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Mitho Pimachesowin through Education

“Not First Time Smart”: Reflections on a Modern Education System of Pimatisiwin in Northern Saskatchewan

Moch Nistam Ithinisowin: Pimatisiwin Mamitonethihtamowina Ote Kiwetinohk Saskatchewan

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Signatories Treaty 6 Adhesion 1889; located on Treaty 10

Abstract: When I was young, growing up in northeastern Saskatchewan, “not first time smart” was a phrase used by my *Nimosom*, my late grandfather, and it has stayed with me throughout my life. The lessons of this concept are two-fold. First, it instills in us values to respect the intelligence and wisdom of *Kesayak*, the aged Elders, and to honour our First Nations heritage and where we come from. Second, it teaches us to be mindful of our families, our lands, our history, and our future. This article is a reflective criticism—through the lens of my experiences and my grandfather’s lessons of “not first time smart”—of the colonization of Indigenous Peoples by the government education and employment systems. In order to receive a modern education, Indigenous Peoples were, and some would argue continue to be, forced to compromise their distinct languages, cultures, and connections to the land. I argue that the only way that governments’ educational and employment systems can learn from the past is to remove all systemic barriers faced by Indigenous people. This article concludes with a personal reflection of how my late Nimosom’s lesson continues to influence my life towards a more positive *pimatisiwin* (life). This article is a chapter in the open textbook *Indigenous Self-Determination through Mitho Pimachesowin (Ability to Make a Good Living)* developed for the University of Saskatchewan course Indigenous Studies 410/810, and hosted by the *Northern Review*.

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> Knowledge is something that is embedded,
> and it takes on a life of its own when it's
> lived experience. (Beatty, 2018)

Introduction

This article is about a lesson that was taught to me by my *Nimosom*, my late grandfather. The lesson illustrates a traditional way of teaching lessons that remain as important today as they were then. My Nimosom Rodrick McDermott (Figure 1) was a respected Cree Elder in our community of Denare Beach in northeastern Saskatchewan. I consider this community to be part of the traditional northern homelands of my maternal parents and grandparents.

The traditional lessons that all our grandparents taught me and other family members were related to the overarching values of *mitho-pimachesowin*, a Cree term ("th" dialect)[1] meaning "living a good way of life (Beatty & Weber-Beeds, 2013, p. 113). The lesson I am sharing is the concept of "not first time smart," which is about the experience of lessons being taught, learned, and relearned. The essence of this concept is two-fold. First, it instills in us the values of respecting the intelligence and wisdom of *Kesayak*, the aged Elders, and to honour our First Nations heritage and where we come from. Second, the concept teaches us to be mindful of our families, our lands, our history, and our future, all of which are interwoven in a holistic perception of life. This article is a reflective criticism of the colonization of Indigenous Peoples by the Canadian government's education and employment systems, through the lens of my experiences and lessons of "not first time smart."

Figure 1. Nimosom Rod McDermott (left) sharpening a hide scraper in the early 1990s for my Nikokom Marie McDermott (right)

I start with the contextual background to situate my story. I then discuss the broad negative impact that colonialism had in my community through the government's imposition of education and employment systems that stereotyped Indigenous people as being "less than." That dehumanization created a cascade of losses in people's lives that affected their language, culture, lands, and livelihood. I argue that government education and employment systems can only improve if all systemic barriers are removed. I then encourage an imagining of a "what if" scenario to help transform the education and employment systems. What if Indigenous people were not seen and treated as being "less than"? I suggest that the lesson of my grandfather's "not first time smart" concept for the government today is for decision makers to learn the lessons of the past, decolonize their systems thinking, and remove barriers that foster the negative treatment of Indigenous people. If Indigenous people were treated more positively in these systems, their opportunities and attainment of a better *pimatisiwin* (life) would dramatically increase. Finally, on a personal note, I will conclude with thoughts on how my grandfather's concept will continue to positively influence my life.

Where I Come From

I am a member of the Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation (PBCN) and I was raised in the small Northern Saskatchewan community of Amisk Osakahikan, which means Beaver Lake in the Cree language. Many refer to the community as Denare Beach, which is also the name of the northern resort village that is close to the reserve. Denare Beach is located about 20 km from Creighton, Saskatchewan and Flin Flon, Manitoba (Figure 2). According to the 2021 Canadian Census, the population of Denare Beach is 699 (Statistics Canada, 2021), and about 32% are Aboriginal (Statistics Canada, 2016); the majority of these Indigenous people are members of the Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation (Irvine & Quinn, 2016).

The Northern Village of Denare Beach has a resort-like atmosphere and is a tourist destination, especially in the summer when the population doubles as cottage owners return to the community (Northern Village of Denare Beach, n.d., para 23). I identify with the Indigenous community within Denare Beach. This distinction is important to note because the "side" of Denare Beach that a person was from influenced the different trajectories of a person's life.

The Indigenous community was established as the official PBCN reserve community of Amisk Osakahikan in the 1990s. Prior to this, the Indigenous community within Denare Beach was referred to as "The Fish Plant" (Strom, 1999, p. 147) since in the 1960s and 1970s everybody worked in the local fish plant industry (see Figure 3). When asked where I was from, I would say "The Fish Plant," and locals from Denare Beach, Creighton, Flin Flon, and surrounding areas knew where that was and who lived there.

Figure 2. Location of Denare Beach in northeastern Saskatchewan, south of Flin Flon. Source Tourism Saskatchewan and OpenStreetMap, https://www.tourismsaskatchewan.com/community/396/denare-beach

Unfortunately, the economy that my community was actively involved in took an unrecoverable hit in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The commercial fishing industry was limited by the Government of Saskatchewan when the fish plant was shut down, resulting in unemployment. In addition to this and at about the same time, the fur industry was negatively impacted by anti-fur lobbyists and the market shifted to farmed and synthetic furs (Statistics Canada, 2006; Wilkie, 2013, p. 4). These two economic changes resulted in extensive unemployment for our community. We were no longer able to make a living off the land as trappers (winter) and fishermen (summer), affecting the trajectories of our lives.

My community was full of the beauty found in people with deep connections to the land and a way of life. However, folded into this experience there was also a dark and unattractive side of pain and trauma due to the history of residential school; poverty from conditions that no longer allowed families to live off the land; and the threats to a way of life, including language and culture that were rapidly disappearing (Massie, 2008). Although elements of our former community continue to exist today, it is harder to see because of the grip this darkness has on many people. The beauty is still there; it is just not as obvious as it was thirty to forty years ago.

Back in the 1970s, my family could live a blended lifestyle without giving up their identity. They could make a living off the land and also earn a pay cheque from employment with business or government. This was how my family—my parents, grandparents, and aunts and uncles—got by. Today, however, it seems all too easy for me to give up a part of myself in order to live a totally modern life. This is in part due to circumstances beyond my control, such as past policy (the Indian Act); actions of others (anti-fur activists); and the need for continued progress and the conscious economic choices of today that inadvertently result in trade-offs. As a result, it seems as though I am giving up the "smarts" that came with my parents' and grandparents' way of life, in exchange for a modern life.

"Not First Time Smart"

Rod McDermott was a pillar in our community. My Gramps was a prominent, well-respected man in Denare Beach. He worked with the Government of Saskatchewan's Department of Natural Resources (DNS) from the 1940s. He was also an avid trapper, hunter, fisherman, and harvester of wild rice. He did well, living a blended life to achieve mitho-pimachesowin (to make a good living) for his family. Even after he retired from DNS in the 1970s, he continued to live off the land until well into his 70s. He provided for and took care of my Gran, Marie, and their nine children (seven girls and two boys), and numerous grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Both my grandparents worked hard all their lives to provide for their family: if they were awake, they were working. They continued to work until their bodies failed them in their late 70s and early 80s.

Figure 3. McDermott family in front of fish plant, 1972. *Reprinted with the permission of those pictured.*

When I was growing up, my Gramps would say "not first time smart" in his broken English, and he would look at me with a smile on his face because he said this when I did something that was not so smart. He was clearly teasing, but his phrase "not first time smart" continues to echo in my mind after all these years. In this context, in saying "not first time smart," my Gramps was actually saying, "hey look, you are giving up something, and be mindful of what's going on. There is more to you than what's going on; there's more to you than going to school; there's more to you than working, and there are connections to the land."

My initial interpretation of "not first time smart" was as a criticism of the formal education that we (his grandkids and others) were receiving. We were ignorant of other types of education, including the Cree language and culture; knowing how to live off the land; and the food, medicine, shelter, and education provided here. Respected Métis trapper and Elder Ted Trindell summarized it best: "to me education is just a tool. It's how you work with it. If you're educated and don't know how to meet the circumstances, it's still no good. You can take the most educated white man and take in the bush with me and—well, he's just lost" (cited in Morisset & Pelletier, 1987). That's me today. While I am not a white man, I am educated and if you took me in the bush I would be lost.

Not everyone in my family received my grandfather's and Ted Trindell's kind of education. Some within my generation were exposed to it in a marginal way, so we have established some connection with traditional ways of making a life, pimatisiwin. However, I am keenly aware that I am missing what should have been my "first time smarts." This loss includes my first Indigenous language, *nehithawewin* (Cree); my cultural sense of identity that is tied to the land; and my experience of our traditional livelihood activities. The hardest part is not being able to pass this Indigenous Knowledge on to my children and grandchildren. This learning and knowledge was lost in the trade-off for modern education. My parents and grandparents knew we had to obtain a modern education in order to earn a living. In fact, they encouraged it. Unfortunately, choosing this seems to have come at the expense of my Cree language and culture, and my connections to the land. I'm not sure my parents and grandparents fully realized the extent of what we were losing over time.

The Modern Educational System Not Meeting the Needs of Indigenous Students

It is no secret that, from a historical perspective, educational policy in Canada forced Indigenous people to give up who they were, and replaced this with Western notions of education. This has been framed by Indigenous people attending Kindergarten through to Grade 12 in Western schools, followed by going to work somewhere, or attending trade school and then working, or attending a post-secondary institution and then working. This education was only in one direction, and we had to leave our identity behind.

There has been extensive research on the education of Indigenous Peoples in Canada. In a speech to the Ninth Session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, the Honourable Justice Murray Sinclair (2010) succinctly describes this relationship:

> for more than 150 years … Canada enforced a racist policy of assimilation against Indigenous Peoples through the use of boarding schools. The belief was that Indigenous Peoples were inferior and uncivilized and with the assistance of Church organizations, they could be Christianized, and therefore become civilized and equal … The Canadian government stated early on, that, through their policy of assimilation, within a century, Indian people would cease to exist … within a few generations, Indigenous cultures, beliefs, languages, and distinct identities would be extinguished … The results while unintended have been devastating. We witness it first in the loss of Indigenous language and traditional beliefs. We see it more tragically in the loss of parenting skills, and, ironically, in unacceptably poor education results. (p. 3–4)

Unfortunately, there wasn't the time, space, or appreciation to also include an education about living off the land nor an immersion in our own language and culture. Furthermore, the pursuit of this type of education, and anything to do with being Indigenous, was viewed by Eurocentric colonialist culture as being somehow "less than":

> The centuries-old assimilation projects of Canada aimed at "civilizing" the Indian were predicated on the belief that a sense of shame (shame about being an Indian) should be inculcated in the minds, souls, and hearts of First Nations children. Generation upon generation of First Nations children were forcibly removed from their homes and brought into "educational institutions" where, among other things, they were programmed to abhor anything that contained, reflected, or symbolized their First Nations heritage. (Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2002, p. 21)

In the Western education model, Indigenous people were encouraged to leave our Indigenous culture and language at the door. Over time, things further evolved so that Western education then became "a way out." I now question, a way out of what? What were we trying to get out of? A way out of who I am, a Cree woman and a successful professional in a modern society? Why couldn't the two thrive

together, me as a Cree woman, with her grandfathers' and grandmothers' teachings intact within this modern society, and alongside Western education? Therefore, "not first time smart" is really a look at the trade-offs that have taken place with the pursuit of Western education. At some point, I need to turn around and come back—back to our original "smarts" as Indigenous People.

Some of the Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing that my parents, grandparents, and Ted Trindell knew, are now lost. Fortunately, efforts are now being made to incorporate Cree language, culture, and living-off-the-land knowledge into modern education. Progress has been slow to blend Indigenous ways of knowing into modern educational systems. Nevertheless, efforts are being made throughout the educational systems across Canada to take action to be more sensitive to the need to recognize and blend in more Indigenous content within the modern education system (Archibald Q'um Q'um Xiiem & Hare, 2016).

Within the modern educational system in Canada, educators and administrators have been questioning the lack of success for Indigenous students. Initially, this failure was attributed to an Indigenous student's identity. In other words, there must be something wrong with them. This was the basis for the residential school system: the government aimed to remove the Indian from the child. The sentiment below was expressed and held by numerous Canadian officials since colonization. For instance, Indian Affairs Superintendent P. G. Anderson stated at the 1846 General Council of Indian Chiefs and Principle Men in Orillia, Ontario:

> it is because you do not feel, or know the value of education; you would not give up your idle roving habits, to enable your children to receive instruction. Therefore, you remain poor, ignorant and miserable. It is found you cannot govern yourselves. And if left to be guided by your own judgement, you will never be better off than you are at the present; and your children will ever remain in ignorance. It has therefore been determined, that your children shall be sent to Schools, where they will forget their Indian habits and be instructed in all the necessary arts of civilized life, and become one with your white brethren. (Rheault, 2011, p. 1)

This racist attitude was the basis of education for Indigenous students and, while it is not held with the same level of rigour now, threads of this attitude remain.

Canadian statistics continue to provide evidence that our educational system does not meet the needs of Indigenous students. In 2016, the graduation rate was only about 48% for on-reserve First Nations students. This compared to high school completion rates of about 75% for off-reserve First Nations, 84% for Métis students, and 92% for non-Indigenous students (Richards & Mahboubi, 2018).

For First Nations people off-reserve who did not complete high school, about 50% of men were employed in 2017, and 24% of women (Anderson, 2019). For First Nations people off-reserve who completed high school, the employment outcomes were significantly better: 68% men and 57% women employed; for those with a university degree, 93% of men and about 91% of women were employed (Anderson, 2019).

There is a distinction made between on-reserve and off-reserve outcomes. The education system on-reserve is funded by the federal government, while off-reserve the education system is funded by the provincial governments. The education system on-reserve has been chronically underfunded, which could partly explain the poorer outcomes for those students (Drummond & Kachuck Rosenbluth, 2013).

With regards to post-secondary education, the statistics communicate a similar story. Indigenous adults have a lower literacy rate and attainment rate in post-secondary education and trades although the rates have been increasing (Statistics Canada, 2021).

According to these indicators, national statistics seem to support the perception that perhaps Indigenous people are not smart by those benchmarks. What is holding Indigenous people back? A Statistics Canada (2015) report indicated that the barriers for Aboriginal adults to further their education and training included time constraints, courses not matching needs, lack of confidence and preparedness, not a personal priority, cost, personal and family responsibilities, and personal/family health. These are valid reasons for the reduced participation in modern education and employment systems. However, what if we had a different system?

What If?

What if the education and employment benchmarks here in Northern Saskatchewan were based on Cree language, culture, and the ability to live off the land? What would the educational and employment statistics look like then? How would Indigenous people's graduation rates compare with non-Indigenous people? The suggestion here is not that one is better than the other. The suggestion is that, within both the current educational and employment systems, there is a glaring omission of Cree language, culture, and connections to the land, all of which are needed to achieve mitho-pimachesowin, to make a good living.

The current educational system cannot respond fast enough to the needs of Indigenous students. Politically, this issue has been ongoing for generations, and very few political organizations, at all levels of government with jurisdiction to do something, have been able to create a system to properly educate our youth. During

my three years working within a K–12 on-reserve education system providing secondary-level program support, I observed several political issues that appeared to create barriers. These include, but are not limited to, the following points.

- Indigenous self-determination is desired but has been difficult to achieve under the current infrastructure (political, governmental, and administrative), which is restrictive.
- Funding arrangements and administration of those funds are not flexible.
- The existing curriculum lacks Indigenous language, culture, and connection to the land—there have been notable improvements but more dedicated resources are needed.
- Physical infrastructure barriers: many upper-year students in northern communities have to leave their home community to complete high school and to access post-secondary.
- Finally, the quality and qualifications of educators who are challenged to embed Indigenous Knowledge and ways of knowing into the Western system of education.

Enriching the educational and employment systems to achieve mitho-pimachesowin by engaging Indigenous youth with the knowledge that this is their right, and giving them the skills necessary to make a good living in society today, will close the education and employment gaps they experience. Inclusive curriculum would result in better educational retention and completion rates because Indigenous students will be innately connected with what is being taught in the classroom. As noted earlier, the statistics indicate that better high school completion rates result in better employment rates for Indigenous students. The cost of limiting Indigenous people's ability to participate meaningfully in our communities, to be contributors, and to find their purpose, is wasted human ability and human potential. This has also contributed to diminished economic capacity. In a report released by the National Panel on First Nation Elementary and Secondary Education for Students on Reserve (n.d.), the following estimate of the economic cost to society was provided:

> In 2006, the Canadian Council on Learning estimated that the social and economic costs of First Nation people who have not completed high school will amount to $3.2 billion over ten years. Based on the current 40 percent graduation rate, the cost of non-completion among the 15–19 year old cohort alone is $887 million; which would be repeated for each subsequent cohort if conditions do not change. (National Panel, n.d., p. 2)

To continue to ignore the gaps and the shortfalls, not of Indigenous people, but of the education and employment systems that plague Indigenous people, is harmful for all communities. So much work needs to be undertaken over a long period of time to ensure Indigenous people are educated in a manner that works for them. This manner is described vividly by Dr. Marie Battiste (2010): "Learning then, as Aboriginal people have come to know it, is holistic, lifelong, purposeful, experiential, communal, spiritual, and learned within a language and culture" (p. 15). Several of these core elements are absent in the modern educational system and I would extend this to employment. Battiste goes on to validate the need to preserve Indigenous Knowledge:

> Indigenous Knowledge is being revealed as an extensive and valuable knowledge system that must be made a priority or mission in education, not just for Indigenous students, but for all students. Scientists, ecologists, and social justice activists are coming to understand the consequences to the world when Indigenous peoples, their languages and their knowledge, are denigrated, dismissed, or denied the resources necessary to retain them. (Battiste, 2010)

This right is affirmed in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP), which states that Indigenous people have a right "…to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language" that is provided by the state in collaboration with Indigenous people (United Nations, 2007, Article 14.3). Of course, the challenge is in bringing Indigenous languages, culture, and connections to the land to the forefront of our educational and employment systems. Actions that can be taken by governments, administrators, educators, parents, and communities include the following:

- speaking Cree language in the classroom, and in home;
- practising our cultural ways without judgment;
- moving the classroom back into the community and out on the land; and
- improving education that provides for a wider array of skills will result in more employment options for Aboriginal youth and for employers.

Traditional Knowledge and ways of making a living should and can be an option for Indigenous youth. Through this process, education and employment success will increase across all Indigenous Nations. This shouldn't be an either/or option, it should be both. In the words of my Nimosom Rodrick McDermott, "not first time smart," Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing need to be included in, and a part of the education systems here in Canada. Indigenous students should not have to compromise their language, culture, and connections to the land—these should be integral parts of the educational system. We would all be in a different place had this been the case from the beginning. My grandfather's concept will continue to influence my personal and professional life.

Notes

1. Cree (Algonquian language family) has five dialects generally associated with geographical areas, and three of these are found in Saskatchewan. The Woods Cree spoken in the northerneastern area speak with the th- dialect, as in "*mitho*" (good). Variant spellings of *pimachesowin* include *pimâcihisowin and pimacihowin.*

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Celebrating Our Path of Ahkamimoh in Northern Saskatchewan: Developing Resiliency in Youth through Education

Emocikihtayak Ahkamimohwin meskanaw Ote Kiwetinohk Saskatchewan: Sohkeyimowin Oskayak Ekiskinwahamacik

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Abstract: This article defines *ahkamimohwin* and how it can be practised in education. Ahkamimohwin is a Northern Cree word that means resilience (*ahkameyimowin* in Plains Cree, y dialect). It is a word that is commonly used to describe "persistence" or "never giving up." Residential school trauma has affected northern Canadian communities such as Beauval, Saskatchewan, and it has continued even years after the school was closed. Today, many communities in Northern Saskatchewan suffer from addictions, poverty, and other challenges that impact negatively on ahkamimohwin and *miyo-pimatisiwin* (living a good life). By incorporating knowledge of traditional culture into our schools, as shared by Elders and Knowledge Keepers in the community, along with incorporating an awareness of place and belonging through connections to the land, family, community, and spirituality, ahkamimohwin will be integrated into education and will lead to miyo-pimatisiwin. Through this integration I believe our Beauval community can heal from the trauma of the residential school experiences and can build resiliency with our youth. This article is a chapter in the open textbook *Indigenous Self-Determination through Mitho Pimachesowin (Ability to Make a Good Living)* developed for the University of Saskatchewan course Indigenous Studies 410/810, and hosted by the *Northern Review*.

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