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Résumé de l'article

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Still Thriving: A Case Illustrating How COVID-19 Affected Indigenous Health and Wellness

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Abstract

The myriad of social, financial, material health, and educational inequities that continue to plague Indigenous communities was exacerbated by COVID-19. In order to place on spotlight on them, this case follows Star, an Indigenous Student Success Coordinator, as she navigated the policies and practices couched in the rhetoric of supporting the success, health and wellness of students and families during a global pandemic. The case and teaching notes that follow illustrate the limitations that Westernized models of health and wellness create for Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators when it comes to maintaining their students' and own well-being. As an alternative to the dominant Westernized models, the teaching notes offer a more holistic and integrated model of Indigenous health and wellness. The elements of the model situate health and wellness as encompassing all aspects of an individual's life by connecting them relationally to their families and communities, nations, and the land.

Keywords: Teacher health and wellness, Indigenous health and wellness, educational leadership

Case Narrative

It's not really about the French roast. Nor is it about the caramel the barista pours into the macchiato or the pumpkin scones or the "it sounds familiar, but I just can't name it" music that plays in the background. The reality is that *Cree Coffee*'s success is all about place. The franchises' success is about creating coffee bars that feel grounded in their neighbourhoods. Places that lure all kinds of people to hang out for a wide spectrum of reasons.

Somehow the thought of a conversation over a coffee makes some people think of *Cree Coffee*. The genius behind the allure is that *Cree Coffee* was designed to strategically fill a void; becoming, for so many people, a "third place" – a familiar physical and psychosocial space existing apart from home and work. A space in which they can either be alone surrounded by others or actually in relationship with others.

Star and Santy were sitting at a window booth in the half-full *Cree Coffee,* eating breakfast, drinking coffee, and talking. Normally, or at least every few months before COVID-19 thrust people on a global scale into the utter disruption of their lives, they tried to get together to touch base and see how the other was doing. They had been doing this for a few years as a way of staying connected; however, the pandemic stretched the few into many months. After eighteen months and a number of waves and health restrictions imposed, lifted, and then re-imposed differently, Star and Santy felt a distance between them and knew they had a lot of catching up to do.

"So, how's it going?" Asked Santy as he looked up from his breakfast plate.

They both broke out in laughter as soon as he said it because they knew how loaded that question really was. "How's it going?" had been the launching point of the conversations around what they would have called the "Gong-show" in the privacy of their coffee shop booth.

The question: "How's it going?" was situated within the reality that they lived and worked in as mar-

ginalized people. One Indigenous and one racialized person who worked within the exact system that had historically been designed and continued to marginalize them and others like them.

Star was born and raised in a First Nation Community and had attended an on-reserve school before transitioning into urban life as a teenager. In the city, Star attended a high school that was part of the provincial school system and experienced education in a manner that was quite different and challenging for her. After a decade-long stint in university and a relatively smooth teaching career, Star had found herself in a leadership position within a large urban school district. Answering directly to an assistant director of education, Star's role involved multiple areas of responsibility, such as supporting school improvement in literacy and numeracy, overseeing the Indigenous education portfolio, mentoring peers, coaching administrators, and supporting various programs and support staff. All of this with numerous other "duties as assigned" that seemed to be assigned with regularity.

Santy, a university professor of educational leadership, had taught Star during her graduate program and supervised her graduate thesis. Santy, who as a child had always found school to be an unwelcoming place, had worked as a teacher, principal, and director of education before transitioning into a university position. Santy's ancestry had all the hallmark disruptions of so many racialized people who could no longer trace back their familial origins with much certainty because of the overwhelming effects of colonization. The intersectionality of Santy's familial history and career with Star's allowed them to have very candid conversations about the intergenerational effects of colonization and the roles schooling had played. More often than not, they chatted about how the educational system might be re-oriented to support Indigenous and racialized students better.

"It's been way too long. Where do I start?" Replied Star before she went on. "Since we were ordered to work from home over a year and a half ago, it's been non-stop work around the clock. As we've battled through each wave of the pandemic, rules and restrictions from the Province have changed frequently. But, the workload and the needs of students — particularly Indigenous students — didn't change. In fact, the pandemic has added more layers to the struggles Indigenous students and their families already faced. Keeping an eye on attendance, raising graduation rates, improving literacy and numeracy scores, I don't know where it ends." Star ended with a slight sigh before she grabbed her coffee and took a sip.

Santy replied, "Yeah, there's no doubt that the pandemic has thrown pretty much everyone for a loop. But, I've got to say that the people that live with any sort of privilege — even if they don't like to use that word, privilege — think they've had it hard. The reality is that COVID-19 has clearly put on display the truth of the divide that exists between the haves and have-nots. Everything we already knew about the social inequities caused by systemic racism became so much more obvious."

"No kidding?" said Star with a sarcastic smirk. "It all started to unravel back in the Spring of 2020, when all of our students and the staff were ordered to work from their homes. My regular duties of supporting literacy and numeracy were quickly tossed aside so that I could sit on every district committee. There were so many; I can't even name them. One of the committees was expected to advocate for the needs of Indigenous students and figure out a way to fulfill them as we entered the first wave of the pandemic. Like, who knew that was part of my job? What my Indigenous learning team quickly realized was that Indigenous students and their families would be among those most hard hit. Many did not have a support network to rely on to meet their basic needs. We knew early on that they were going to be the ones who would suffer the most throughout the pandemic."

The school district where Star worked had the highest number of Indigenous students within its catchment area when compared to any other school district in the Province. Added to that fact, the majority of the Indigenous population of the district lived predominantly in the urban core, which was classified as being one of the highest poverty areas in the country. It meant all of the existing challenges were only going to be amplified by COVID-19. Whenever Santy and Star met before the pandemic gripped the world, they almost always talked about how it seemed best to re-arrange or create initiatives that were actually designed to meet the needs of Indigenous and racialized students as opposed to trying to make them fit into the system.

After a few minutes of welcomed distraction to talk about their families, Star added, "It was so hard when it happened. Decades of resources, support, and additional programming intended to assist Indigenous students and families were immediately ripped out from under them. Most of the resources and supports that had been created relied on people's abilities to physically come together in some way, shape, or form. The truth is that we were running everything through the schools. The nutrition programs

that families relied on for their children to access healthy meals in school were no longer available since schools were not allowing students into the building. Closing schools meant kids would go hungry. Technology and equipment for learning support were housed within the schools. For many families, learning online was impossible. Community supports such as parent programs, early childhood programs, and support groups for families were shut down. Essentially as schools were physically closed, schooling came to an abrupt halt."

Star continued after a pause to sip her coffee. "When COVID-19 first hit, everyone was told to stay inside. What many people don't know is that Indigenous people have always been community-based people — sharing the skills and strengths of the community, taking care of each other, and looking out for one another. When one has and the other needs, we share. This community-based lifestyle is what we still see today in the resourcefulness of Indigenous people and innovative ways of solving real-life problems that pertain to their survival and well-being. You know, the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual parts of their lives. When the community is forced to stay away from each other, the lifeforce of the community breaks down, and the people suffer in more ways than one."

Star added, "People were just cut off from one another and felt very alone. It's not a good feeling for Indigenous people. To feel isolated and alone. I felt it."

Santy knew he should just listen. So, he waited in silence for a minute before Star continued.

"The first concern our Indigenous support team had was to figure out how to address the loss of in-school nutritional programs for families. We immediately had to figure out a way to safely provide access to food for families in need. Many of the families that need food don't have transportation, and asking them to get on a bus during a pandemic is not something we feel comfortable with, even if they had the means to do it. Simply going out of the house to get basic needs was a challenge for many reasons."

Star took a sip of her lukewarm coffee and pushed her now cold scrambled eggs around her plate before continuing. "We were ordering groceries online for pick up. We were using our own SUVs to pick them up or having them delivered to our office's doorstep. Suddenly, we had become quasi-nutritionists and budget-managers."

Star added, "then it was all about logistics of food delivery. We would leave the packages outside the district office so that people could walk over to grab them. Then it was about how to finance the operations. I think so many people take for granted the privilege of owning a credit card. We were allowed to use our personal credit cards to purchase food even though it violated district policy."

This time when Star paused, Santy added, "It sounds like your work became much more about providing the necessities of life. And, much less about what was encoded in district policy and printed in fancy strategic plans."

Star smiled back and said, "Here is one truth: sometimes policy doesn't match reality. I already knew it, but it was reinforced that having a credit card automatically puts you in a safer living environment than those that do not. That's a fact. We ended up setting up three food hubs at different schools throughout the most impoverished areas to hopefully service most of the Indigenous students that stayed in those areas. It's not like they could return to their home communities. It's not like any of us really could. Our Indigenous support staff team reached out to many Indigenous families in their area to check in on them. Based on what they heard, we created as many food hampers as we could from the food security program, and in some instances, we delivered one to each family with a smudge package. But the struggles went beyond providing food security. Wi-Fi. Homework support. Parental supervision. You name it. We were trying to figure out ways to support our students and their families."

"Star, I'm pretty sure most people never had to think about much of this when the schools closed. I mean, we kind of heard about the stresses teachers were put under in order to provide engaging teaching and learning. You know, about having to shift to remote learning at a moment's notice. About how hard it was to pivot to online teaching. Oh, I hate that word 'pivot.' There were news stories that ran in the mainstream media about how challenging teaching remotely was for teachers and students. But only a few came out about the impact that the pandemic had on Indigenous and racialized students and families, and the important role that schools play in their lives."

Santy looked at Star and said, "Somehow, people still do not seem to be aware or understand just how Indigenous students and families are so very connected to the wider community. For whatever reasons, some people still seem surprised to hear about how the existing socio-historical challenges that Indigenous students face on a daily basis intersect with what schools are expected to do."

Santy added. "How about you? How are you doing?" Santy knew Star was herself very connected to the Indigenous communities where many of the students self-identified as their traditional homes.

Star didn't answer the question but instead offered, "Well, that was and still is my major role and responsibility. To support schools in providing the most effective teaching and learning environment to meet the needs of all students. I still had to ensure I was fulfilling my responsibilities to the school I was assigned to support, as well as check in on additional schools and support those Indigenous families that reached out. The workload quadrupled. Pretty much overnight. It just exploded. There weren't enough hours in the day. But that didn't seem to matter to…"

Star paused for a moment before she continued, "at least, I don't think it did. It's not like they didn't care. I'm guessing they did. But it was all about the students. That's all we ever talked about; students and their family's needs."

Santy replied, "They should have known," without specifying who "they" were.

"We expect so much from teachers on a daily basis, but even more from Indigenous teachers. It's not like you were insulated from everything your community was experiencing. I'm not blaming them. But I used to work in central administration, and even back then, we knew that teachers were under immense pressure. That was before the pandemic hit." Santy paused a moment before he asked again, "How are you doing?"

Star looked across the table at Santy, "Decent now. Thanks. But back then, in the middle of it…." Star rolled her eyes and smiled. "No one asked me how I was coping. No one asked about how my kids were doing. Or how my parents were doing. Or my home community. No one asked."

Star looked away from Santy before she looked back at him and added, "It's not like I needed some kind of special treatment. I wasn't looking for sympathy. But we talk a big story about the importance of relationships, relationships, relationships. But no one seemed to understand that as an Indigenous woman, I not only work in and through relationality with the students, but I try to live relationally in all aspects of my life. No one asked me about how I was really doing. I'm not sure they understood that my own health was suffering. Sure, we have employee assistance programs. But it's not like they are designed for Indigenous people. It's not in our way of living to call a 1-800 number, tell our story and then ask a stranger for help. The programs and people who run them don't really seem to understand the ways we live our lives." With that, Star took a deep breath and relaxed back into her seat.

Santy nodded in agreement as the waitstaff came by to ask if they wanted their coffees refilled and asked how they were doing. Star and Santy smiled a knowing smile at each other.

Teaching Notes

Increasingly, the well-being of educators has emerged as an especially significant concern to many educational leaders and policymakers across many global educational contexts (Acton & Glasgow, 2015; Alberta Teachers Association, 2019). While it is generally understood that teachers, school-based administrators, and school district leaders belong to a profession that can expose them to a high level of stress, the health and wellness of educators has emerged as an under-researched area (Acton & Glasgow, 2015).

Importantly, the health and wellness of Indigenous educators ought to be of particular concern given the relatively small number of them in Canada and the pre-existing challenges of retaining Indigenous teachers (Muller et al., 2011). As was noted in a recent report produced by the Alberta Teachers Association, *School Wellness and Well-Being Initiatives Across Canada* (2019),

> Stress, burnout, and lack of support can lead to poor mental health. Evidence has shown that poor mental health in teachers can have an impact on student health and academic outcomes (De Stasio et al., 2017; Kidger et al., 2016; Shen et al., 2015). According to Lau et al. (2017), "studies of teachers' stress and burnout have dominated research in the area of teachers' well-being" (p 89). Lau et al. (2017) ascertained that a dearth of research has been done to explore the consequences of teacher burnout, needed coping strategies and/or preventative factors for teachers' well-being. (p. 26)

It seems fair to conclude that the global pandemic created by COVID-19 intensified and exacerbated many of the existing pressures that all educators faced (Yong, 2021) and, in particular, placed an uneven

burden on Indigenous teachers and educational leaders (Heck et al., 2021).

In fact, according to research conducted by the University of British Columbia's Faculty of Medicine, two-thirds of the 1200 British Columbia teachers who responded to a survey reported an increased workload than before the pandemic, and four out of five teachers reported worse mental health during the 2020-2021 school year (Yong, 2021). Yet, in many instances, teachers' emotional health needs and wellness are overlooked by their employers and by researchers because the major focus within the education system is on the health and wellness of students (Acton & Glasgow, 2015). The end result is that some teachers are left with little ability, and in some cases, an unwillingness, to cater to the health and wellness of their students as they struggle to maintain their own (Kidger et al., 2010).

Typically, paradigms of teacher health and wellness are framed by narrow understandings based on an individual teacher's ability to withstand stress rather than focusing on what is required for educators collectively, such as teachers, principals, and school district leaders, to thrive physically, mentally, emotionally, and professionally both at work and in their personal lives (Howell et al., 2016; Kern et al., 2014; Richmond et al., 2013).

In large part, this is an outcome of Eurocentric worldviews of health and wellness that underestimate the role that culture and community play and overvalue individualistic notions of human development in narrow economic terms (Airhihenbuwa, 1995). As Tuck (2009, p. 62) noted,

> Because Western ideology holds the individual a priori to the group, it's difficult to translate the concept of collectivity or tribal relationship in a way that does not get reduced to giving up autonomy (an individualistic idea) for steamrolling the wishes of the group.

In addition, the vast majority of Western biomedical concepts of health often concentrate on disease and infirmity, while many Indigenous models of health and wellness are much more holistic and encompass four dimensions of health and wellness, which are physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being as they connect an individual's health and wellness to their relationships with families, communities, nations and the land (Howell et al., 2016). For the purposes of this paper, as per the description offered by Hyett et al. (2019),

> Indigenous in the context of Canada will refer to the First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples; Indigenous may also refer to peoples globally who occupy their traditional and historic territory. Indigenous community will not necessarily refer to a geographically defined community, but instead any group of people that defines themselves as an Indigenous community. (p. 103)

Without suggesting that there is a singular, pan-Indigenous model of health and wellness, Howell et al. (2016) argued that from an Indigenous perspective,

> a more comprehensive holistic understanding is necessary to acknowledge the four dimensions of one's being, extending beyond the individual to include family and community. A focus on lived wellness is more proactive, less reactive, and more conducive to healing than present practices that emphasize a program approach based on the biomedical model of health (p. 114).

Figure 1, "Indigenous model of health and wellness," below is an adaptation of an Indigenous model of health and wellness developed by the *British Columbia First Nations Health Authority* (known as the "FNHA," the first province-wide health authority of its kind in Canada (First Nation Health Authority, n.d.) and illustrates many of the commonalities that Indigenous perspectives of health and wellness share as a framing orientation. It illustrates how an individual's health and wellness are nested within relationships to the social, physical, and spiritual aspects of their lives and how these interact relationally to the external features of their lives.

Figure 1

Indigenous Model of Health and Wellness
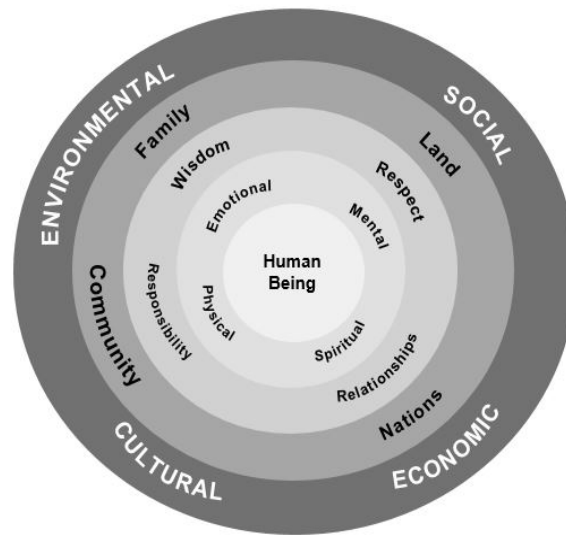
Note. Adapted from the First Nations Health Authority

For decades, while policies have stressed the importance of involving Indigenous peoples' partic-ipation in the design and delivery of healthcare, little progress has been made to actually involve them in the decision-making processes about their own health (Jacklin & Warry, 2012). However, Indigenous models of health and wellness acknowledge the very real connections that individuals have to their fam-ilies, communities, nations, and the land. The relationality of Indigenous existence is mediated not only through the physical body, but is also mediated through a mental, emotional and spiritual connectedness to the external social, physical and spiritual world (Richmond et al., 2007; White, 2010).

It seems clear that educational leaders and policymakers would benefit from more robust under-standing of Indigenous health and wellness in order to develop policies, initiatives and/or programs for Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators. Such culturally-relevant models hold promise. They better articulate an educator's health and wellness to their connections, in essence, their relationality, to the broader professional and social contexts within which they work and live.

Activity 1: The Impact of COVID-19 on Deepening Understandings of Socio-historical Inequities

Throughout the various waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, Indigenous young people, families, and com-munities within Canada have faced new and more intensified pre-existing challenges to their health and well-being (Giroux et al., 2020). Arguably, many of the pre-existing disparities have likely been wors-ened by widespread health and economic crises resulting from the pandemic (Heck et al., 2021).

1. Based on the case and the accompanying teaching notes, how did the pandemic further ex-pose the social and historical inequities that exist in the intersections of schools and society for Indigenous students, families, communities, and staff?
2. How might educators and educational leaders re-consider the current school-based delivery approaches to support programs such as school breakfast and lunch programs, in-school as-sistive learning technologies, and parenting programs in light of the fact that schools were required to close for extended periods during various waves of the COVID-19?
3. In a small group, consider your responses to the above two questions and be prepared to share your thoughts with a larger group and/or class.

Activity 2: Contextualizing Indigenous Perspectives of Teacher Health and Wellness

An Indigenous perspective of health and wellness might better reflect the complex sociocultural world that Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators exist in and illustrate the myriad of interconnected influences that impact their health and wellness (Richmond et al., 2007).

1. Using the *Indigenous model of health and wellness* in Figure 1:
   a. Consider Star's work context and recommend the supports that you believe should have been put into place to support her health and wellness.
   b. Consider your own context and the supports that you believe were in place to support your own health and wellness during COVID-19.
2. In a "pair-share" arrangement, discuss what non-Indigenous educators and educational leaders might need to consider that could better support a teaching workforce that is increasingly diverse along characteristics of race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, and disability.

Activity 3: Applying a Decolonizing Lens to School District Health and Wellness Policies

The global persistence of health inequities for Indigenous peoples is evident in the ongoing discrepancies that exist in health services and standards of living. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed many of these inequities (Heck et al., 2021). Improving the health and well-being of Indigenous students and staff in the education sector falls within a growing broad discussion on decolonized approaches to understanding health and wellness (Eni et al., 2021).

Decolonizing employee assistance programs requires a reconsideration of the existing models that school districts have in place and necessitates that they are shifted away from a primary focus on illness and disability and instead be centred on what is necessary to promote health and wellness for Indigenous educators individually and collectively (Eni et al., 2021). Indigenous understandings of human development are founded on collective values such as humility and altruism, and individual development that is aimed at the good of the community or nation rather than being utilized only for individualistic gain (Richmond et al., 2007).

1. Using a decolonizing approach, one that is aimed at dismantling the colonial cognitive and structural architecture of employee health and wellness programs by recognizing how historical social, cultural, economic, political, and educational factors have influenced their development (Eni et al., 2021; Kovach, 2009):
   a. Critically analyze how more robust and holistic understandings of how individual and collective human development might be better supported through policy and thereby enacted differently by focusing on the relationality of individuals to their families, communities, nations, and lands.
   b. How might current approaches to health and wellness be re-considered, informed, reshaped, and redirected to better support the health and wellness of Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers, staff, and administrators?
   c. In light of "lessons-learned" during COVID-19, in a small group, develop a one to two-page policy brief that might be submitted to central administration that advocates for a differential model of employee assistance programs based on Indigenous understandings of health and wellness.

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