Indigenous educational practices.

After session five, the class was asked to do an interview activity in which they wrote three questions and posed the questions to other classmates. Several of the students asked their peers if they would recommend this type of learning to other students and received answers that were some version of, “Yes, because it’s fun!” While the notion of fun might appear as a somewhat casual or straightforward justification for a recommendation, I would reiterate that when a student uses the word fun, they are alluding to and suggesting an array of underlying emotions and words, including but not limited to pride, excitement, self-esteem, and positivity. A student explains:

I thought it was a great experience to learn about this because it was a fun activity, it was entertaining, it was not just one of those things that, oh we have to go and do this. It was exciting, it was like everything was, once you came back to the class, it was like everything was brand new. (Denise, student)

Denise categorizes the hoop dance activities as generally fun, much like many of the other students, but the distinction lies in their endeavor to provide additional explanation for the sentiment. Fun is explained as containing the elements of excitement, eagerness, and novelty. Denise explains that they do not feel a begrudging necessity of compliance, as may occasionally be the case with other activities, but is eager to attend class. They also pair the feeling of excitement with the somewhat poetic perception that everything is brand new. The student may mean that the learning is novel, however, it is interesting that they specify that the newness is felt “once you come back to the class,” which indicates that the feeling that everything is brand new happens after the completion of the lesson, in the classroom space and outside of the hoop dance. Does this indicate a subtle transformation prompted by artistic engagement, resulting in a slight shift in an individual’s perception of the world?

### ***Belonging and Friendship***

“When it was done everyone was cheering my name because my hoop was the first hoop of the program: Peter! Peter! Peter!” (Peter, student).

Near the middle of the initial session, Peter was the first student to complete a hoop. He held it above his head and the class started to cheer. They were smiling and laughing and began to chant Peter’s name. It was a lovely and enjoyable expression of the energy and excitement that was palpable throughout the room. Sometimes, youthful excitement can bubble over into issues of self-regulation, classroom management concerns, or simply well-meaning behaviour that is somewhat off-task. However, in this case, the excitement and energy created a beautiful moment of support for a fellow student. Students did not seem concerned about who had completed the first hoop but were instead excited that someone had succeeded. At that moment, Peter was smiling broadly with apparent pride.

During the hoop dance project, several students reflected on feelings of belonging, and friendship:

“I thought it was fun too because we got to do it with the class, so everybody got to learn it” (Jessica, student).

“It was cool to do stuff with other people” (Andrew, student).

“It reminds me of teamwork” (Lennon, student).

These are statements that point to feelings of comfort within the group, teamwork, class accomplishment, and acceptance. Feelings of acceptance and belonging are positively correlated with successful learning outcomes, while feelings of rejection, isolation, and lack of belonging make learning and success very difficult for all people, but especially for children and adolescents (Amant, 2013; Bukatto & Daehler, 2011; Caine & Caine, 1991; Cervone & Cushman, 2015). Considering that many academic activities and assessments are individualistic in nature and considering that many elementary and adolescent classrooms are plagued with inter-personal conflict, learning activities that encourage belonging and acceptance are both prudent and necessary. One student states:

Well, when we were practicing, because I got to sit next to Mark and Nathan, and my friends, we were just all goofing around and playing with the hoops, and then Mark kept putting it over me, and wrapping the tape. (Will, student)

Some teachers might hesitate at this statement, as it appears to indicate more of a classroom management concern than a learning moment. However, it is worthy to note that these students finished their hoops within the allocated time and did not cause noticeable disturbance to their classmates. And, because of the relaxed atmosphere, they got to sit with their friends, feel comfortable, and play. Mark echoes this sentiment:

“Like Will said, I liked playing with my friends and I liked how Beany let us talk and smile and we could have fun” (Mark, student).

Mark reinforces the positive experience of working with friends and also identifies Beany as the one who permits this type of environment. Other students also supported the statement that it was Beany who made them feel comfortable and contributed to their sense of belonging.

Cindy preferred to illustrate the comradery and fun that she experienced during the project in a picture that depicts she and her friend standing together. They are holding their hoops, the illustrator’s mouth is open, and her foot and arm are raised, as if in dance. She says:

Well, of course like the others I had fun, and Beany John made us feel comfortable. As soon as she walked in she wasn’t like, you must do this, it doesn’t matter if you make a mistake, it’s your own personal dance, you put a story behind it, and, yah. (Cindy, student)

Beany brought a positive student-teacher relationship to the learning environment, increasing emotional security and a sense of belonging. Beany explained that the dances were personal expressions, and therefore did not include mistakes. Although Beany spoke confidently and with calm authority, she spent less time talking and explaining than Lauren generally does and more time demonstrating and showing. She circulated around the room while students were practicing the moves and offered advice and encouragement.

“She was really nice and encouraging and was open to any questions or comments” (Sage, student).

“She said we did great!” (Ann, student).

In this case a student poses a question about Beany to another student during the interview activity:

“How did you like Beany John as your teacher? Is she nice?” (Sage, student).

“She is nice and very helpful.” (Charlie, student).

This section concludes with a question-and-answer student interaction that demonstrates the open, optimistic, friendly, and positive atmosphere that served as fertile ground for a space of belonging and love:

“How do you feel about the performance coming up?”

“Awesome”

“How do you think your friends are going to do?”

“I think they will do good.” (Peter and Adam, students).

Comments and feedback received during the hoop dance reflection activities indicate that students felt it was important to express their positive experiences, particularly highlighting

elements of enjoyment, camaraderie, and a sense of belonging. The research suggests that these feelings created an accepting environment and became the elements that created the positive space necessary for feelings of peace and kind actions. Furthermore, it suggests that the special characteristics of the hoop dance project, coupled with Beany John's skilled teaching approach, were reflective of valuable Indigenous pedagogical practices.

### **Indigenous Educational Practices**

Indigenous teaching approaches include pathways to build relationships with peers, communities, and the environment. These strategies are rooted in culture and history, which inform and shape the lessons and content. Although not mutually exclusive of western academic rigor, Indigenous educational practices do not privilege academic success as the only valuable learning outcome. Rather, children are seen in a holistic way, and teachers strive to educate all aspects of each child, including the intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and physical (Amant, 2013; Battiste, 2011, 2013; Bell, 2013; Cote-Meek & Moeke-Pickering, 2020; Goulet, L. & Goulet, K., 2014; Jordan, 2016; Kress & Horn-Miller, 2023; Pewewardy & Lees, 2022; Reyhner et al., 2011; Smith, Tuck & Yang, 2018; St. Denis, 2010; Toulouse, 2008, 2011, 2013). Indigenous teaching practices facilitate the development of relationships, academic rigour, social and emotional intelligence, spiritual depth, and physical engagement. The research suggests that these practices were evident throughout the hoop dance project.

In 1992, Suzanne Stiegelbauer interviewed eight Algonquian elders about their life experiences and knowledge. These elders offered an educational plan that dealt not only with skills and knowledge, but with the development of citizenship and virtuous conduct. They said:

1. Education should model the "good life."
2. Education should be experience based.
3. Children can make choices and are unique.
4. Through cooperation, respect, feeling, and good heart, learning is a shared experience.
5. Each individual is unique, yet part of community.
6. The old and young teach each other.
7. Everyone has a responsibility to give back (Stiegelbauer, 1992).

The hoop dance project was able to address several of the elders' suggestions. For example, Beany's teaching was heavily experiential, and sit-down tasks comprised the minority of the activities. Furthermore, the dichotomy of individuality versus community membership was addressed when Beany asked the students to dance together as a group and when she instructed them to wait for their peers so that they could move through the pictures together, but at the same time, to tell their own story with their dance. The children made their own choices regarding hoop style and design but were also required to work together and follow several overall guidelines in hoop design and dance style. Students were encouraged to help each other, and emphasis was placed on giving back to the community. The final performance was presented as a gift to the community, and, by donating some of their hoops to the school for future use, the children learned about generosity.

In addition to the teachings of the Algonquian elders, contemporary Indigenous literature also shares specific strategies for incorporating Indigenous educational principles into mainstream classrooms. Scholars Bell and Brant (2015) stress creating culturally relevant Indigenous education and culturally inclusive spaces by developing an accessible curriculum, by acknowledging the local Indigenous Nation, by using current information, by eliminating biased materials (such as outdated texts that tell the stories of history from a Euro-centric standpoint), by providing cultural experiences for all students, by employing teachers and leaders with expertise, and by making connections to the land. Philosophically, they also echo the teachings of the elders by stressing the oneness of all life, holistic education, responsibility to family, modelling in teaching, and storytelling.

Métis and Ojibwa teacher Deb St. Amant offers additional specific ideas to support Indigenous student success. These ideas, which also serve as wise practices for the success of all students, include learning the history of the area and finding out how many students self-identify as Indigenous. They also involve asking all students about their cultures and understanding intergenerational trauma. Effective communication with parents and getting the community involved are crucial, as are establishing discipline and creating a positive learning space by decorating the room with cultural items. Including Indigenous perspectives in all subjects, using talking circles, and engaging hands-on activities are recommended. Allowing wait time for answers and incorporating drama and storytelling can enhance learning experiences. Encouraging students to consider different perspectives and voices in historical stories and doing land-based inquiry are important strategies. Finally, differentiating discussions, and encouraging partnerships and cooperation further contribute to successful educational outcomes (2013).

While not universally applicable in all areas, the hoop dance unit did address several of Amant (2013), Bell, and Brant's (2015) specific recommendations. For instance, the local Anishinabek Nations were acknowledged by Beany in her historical teachings about the origins of the hoop dance. As an active artist, Beany's presence also ensured that information was current, that western bias was interrupted, that the teacher-leader had expertise, and that an Indigenous perspective was included. Parents and community members were involved in the performance event, and several letters were sent home to provide information about the project and to invite parental feedback. Most of the activities were experiential and cooperative, and the final reflection activity used a talking circle. Drama and storytelling were also an integral part of the unit as they are a foundational part of the hoop dance. The project did not directly incorporate land-based inquiry, and this is an area for future consideration. The room was not decorated in a way that reflected the project, and the learning could have incorporated even more space for student reflection. Ideally, students would have had the opportunity to continue their relationships with Beany beyond the seven-week program.

It is also prudent to consider that there are philosophical and practical overlaps with what western educational theorists and scholars have labelled Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). SEL research demonstrates that group work and experiential educational activities contribute to feelings of well-being, belonging, success, and perhaps, therefore, love (Caine & Caine, 1991;

Cervone & Cushman, 2015; Devencenzi & Pendergast, 1999; Dei, 2014; Wright, 2023). Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to suitably contrast Indigenous educational strategies with SEL, the hoop dance project suggests that the two epistemologies may not only be compatible, but may in fact be mutually enriching, thus further guiding student success.

### **The Failures of the Contemporary Teaching Model**

This section focuses on the current teaching environment in Ontario. The authors argue that despite the sincere efforts of dedicated teachers, it does not effectively support Indigenous education practices. Lauren's personal teaching experience has consistently indicated that the mainstream, public school system in Ontario works very much *within* the existing western education system and generally does not significantly attempt to recreate, reimagine, or improve its framework for Indigenous students. She believes that while this conventional approach occasionally creates an environment that supports and encourages a culture of belonging and love, it nevertheless regularly places philosophical and practical barriers in the way.

Both the curriculum and the First Nations, Métis and Inuit Framework (FNMI) encourage teachers to incorporate Indigenous content and experiential teaching throughout all subject areas (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, 2009, 2016, 2017). Additionally, some schools and teachers, drawing on their own expertise and relationships with Indigenous communities, endeavor to cultivate Indigenous perspectives and wise practices within their classrooms (Manitowabi, 2022). However, despite these successes, there exist systems in Ontario that inhibit teachers and limit the possibilities for Indigenous content delivery. For example, standardized testing and large class sizes are obstacles to the delivery of Indigenous content and to the creation of emotionally safe classrooms. Under the deadlines of the standardized tests and under the duress of the understaffed, overpopulated classrooms, opportunities for teachers to spend time creating environments of belonging are limited. Rather than focusing on interactive and cooperative learning experiences, and rather than making space for children to build the confidence necessary to act kindly and peacefully, teachers are forced to contend with the larger and more imminent pressures of testing and student numbers.

In elementary school, grades three and six students sit a multi-day written test which is administered by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO). The EQAO also gives a grade nine math test and a grade ten literacy test. The literacy test must be passed for graduation, though it can be taken twice, and students who are unsuccessful receive supplementary literacy support. These large assessments are meant to gather data that can be used to improve teaching strategies for children in the future. However, regardless of the success or failure of this goal, EQAO testing is most certainly time consuming and stressful for students, teachers, and schools alike. The multi-day, intensive written tests are followed by the public release of school achievement information that ranks schools and evaluates performance (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017). For these reasons and others, EQAO tests often take precedence over the search for optimal teaching strategies and the consideration of the holistic learning needs of each individual child.

Additionally, class sizes present a significant challenge. Children in junior and senior kindergarten, and grades four through twelve often share their space with approximately thirty peers. (Grade one, two and three classrooms are capped at twenty students). Even with skilled teaching techniques and experience, it remains extremely challenging to effectively address the intricate needs of all students within these classes. In summary, despite research suggesting the favourable impacts of Indigenous pedagogical practices that include teaching for belonging and community, and despite teachers' earnest endeavours, assessment demands and class sizes are structured in a manner that hinders and prevents these beneficial results.

### **Student Conflict and Resolution**

Another obstacle to student learning is conflict, and it is important to explore the conflict that occurred between students during the hoop dance project. While the hoop dance project remained free of discipline issues, disrespectful behaviour, and overall negativity, there was one occasion where two students experienced an uncomfortable interaction that led to tears. The students managed to largely resolve this issue on their own and subsequently performed together in the concert.

The second last practice was held the day before the concert and because it was scheduled last minute, the practice was held in the music room, which was not ideal. The incident will be retold using excerpts from Lauren's personal reflection journal, as it was an emotionally wrought time. The notes, written on the same day as the incident, are believed to better represent the situation than a narrative retelling:

This last practice had a very different feel than the concert. The students smiled much less. They seemed focused but nervous and somewhat anxious. Some were forgetting moves; others were fine. Beany told them, "This is your dance." We ran each group (dance) once or twice. At the end we felt like we needed more time. Notable: Two thirds of the way through the practice Lindsay left in tears and went into the washroom. When she emerged, she said that Jennifer (who was dancing beside her) just kept yelling at her and telling her what to do. She sat on the floor in the hall and cried and did not re-enter the class. I told her that she did not have to be in Jennifer's dance group (wrong approach – not restorative?) and asked if there was anything I could do and that she could re-enter when ready. She did not. I did not have any more time that day to talk to her. Notable: Near the end of class, Jennifer also left in tears. She said, "They didn't wait for me to finish my picture". I think she is a perfectionist and is anxious. It is possible that this style of performance (which is not super structured) is difficult for her. This could be a cultural difference? I wish I had more time on this day. I had to rush to Kindergarten literacy immediately after the rehearsal; in fact, I was ten minutes late, but another teacher kindly covered my Kindergarten class for that ten minutes. This day I was feeling very busy, like there was too much to do in not enough time (this is a common theme during concert season and in general), and I could tell I was being *shorter* with classes than usual and than I'd like to be.

Perhaps I need to change my approach? More zen? More community oriented? More like Beany? I've been thinking about this and would like to think about it further. (Hill, 2019)

This excerpt illustrates that tensions were high and that both instructor and students were feeling stress. This scenario commonly arises before a concert, highlighting an ongoing frustration where the teacher, despite the need to be available to support student preparation, finds themselves less available due to simultaneous preparations for other classes. (All of the other classes at the school also performed at the concert, with the hoop dance group being the grand finale.) While Jennifer initially appears to be the instigator of the conflict, her subsequent collapse into tears indicates that she was also experiencing distress. Lauren is pleased to have had the opportunity to briefly address the upset students, allowing them to voice their general concerns and feelings. However, there was a desire to follow up with them later in the day and ideally convene a restorative practice session. As it was, Lauren left feeling busy, anxious, and concerned, and Beany stayed with the class, remaining calm and steady. Beany's phrase "This is your dance," reminded students to focus on their own creative expression and gaze inwards for strength and calm. The contrast between Lauren and Beany's teaching styles, particularly Beany's ability to maintain a peaceful demeanor during a stressful time, is acknowledged.

Though Lauren was not able to attend the final practice because of pressing rehearsal needs with other classes, she knew that with Beany leading the class and with the use of the gym, preparations would continue as well as possible. In the moments before the final performance, Lindsay and Jennifer demonstrated readiness to participate and did not have any further noticeable interpersonal conflict. They performed in the concert, and their dances were strong. This is an excerpt from Lauren's journal entry, written shortly after the concert:

Immediately after the concert: Lindsay is smiling and walking next to Jennifer who is also smiling. I said, "Good job!" Lindsay smiles big and says, "Thank you!" I said, "Everyone did so well!" Lindsay said, "I was surprised because I wasn't even there for the (second last) practice, but it was good!" Jennifer smiles and says, "It was good!" In the following days, when students were asked to make groups to do their final oral reflection circles, Jennifer and Lindsay chose to be in the same group. (Hill, 2019)

## Conclusion

When considering the emotions that evoke positive feelings and those that do not, it can be argued that one category cannot exist without the other. In his beautiful book *The Prophet*, turn of the century Lebanese American poet Kahlil Gibran says of joy and sorrow, "But I say unto you, they are inseparable. Together they come, and when one sits alone with you at your board, remember that the other is asleep upon your bed" (1923, p. 30). Noddings also considers this contrast in her research, stating, "I will contend that true happiness requires a capacity to share unhappiness..." (2003, p. 3). Jennifer and Lindsay did share unhappiness in the latter part of the hoop dance unit, and perhaps this means that they experienced the project in an even deeper and more meaningful way than did their peers. However, the other students might have experienced their own conflicts during this time, potentially being more difficult to observe. Indeed, love's less



celebrated companions may well have been present in the minds and thoughts of the students. Ultimately, the girls' demonstrated resiliency as they performed in the concert and in their ability to resolve their conflict on their own and without significant intervention from a teacher. Would they have been able to surmount this challenge if the teaching approach had been different? Did elements of Indigenous teaching practice assist them in moving forward with a positive outlook?

The hoop dance project, along with Beany's teaching approach, facilitated novel and advantageous learning experiences for the students, fostering engagement with the foundational goodlife teaching of Zaagi'idiwin (love). Analysis of student data revealed prevalent themes including enjoyment, friendship, a sense of belonging, connection with the teachers, and overall happiness. These emotional dimensions may constitute important aspects of the student journey towards embodying the principles of love. Moreover, this endeavor serves as an example of Indigenous pedagogical practice, prioritizing relationships and active participation. However, it is imperative to recognize that prevailing educational norms may pose challenges to the implementation of such practices, potentially undermining the pursuit of culturally grounded learning experiences. In conclusion, the hoop dance project suggests and illustrates the transformative power of Indigenous educational methodologies and underscores the need to reevaluate and prioritize practices that nurture holistic, culturally rooted learning experiences for all students, grounded in the fundamental principle of Zaagi'idiwin.

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