



**MORE THAN AN ECO-LOGICAL
CRISIS—A LIFE CRISIS:
ON THE NEED FOR
EDUCATION TO CONNECT US
TO INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE,
KNOWLEDGE, AND THE EARTH**

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Recently, I asked members of my graduate class in curriculum theory to recall an experience in which they felt connected to the natural world, intellectually, physically, emotionally and/or spiritually. Some members of the group recalled canoeing on a lake, snowshoeing under the moonlit sky, growing up on a farm, and gardening. We enjoyed talking about these experiences and seemed to long for the moments in life that afforded opportunities to (re)connect with the land. This was the focus of a talking circle that opened up the class in which we discussed an article that lamented how education's core curricula is dislocated from natural landscapes and that fewer youth than at any other time in human history have exposure to the natural environment (Kulnieks, Longboat & Young, 2011, p.351). On this same evening, two educators presented an examination of their provincial science curriculum that asks youth to show "respect for all forms of life," and ultimately "modify their behaviour" to "protect the environment," at a time when our federal government has chosen to withdraw from the Kyoto Protocol (New Brunswick Department of Education, 1998).

Certainly, the most significant and complex issue we face on Earth is the ecological crisis. We all need water, air, land, and warmth to live. In some worldviews or in the public realm, what is fundamental to life may be deemed merely a basic necessity or as a means to an end, rather than as fundamental and integral to our being. In this way, the eco-logical crisis has been separated from our being; it is a problem that is outside of ourselves that we may or may not choose to act upon, rather than being integral to our own lives and the lives of *all* others (not just humans) to whom we are connected. How might we better understand our fundamental interconnection with the Earth? In 2010, the Association of Canadian Deans of Education responded to the call to value Indigenous knowledge systems by signing the *Accord on Indigenous Education*, which, in part, affirms the importance of infusing Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum. What might it mean to have a curriculum that values Indigenous knowledge? How might Indigenous knowledge(s) deepen our understanding of all our earthly (inter)connections?

The language of many Indigenous people illustrates ways of talking about the Earth as living and nourishing all life: body, mind, spirit, emotions. Many Indigenous people, including the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, and Métis, use root metaphors in their languages that show a different relationship to the Earth. For example, the Earth is referred to as Mother to show life giving familial relationships, rocks, as the oldest substance on Earth, have spirit and are employed respectfully, as helpers in birch bark canoe making (Elder M. Labelle, personal communication, December, 2010), and in ceremonies (see Kulnieks et al., 2011 for other examples). The Inuit, rather than developing “egocentric” perspectives developed “ecocentric” identities (Wenzel, 1991) that place the land and the environment as central. Further, if we know whose territory(ies) we live upon, there may be stories/teachings that have survived that can offer knowledge for understanding our connection to the land. So, if we live, for example in Mi’kmaq territory, there may be stories to explore the red Earth and the ocean that is specific to this place, and a language that reflects a spiritual, emotional, physical and intellectual connection to place.

Kulnieks et al. (2011) implore all people to recognize that we are failing to examine the lack of “cultural and linguistic roots of the environmental crisis” which “ignores Indigenous knowledge” (p. 359). Our understanding of the ecological crisis in both the educational and public spheres is largely premised on Eurocentric hierarchies (Battiste, 2011) and the language of industrialization (Kulnieks et al., 2011). Take, for example, the root metaphors that are used to describe natural landscapes in many non-Indigenous paradigms: forests are referred to as commodities, animals as livestock, minerals are owned through mining rights (Kulnieks et al., 2011, pp. 360–361). Curriculum, and therefore knowledge, is often presented to us as neutral (Donald, 2009), but it usually serves the dominant mode of power circulating in society. Currently, this dominant paradigm lays the responsibility for the environment on individual youth actions, while a few powerful adults in the public realm make local and international decisions that are not in the best interest of *all* and use language that alienates them from and commodifies the living Earth. In contrast, Indigenous knowledge and learning is and “was responsive to the needs of ecology and the communities” (Battiste, 2011, p.287). As Bowers (2009) notes, “the pathway we need to take in order to reduce the human impact on the Earth’s natural systems does not have to be invented and then imposed on people. Rather, it already exists in as many ways as there are cultures” (p. 8). Indigenous thought is not the only way to re-imagine our relationship with the land, but it is a way that we could all (re)learn ways of being ecological stewards of the Earth.

In considering ‘language and education: context, trends, and perspectives,’ I have been inspired by the circle conversations that Indigenous knowledge has provoked with regard to our relationship in the environment. If we are to imagine a new awareness of the interconnection of *all* on Earth, one that helps us protect and appreciate the gifts the natural environment provides, then the current educational efforts to value Indigenous wisdom is one way to help promote the need for sustainability and foster deep understanding of place. We must examine the underlying causes of environmental stress which go back to how we view our lives, live our lives, name our lives, organize our economics, determine what and who we value, and how we imagine future generations will relate and connect to the Earth. We need to challenge the

language that frames the eco-logical crisis as outside of ourselves, and address it within the very foundation of our lives, an ecological life crisis, so that we feel interconnected and nourish the experiences that give us joy in nature—with a deepened intellectual, physical, emotional and spiritual connection to all our relations.

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Biography

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