

## **Culturally Relevant Physical Education: Educative Conversations with Mi'kmaw Elders and Community Leaders**

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### **Abstract**

This paper presents results from a recently completed inquiry that investigated culturally relevant physical education for Aboriginal students. Employing a decolonizing research methodology (storywork), we engaged seven Mi'kmaw Elders and three Mi'kmaw community physical activity/education leaders in conversations about culturally relevant physical education. Attending to Halas, McCrae, and Carpenter's (2012) framework for culturally relevant physical education, we share our findings related to Mi'kmaw students and school communities. The results ought to be of notable interest to those who share an interest in culturally relevant pedagogy, physical education, and/or Aboriginal education.

*Keywords:* culturally relevant; physical education; Aboriginal education



*in education*

exploring our connective educational landscape

## **Culturally Relevant Physical Education: Educative Conversations with Mi'kmaw Elders and Community Leaders**

Canadian scholars have recently suggested there is an absence of understanding, or action, related to culturally relevant pedagogy in physical education, particularly with respect to Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> students (e.g., Halas, McRae, & Carpenter, 2012; Kalyn, 2014; Melnychuk, Robinson, Lu, Chorney, & Randall, 2011; Robinson, Lunney Borden, & Robinson, 2013). Globally, and particularly within the United States, culturally relevant physical education efforts have focused principally upon groups other than Indigenous students. For example, much of the recent research and literature in the United States has focused upon African-American, Hispanic, and/or 'urban' students (e.g., see Columna, Foley, & Lytle, 2010; Culp, 2010; Flory & McCaughtry, 2011). Conversely, outside of North America, a small group of New Zealand (Aotearoa) researchers (Hokowhitu, 2008; Legge, 2011; Salter, 2000, 2003) are recognized for their important work related to culturally relevant physical education for Māori students. Within Canada, such work has been limited, shaped largely by a very small number of pedagogues (e.g., Casey & Kentel, 2014; Halas, 2011; Kalyn, 2006). It is within this context that we came to recognize the importance of our research project, "Culturally Relevant Physical Education: Educative Conversations with Mi'kmaw Elders and Community Leaders."

The justification for our research is twofold. First, we believe there exists a need to ensure high quality First Nations education and, more specifically, physical education—grounded in First Nations culture, history, and language (Anderson, Horton, & Orwick, 2004; Kitchen, Cherubini, Trudeau, & Hodson, 2009; Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2012). Secondly, though we are familiar with the limited literature related to culturally relevant physical education for Aboriginal students, we believe research interest and efforts related to culturally relevant physical education should be more specifically directed toward understanding and honouring the uniqueness and particular of needs of physical education students from each of the many Aboriginal groups within Canada (Smith, 1999). This research focused on the need to more specifically understand culturally relevant physical education *for Mi'kmaw* students. In this effort, we completed a year-long study in which we invited Mi'kmaw Elders and community physical activity or education leaders to share in educative conversations, giving them voice so that they, and we, could begin to articulate what Mi'kmaw-relevant physical education might look like or be.

### **What is Culturally Relevant Physical Education?**

Pedagogues have adopted a number of terms and meanings to describe what we herein label as culturally relevant. For example, somewhat synonymous terms fashioned and/or employed by others include "culturally appropriate" (Yazzie-Mintz, 2007), "culturally congruent" (Berger & Epp, 2006), and "culturally responsive" (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). By adopting "culturally relevant," we mean to signify and identify our adherence to Ladson-Billings's (1994, 1995) original conception of the idea, particularly her caution that creating culturally relevant pedagogy requires much more than simply inserting culture into curriculum (which is an altogether too common "solution"). Rather, and like her, we believe that creating cultural relevance requires educators to purposefully "utilize students' culture as a vehicle for learning" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 161). Integrating students' background knowledge and prior (and current) home and community experiences into curriculum and teaching is an essential exercise for those aiming to achieve culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1994). This requires that teachers hold

high expectations for their students, that they assist their students in developing cultural competence, and that they guide their students to develop a critical cultural consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Culturally relevant physical education attends to all of these requirements and tenets—albeit within the unique physical education context.

### **Canadian Culturally Relevant Physical Education Scholarship**

Casey and Kentel (2014) explain that culturally relevant physical education “not only recognizes the diverse cultural identities of students, [but also] it aims to affirm them through comprehensive curricular development and responsive pedagogical practices that reach beyond the context of the school” (p. 125). They also recognize that attending to culturally relevant physical education will necessarily require a disruption of the current hegemony of whiteness within the discipline. However, despite the best efforts of critical pedagogues to do just that, teachers’ lack of expertise and confidence to speak about issues related to race and racialized identities (Douglas & Halas, 2013; Hylton, 2015) often has the unfortunate effect of normalizing the “experiences, histories, and worldviews” (Casey & Kentel, 2014, p. 125) of the White racialized majority.

In many Indigenous cultures, the Medicine Wheel contains all of the traditional teachings and can, therefore, be used as a guide in any journey, including the educational process. While there is some variation in its teachings and representations, the underlying web of meaning to the Medicine Wheels remains the same: the importance of appreciating and respecting the ongoing interconnectedness and interrelatedness of all things (Bell, 2014). Recognizing that Indigenous peoples have had a model for healthy living for generations before contemporary (and Western) physical education existed, Kalyn (2006, 2014) has worked with Indigenous teachers, cultural guides, Elders, and administrators to articulate culturally relevant guidelines and practices that honour the Medicine Wheel and the teachings of the Sacred Tree (Bopp, Bopp, Brown, & Lane, 1985). Clearly, Kalyn’s model purposefully draws upon the Medicine Wheel, in structure and in purpose. While some of Kalyn’s multi-layered components are intuitive and observably appropriate (e.g., the alignment of a wellness framework’s spiritual dimension with the Medicine Wheel’s East/Spiritual), others are less intuitive though still beneficial (e.g., the alignment of dance with the Medicine Wheel’s West/Physical and gymnastics with the Medicine Wheel’s South/Emotional).

Halas (2011), whose work has focused almost exclusively upon Aboriginal education within a Manitoba First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) context, has defined culturally relevant physical education as “providing programs that are rich in meaningful and relevant activities that affirm the cultural identities of students” (p. 23). Moreover, she and others (Halas, 2011; Halas et al., 2012) provide a framework for engaging students in culturally meaningful ways. This framework, a four-sectioned circle also somewhat resembling the Medicine Wheel, suggests the following are required if students are to experience cultural relevance within physical education: a teacher who is an ally, a shared understanding of students’ day-to-day cultural landscapes, a supportive learning climate, and a meaningful and relevant curriculum (Halas et al., 2012). This wheel-as-model approach suggests an interconnected and relational model—and, as previously, is certainly consistent with others who advocate for such a wholistic approach (e.g., see Battiste, 1998).

## Researching Within Mi'kma'ki

The Mi'kmaw people are Aboriginal First Nations people who are located within present-day Nova Scotia, northern New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, the Gaspé Peninsula in Eastern Quebec, and parts of Newfoundland and Maine. Throughout Mi'kma'ki territory, there are over 20,000 Mi'kmaw people who reside in more than 35 different communities (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2013). Much like other Aboriginal First Nations across Canada, the Mi'kmaw have deep attachments to the land and their language and culture connect them to it. However, Mi'kmaw people also have been challenged to preserve their language and culture as a result of colonial policies such as centralization (Paul, 2006) and residential schools (Benjamin, 2014; TRC, 2012).<sup>2</sup> Despite the detrimental effects of these policies on Mi'kmaw communities, Mi'kmaw people have persevered and a cultural resurgence has occurred. Through the work of the chiefs and organizations as Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey (MK), the current socio-political landscape has been able to support the revitalization of Mi'kmaw culture and language (Orr & Cameron, 2004).

With Indigenous physical education scholarship in Canada being largely limited to the work conducted by a handful of scholars (i.e., Halas, Kalyn, and other collaborators), there exists a paucity of scholarship related to physical education and Aboriginal students east of the prairies. While to many this observation in and of itself would not give reason enough to pursue scholarship related to physical education and Aboriginal students east of the prairies, it does reinforce our belief that research interest and efforts related to culturally relevant physical education should be more specifically directed toward understanding and honouring the uniqueness and the particular needs of other Canadian Aboriginal peoples (Smith, 1999). It also suggests to us that more scholars ought to be taking up this line of inquiry; the relative lack of scholarship in the (geographic and content) area is both significant and troubling. As such, we recognized the need to do similar research within Mi'kma'ki so that we might come to understand culturally relevant physical education for Mi'kmaw students.

Though the broad aim of this research focused upon culturally relevant physical education pedagogy for Aboriginal students, the primary research questions guiding this study were:

- What is culturally relevant physical education pedagogy for Mi'kmaw children and youth? (What should—and what should not—be taught within physical education so as to respect Mi'kmaw ways of knowing? How should—and how should not—physical education be taught so as to respect Mi'kmaw ways of knowing?)
- In what ways might Halas et al.'s (2012) four criteria for cultural relevance (teacher as an ally, understanding of students' day-to-day cultural landscapes, supportive learning climate, meaningful and relevant curriculum) be best realized for Mi'kmaw students and school communities?

Our efforts to answer these questions relied upon a decolonizing methodology (storywork), conversations with Elders and community leaders, and an analysis process that necessarily privileged the knowledge and wisdom of participants.

## Research Methodology: Storywork

Indigenous research methodologies, specifically decolonizing perspectives, challenge the status quo and provide those who have been oppressed with necessary tools to combat the oppressor and oppressive structures, including, for example, Eurocentric research approaches. Eurocentric research approaches have perpetuated oppression on Aboriginal peoples but decolonizing perspectives specifically aim to address, resist, and rectify that oppression (Beeman-Cadwallader, Quigley, & Yazzie-Mintz, 2012). Smith (1999) offers, “It is about centring our [Indigenous] concerns and worldviews and then coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives and for our own purposes” (p. 39). Swadener and Mutua (2008) assert that, “decolonization is about the process in both research and performance of valuing, reclaiming, and foregrounding Indigenous voices and epistemologies” (p. 31).

Researchers who employ Indigenous research methodologies are more effectively positioned to counter the metanarrative and to redefine research and researchers. They have activist agendas and work towards social justice and emancipatory goals (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Furthermore, Kovach (2009) contends, “As long as decolonization is a purpose of Indigenous research, critical theory will be an allied Western conceptual tool for creating change” (p. 48). With these beliefs and perspectives, we adopted storywork as a decolonizing methodology.

Embracing a criticalist perspective, we attended to Archibald’s (2009) Indigenous storywork—which is both a narrative and critical research approach. This approach was chosen because we presupposed that we, through the knowledge and wisdom of Mi’kmaq Elders and community leaders, could gain an improved initial understanding about culturally relevant physical education. Moreover, it was our sincere goal that this research would: (a) give voice to the participating Elders and community physical activity/education leaders in an effort to, together, begin to articulate what Mi’kmaq-relevant physical education might look like or be, and (b) support the efforts of community Elders and leaders to bring about change for their own communities.

## Research Methods: Conversations

Data were collected over a one-year period through the use of one-on-one conversations. As Euro-Canadian scholars, we entered into our conversations acknowledging and respecting Indigenous ways of knowing and doing (Kitchen, Cherubini, Trudeau, & Hodson, 2009). Conversations (particularly as an alternative to interviews) privilege Aboriginal approaches to research—something we, as well as others (Chilisa, 2012; Lavalée, 2009), believe is especially necessary when employing Indigenous methodologies. The use of minimally structured open-ended conversations allowed participants to discuss themes related to physical education, cultural relevance, and Mi’kmaq ways of knowing as they naturally unfolded (Kvale, 1996). All conversations (save one) were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim (one participant requested that the conversation not be recorded). Conversations ranged from 67 minutes to 112 minutes.

## Participants

Seven Elders (from four Mi’kma’ki regions) and three community physical activity/education leaders (from three Mi’kma’ki regions) participated in this research. Eight

participants were male while two were female. Moreover, a pilot process with two Elders and two community physical activity/education leaders preceded these research conversations; data from these pilot conversations are not included within this paper. In order to protect the anonymity of the participants, schools, and communities, pseudonyms have been used throughout the remainder of this article.

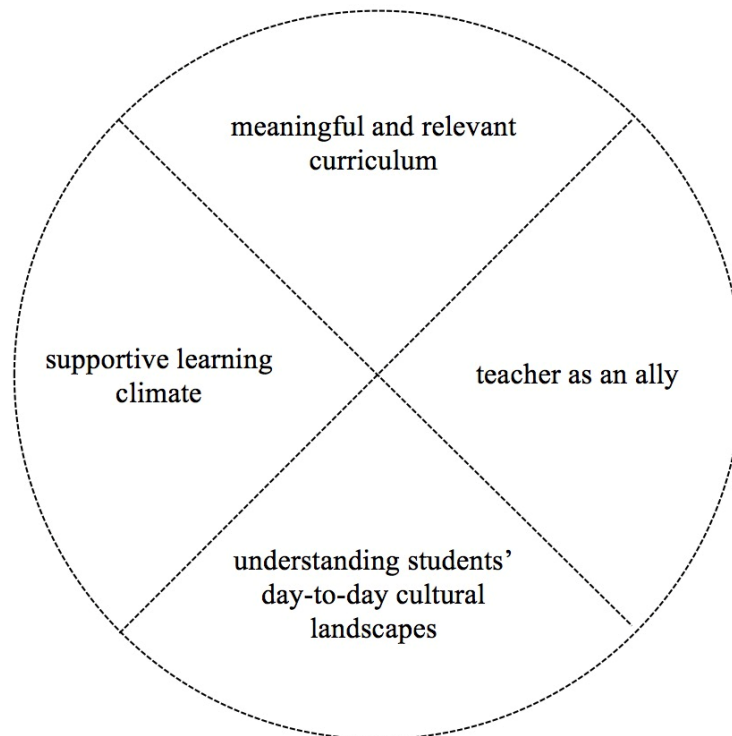
### **Research Ethics and Mi'kma'ki**

In addition to first receiving research ethics approval from one university's Research Ethics Board, additional ethical approval was granted by Mi'kmaw Ethics Watch. It is worth noting that the Mi'kmaw Ethics Watch committee is appointed by the Sante' Mawio'mi (Grand Council); this committee ensures the right of ownership of research conducted with Mi'kmaw people rests with various Mi'kmaw communities.

**Positionality.** Positionality “refers to the place that a person occupies within a set of social relationships” (Leistyna, Woodrum, & Sherblom, 1996, p. 340). Locating ourselves—that is, identifying and contemplating our social locations—enables us to understand and disclose our positionality. Such a process is rightfully important to our readers, allies, and critics. Appropriately, then, we offer some insight into our positionality as researchers. We identify as Euro-Canadian scholars. We also share a history of teaching experiences within different Canadian Aboriginal communities. Moreover, since moving to the academe, we have developed working and research relationships and partnerships with a number of Mi'kmaw people and communities associated with MK. We believe these relationships and partnerships allowed us to develop the requisite “trust, rapport, and authentic communication patterns” (Chilisa, 2012, p. 34) necessary to engage in research with participants.

### **Data Analysis**

Agreeing that the researcher and participants are co-learners (Wilson, 2008), and as suggested by Chilisa (2012) and Wilson (2008), data were analyzed in collaboration with the participants. That is, following each one-on-one conversation, we (as the researchers) transcribed the audio-recorded conversations as we also began to identify major themes. Follow-up correspondence with participants invited them to co-construct meaning of the text (Richardson, 1994) by reviewing the transcribed conversations. This process was meant to allow the participants to confirm or provide suggestions on how to amend our articulation of their words and stories (Brown & Strega, 2005). Following the completion of conversations, we considered the larger ideas and the themes presented by all of the participants—particularly as they “fit” into Halas et al.'s (2012) four categories of cultural relevance (see Figure 1 below). These four areas are: (a) teacher as an ally, (b) understanding students' day-to-day cultural landscapes, (c) supportive learning climate, and (d) meaningful and relevant curriculum (Halas et al., 2012). The teacher as ally uses of her/his own privilege to help students overcome their oppression and works in support of the students. The teacher who demonstrates understanding students' day-to-day cultural landscapes ensures that she/he is knowledgeable about the students' socio-historical context and purposefully works to build relationships with them. By providing students the opportunity to contribute to each other's learning, the teacher demonstrates a supportive learning climate. The teacher's use of meaningful and relevant curriculum demonstrates her/his commitment to use culturally meaningful activities that affirm students' cultural identities.



*Figure 1.* Culturally responsive physical education (Halas et al., 2012).

By carefully and repeatedly reading, discussing, and juxtaposing the transcribed data, research notes, and feedback from the participants, we identified key ideas derived from our conversations.

### **The Findings**

Conversations with Elders and community leaders revealed considerable information related to possibilities for (more) culturally relevant physical education for Mi'kmaw students and school communities. As noted, we focused our analysis on the participants' conversations (and stories and responses) as they related to Halas et al.'s (2012) framework for engaging students in culturally meaningful ways.

#### **Teacher as an Ally**

Participants cautioned about the difficult and fine line between being an ally and also trying to be a friend to students. For example, one participant offered:

Be an ally but when you are teaching, you can't be a best friend to the kids all of the time because a lot of them are going to be disruptive...and you got to deal with them. So, you can't be everybody's best friend all of the time—I find anyway. I mean, I worked in the school 12 years as a guidance counsellor and I was supposed to be everybody's best friend all of the time, but I wasn't. What's important is that you draw a line and they can come up to the line but they can't cross it. You got to have a line with the kids and they understand line but if you don't have a line and you try to be everybody's ally and best friend, they will walk all over you. They'll take full advantage of you trying to be their best friend.

The observation that teachers ought to avoid trying to be friends with their students is not a unique one. Indeed, a similar note of caution is routinely shared with our institutions' neophyte teacher candidates in an effort to reinforce their duty of care responsibilities. Still, it was interesting to us that participants felt it important to provide a similar caution when asked about the importance of physical education teachers also being allies. Clearly, these participants recognized the difficult-to-define notion of being an ally. As described by Champagne (2006), serving as an ally to Aboriginal youth "involves having consciousness of patterns of oppression and intervening to minimize the hurt that gets inflicted or re-enacted up Aboriginal people" (p. 18). Another participant offered the following:

If you notice if the kid is off, it might be just the fact that they didn't have breakfast, you know. Just ask. Ask the people from the community that are on staff. Anyone, not just teachers. Just ask them privately, "Is there anything going on with that kid and his family?" "Oh, yeah, yeah. His parents broke up last week." Wouldn't know that as a teacher and he's acting out. Just be understanding but you don't need to be like that with everybody because not everybody is going through the same thing. That's what I used to say when I worked at Ravenwood to teachers: "Just be understanding. Just ask me if one of the kids are acting up and I will tell you what is going on with them or what might be going on with them."

Similarly, another shared:

The understanding, if they are having problems with their parents, their girlfriend, [their] boyfriend, their uncle is dying of cancer or something. Like that is going on in the family, it's the understanding.

These findings—pointing to the fundamental importance of physical education teachers having and demonstrating an understanding of students' social circumstances and needs—have been affirmed in the literature (Champaign, 2006; Halas, 2011). Additionally, others suggested that being an ally required teachers to make an extra effort to learn about their students' cultural knowledge and cultural connections. One participant shared:

First of all, have a knowledge base of what they are supposed to be doing. Have the resources available so they can provide the best supporting learning climate. Have the integrity to work towards that. Have a vision of some sort so that they can provide. Have a historical knowledge of the people you are going to be teaching. Have a knowledge of the community that you are going to be instructing in. Have a good working relationship with the rest of the staff or the rest of the people that are in the same business as you.

Given this response, we see teachers as allies to Mi'kmaw students endeavouring to demonstrate cultural competence—an understanding of their students' cultural knowledge and cultural connections. This could be achieved by tapping into the wealth of community information harboured by teaching assistants, administrative assistants, and kitchen staff. By gaining valuable community information from community members within schools, participants suggested teachers might be enabled to be more understanding of their students.

Additionally, teacher candidates coming into practice would benefit from university offerings that explore Aboriginal culture and history as it relates to teaching. Despite the TRC's



(2012) call for federal, provincial, and territorial governments to provide education to public servants on Aboriginal history and intercultural competency, most teacher candidates do not take a single university course related to Aboriginal history (and fewer take a course related to Mi'kmaw history); further action is certainly needed if this is to occur.

Finally, participants were asked to share stories about the types of things that were important for teachers-as-allies to know when working with students in their communities. This is a commonly held viewpoint related to the notion of interconnectedness or relationality. One participant shared a story of the interconnected relationship that existed between teacher, student, and Elder and the need for allies to be understanding:

We had a girl in class; it was Friday afternoon; nice girl, she was, she was a bit cross with her teacher and the teacher came to see me and said and after the fact, she was pretty mean in class, "Anything going on with her?" "Not that I know of, nothing going wrong with the family." Anyway, long story short, Monday morning, she went to the hospital Friday night and had a baby. Not me, not any of her friends, not her parents, not her sisters, not one person knew that she was pregnant. So she was probably in labour Friday afternoon. But the good thing is the teacher was understanding because I had in-serviced the teachers about if a Mi'kmaw kid gets cross in class and they normally don't, there is something going on.

We were further reminded of the need for and importance of seeking out guidance from Indigenous voices to better understand teacher roles in intercultural learning communities. We were drawn back to the words shared by Halas (2011) about her own experiences with Aboriginal communities:

In striving to understand what I have been taught and have learned in my many personal and professional encounters with young people from diverse Aboriginal cultural backgrounds, I continually look for guidance from Indigenous voices. In doing so, I have worked hard to loosen the constraints of my own White, Eurocentric pattern of seeing and being in the world. (p. 3)

It is vital for teachers to make meaningful connections with community members throughout the school and school community. Moreover, creating these meaningful connections needs to be cultivated with care and respect. We all need to see our physical education settings as an intercultural space shared between Aboriginal students and Euro-Canadian teachers—those privileged with the opportunity to be invited to live and work alongside Mi'kmaw communities.

### **Understanding Students' Day-to-day Cultural Landscapes**

Participants shared examples of how important it is for physical education teachers to engage with their students outside of the classroom—something that clearly requires them to be present within the community outside of regular school hours. For example, one participant shared:

Spend some time in the community. At least go visit the kid's home, see what his home life is like. If that kid is coming in every day and he is all screwed up in the head well go see what is wrong with him. Maybe it is not a very happy home life. Rather than just show up at quarter to nine every morning, they are gone by four

o'clock and they did not spend any time outside that school and they don't know nothing about that community, they know nothing about the community, nothing about the peers, nothing about that kid except what they see in the classroom and that does not give a very clear picture.

While teachers within virtually all public school contexts can expect meetings with parents to occur at the school site, participants suggested that teachers may need to travel to parents'/guardians' homes in Mi'kmaw communities. This was a common suggestion by participants. In explaining this preferable practice, one participant also offered insight into parents who do not come to the school yet still care for their children:

I would say that, take the time to really devote and sometimes if the parents are not too willing to come to teachers' nights, I would think after school drop by the parents' home and see them. They do care but a lot of parents are not really educated or outgoing people, but they do care about their child and if you care about the child as you say you do by going in to be a professional teacher, then you would be in the same boat as the parent who wants the best for their child so it should not be something that is out of your way to go in and find out how you can best teach and the parent can perhaps help.

Teachers also need to have a colour-conscious perspective—one that recognizes the extent to which colour and race continues to influence the life chances of citizens (Wilkins, 1996). Such a point was made by many participants, particularly when contrasts were being made between the “White way” and the “Mi'kmaw way.” As many Elders and leaders suggested, understanding how to best work with Mi'kmaw students requires teachers to understand that they are not the same as White kids. For example, one participant shared:

I think that if the teachers spend time with the kids out of the classroom, they would know they're different, that they are not like the White kids outside and they have to be given a different kind of—Cherise said not that long ago she was not really proud and honoured as a Native person when she went to the White school. It is only after she was knowledgeable about her own background, about our history and language that she became more proud. The teachers should have recognized the shortcoming a long time ago and advocated something. You want your students to succeed. That is your ultimate goal: you want your students to succeed.

The findings highlight the importance of understanding and affirming Mi'kmaw cultural identity and tradition with the aim of helping all students succeed. These findings are in line with assertions made by Halas et al. (2012) who stated that:

To enhance learning outcomes related to physical and health education, PE teachers need to create climates where Aboriginal youth feel welcome, where teachers and classmates affirm their cultural identities, and where teachers provide proactive assistance to individual students who may be struggling. (p. 6)

Others offered stories of promise, sharing that some physical education teachers had been making very real attempts at cultural immersion. For example, one participant shared:

One of the things we can see as more physical education teachers attending sweat lodge ceremonies, attending powwows and seeing the dance because they are culturally immersing themselves so they are able to utilize our own practices and take them and put them into a classroom. Even if they are teaching, non-Natives, bring that in. The non-Natives are not so stereotypical when they see us practicing our own practices. It helps with that colonialism or centralization that we talked about earlier that creates the fear in the white system.

These findings also align with the work conducted by Champagne (2006), who noted that “physical education teachers are strategically placed to help Aboriginal students nurture healthy relationships among themselves, their families, and communities” (p. 18). Though we appreciated the observations that physical education teachers need to include culturally relevant movement experiences (e.g., sweats, powwows, traditional dances), we were also honoured that participants, such as this one, suggested that all students, regardless of racialized identities, be invited to participate in these same culturally relevant movement experiences.

### **Supportive Learning Climate**

Conversations about supportive learning environments primarily focused upon belonging—making students feel safe and feeling cared about—core tenets of Maslow’s (1968) well-established and widely familiar hierarchy of needs. Indeed, many participants shared examples about White teachers who were unable to connect with their Mi’kmaw students because they were unsuccessful in first attending to the need to make their students feel safe and cared about. For example, one participant explained:

Because I will have that group of kids in Welp’tek where they are safe, they feel safe in the community and then I will go watch them practice in Bellesville and have a non-Native coach and I am, like, “Oh, he is not hearing you; he is over there banging his head off the wall; he is not connecting.” I am thinking, and the coach asked me once, “What will I do? Why doesn’t little Johnny listen to me?” “Because you did not pay attention to him: you did not once ask him his name, you did not once ask him what he thinks, you did not connect with him, or look at him. He tuned out way before practice started. You don’t care about him.” You don’t have to make a huge effort every single time but if you do it once in a while then they know that you are actually trying.

Others, elaborating upon what can be gained when teachers engage themselves within Mi’kmaw communities, suggested that students who felt their teachers cared about them would try harder to excel:

I think kids would take a huge leap forward with their teachers if the teacher just took an hour to go visit the powwow or drive through the reserve or go to a function or just get to know the community. It is a community within a community and if you get to know that community that kid happens to see that teacher. Basically, if the kid knows that you care then he is going to give you more.

Another similarly shared:

Like, I can run really fast, but I don't know if you want to help me be the best runner or you just want me to run. If you generally convince the child that I really want you to be the fastest runner because I think we can make something out of it, then that kid will give you 110% but what I am trying to say, if you are just trying to make him run just to run, he is probably only going to give you 50-60% because he does not want to tire out. If he thinks that you really care, he will give you 100% all the time.

Others shared poignant stories of past teachers who made such efforts to make their students feel cared about. For example, one participant suggested:

The teachers become involved and show an interest in what interests the kids; they are not distancing themselves. We had a teacher there, she had to be the—we talk about her often even now because she is retired now. She used to get the kids to write a journal. “Write what you did last weekend, tell me what you did” and she would read them and write a little story right behind it and go, “It was so nice to hear how much fun you had with your grandmother, grandfather, and your mother.” We went to a powwow and enjoyed ourself. “I am going to go to a powwow sometime too.” Things like that and it was—my kids just loved her. They wanted to go to school just to be in her classes; we are going to have Ms. Linda today. Ms. Linda is really nice.

Gregory and Chapman (2013) suggest that the emotional environment influences and interacts with students' experience with instruction and learning. The findings presented support this notion highlighting the importance and need to ensure we are providing a learning environment that goes beyond the duty of care. Rather, a learning environment must be derived out of a moral obligation to ensure safe, caring, and empathetic spaces for Mi'kmaw students to learn and grow.

### **Meaningful and Relevant Curriculum**

As was expected (and we certainly welcomed these sorts of suggestions), most participants saw and shared obvious examples where curricular content could very easily be made more culturally relevant. For example, one participant suggested:

Yeah, I think that if it is more culturally relevant that you be able to get more out of a child. You don't necessarily have to make everything but sometimes if they are going to play dodge ball for the sake of getting kids active, why don't we practice dance or jump or a culturally relevant game?

Another participant—who was also aware of distinctly Mi'kmaw activities—also suggested that hockey, a more traditional game, ought to be taught as a Mi'kmaw activity:

Me, personally, I like hockey because when schools do floor hockey, they don't realize that hockey actually comes from Mi'kmaq around here. If you really research it, it was first played in a variation of a game using a piece of wood and a ball that was made out of wood. It evolved and the first hockey stick was called Mi'kmaw hockey stick and the birth place of hockey happened either in Windsor

or Ontario but a little bit of research behind that and that is why hockey is so huge among First Nations kids because some are taught we kind of invented a type of hockey that is to this.

Another participant, also recognizing hockey's Mi'kmaw heritage, added an explanation of a Mi'kmaw variation of cricket:

With the advent of summer games I would think that you would try to get things that are culturally relevant to go along with the ball. They moved into basketball and volleyball and stuff like that but running would be culturally acceptable as well as things that some people are really good at such as dancing to go along with, maybe even floor hockey. That is something that is culturally relevant too because I know our people always played hockey and there was a game we used to play on the street before cars became a problem and it was called cricket. We never played it the British way; we took an old sponge ball and put up a couple rocks and rolled the ball down the road that kept us going all Jesus day!

Other participants also recognized other culturally relevant curriculum, sharing some of the most exciting local initiatives related to physical activity. For example, consider this participant's words:

Another thing in the schools that is starting to scratch the surface for the schools, we started, another one of the things that we started, the education director from here... they're field trips for the kids and basically what they do is they incorporate physical activity, culture, and Elders teaching on the trip plus healthy eating so basically what they did, they got an Elder that knew about traditional medicines, that are in the forest so they drove over to Epsmusi Mountain and then the kids had to hike up the mountain along with the Elder for about a mile and then until they found some traditional herbal medicines right in the forest. The Elder taught them about that and the importance and significance then their lunch was a healthy lunch it was like sandwiches and stuff so that's one aspect where physical activity was incorporated with the culture and the connectedness.

Others lamented the loss of other clearly culturally tied physical activities. For example, one shared:

It is unfortunate canoes and all that disappeared because we did not need to travel anymore; we were all put in a community. "Don't leave, you probably don't need a canoe." Just for them to know that you don't even have to say we are going to do this Mi'kmaw game, but if we do canoeing, I think they will appreciate it a little bit more. Although it is sort of lost in the last couple of generations but it played a huge part on who you are as a nation because that was the main mode of transportation other than walking.

Similarly, others suggested physical activities related to day-to-day life of generations of Mi'kmaw people:

Alright, ha, that is the fastest potato pickers or blueberry pickers. Ash pounding. People used to pound ash to make baskets and stuff. Jesus, that is hard work. Bang on that Jesus ash all day! They used to make you go get ash and make you

pound it. It just freezes. Anyway that and, Christ, even basket making, maybe you should try that whole concept: going into the woods to get the ash, identifying it and splitting it, and pounding it and making the basket itself. Finishing it. That should be an event in itself.

It has never been lost on us that many of these activities require someone with cultural competence—and very often an Elder would be most able to ensure activities were appropriately and authentically taken up. Supporting this notion was one participant:

Cody, he is a resource person at the school for our culture so he does things with them like showing them how to spear eels, how to do canoes, kayaks, he will camp outside with them in the fall. You got to make your place where you are going to stay warm because you will be there overnight; they are not allowed to take tents so he has to teach them to make a fire. You need your rocks and boughs and make yourself as comfortable as possible. You need an Elder to tell you this. We had sessions on how to make a needle spear. Nobody knew how so we had to get a guy from Melgignat who does it, Cody, he was down and showed this is how you make a needle spear, this is what you look for. That is the kind of things we try to deliver to the kids. The more we deliver, the more complete Mi'kmaq they turn out to be.

While many of the participants' recollections of past physical education activities were positive, we also, unexpectedly, found that our conversations necessarily had some Elders reflecting upon their residential school experiences. Without arriving with any questions meant to elicit conversations about their experiences as residential school survivors, participants nonetheless turned to those experiences when trying to capture what (physical) education was like for Mi'kmaq students in the past. For example, consider this Elder's comments:

I would say there are different reasons why we participated. Like, in [residential] school there was a core group, about 12 of us, that played softball every day. Every day we played softball. That was the reason we got good at it. There was a group from Millsport and a couple from Bezanson and a couple from Prince Edward Island. It was our way of getting out of the school and getting away from the nuns and priests who would constantly would beat on you or berate you. We used that as therapy. We went to play ball instead where nobody else would bother us and we did that when it was raining or cold and as a result we grew up to be pretty, have decent athletes.... It was therapy for us. We survived it and maybe we can thank them for doing that; we can thank us we did not think about it, we just did it and now over the years I have thought about it and realized it and gee wiz somebody gave us a gift to play ball and saved us a lot of beatings and a lot of misery in that school. Anyway I did not mean to get off on sports.

Forsyth (2012) has documented similar stories of survivors of the residential school experience. These unplanned residential school conversations reminded us that we must be especially sensitive when engaging with Elders about conversations related to education or schooling. Indeed, we felt some shame about our role in eliciting some of these memories when asking about Mi'kmaq conceptions of physical education in the past.

## Making Sense of Multiple Conversations

This inquiry has not been an easy exercise. For example, and while we already knew it to be true, after engaging in conversations and considering participants' responses, we were very quickly reminded that Halas et al.'s (2012) four criteria for engaging students in culturally meaningful ways are certainly not entirely discrete. Wilson (2008) and Lavallee (2009) lay challenge to the Western research tradition of breaking data down into smaller parts in order to gain an understanding of the whole. However, our categorization of the data using the four criteria has served to help us better understand and explain the multilayered responsibilities of physical education teachers. We recognize that these are not distinct categories and they, in many ways, are overlapping and interrelated concepts. For example, having a teacher as an ally can help create a supportive learning climate. Similarly, only by attending to students' day-to-day cultural landscapes can planned and/or taught curriculum be meaningful and relevant. Given these overlapping and interacting concepts, coding responses into these categories is not a straightforward task. Still, we would like to believe we have captured some Mi'kmaw Elders' and leaders' perspectives related to these four categories.

These four categories also serve as a framework for engaging students in culturally meaningful ways. We recommend that physical education teachers actively employ these acts of relationality in their spaces of learning. Our study's findings both rely upon and support Halas et al.'s (2012) model. A physical education teacher as ally needs to exhibit caring (but with clear boundaries). Demonstrating cultural competence requires physical education teachers to use knowledge about the local culture to make purposeful connections with the students and the community. Physical education teachers need to use curriculum to connect traditional cultural activities with contemporary practices. Finally, physical education teachers must be mindful to engage with their students, their families, and communities in ways that celebrate their cultural identities and their community-based knowledge.

Also, though we aimed to focus on culturally relevant *physical education*, we note that most conversations and quotations are related more generally to *education*. That is, in our research, only one of Halas et al.'s (2012) four criteria had a clear and continued focus upon physical education (meaningful and relevant curriculum). Although physical education—as it relates to the other three criteria—was addressed by some participants, we acknowledge that it was not a common central focus. What we can take from this is that we have engaged with these Mi'kmaw Elders and leaders to learn about culturally relevant education—with a focus upon culturally relevant physical education as it relates to meaningful and relevant curriculum.

## Future Directions

We believe we are doing important work—that we are on the “right track.” One Elder, when explaining what needs to be done to ensure physical education teachers are able to more adequately provide culturally relevant physical education for their students, suggested continued inquiries, like ours, are needed more than anything else. We were certainly appreciative to encounter this sort of unsolicited approval of our work. This Elder shared:

I think there should be more people doing just what you are doing right now, trying to get information; then you have to have someone who helps you put it all together. Hopefully from that you will get a better idea of what the Native community wants or needs. You can only get that through the participation of the

entire nation. It can't just be [one person from one community] doing that. It has to be [many people] from here and here doing this so there is consensus; you probably have concepts you would agree on. Maybe you would not agree on the exact procedure but you agree with the concepts so you develop from that concept and bring in these white people and teach them this is the way we want it done. I think that would work.

To this suggestion we have been especially responsive. That is, we are now moving forward with a follow-up research project that will build upon this one. Responding to this observation, our current research employs Sharing Circles (rather than conversation) with Mi'kmaw Elders and students. Inviting students to these Sharing Circles was also decided upon after listening to Elders who shared:

If you don't have meaningful and relevant curriculum as defined by a group of Native educators *and students* you are just going to be guessing. You have to have these people that are in the know how, that are in the system right now.

Agreeing with these participants that this needs to be a group task that includes Elders and students, where consensus—rather than multiple individual perspectives—is sought, our follow-up research is likely to achieve more meaningful results. With this model, groups of Elders and students will come together to learn together—or as Lunney-Borden (2010) has observed, *mawikinutimatimk*.

Moreover, our ongoing research also has two other notable changes from our initial conversation sessions. First, instead of using pseudonyms throughout, we will be sharing participants' names and communities (unless they indicate they wish to remain anonymous). We believe that for far too long Aboriginal voices have been silenced in research (results). To us, their voices are paramount. It is our hope that by connecting their names to their comments and stories, they will retain and hold onto their own power. These are their ideas, not ours. And we want them to be recognized for them. Second, we are more closely focusing our follow-up research on physical education. To do this, we are focusing our Sharing Circle discussions around four areas of culturally relevant physical education. (Western physical education designs have three broad areas: physical/psychomotor, cognitive, and affective.) This research will be focusing upon Spiritual (East), Emotional (South), Physical (West), and Mental (North). It is our goal to work with Elders and students to better articulate what outcomes we might aim for in these four areas and then to decide, together, what might then be done, and how, in physical education to achieve them.

We know that our initial research has allowed us to recognize the necessity of this work but it has also let us know that it is unfinished. We believe we are now better positioned to do more meaningful follow-up research. In addition to this, we also recognize that we are on a research journey. And unlike most of the other educational research we do—which can sometimes be started and finished within a few months—this is more likely a life-course inquiry. Given our relationships we have forged with our Indigenous partners in beginning this research, we are hopeful that we can build on these partnerships and create additional opportunities for future collaborations.



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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> We use the term “Aboriginal” to refer to Canada’s First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) peoples as well as the United States’ Native American/American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander peoples. We use the term “Indigenous” to refer to first peoples throughout the world—including Canada’s and the United States’ Aboriginal peoples.

<sup>2</sup> We suggest those interested in understanding the Mi’kmaw residential school experience ought to look to Benjamin’s (2014) *Indian School Road: Legacies of the Shubenacadie Residential School*.