

How can Non-Indigenous Educators Understand and Respect Indigenous Spirituality?



The following ideas have been compiled as part of the research project, *Designing and Implementing Environmental Inquiry Strategies in Early Years Programs 2020-2024* under the guidance of our advisor and team member, Lori Budge, a member of the Wikwemikong Unceded First Nation and faculty member at George Brown College.

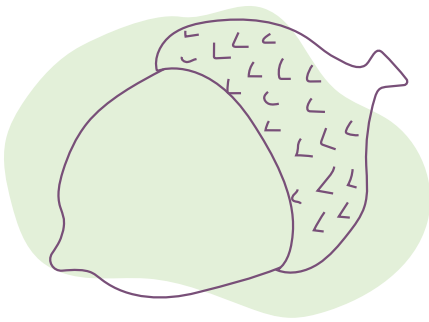
We learned from our workshop speakers who brought teachings from different First Nations: Lori Budge (Ojibwe and Odawa teachings), Dr. Hopi Martin (Ojibwe teachings), Carolynne Crawley (Mi'Kmaq teachings), Natasha Bascevan (Anishinaabe and Metis teachings) and Emma Greenfield (Mohawk teachings). We also learned a great deal from Indigenous teachers through virtual and in-person presentations, and Indigenous authors through texts and videos. They include Elder Willie Ermine (Cree Elder, Knowledge Keeper and Ceremonialist from Sturgeon Lake First Nation, Saskatchewan), Robin Wall Kimmerer (Citizen of the Potawatomi Nation), Elder David Courchene (Sagkeeng Anishinaabe Nation), Elder Albert Marshall (Mi'kmaq, Eskasoni First Nation), Doug Anderson (Metis), Thomas King (Cherokee), and Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair (Anishinaabe, St. Peter's/Little Peguis).

Indigenous peoples are diverse and have different spiritual beliefs and practices. The following represents some overarching principles that we think may give non-Indigenous educators a starting point for their own journeys to understand and respect Indigenous spirituality in their work with children and families.

Indigenous spirituality is a lifeway that manifests in many everyday experiences such as:

- Realizing we are in a relationship with everything else in creation. We are all part of the same whole;
- All life on earth is animate. It carries spirit and energy. This includes the rocks, the water, the plants and the animals. They are family. Everything has spirit and is therefore respected;
- Sharing and caring for all life (human and non-human);
- Everything is in a constant state of motion. Changes happen in patterns and cycles. These are sometimes referred to as the laws of nature;
- Respecting and expressing gratitude for nature;
- Giving before taking- reciprocity;
- Acknowledging the Land as teacher;
- Connecting to your own heart and the heart of others - heart-based learning;
- Experiencing life with your whole person (mind, body, heart, spirit);
- Experiencing awe, wonder, beauty, love, and peace in nature, and striving for balance in all things;

- Connecting with the sacredness of life;
- Experiencing love and friendship as spiritual connections;
- Respecting and honouring other people's spiritual views and practices as part of the human experience and equal to your own;



Indigenous people also have ceremonial ways of expressing their spirituality such as:

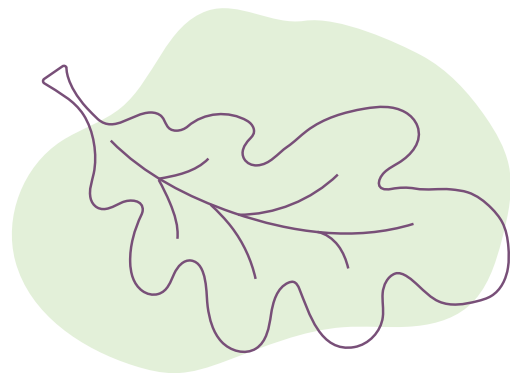
- Fasting, praying, singing, dancing, drumming, and making offerings of the four medicines (tobacco, sage, cedar, and sweetgrass) in ceremony. Smudging is only one component of Indigenous spirituality;
- Indigenous people's spirit is expressed through creativity which takes many forms such as dance, song, ceremony, and other practices. There is no word for 'art' in Indigenous languages, it is an inseparable part of all things;
- There is no word for 'religion' in Indigenous languages, it is an inseparable part of all things. Indigenous people do not separate "everyday" spirituality and ceremonial spirituality.

How should non-Indigenous educators teach about Indigenous spirituality?

In a mainstream classroom setting, it is appropriate for educators to teach about "everyday" and ceremonial Indigenous spirituality, but it is only appropriate to practice the "everyday" experiences. The ceremonial practices are for Indigenous people to lead. Non-Indigenous people may be invited to participate in some ceremonies by Indigenous leaders but should not initiate them on their own.

Non-Indigenous peoples have their own paths to follow. All paths are important and necessary for a balanced planet.

There are many spiritual teachings in all Indigenous communities. Two that are common are the 13 Moon Teachings and the 7 Sacred Teachings (or Grandfather or Grandmother Teachings)



The following Anishinaabe principles of learning and teaching shared by Nigaan Sinclair support these concepts

(Nigaan Sinclair, IALS Conference @ GBC, April 2023)

1. Recognize that gift-giving is a law of creation. The Land gives and we are called to give.
2. Education happens when teaching, living, and healing are all happening in the same place.
3. Have an ongoing commitment to listening, watching, and sharing on the Land.
4. Practice shared leadership - everyone has a role.
5. Elders and children are the most important teachers.
6. Be responsible and act in an ethical manner. Anishinaabe people hold each other accountable through humour.
7. Act sustainably. Don't over pick.
8. Kindness builds trust, and trust builds security.
9. Embrace inquiry.
10. Be open to different perspectives. Indigenous people are "and" people, not "or" people.