

The Kids Are Alright:¹

Changing Perceptions for a New Wellbeing

Ramona Elke

Abstract

This work is an Indigenous Métissage weaving together poems, stories, scholarship, and images. It suggests that the distress, educational struggles, changes in traditional educational pathways, and other behaviors of current youth in response to social challenges offer ways out of these crises rather than being symptoms of them. This work offers pathways to learn from the wisdom of distress, and ways to create healing futures for ourselves, the land, waters, ancestors, and All Our Relations.

How I Came To Be Here: Introductions

To Me and All My Relations²

Aanii. Tansi. Boozhoo kina wiya. Ramona Elke ndi-zhnikaa. Saskatchewan, Canada ndoo-njibaa. Mission, British Columbia, Canada ndi-daa. Anishinaabe/Métis-kwe endaaw. Enknoomagenh ndaaw.

Hello, everyone! I am from Saskatchewan, Canada. I currently live in Mission, British Columbia, Canada, as a grateful, uninvited guest on the unceded ancestral lands and waters of the Sto:lo peoples. I am Anishinaabe/Métis on my late mother's side and Celtic/Germanic on my father's side. I have been a high school teacher for over 22 years in a rural high school in Maple Ridge, British Columbia, where I teach both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. I am a PhD student in Arts Education at Simon Fraser University, focusing my inquiry on how to create spaces of honoring for all beings. I am a poet, a grandmother, a painter, beader, drummer, and singer. Each of these pieces of me has influenced how I walk in the world as a student, as a teacher, mother, grandmother, partner, and relation. It is important that, as an Indigenous scholar/searcher, I introduce myself, as I have been taught, through the scholarship of such folx³ as Absolon & Willet (2005), Archibald (2008), Kovach (2021), and Wilson (2008), to connect myself, relationally, to people and place and spirit. Through this introduction, I situate myself in relation and reciprocity, creating connection between you, me, and all beings and Ancestors around us who bring us teachings and prepare us to walk together in this learning journey/conversation.

My work calls me into spaces through vision, ceremony, making, listening, and witnessing to teach me how to be most useful to children and youth and All My Relations. I have learned, over the many years of trial and error, that the answers to our worries are not to be found in the same, colonial ways of viewing *wellness*; rather, they are to be found in the dis-ease manifest in the behavior of the youth. The distress many children and youth exhibit are not the issue. They are pointing us in the direction of the solutions, and we ignore them at our peril. Through Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and doing, and arts-based

education/making practices, we have an opportunity to listen to the teachings⁴ of the youth and to collaborate with them to create meaningful change for ourselves, our ancestors past and future, the planet, and All Our Relations.

To the Work

Through this discussion, I invite you into wondering: What if our definitions of *wellness/disease* and systems (educational systems, mental health/wellness systems, economic systems) are insufficient for the youth and, through their non-completion of outdated educational pathways, their non-compliance in a soul-crushing workforce, and refusal to buy into the old mythology of home/land ownership, they are showing us the way out of the crises we are currently trying to survive, rather than being distressed within them? What if their distress is not about the demand to live in the old systems but an invitation for us to step outside of worn-out systems, into inclusive, spirit-forward futures where all beings are honored as they are (particularly Indigenous youth, Black youth, youth of color, and LGBTQIA2S+ youth)? I would suggest, after over two decades of walking with *challenging*⁵ youth in all these communities, the youth are opting out of these old capitalist/colonial/heteropatriarchal systems because, perhaps, the systems are in distress, not the youth who are fighting to resist them.

This work reflects upon these questions through Indigenous Métissage, sharing my poetry, stories, and photographs. Métissage, as a methodology of inquiry, has been taken up by Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars as an invitation to weave many strands of knowing into a whole (Kelly, 2021; Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 2009). Papachase Cree scholar, Dwayne Donald (2012), teaches that Indigenous Métissage, specifically, seeks to create community and connections through the weaving together of seemingly disparate pieces into a whole that reaches for ethical relationality to honor difference rather than trying to eliminate or shy away from it (Donald, 2012, p.535). Indigenous Métissage brings ethical relationality into the arts-based/arts/ography-based methodology of Métissage from an Indigenous understanding of connection and relationality between the pieces being braided. The experience of the re-researcher, as specific to the teachings of their nation/Elders/life ways informs the work, so that the inquiry is not pan-Indigenous, but, rather, deeply specific to the teachings of the person doing the work.

This work weaves together three strands: the strand of my story as a *teacher*,⁶ the strand of my experience as a mother of a young man who is struggling to find his way in these days of post-COVID teachings, and the thread as a poet/artist who has found medicine to these current dis-eases through the power of making and living in the transformational offerings of art. I offer, in this weaving of story, image, and poetry, an invitation into a conversation around the possibility that youth are showing us the way to better futures where, perhaps, their distress and dis-ease may become medicine for us all.

Strand #1

Learning the Hard Way: Teacher as Student

Until the imbalances in our society's current ways of living are addressed, people will continue to experience symptoms and behaviors that call for movement towards good relationships, healing, and social and environmental justice. These difficulties are not considered pathological but rather as important sources of knowledge and wisdom. (Fellner, 2019, pp. 161–162)

Fellner's Teaching Story: *Iskotew and the Crow*⁷ (2019)



Fig. 1: "The Crow" by cheddar. Licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.

One of the most resonant teachings I have received, and found profoundly helpful, is Dr. Karlee D. Fellner's (Cree) story *Iskotew and the Crow* (Fellner, 2019, pp. 143-150). In her story, Fellner offers a Métis/Cree perspective of dis-ease and distress as the pieces of ourselves that offer a way to be connected to All Our Relations, our own inner medicine (that which heals, sustains, strengthens, and connects my body, mind, heart, and spirit to my web of relations so that I may walk in a good way for the good of All My Relations), our own healing journeys, and our ancestors past and future. Through the story, Fellner offers "a conversation that is shifting paradigms of pathology that are dis-empowering and dominating toward Indigenous counternarratives of survivance, resilience, and resurgence" (Fellner, 2019, p. 151). The story offers alternatives to colonial approaches to dis-ease and illness and, thus, offers a new definition or understanding of wellness, not exclusively for Indigenous folk but for us all. Within our wounds lives the knowledge of how to heal and the wisdom of how to create spaces where healing is offered for the wounds of others. Fellner shares this teaching as *trauma wisdom*: "the personal and collective medicine that emerges through direct, vicarious, collective, or intergenerational traumas" (Fellner, 2019, p. 156). Coming face-to-face with the teachings of *trauma wisdom* has helped shift my view of the struggles youth present as "behaviors" to an invitation to reflect upon the possible solutions these behaviors are asking me to address.

The past 22 years have been an education in surrendering to the hope that how I walk in the world, alongside youth, creates communities where love, spirit, and creation are at the center—where youth are able to be themselves in their fullness. Over half of those two decades have been spent in the role of a support teacher for youth who were labelled as *challenging*, with one educational psychological diagnosis or another, who struggled to be seen as *successful*,⁸ and struggled to experience success in the colonial educational sense of the word. The youth with whom I walk live in complex worlds of disengagement from and weariness of classrooms and curricula that do not see them, their lives, or communities. They are Indigenous, non-Indigenous, racialized, and LGBTQIA2S+. Many come from poverty, from homes where addiction lives alongside them and their siblings, from lives where racism, sexism, and homo/trans/queer/phobia are everyday realities. These young ones often find themselves in trouble with teachers, administrators, and the law—fighting authority, fighting friends, family, and

themselves. Mental and physical health crises are very real in their lives, from school avoidance, anxiety, and life-threatening depression.

During the early years of my career, I suffered, deeply, alongside them, in their struggle to walk their walk. My view of their struggles was deeply rooted in the “dominating Western colonial strategies aimed at symptom reduction, such as . . . behavior management techniques. . . and these strategies did not adequately address the difficulties these children were facing, particularly in a long-term, meaningful way” (Fellner, 2019, p. 153). I was even on a school district *behavior* team designed to help classroom teachers manage challenging classroom behaviors⁹ in secondary schools. My experience, observation, and reflections on my own practice created in me a deep knowing that “these interventions merely exacerbated symptoms” (Fellner, 2019, p. 153), especially for Indigenous youth. This is no surprise considering that the so-called *behavior management* strategies were (and still are) deeply rooted in “settler colonial ways of knowing, being, and doing that have themselves contributed to the traumas and symptoms being expressed in the first place” (Fellner, 2019, p. 153). I had come to know, through much of my training, that “all behavior [was] meaning” (Connect Parent Group training, The Maples, Vancouver, BC) but the view I had of the behaviors was rooted in pathology rather than *trauma wisdom* (Fellner, 2019, p. 156). In the past few years, I have come to know the work of scholars, such as Dr. Karlee Fellner (2019) and Drs. Marya and Patel (2021), all of whom suggest that the behaviors I have spoken of above, are invitations to examine the dis-ease from a social justice/healing perspective, rather than pathologizing the distress. When I leaned into Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and doing, I came to hear the teachings of not only the wounds of my students, but also the wounds of my children, my partner, myself, and my ancestors.

Living the Teachings

The best example I have of this teaching comes from November 2022, after an incident at our school called my attention to the damage COVID has done to the youth, my colleagues, the school community, and to me. A group of boys, identified by many frustrated colleagues as a “problem” for the past two years, acted out against several LGBTQIA2S+ youth, prompted by a conflict which occurred outside of school the day before. One of the LGBTQIA2S+ youth had had enough and took it upon themselves to retaliate in the community by punching one of the “bullies” in the face. The next day, in school, the peers of the person who was punched found the friends of the “puncher” in a classroom at lunch and tried to push past a young teacher to get into the room for pay back. The young teacher held her ground, called administration, and protected the youth in the room by not letting the angry group past her.

Colleagues were, justifiably, horrified and furious with the behaviors of the youth involved in the altercations (who became known by these colleagues as “bullies”). I was too—but the first question I asked was: if folx knew the youths had been a “problem” for two years, why had no one stepped forward to offer them guidance? Through the lens of *trauma wisdom*, I was invited to consider that these “behaviors” were a deep, painful yearning for belonging and community which required Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and doing to help us all heal from the conflict because colonial ways, rooted in punishment and separation, were not sufficient for healing the *whole* community. My classes and I held

a drumming circle, offering a pathway to healing the rifts in our school community. I also offered the ceremony of smudge and circle work, in the hopes that these Indigenous medicines might help soothe the wounded spirits of my colleagues and friends and myself. We had all been wounded in this conflict—“victims,” “bullies,” and those of us who cared for both.

I had learned that one of the Grade 11 students with whom I had been walking for the past three months was at the center of the conflict. He had just recently shared with me that his grandfather was a dissident in Romania when Nicolae Ceaușescu was president. His grandfather was a political prisoner, tortured by government police at a time when Ceaușescu was torturing and murdering millions of Romanians. He shared how his father was beaten and abused by his grandfather after he was released from prison and how the whole family felt the hurt and anger of the generations before because of the traumas of their ancestors.

At the time, I knew, instinctively, that the traumas experienced by the young men in the group of “bullies” was driving their intolerant behavior of others. Children and youth have a gift that allows them to, as Shirley Turcotte says “pick up the trouble so that the troubled aren’t as troubled, and . . . can therefore function better than they would if the child did not pick up the trouble” (Turcotte in Fellner, 2019, p. 157). Those boys were showing our school that there were gaping holes in our community, through which they were falling. They were not being guided by safe adults to learn how to be in a good way in a community—how to be understanding, compassionate, and accepting—because no one had been this way with them. In the absence of a welcoming, caring community, they created one of their own with their own rules of engagement, acceptance, and definition of what community is. They taught me that COVID ripped apart an already threadbare school culture that was in dire need of repair, restor(y)ing, and reinvention in a way that would allow for the growth of truly inclusive school communities.

Fellner reminds us that healing is not linear and that we are continually in a web of relations made up of our families, communities, the natural world, spirit world, and All Our Relations (Fellner, 2019). What this also suggests is that in this web are our past and future ancestors who call to us to prepare spaces to heal them in spirit or make ready spaces which are centered in wellness, wholeness, and justice for All Our Relations. Fellner reminds us “from an interconnected Indigenous perspective, these symptoms and behaviors may have emerged solely because an ancestor was trying to communicate through them about how balance, wellness, and healing were needed in that environment” (Fellner, 2019, p. 158). In these times, in Fellner’s experience, “when honored and listened to, the wisdom that emerges through these conversations moves the child and all of her relations towards balance, wellness, healing and social and environmental justice” (Fellner, 2019, p. 158). The young ones are showing us what needs to be done to create healing spaces where they can become who they were born to become. We just need to have the courage to listen and honor their offerings—even if we are uneasy with what is being offered.

seeking

Shel Silverstein's fractured circle—
searching for its missing piece;¹⁰
as if one
 single
 thing
could fill a thousand years of empty
or 500 years of heartbreak.

this longing to do good by souls
so far lost in the darkness of their forests,
even glow-in-the-dark breadcrumbs
can't lead them out of my despair.

leaning into faith-filled places pliant with hope,
like mercury on mirrors;
separating in my grasp if I hold it too tightly—
like them.
like me.

like me and my missing piece.



Fig. 2: Our powwow drum. Ceremony in June 2021 at our school after the recovery of the 215 children outside of Kamloops Residential school. Photo from the author's collection.

Strand #2

Learning From My Children: Parenting a Twentysomething Post COVID

Some suffer far more than others, but none of us is immune to pain, and hopefully none of us ever becomes inured to pain because pain is a reminder that life is complex and mysterious, never to be taken for granted. In the tangled midst of the events, experiences, and emotions of each day's living, we need to be careful that we do not perceive the world as fearful only. (Leggo, 2011, p. 118)

I am deeply blessed to have three children, all of whom have found their own ways in the world. My two oldest children (nearly 30 and in their early 30s), have found themselves in successful careers, have established themselves in homes and relationships; one has begun a family of his own, while the other is blossoming in her new relationship. Both have Master's degrees, careers, and both are well on their way in the world, "successfully," as defined by the pre-COVID world of capitalism, environmental crisis denial, and heteropatriarchy. Both are social justice/environmental justice-minded, both are generous, kind, and supportive of all kinds of folk. They make me proud every day with the ways they choose/have chosen to walk in the world.

My youngest son is 21. He is ten and eight years younger than his older siblings and has taken a decidedly different path in his life, so far. I have asked for, and been given, his permission to share pieces of his story as a teaching to understand, more deeply, what I have been talking about in this work. He, unlike his brother and sister, was diagnosed with a learning disability in Grade 8, struggling with reading and writing his whole life. He is, however, verbally gifted, designated as a "gifted child" at the same time as his dyslexia and learning disability diagnoses. He walked through his schooling very differently than his brother and sister. For his brother and sister, success in school seemed to come so easily. Not so much for him. He excelled in discussions and complex, abstract thinking (like decoding poetry or stories), and has been an empath since he was a little boy. He feels the world very deeply—the feelings of humans and the more-than-human. His struggles in colonial school structures were excruciatingly painful for him and for us, as his family. He rarely felt seen by his teachers or the curriculum he was forced to engage in and, as an extremely gifted spoken word artist/storyteller, his gifts were devalued and shut down, especially in elementary school where he was often in trouble for talking to his neighbor or talking too much in class.

He carried the wounds of his school experience through high school. Even though he made good friends and found teachers who cared a great deal for him, lifted him up, and celebrated his gifts, he could see no future pathway to postsecondary education. In his view, "Why should I pay for something I can learn on my own from people who really do what I want to do [personal communication]?" He does not feel the need to chase educational outcomes pre-determined by the same school system that did not see him in the first place. I can't say that I blame him. Why would he want to engage, at a "higher level," the same systems that traumatized him from the very beginning?

I introduce my youngest son here because he is one of those young ones who have found themselves in a world where mental distress, challenges with transitions to employment and further education, housing, health and environmental crises have become the foundation of his early adulthood. He chooses art over what he understands to be the capitalist lie, intuitively understanding that “the arts act like this mighty medium that also allows for the intimate conversation between the soul of the world and the human soul” (Kelly, 2010, p. 97). Like Anishinaabe/Métis scholar Dr. Vicki Kelly, my son has come to a knowing that “‘making’ needs the soil of the soul to enact its active alchemy” and “in its unfolding it renders or transforms us, makes us available or resonant to the world around us” (Kelly, 2019, p. 19). He intuitively knew/knows that through his art, he is made more, becoming the human he was born to be.

My youngest son and I have often spoken of the future, of which he has great anxiety because he has chosen not to take the same route as his brother and sister. He has chosen to reach toward a world where folx work together to create in community and to create communities where capitalistic ways are challenged. He and his friends want a world where traditional educational pathways are challenged, where learners of all kinds may follow their Learning Spirits¹¹ (Battiste, 2010) to the places and spaces they long to be so that new worlds may be born out of the ashes of the old ones. He longs for worlds of social and environmental justice where diverse learners, thinkers, and gendered folx may have space to bring to bear the changes our ancestors are demanding of us.

I used to worry about him and his pathway through life. I used to worry about his friends and others from his generation who are opting out of taking the same pathways as his brother and sister and all the other older brothers and sisters. I used to worry about how they would all make their way, that their refusal to attend postsecondary, to fall into jobs they hated, to even be disinterested in getting a driver’s license would impede their abilities to travel to the futures they want for themselves. For a while, I viewed their pathway as distress, as pathology. I don’t see it that way anymore. Now, I lean into the different ways of my youngest son, and I try to learn from what he is choosing to do. What is he asking of me? What are they asking of us? What are they asking for us to open up so they may come through and bring their teachings? How could our shifting focus invite stories of survivance (Vizenor, 2009), especially for our Indigenous and LGBTQIA2S+, Black and other racialized folx? How could we invite teachings from our present and future ancestors by listening to the ways our children are choosing to navigate the world right now? (Fellner, 2019) What if we learned from Iskotew’s story to guide the young adults, like my son, shifting from “trauma as individual pathology to the wisdom of the past-present-future self in relation to the natural and spirit worlds”? (Fellner, 2019, p. 157) We could find the solutions we seek to the crises we are feeling in our families, schools, communities, and among All Our Relations.



Fig. 3: My youngest son as a wee boy. He has been reaching for the light his whole life. Photos from author's collection.

I am profoundly grateful to my youngest son and to the generations of youth with whom I am currently walking. They have helped me root myself in the teachings of my ancestors, encouraging me and calling me to bring them into educational spaces as antidotes to the “trauma of erasure and separation” (Snowber and Bickel, 2015, p. 67) currently experienced by children, youth, and adults as spirit-forward, empathetic, and artistic as my youngest son.

star child

little sunbeam chaser
reaching to catch and hold fire—
like Icarus
but not like him at all:
your wings won't melt,
made of prayers instead of wax...
and the dreams
your Ancestors built for you,
millennia before you were born.

making your way from the other side of the sun,
you remembered how it sounded:
the stars singing to you as you fell to earth—
taking the opening in our wounded lives
so soon after your sibling chose to return to the stars.

makes me always wonder why you chose me—
us—
with your wise spirit
and wild ways—
to teach how to step so gently in the wildest places,
keeping us true North;
facing the stars that call us home
to the places on the other side of the sun
where they sing our names so many times,
maybe we'll remember them ourselves.

Strand #3

Learning From Making: The Medicine in Indigenous Poiesis

Why does the practice of Indigenous Poiesis and the honouring of our Indigeneity matter today? It is because it creates human beings that are porous to the teachings of Creation and the circle of life. It allows us to fully participate, through our Indigeneity, in the ceremony of living with 'All Our Relations'...it creates an organ of imagination in which dwells the living signature or essence of being that we are gifted by Creation. (Kelly, 2019, pp. 24-25)



Fig. 4: Smudging with sweetgrass at my writing table. Photo from author's collection.

Amid the crisis and chaos youth walk in and face, where do they find the hope and strength to move forward, face to the light? Where do they look to for ways to, like Iskotew, find the medicine within themselves to keep standing? In my experience, as a *teacher*, mother, and artist, I have found my medicine in Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and doing. Through making practices, I have found ways to make, unmake, and remake myself and have offered these practices to my students, my children, and my grandchildren as ways to connect themselves to these healing ways as well. Practices and pedagogies such as weaving, beading, drumming, singing, the practice of smudging,¹² and talking circles have been offered in my learning communities as ways to calm the anxious heart and reconnect youth to the voices of their spirits. Fellner (2019) reminds us “the smudging, talking circles, and traditional teachings make a profound difference in the classrooms. The energy shifted towards greater harmony and balance, fostering learning, and increasing student engagement” (p. 165). I too have noticed the same shift in my learning spaces. Youth have reflected to me, through discussion and written reflection, that they feel calm, safe, and seen in our space because when they are allowed to weave, bead, or draw when they listen to lessons/teachings, they feel more connected to what they are learning. They have also shared that they appreciate having “making days” built into our week. Every Friday, the youth work on any making practices they have been engaged in. Some folx are working on crochet or knitting projects, some bead earrings or decorative pins for friends and family, some draw or paint, and some choose to use the time to work on homework, do puzzles, or play games with their friends.



Fig. 5: Samples of projects from our classroom. Tiles, woven bags, and painted feathers as gifts for Elders in our community.

What I have learned, is that these days are the days of connection for our community. They sit together and check in on one another. I am permitted time to build stronger relationships with youth, especially those who show me, through their actions, that they need to feel seen. In the old days, I would have seen those youth—the ones who are *challenging*—and tried to diagnose their behaviors. They have taught me to pay attention to what is being asked for and, during these quiet times, I am able to show I am available to them and whatever it is they are asking me to learn about what they need. It is so much easier to connect, to slide into difficult conversations, when we are beading, weaving, or sitting together over a card game.

When we engage in Indigenous pedagogies such as walking on the land, beading, weaving, drumming, singing, circle work, and smudge, not only do the youth and children have an opportunity to listen to and learn from their trauma wisdom, but the adults working with them do as well. Those of us who have worked with students, whose journeys are difficult ones, may suffer vicarious trauma¹³. We need medicine, too, to be most useful and available to the children and youth and what they are asking of us. Like Fellner, I have also observed/experienced “teachers who were vicariously picking up and carrying some of the difficulties the children were facing were able to let go of those difficulties with the help of the circle and land-based practices” (Fellner, 2019, p. 161). If you are in the circle, doing ceremony, you cannot help but be healed by it, too. That is the nature of the work, this is the work of ceremony:

We are born spiritually perfect, but once we experience trauma in our lives, we begin to spiral away from that state of perfection. Ceremony helps us reverse that spiral by dealing with our traumas in healthy ways, and it helps us to start spiralling in a better direction. Through ceremony, we can create a relationship with Spirit: it will love us back, feed us with good energy, and help push us forward. (George, 2023, p. 79)

Not only does ceremony offer ways for youth to return to the pathways to becoming who they were born to be, it also offers “culturally rooted coping mechanisms that would help them face challenges throughout their lives” (Fellner, 2019, p. 165). When youth and children learn early how to cope with crisis and the pain of their trauma, present and past, they have choices which will, potentially “serve as a critical role in the prevention of health and social issues which is not often addressed in current health systems that are designed primarily to react to existing concerns” (Fellner, 2019, pp. 159-160).



Fig. 6: My medicines: smudge, tobacco, and drum.

Photo from author's collection.

only through ceremony

Ceremony will save us,
bring us back alive from the brink of extinction
in a grand plan cast upon us like a net made of nettles.

Ceremony will lift us up out of tar pits
and denial of all who we are in Spirit and love—
from the mouths of Ancestors,
holy songs are sung to us,
to free our pain and bring us hope
but we can only find them through ceremony.

Reminders From Crow: Why These Teachings Matter

Over the past twenty-two years, I have walked alongside children and youth, observing the challenges and callings many of them have taken up. I have watched my own children walk into this uncertain future, filled with pride as they have made their way to the places and spaces they have needed to be to become the people they were born to become. Two out of three of my children have found ways to step into the roles and responsibilities created for them by a system they could work within. For my youngest son, these systems did not offer him what he needed to help him become who he is called to be in these days of environmental crisis and social injustice. For him, and for many of my students, the challenges of transitioning into colonial educational pathways, meaningless employment, and the adoption of the capitalist/heteropatriarchal definition of “success” is not what he/they are looking for. Their mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual distress is not a deficit. These are feelings calling them to demand different options for their futures—options beyond the ones that have gotten us into this mess in the first place.

As the adults in the lives of these young ones, we are called to hear their trauma wisdom, to shift from “colonial deficit narratives toward Indigenous narratives of survivance, resilience, and resurgence ... from patronizing to honouring, from reactive interventions to prevention through good relationships ... and from pathologizing ‘symptoms’ to listening to and engaging wisdom, knowledge, and resilience” (Fellner, 2019, p. 165). Within their “distress” lives the answers to the crises and chaos they/we are living.

Through the ceremony of making, smudging, drumming, singing, and working together in learning communities of care and honor, we offer medicines which help us spiral back to the source of our spirit connection to All Our Relations, where the healing begins and the re-emergence of our true selves can be found (George, 2023, p. 79). Finally, like Dr. Vicki Kelly, I wonder, and seek to answer the following questions so that I may prepare spaces for youth to find their way, and to learn from them in their trauma wisdom, because our futures depend upon it:

What process and practices can we gather in our medicine bundles as we walk bravely into the future amidst the climate crisis and the crisis of relations with our human relatives? ... Will we find a way to transform our systems of education and justice to restore ecological sustainability? And how can we transform ourselves such that we are useful to this task? (Kelly, 2021, pp. 142–143)

Chi miigwech, kina wiya! (Thank you very much, everyone.) Thank you for walking with me and reflecting with me in this work.

Notes

1. A nod to The Who's 1965 single.
2. *All My Relations* is a term used by many Indigenous communities/people as a statement of connection to our human and more-than-human relations. It encapsulates our acknowledgment that there are more relations to us than merely those of the human world. This includes the physical and spiritual worlds as well.
3. Below is an excellent explanation and source for the use of the word "folx":
Overall, research around the usage of "x" in language shows that there are generally five reasons it's used, says [Norma Mendoza-Denton, PhD](#), linguistics expert and anthropology professor at UCLA.
 - 1) To avoid having to assign gender within a word.
 - 2) To represent trans and gender non-conforming people.
 - 3) As a variable (such as in algebra), so it acts as a fill-in-the-blank term for each person. For example, in the use of "xe" or "xem" in [neopronouns](#), a category of new pronouns that can be used for anyone, regardless of gender.
 - 4) For many colonized communities—whether [Latinx](#), Black, or other Indigenous groups—the "x" also stands for all that has been taken away from them by colonizers. For example, communities in Mexico call themselves Chicano/Xicano/a/x as opposed to "Mexican" because it signals identification with Indigenous roots.
 - 5) The "x" also comes into play specifically in Indigenous languages that have always had or have lost their third gender. For example, the community in Juchitan, Mexico, is [reclaiming and celebrating their third gender](#) "muxe."

All of these reasons reference the desire to escape binary language as well as colonization. In reclaiming language, it's easier to pave the way for a more inclusive system.

<https://www.shape.com/lifestyle/mind-and-body/latinx-folx-womxn-meaning>

4. Indigenous teachings encompass ways of knowing, being, and doing that are actively practiced or learned. Teachings is the English word used to describe the process of sharing knowledge or original Indigenous methods of educating. Original practices and teachings are distinct to each diverse Indigenous group and continue despite centuries of legal and extralegal oppression and demonizing such as forced assimilation laws, policies, attitudes, beliefs and practices rooted in genocide that are inflicted on Indigenous Peoples (<https://cass.ab.ca/indigenous-education/teachings/>).

5. I have italicized this word because it is the label placed on students whose behavior is viewed as unacceptable or challenging in a colonial view of what classrooms should be. These are the students who would have been labelled as having behavior or mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, aggression, non-compliance, and many more. I do not see these young ones in this way. I try to view their behavior as a form of communication, calling me to see them more fully and understand what needs they are asking me to meet.
6. I have chosen to italicize the word *teacher* because I feel that this term is laden with all kinds of baggage of power that I do not feel particularly comfortable with. I am a student of life and All My Relations who happens to hold the title of *teacher*. It is very important for me, as an Indigenous searcher, that folk understand my discomfort with the history of the term and the colonial power issues it holds.
7. For a complete telling of the story, see her chapter in *Knowing the past and facing the future: Indigenous education in Canada*. She shares the story with the Education Faculty at Simon Fraser University in the following presentation: https://www.sfu.ca/psychology/about/indigenous-reconciliation/Events/iskotew_crow.html. I highly recommend listening to the presentation and the story. Her teachings are deeply resonant with the work we all seek to do.
8. Successful, in this sense, is the ability to produce, regurgitate, read, write, and engage with colonial curricula, void of offerings of adaptations or modifications to address individual learning needs.
9. Challenging behaviors such as distracting others in a learning environment, school avoidance, fighting, lack of engagement with the learning material, swearing, drug use, and other behaviors which cause challenges to a productive learning environment.
10. A nod to Shel Silverstien's book *The Missing Piece*.
11. Mi'kmaq Elder and scholar Marie Battiste teaches us what the learning Spirit is: "We are all on a journey to find our unique gifts given to us by Creator, Elder Danny Musqua tells us. *Knowledge is held by the spirits, shared by the spirits and comes from the spirits . . . our body then can be seen as carrier of the learning spirit* (Elder Danny Musqua, in D. Knight, 2001). The 'learning spirit,' then, is the entity within each of us that guides our search for purpose and vision. Our gifts unfold in a learning environment that sustain and challenge us as learners." (Battiste, 2013, p. 18)
12. Smudging is the ceremonial practice of burning sage, sweetgrass, cedar, and tobacco in a shell or cast iron/metal container, waving the smoke over the body as a way to cleanse negative energies.
13. Vicarious trauma happens when caregivers experience similar manifestations of the trauma of others. If we are not mindful of our experience of this, we can become burned out and unhealthy, just like the folk with whom we work. For more information on vicarious trauma, here is one resource: <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/bph/wp-content/uploads/sites/161/2021/10/Trauma-Fact-Sheets-October-2021.pdf>

References

- Absolon, K. & Willett, C. (2005). Putting ourselves forward: Location in Aboriginal research. In L. Brown & S. Strega (Eds.), *Research as Resistance: Critical, Indigenous and anti-oppressive approaches* (pp.97–126). Canadian Scholars Press.
- Archibald, J. (2008). *Indigenous storywork: Educating the heart, mind, body, and spirit*. UBC Press.
- Battiste, M. (2013). *Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the learning spirit*. UBC Press.
- Battiste, M. (2010). Nourishing the learning spirit: Living our way to new thinking. In *Education Canada*, 50 (1), 14 – 18. <https://www.edcan.ca/wp-content/uploads/EdCan-2010-v50-n1-Battiste.pdf>
- Connect Parent Group handout
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6191d20b18cacb2b6bf74bad/t/61f644343c2b8a3e9fa4f18d/1643529269434/Attachment-and-your-Child-1-1.pdf>
- Donald, D. (2012). Indigenous Métissage: a decolonizing research sensibility. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 25:5, 533 – 555.
<https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1275&context=aprci>
- Fellner, K. (2019). In Carr-Stewart, S. (Ed.). *Knowing the past, facing the future: Indigenous education in Canada*. Purich Books.
- George, R. (2023). *It stops here: Standing up for our lands, our waters, and our people*. Penguin Random House.
- Hasebe-Ludt, E., Chambers, C., & Leggo, C. D. (2009). *Life writing and literary métissage as an ethos for our time*. Peter Lang.
- Kelly, V. (2021). Radical acts of re-imagining ethical relationality and trans-systemic transformation. *Engaged Scholar Journal: Community – Engaged Research, Teaching, and Learning*, 7(1), 183–202.
<https://doi.org/10.15402/esj.v7i1.70759>
- Kelly, V. (2021). Kizhay ottiziwin: To walk with kindness and kinship. *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies (JCACS)*. 18(2), 138–149.
<https://jcacs.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/jcacs/article/view/40617>
- Kelly, V. (2019). Indigenous poesis: Medicine for Mother Earth. *Artizein: Arts and Teaching Journal*, 4(1), 17-30. <https://openuic.lib.siu.edu/atj/vol4/iss1/3>
- Kelly, V. (2010). Finding Face, Finding Heart, and Finding Foundation: Life Writing and the Transformation of Educational Practice. *Transnational Curriculum inquiry*. 7(2), 83–100).
<https://doi.org/10.14288/tci.v7i2.2042>
- Kovach, M. (2021). *Indigenous methodologies: Characteristics, conversations, and context*. University of Toronto Press.
- Knight, D. (2001). *The seven fires: Teachings of the bear clan as recounted by Dr. Danny Musqua*. Many Worlds Publishing.
- Leggo, C. (2011). Living love: Confessions of a fearful teacher. *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies (JCACS)*. 9(1), 115-144.
<https://jcacs.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/jcacs/article/view/32135>

Marya, R. and Patel, R. (2021). *Inflamed: Deep medicine and the anatomy of justice*. Picador.

Snowber, C., & Bickel, B. (2015). Companions with mystery: Art, spirit, and the ecstatic. In S. Walsh, B. Bickel, & C. Leggo (Eds.), *Arts-based and contemplative practices in research and teaching: honoring presence* (pp. 67–87). Routledge/ Taylor & Francis Group.

Silverstein, S. (1976). *The missing piece*. HarperCollins.

Smith, G. (2020, December 17). *What it means to include “x” in words such as womxn, folx, and Latinx*. SHAPE. <https://www.shape.com/lifestyle/mind-and-body/latinx-folx-womxn-meaning>

Townsend, P. (1965). *The Kids Are Alright*. On My Generation. Decca Records.

Vizenor, G. (2009). *Native liberty: Natural reason and cultural survivance*. University of Nebraska.

Wilson, S. (2008). *Research is ceremony: Indigenous research methods*. Fernwood Publishing.



Ramona Elke identifies as Anishinaabe/Métis/European. She is a doctoral student in the Arts Education program at Simon Fraser University. She is a high school teacher, a mother, a grandmother, and a student of weaving, beading, drumming, and ceremony. Her research centers on how to create spaces of honoring for all of the beings with her on this journey, to nourish her learning Spirit, and the learning Spirits of others. She is dedicated to bringing Indigenous pedagogies and methodologies into every aspect of her personal and professional life, making place for the transformative medicine teachings of All Our Relations in the hard work of reconciliation.