

## Embracing First Peoples Principles to Engage Students in Learning:

by Tina Kennedy, former special/inclusive education teacher with 25 years of experience from the traditional lands of the Liḡ<sup>w</sup>iḡ<sup>w</sup>dax<sup>w</sup> people

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"Shame is the legacy of colonization which affects all Canadians." This paraphrased statement by Dr. Niigaan Sinclair greatly impacted me, a Settler, at a professional development workshop in November 2022. Up until that moment, I hadn't truly appreciated how colonization was why I was so uncomfortable in the education system. Don't get me wrong, I love learning, and I love the idea of school, but the system of education needs a lot of work. In my view, it's the cultural beliefs we tried to stamp out with residential schools that can bring hope to education in Canada and lead to our youth re-engaging in learning.

The First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) in British Columbia published the nine "First Peoples Principles of Learning" in 2006/2007. These principles are "teaching and learning approaches that prevail within particular First Nations societies," and they sing to my teacher's heart. Incorporating them into our teaching and learning will not only support Indigenous students in their learning but also hold truths about humanity that will engage all learners. We are all seeking a life of purpose, and our students are no exception. We need to put an emphasis on well-being so that our students are capable of real and meaningful learning that leads to that life of purpose while engaging them in school once more.

The three particular principles that I believe can bring education out of the era of colonization into an era deeply rooted in humanity are the following.

Learning requires exploration of one's identity.

Let's start with students' strengths rather than their stretches. Several knowledge keepers and storytellers I have listened to talk about the miracle that each individual is and that when we live in our gifts, we are living with purpose. Jennifer Katz, in her book *Ensouling Our Schools*, shares that one of the building blocks of flourishing communities is in helping each member understand and articulate their identity—what are they good at, and how will their gifts contribute to the classroom community? If every person in a classroom, including teachers, starts each learning cycle by articulating and sharing their gifts, wouldn't they naturally want to be there? And, how special would we each feel when we recognize that sharing our identity with others is giving something precious, and it will be handled with care? Katz shares specific classroom activities to accomplish this in her *Respecting Diversity Program*, and there are many activities, questionnaires, etc., which classes can use to explore their gifts (search "self-exploration worksheets" online). While exploring their individual identities, students are also creating inclusive relationships as they recognize that everyone has their strengths and stretches—all of which add to the beauty of their community. Connecting to one's identity allows for meaningful connection to others, which will lead to increased attendance and engagement. Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational.

Too many of our students feel like school is being done to them—they have to attend; they have to listen to whichever adult is speaking; they have to get a certain percentage to "pass"; they have to learn

particular subjects... etc., etc. Instead, how can we make school a happy-making place for everyone involved—a place where they don't just survive but thrive?

Once the relational aspect of learning is established by exploring and sharing their gifts, students can use their gifts as vehicles for learning and making meaning out of new experiences. In an interview on the CBC Radio show, "Tapestry," Dorsa Amir describes how traditional cultures did not do a lot of overt parenting or instructing of their children—young people did a lot of their learning through observation and mentorship of one another. This makes sense in a hunter-gatherer society, and it is important to remember the evolutionary foundation of learning as we layer on the complexities in our current Western society. With inputs coming from multiple directions at once and with expectations of milestones being met by certain ages, the need for overt instruction has increased over time. That said, if we use observation and mentorship as foundational learning experiences and supplement with direct instruction around how to learn, our students can be in the driver's seat of their own education. Giving learners ownership of their learning in an organic way will be much more appealing than feeling like school is being done to them, which many students articulate with whinges like, "Why do we have to learn this?"

If we overtly teach executive function skills with both isolated and integrated activities, we enable students to independently access structured learning activities within the school. Instead of giving a study guide, model and guide study activities in class before an assessment. Instead of telling students to "pay attention," teach them mindfulness activities for when they catch their minds wandering and need strategies to bring their minds back to the task. If we teach them the "how" of learning, then those very important relational and experiential aspects of learning will be much more accessible for our students. They will have the tools to effectively explore and learn in the required content areas while gaining proficiency in the areas they're most interested in. In this way, learners are empowered and inspired rather than directed. They can take ownership of their learning while feeling their whole self is being addressed in their learning, not just their stretches.

Learning ultimately supports the well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits, and the ancestors.

If we are celebrating everyone's gifts in our community, then we are bringing parents, grandparents, aunties, and uncles into our classrooms to be part of the learning experience. This can be done both physically and virtually. Invite family groups to sit in on classes over the first week of school. Set up monthly "family fun days," so that school becomes an integral part of family connection. Invite multiple family members to join parent-teacher conferences via Zoom.

All communication with families must come from a place of working together, must walk alongside the family to advocate for the youth's learning, and must invite the family on the learning journey. Inclusive communication accounts for cultural differences and provides the time and space to meet people where they're at. Know which parents prefer calls, texts, or emails; make first contact with everyone inclusive and positive. The first one-to-one contact with parents needs to be constructive and share the gifts observed in their children. Most importantly, we must appreciate and honour the time it takes to build these relationships with the students' families. School life is so much better for the student when they know that home and school are on the same page, have open lines of communication and support one another.

In conclusion, it's important to note that living in your gifts and with your purpose does not mean you won't make mistakes, because we all will; however, if every person is given the kindness and grace to make mistakes and learn from them, then everyone's learning potential grows exponentially. This also means that we have created a safe space that everyone is keen to enter and school attendance will improve. If school learning builds identity, is relational, and connects learners to family and community, and explicitly teaches the "how" of learning, learners will attend and be more engaged in education. It is through learning that we can heal from the damage created by the shame of colonization.

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## About the Author

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