



A Virtual Circle: Fオム·가"⊃ム·[>]Miyo Wicehtowin: Building Relationships through School-Community Voices

Elders Virginia Cardinal and John Bigstone, Debbie Mineault and Mark Owens

Summary

Building Effective Relationships

The intent of a CASS Learning Guide is to apply research, deepen understanding and enhance professional practice within the Alberta context. With a focus on optimum learning for all students, a Learning Guide provides an opportunity to grow system leader knowledge, resulting in quality school leadership and quality teaching throughout Alberta.

Ensuring First Nations, Métis and

Inuit Education for All Students

The <u>Guide to Relationships and</u> Learning with the Indigenous Peoples of Alberta reflects the knowledge and wisdom of many, including one of the lead developers, **Crystal Clark**, of

Nehiwayak (Cree), Denesuline, and



Métis ancestry and an Indigenous Education Consultant. The <u>Guide's</u> visual flow of leaves from a birch tree is significant. The birch tree was chosen as the concept for the Guide to remind us of our deeply rooted connection to the natural world.

This virtual circle was built on the insights of the <u>Guide</u> and related CASS resources including: <u>A Virtual Circle with Elders</u>; <u>Establishing</u> <u>and Sustaining Respectful Relationships for Student Success</u>; and, <u>Improving Success for Indigenous Students</u>.

Each of these resources represents a leaf flowing from



the <u>Guide</u> and the birch tree, reminding us of the importance of building and sustaining respectful, reciprocal relationships. They underscore the need for learning as highlighted in <u>Optimum</u> <u>Learning For All Students: Implementing</u> <u>Alberta's 2018 Professional Practice Standards</u>.

In this webinar, participants were invited to sit in a virtual circle featuring the learning journey of connections supporting reconciliation between Northland School Division (NSD) and ℃℃ Nehiyawak. Participants had an opportunity to learn with Nehiyawak Elders John Bigstone and Virginia Cardinal as they highlighted what reciprocity means for building respectful relationships and how others can use the practice of reciprocity to support parents, community members, staff, and students. Watch the <u>full recording here</u>.

(<u>SLOS/LOS</u>) Whereas: Superintendents, principals and school jurisdiction leaders play a fundamental role in establishing the conditions under which the learning aspirations and the potential of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students will be/are realized.

Beginning in a Good Way

Crystal welcomed everyone and emphasized the importance of coming together in a good way to build and honour relationship. (view)

Debbie Mineault, Director of First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education, Northland Schools Division, introduced herself and welcomed the Elders. She shared the importance of honouring cultural protocol by offering sacred tobacco. She explained that she was offering the tobacco on behalf of CASS and Northland School Division. She asked for prayers and a song to guide everyone's thoughts and hearts through the sharing of the Elders' wisdom. She highlighted the importance of beginning with ceremony to open minds, hearts, and spirits. (view)

Elder John Bigstone opened the circle with a beautiful blessing and a song. **The recording was turned off to honour this sacred time** and resumed after the blessing.

Acknowledgement of Land

Dr. Dianne Roulson, a white settler with Icelandic and French roots and CASS Leadership Consultant, highlighted lessons she has learned from Elders and Knowledge Keepers. These included:

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the importance of showing respect for the contributions and



ways of knowing of Indigenous Peoples reflected through stories and songs that have lived on this land for thousands of years;

• a teaching from likiinayookaa (Marlene Yellowhorn, Kainai Nation, Principal, CBE) that land acknowledgement is not

something you do, rather, it is something you feel – a lesson passed on to likiinayookaa from her grandfather; and,

 a teaching from Lori Pritchard (Métis and Ukrainian from Saskatchewan, Education Director, CBE) that identifying a commitment to action must always be connected to land acknowledgement. (<u>4:52</u>)

Invitation to the Circle and Land Connect Moment

Crystal invited participants to imagine themselves on the land and settle into a spot around a fire as they prepared to listen, connect, learn, and reflect. She emphasized the pedagogy of Indigenous



learning that brings us together in circle. She also provided an opportunity for participants to connect to land through their imaginations and hearts. This was done to set the tone for the virtual circle while modelling the need to acknowledge and become aware of our deeply rooted relationships to one

another and the natural world. (9:53)

Spirit and Intent and Navigation of the Guide:

Crystal, one of the key developers of the <u>Guide</u>, talked about the birch tree image featured throughout as representing our connection to one another through land, life and breath. She described the <u>Guide</u> as a starting point; a branch or leaves on a tree that represent a small part of the whole tree within a forest. It was developed in 2019 and updated in 2022 to support system education leaders begin the process of deepening their understanding. The real work, she said, is connecting and working with Indigenous Peoples and community and building respectful relationships over time. (<u>15:40</u>)

Resources Growing from the Guide

In the spirit of strengthening relationships, Dianne highlighted the three additional resources that flow from the Guide and represent leaves on the birch tree (<u>A Virtual Circle with Elders; Improving</u> Success for Indigenous Students; and Establishing and Sustaining Respectful Relationships for Student Success (ESA Guide). The latter focuses on Education Service Agreements (ESAs) and is directly tied to the webinar topic; building respectful and reciprocal relationships. ESAs are agreements between First Nations and provincial school authorities. They come into place when students living on reserve attend provincial schools and when students living in the city attend school on reserve. The ESA <u>Guide</u> offers heartfelt and honest guidance from many leaders, including members from the CASS First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Education Action Committee. It includes the wisdom of Debbie Mineault, Director of First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education, Northland Schools Division, who played a key role in this webinar. She talked about the important work that began many years ago (Alberta Education, Collaborative Frameworks, 2012) and is being carried on today (refer to the Explore section of about ESA Guide, entitled: Reawakening the Spirit of the Collaborative Frameworks/Image). (19:25)



Presenter Introductions

Debbie Mineault, Director of First Nations, Métis and Inuit
Education, Northland Schools Division (0:41)
Elder Virginia Cardinal, Bigstone Cree Nation (22:22)
Knowledge Keeper John Bigstone, Bigstone Cree Nation (24:31)
Mark Owens, Associate Superintendent, Northland School
Division (while Mark did not present he played a key supporting role)

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Elder Teachings About Reciprocity

Debbie invited the Elders to respond to questions to highlight the work they have been doing with NSD and offer teachings about reciprocity. Each of the questions is highlighted in the video with beautiful images that show reciprocity in action. (<u>27:00</u>)

Why Is Teaching About Reciprocity Important in School Communities?

Elder John Bigstone spoke about practicing reciprocity when he is picking medicines. He always carries tobacco with him and makes an offering to the land before taking anything. He gives back to the people in his community (and beyond) who can benefit from the gifts he has been given. He said reciprocity is about always giving back and sharing what you have to help others. He talked about his own learning path as an $\triangleright^n \dot{\mathbf{b}} \vee \Delta \cdot^n \mathbf{osk} \hat{\mathbf{ap}} \hat{\mathbf{ew}} \mathbf{is}$, Elder Helper, and that now, at this stage in his life, he needs an $\triangleright^n \dot{\mathbf{b}} \vee \Delta \cdot^n \mathbf{osk} \hat{\mathbf{ap}} \hat{\mathbf{ew}} \mathbf{is}$. He said the way we give of ourselves is important; that we must always be of service. He highlighted the importance of all of us "living by example", being prepared to help in any way, not being afraid to roll up our sleeves and show the children how it's done. He shared the **nēhiyawēwin** (Cree language) word,

►סל"bL9° onîsohkamakew to get to the heart of what he was describing. It means, helping people, supporting and loving one another, and sharing what you have with the whole community. (27:28)

What Does It Mean to Give Something Back in Return for Gifts Received?

Elder Virginia said she has a responsibility to give back the legacy gifted to her by her parents and grandparents. She strives to do so with the parents and children with whom she works each day. The gifts that she has been given must be practised and taught, she said. This includes bringing back the things that have been lost through assimilation. Her mom taught her the **nēhiyawēwin** word, **Г ≺ <∩ "Ċ° miyo-âpacihtâw**, the importance of sharing of knowledge, having humility, caring for others, knowing we are all equal, not putting herself above anyone else. (<u>36:43</u>)

How Do We Embrace Relationships and Reciprocity With Each Other?

Elder John pointed to trust and respect as foundational to any relationship. He said this must include respectful communication. Elder Virginia acknowledged that, because of our shared history in this country and violent colonial practices, trust has been lost and many Indigenous peoples have shut down. There is a lot of work to do to build trust and respect with each other, she said. She emphasized the importance of returning to the **nehiyawak** teachings of

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relatives), $L^{o}b\Delta \cdot r'\Delta \cdot P$ maskawisiwin ekwa (strength of character), and $P^{o}\Delta \cdot \Delta \cdot P$ sakihiwewin (love) and embedding them in their everyday cultural practices. This is what will provide a strong foundation for young people. (<u>40:00</u>)

How Does the School Community Promote Cultural Wellbeing?

Elder Virginia talked about teaching the children the **Niska** dance. May is the time when you teach this, she said. The dance is full of teachings to connect the young people to the land. When these teachings are connected to what is happening in the classroom, the kids feel a connection. They are dancing for their own wellness. Elder John talked about the importance of nurturing young people's sense of identity and their connection to the spirit world. This dance and other dances, songs, and ceremonies hold the teachings necessary to show young people who they are and where they come from; how they are connected. Debbie highlighted the concept of $< "9.7 J \Delta$.^{->} pâhkwesimowin, a ceremonial dance. This is about the skill of observation, she said., and the gift of having a relationship with nature. Dancers have that gift and with it comes a feeling of pride and joy in identity. (<u>43:59</u>)

How Do We Preserve Old Knowledge Held in Language Teaching?

Elder Virginia explained that the stories shared through **nēhiyawēwin** hold teachings about life skills, survival, morals, spirituality, respect for the land, and respect for family and community. It is through language that we preserve our knowledge, she said. Elder John underscored how hands-on experiences, ceremony, observation, oral teachings, and stories were how young people learned their ways. Very few people speak **nēhiyawēwin** now and this loss has been devastating. In the translation of **nehiyawak** to English, a great deal is lost. **Nēhiyawēwin** connects us to our spirit, he said, and through spirit we learn our values and ways. Debbie and the Elders emphasized how critical language revitalization efforts are to preserving the beauty and complexity of their values and ways. They recognize

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the importance of involving young people in this effort and balancing traditional and current practices. (50:52)

What Cultural Practice is Rooted in Land Relationships and Traditions?

Elder John said that while all ceremonies are rooted in land tradition, ceremonies that take place on the land create an even stronger connection. When possible, we should sit right on the land, he explained, without anything between us. When doing so, we are connecting directly with Mother Earth and the energy of the land. He also talked about the importance of laying down tobacco, sharing intentions, offering a blessing, and taking great care before taking anything from the land. Destruction of the land is rampant and has destroyed this sacred connection. Young people need to have a connection to the land to know who they are and where they come from; to be well. Speaking in nēhiyawēwin he said, "Lor"C manachihta (to know how to treat and respect humankind and holders of knowledge) manachiha P"1+"CdrA.[>] kihcheyihtakosiwin." We are spiritual beings, everything has spirit. (1:03:53)

What Culture and Land Relationships Support Student Learning?

The outdoors is a classroom, Elder Virginia emphasized. It is important to highlight the many connections to mathematics, literacy, language, and other subjects. Different teachings connect with the seasons and follow the changes in the land. This experiential learning is vital for young people. (1:11:39)

What Is One Thing We Can Gain by Building Trust?

The most important thing, Elder John said, is to have a relationship with Mother Earth. Everything comes from the land. It is important also to recognize that Elders hold diverse knowledge and expertise. For example, there are medicine people, ceremonial holders, crafts people, and singers. There are many, many specialized areas. Each Elder has different gifts and it is important to learn what they are able to offer. This is part of reciprocity; learning the skills, knowledge, and gifts that Elders have to share. Elder Virginia talked about how vital trust is to reconciliation efforts; trust in yourself and others. Debbie spoke about the photo of the white buffalo as symbolic of the relationship between the creator, the land, and the people. (1:15:28)

How Do We Support Giving Back and Walking Together With You?

Elder Virginia finished by saying that we can support one another when we are walking together and sharing the things that matter most. This is about coming together in partnership and includes defining what we are walking for, the sharing of resources, and recognizing what each of us has to offer. Elder John emphasized that we need to have respect and trust to walk together for the benefit of all. This involves recognizing the value in each other and being there for young people. Debbie closed by expressing heartfelt gratitude to all, kinanaskomitina. (1:25:47)

Exploring the Resources

Dianne encouraged participants to explore the various resources highlighted in the webinar including the Guide and related CASS resources including: A Virtual Circle with Elders; Establishing and Sustaining Respectful Relationships for Student Success; and, Improving Success for Indigenous Students. (1:34:57)

Gratitude and Honouring Knowledge

As part of the closing, Dianne and Crystal expressed gratitude to all who were part of the circle. Crystal offered a gift to the presenters in the spirit of reciprocity and to honour their knowledge and time. It was made by Shieda Meechance of O'Chiese First Nation and is a beaded leaf on birch bark. Shieda offered protocol to a birch tree and harvested the bark from her back yard. She designed the gift specifically to honour our collective work and to exemplify our relationships with one another and the natural world. The gift was made with love and clearly embodies the symbolism of the birch tree as a reminder of continued relationship to one another and the natural world to support student success. (1:34:57)

Questions for Reflection and Dialogue within your Context

- How are we working to build and sustain respectful 1. relationships with local First Nations, Métis and Inuit?
- 2. How are we engaging and collaborating with First Nations, Métis and Inuit to optimize learning success for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students? How do we know?
- 3. What differences are these relationships making for young people and their learning? How do we know?

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4. What are our next steps and how will I put one learning from this webinar/learning guide into action?



Resources for Building System Leadership Capacity

- <u>A Virtual Circle with Elders</u>
- <u>Establishing and Sustaining Respectful Relationships for</u> <u>Student Success</u>
- <u>Guide to Relationships and Learning with the Indigenous</u>
 <u>Peoples of Alberta</u>
- Improving Success for Indigenous Students
- Successful Practices in First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education: Collaborative Frameworks Building Relationships Companion Resource, 2012
- Indigenous Education I Cultural Protocols, Calgary Board
 of Education
- Optimum Learning For All Students: Implementing Alberta's 2018 Professional Practice Standards
- Walking Parallel Paths, Together, in a Good Way. The Office of Indigenous Engagement and ii' taa'poh'to'p, University of Calgary



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