

Mitho Pimachesowin through Economic Development

Mitho-Pimachesowin (Earning a Good Living): Training Indigenous Youth for Readiness in a Blended Economy

Mitho-Pimachesowin: Oskayak Takisinwahamacik Atoskewina Ta Isi Pimachesocik

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Abstract: In order to enjoy a good life (*mitho-pimatisiwin*) and earn a good living (*mitho-pimachesowin*), Indigenous youth must receive innovative education and training to obtain the skills necessary to find suitable employment. Many Indigenous youth in Canada live in poverty and face challenges in obtaining suitable employment in and outside of their communities. In order to address the poverty cycle and high unemployment of Indigenous youth, the author engages the reader in various Cree concepts, discusses a blended economy training approach, and presents a hypothetical education training model whereby Indigenous youth are trained to work in a blended economy. This blended economy consists of both local economic and Western economic industries. Training within this blended economy will take place within Indigenous communities and will incorporate and utilize the Indigenous community as a whole in the training of Indigenous students. The Cree concept of *wahkootowin* (or *wâhkôhtowin*) is the basis to guide this training. In training students utilizing the grassroots community, students will be able to learn through traditional methods, and learn their culture and use cultural concepts to learn valuable skills in a way that is innovative and unique to Indigenous People. It is the hope of the author that Indigenous youth will attain the self-confidence to achieve the dreams and goals that may have been previously unattainable. With new approaches to learning such as those suggested in this article, there is a brighter future for our Indigenous youth in Canada. 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*.

Introduction

Training Indigenous youth to obtain employment in a blended economy is key to eliminating poverty and high unemployment in many Indigenous communities in Canada. This article provides an understanding of how Cree concepts, perspectives, and training may enable Indigenous youth to achieve success in a blended economy. These concepts and the training model discussed in this chapter may provide educational institutions with an understanding in order to develop training programs for Indigenous youth within their own communities.

This article will focus on three Cree concepts: *mitho-pimachesowin* (making a good living), *mitho-pimatisiwin* (a good life), and *wahkootowin* (good relations). First, an examination of how these three concepts correlate in training Indigenous youth to earn a good living is presented. Second, the poverty cycle among Indigenous youth, leading to high unemployment and their absence in the workforce, is presented, along with a potential solution. Third, the concept of a blended economy as it relates to training Indigenous youth is introduced. Fourth, training Indigenous students for improved success in obtaining employment from the local economy and the Western wage-for-hire economy is discussed. Fifth, a hypothetical training model is presented for potential implementation at the secondary school level in Indigenous communities in northern Canada.

In the conclusion, the Cree concepts are summarized, pointing out the importance of *wahkootowin* and the cultural relationships of Elders and the community in providing guidance, stability, and training of Indigenous youth. This may enable youth to earn a living from the traditional economies in their local areas. *Wahkootowin* (or *wâhkôhtowin*) will also ensure that Indigenous students attain the knowledge of language and cultural traditions, while providing the stability, confidence, and community support needed so they can obtain the necessary knowledge and skills in trades and technology of the Western economy. Indigenous youth may potentially have the best of both worlds, which may provide future economic stability and may ensure *mitho-pimatisiwin* through *mitho-pimachesowin*.

Mitho-Pimachesowin

Mitho-pimachesowin is the Cree concept of making a good living (Cardinal and Hildebrandt, 2000). Cardinal and Hildebrandt (2000) contend that *pimachesowin* is a concept that shares both spiritual and physical dimensions. These components are necessary for making a good living.

The element of respect is an important part of *mitho-pimachesowin*. Cardinal and Hildebrandt (2000) observe that, in the past, “the teaching of respect

associated with the concept of *pimachesowin* provided guidance for the ways in which individuals conducted themselves when exercising their duty to provide for their life's needs from the gifts provided by the Creator" (p. 44). Cardinal and Hildebrandt (2000) verify that land (gift from the Creator) is closely tied to *pimachesowin*, as land "provides those things required for physical, material and economic survival of the people" (p. 43). This suggests that *pimachesowin* is part of and is derived from the land. In her dissertation, Settee (2007) shares the importance that Indigenous Peoples place on being respectful of all things. Key to being respectful is caring and compassion, and our relationship to all creation.

Earning a good living is important to Indigenous People. Speaking for myself in my own experience, the opportunities of making a good living off the land were exciting times. In my younger days I helped my uncle to fish commercially. Fishing not only brought about income, but more importantly it provided land-based education—learning the art of gathering fish, learning the Indigenous Knowledge of where the fish could be caught, utilizing the equipment required in the commercial fishing process, working hard while providing the opportunity to enjoy and have fun being out on the land. I recall one early morning out on the water, my uncle had just bought a new thirty horsepower motor and we were all excited to get out and "zoom" to our nets. All was good as we completed checking our nets and headed back home. As we were nearing home and were enjoying the fast ride, boom, we hit a rock reef (which we knew was there!). Although not funny at that moment, we now laugh about it. Our laugh is more about the land teaching us about being too carefree and not paying attention. As you can imagine, we lost many days' catch in order to purchase a new motor and from that time on we never took the lake for granted. So I can say *mitho-pimachesowin* is not only to earn a good living, it also provides lifelong learning to continue to earn this good living.

Mitho-pimachesowin may be achieved through a blended economic model. This blended economic approach consists of training in both the traditional economy of Northern Saskatchewan Cree communities and training to work in the contemporary Western economic society. This blended economic strategy may also be a catalyst that will help Indigenous youth achieve a good life—*mitho-pimatisiwin*. To achieve *pimachesowin* in a blended economic training model, physical, spiritual, and respect for all creation components should be included.

Mitho-Pimatisiwin

Mitho-pimatisiwin, according to Beatty & Weber-Beeds (2013), "is a northern Woodland Cree term that means the good life" (p. 113). Gross (2002), in his article on *bimaadiziwin* (*pimatisiwin*) maintains that "*Bimaadiziwin* or the good life, can basically be described as a long healthy life" (p. 15–16). Settee (2007)

argues that, “for indigenous peoples, land, food and health are key components of Pimatisiwin” (p. 7). Researchers identify the “good life” as part of Indigenous culture, which emphasizes living off the land, eating the food provided by the land, and being healthy (Gross, 2002; Settee, 2007; Beatty & Weber-Beeds, 2013). However, Carriere (2014) states, in her research study of Lac La Ronge Indian band (LLRIB) members regarding pimachesowin and pimatisiwin, that participants in her research were:

able to connect Pimacihowin and Pimatisiwin to their livelihood on the land and in their workplaces. They identified that achieving a good quality life is concerned with making a living. Each individual needs to make a good living in order to have a good life. In other words, each individual needs good Pimacihowin to have good Pimatisiwin, or Mitho-Pimatisiwin. (p. 103)

The grassroots band members from LLRIB view that a person needs to earn a good living to have a good life. Based on the Carriere (2014) findings, band members from LLRIB believe personal economics dictate their ability to enjoy a good life (mitho-pimatisiwin). LLRIB members also recognize the importance of being on the land and living, eating, and enjoying a healthy lifestyle; however, it appears that the view of LLRIB band members is that having a good livelihood correlates to a steady source of income.

As a middle-aged Cree person, I look back on my experiences regarding mitho-pimatisiwin. Although my work life is in the field of education, the good life for me still reverts back to the days of living on the land. I remember the good life for me came from having the crisp fall air blowing in my face while checking whitefish nets and hunting moose and ducks all at the same time. The exhilaration of harvesting whitefish, moose, and ducks all in one day surpasses being in the office worrying about budgets. It is in these times that I feel that I am at peace with the world and I can enjoy and live life how it is meant to be lived.

Wahkootowin

Wahkootowin is a Cree term, “referring to kinship or the state of being related” (Beatty, 2015). Macdougall (2011) points out that wahkootowin is the relationship between land, identity, and family. Settee (2007) adds that the Cree, Mohawk, and Athabaskan values are all very similar. Settee (2007) describes these similar values as the following:

Having a focus on self-sufficiency, hard work, care and provision for family, good family relations, unity, humour, honesty, fairness and love for children. Athabaskan values also include sharing, caring, village cooperation, responsibility to village, respect for elders and others, and knowledge. (p. 14)

These values passed down by Elders, family members, or members of the traditional community are important as they provide cultural insight into how the process of life works, and also give knowledge and insight into why these cultural values matter. I recall one event of wahkootowin relationship whereby family all worked together in bringing home harvested animals. My uncles and I were out hunting and harvested some moose on our excursion. Once we had taken care of the initial field dressing we went home to share the good news of our harvest. The next day grandparents, parents, wives, and cousins came out and helped butcher the animals and haul the meat back home. The meat was then divided up and shared among family, extended family, and friends. The communal concept of working together, learning from our grandparents and parents, and providing for our family, extended family, and friends exemplified the values as stated by Settee (2007).

In order for Indigenous youth of the present day to achieve mitho-pimachesowin—to be successful and to achieve and live a good life—it is necessary for all three concepts of mitho-pimatisiwin, mitho-pimachesowin, and wahkootowin to work in unison.

Poverty

Colonialism through assimilation, residential schools, addictions, and the Western concept of education have contributed to the genocide of Indigenous culture. Indigenous People, especially youth, have borne the brunt of cultural genocide by losing their languages; wahkootowin; and the spiritual, physical, and mental connection to the land. This loss of connection has resulted in poverty, lack of identity, poor self-image, low self-worth, a general sense of hopelessness, and youth suicide.

Poverty among Indigenous youth within Northern Saskatchewan communities may be one reason why Indigenous students drop out of school and have difficulty finding sustainable employment. Bennet (2007) states, “A UN report on a decade of child poverty found that ‘among Aboriginal children, whether living on or off reserve, almost 1 in 2 lives in poverty’” (p. 276). Given Bennet’s observation, 50% of Indigenous youth live in poverty.

Kendall (2001) argues that Indigenous underdevelopment relates to the poverty of Indigenous people, suggesting that these factors of underdevelopment

are, “numerous and complex, including loss of land and sovereignty, cultural genocide, lack of education, and job market discrimination (p. 45). This lack of underdeveloped educational potential may explain the loss of Traditional Knowledge and culture that has caused hardship for many Indigenous people, especially youth.

The cultural genocide Kendall (2001) refers to has impacted Indigenous youth through failing in school, turning to gangs, developing addiction problems, suicide, and becoming parents at a young age. Consequently, the self-worth of Indigenous youth may be extremely low. When the future is bleak, depressed young Indigenous people perceive no hope for the future and fall into the poverty cycle. Young Indigenous people then turn to social assistance to live, and their children, in turn, are dependent and poor. Hunter and Douglas (as cited in Pelletier et al., 2013) describe these consequences of poverty:

Poverty can do both immediate and lasting harm to children. Children who grow up in poverty are more likely to lack adequate food, clothing and basic health care, live in substandard housing and poorly resourced neighborhoods, become victims of crime and violence, be less successful in school, suffer ill health and have shortened life spans. (p. 12)

Therefore, to break the poverty of Indigenous youth, these problems need to be addressed. Incomplete education stands out as a primary cause of poverty among young Indigenous people. Pelletier, Cottrell, and Hardie (2013) indicate that statistics in Saskatchewan confirm a bleak picture: 32.5% of Indigenous students graduate from high school, whereas 82% of non-Indigenous students graduate. Bennet (2014) states that 50% of Indigenous youth live in poverty. Where is a starting point to improve these sombre statistics?

Blended Economy

One example to encourage Indigenous youth living in poverty to improve their situation is to integrate a blended economic training model at the local secondary high school level. This model would provide Indigenous youth local training in traditional economies such as commercial fishing, gathering wild rice, mushrooms, roots, and berries, and harvesting fur, while also engaging in Western trades and technology training that may provide them with the opportunity to enter the workforce to earn wages for hire. Skills gained by completing high school can be useful not only in securing employment, but also in enhancing Traditional Knowledge. As Beatty et al. (2015) argue:

The underlying idea in treaties for the proper education of young people was not to stick First Nations children in foreign and distant residential schools, but to enhance their traditional knowledge and learning in their communities with the new skills and knowledge that they needed to make a living (Pimachesowin) in a changing world. (p. 3)

Beatty et al. (2015) suggest that Indigenous youth need to be prepared to function in a dual world or blended economy. Therefore, Indigenous youth should be equipped with two sets of skills: those necessary to work in the Western economy and those that will make them strong contributors to their culture and community. Youth who can function in the Western culture, while maintaining their own culture, can achieve *mitho-pimatisiwin*.

In addition to Beatty et al. (2015), Paci and Villebrun (2004) also claim that a blended economy is important in living the good life. Paci and Villebrun (2004) further contend that a good life is “supported by Denendeh, the land and water,” but that “Dene definitions of the good life must now take into account the influence and effects of development, including the mining economy” (p. 75).

Other scholars have asserted the importance of economic independence as Indigenous people seek the good life in a blended economy. Bone (2012) shows his support of the adaptations made by Indigenous people in deciding for themselves what is best and what works for them in terms of their economic well-being. Bone (2012) claims, “Aboriginal peoples have taken giant strides to secure a new place in Canadian society. They have moved from a restrictive colonial world to a more open post-colonial one where they have gained a measure of control over their lives” (p. 225). In training for employment in a blended economy, it is imperative that Indigenous youth take back control of their lives in order to look after themselves and their families in the future.

My late grandparents, Oscar and Jean Beatty, always believed in hard work. They taught their family the Woodland Cree language and culture, and ensured that their family and future generations could live off the land if they made the choice to do so. My grandparents also knew the value of education and promoted higher education learning. My late *Nimosom* (Grandfather) once shared that *pimatisiwin* on the land was important; furthermore, he shared that although living on the land was rewarding, it was a very hard way of life at times. Like all parents, my grandparents wanted their family to have an easier way to enjoy *mitho-pimatisiwin* (good life) and obtain *mitho-pimachesowin* (earn a good living). They also wanted their family to be educated and trained, so they could also survive and make a good living in the Western economy. This vision of a

blended economy was visionary on my grandparents' part and one I totally agree with and continue to pursue for our Indigenous youth today.

Training

Educational leaders should understand that the traditional way of sharing knowledge and teaching is important when providing education and training that will work in a blended economy. According to Neegan (2000), in the past the responsibility of Indigenous education was with the “parents, elders and members of the community as a whole who were charged with teaching ‘younger people’ in such a way to ensure they led a good life” (p. 4). This observation gains significance when one considers the way Indigenous youth today are educated in schools in which the Western concept of education is followed in structured classrooms where teachers impart education and knowledge to students.

Indigenous students' full immersion in Western culture and systems may be one reason why they are falling behind their non-Indigenous counterparts. From my experience, Indigenous students learn best in their own environment when they are taught using both traditional and Western methods of learning. Although many Indigenous students do not know why they learn best in their own environment and gravitate to traditional ways of learning, it seems that this occurs because traditional learning is part of who they are as Indigenous people and it is built into their genome. Antone (2000) supports this idea: “Elders tell us that these traditions are contained in the blood memory of our people, and now they are coming out of the shadows to be revived for use in our present day cultures” (p. 4). If Indigenous people learn best through innate cultural ways of understanding concepts, it makes logical sense that traditional methods be incorporated in training.

Interestingly, the Indigenous way of learning, as Neegan (2000) observes, involves listening, looking, and learning. Trades and technology in Western conceptual teaching are taught by listening, looking, learning, and practising. These strategies are very similar to traditional teaching; therefore, Indigenous students may adjust easier to the Western training and concepts, resulting in successful training experiences.

Where do young Indigenous people find employment after successful secondary training? Some may enter the workforce after obtaining skills in trades and technology training, while others might choose the traditional economies of fishing, trapping, and wild rice harvesting. Indigenous economic self-reliance could come from working in a blended traditional and resource-based economy. In fact, there may be opportunities for Indigenous youth in the growing resource-based industry. Burke (2008) points out that “Canada has a shortage of skilled

tradespeople and that Aboriginal young people, with their background in the traditional economies, who are looking for well-paying employment might have the advantage in obtaining employment in the trades” (p. 24). Burke’s (2008) assessment suggests that Indigenous youth have an opportunity to gain well-paid employment. To benefit from the shortage of tradespeople in Canada, young Indigenous people should obtain the necessary skills to enter the various trades.

To enhance Indigenous training models, the concept of *wahkootowin* should be included. Settee’s logical definition of *wahkootowin* bears repeating:

Having a focus on self-sufficiency, hard work, care and provision for family, good family relations, unity, humour, honesty, fairness and love for children. Athabaskan values also include sharing, caring, village cooperation, responsibility to village, respect for elders and others, and knowledge. (Settee, 2007, p. 14)

Given Settee’s definition, Elders and skilled community members could build relationships and pass on fundamental values of Indigenous traditions and culture while also teaching youth both traditional cultural practices and skills along with technology and trades training skills. Locally developed training models may provide an avenue for young Indigenous people to obtain the necessary traditional skills along with Western occupational skills to proceed directly into the local land-based economies, the outside workforce, or other post-secondary training.

At the centre of these values suggested by Settee (2007) is the idea of collaboration, or the emphasis on acting for the greater good for all. Kendall (2001) notes that this focus on the community differs from values embedded in Western culture: It is “a communal approach to living, that is, collective ownership and sharing of resources, as opposed to the idea of individual private rights that characterizes Western culture” (p. 46). This communal concept of sharing resources is related to the concept of community teaching and the passing on of Traditional Knowledge. In the last few years, communal teaching and community relationships that were a way of life in Indigenous communities have been giving way to more individualistic tendencies, including learning through Western concepts and styles. To prevent Western-concept teaching from completely overtaking Indigenous communities, *wahkootowin* must be reintroduced as the primary way of learning. The reintroduction of this critical concept will help ensure that knowledge and culture are passed on from one generation to the next.

Training Concept Model

It is one thing to suggest that Indigenous students need opportunities to study the trades; it is another to determine how to deliver such training to them. Beatty et al. (2015) argue that new ways of delivering education and training need to be explored. One avenue these authors suggest is to include training programs within Indigenous secondary school systems. Beatty et al. (2015) maintain that “youth need to have accessible training and education opportunities in their own communities. Both private and public institutions need to engage more effectively with Northern Aboriginal communities and youth to develop relevant programs that produce better educational and employment outcomes” (p. 7).

The education of Indigenous youth should also include, as its foundation, a spiritual component for all training and development. Spirituality among Indigenous cultures is a key concept in achieving pimatisiwin. Doige (2003) contends that:

Education as the Elders understand it, contains a spiritual message. It is about giving and taking the good, without apology or expectation. Essentially, it is about knowing the Creator’s will for us; this is a necessary part of living. Thus Aboriginal spirituality is a way of life and a way of thinking that must be acknowledged and utilized in the classroom. (p. 149)

As Doige (2003) points out, spirituality is an important principle in Indigenous culture. This is why it is important to honour the Creator who provides and gives us the ability to learn, and to understand what he wants us to learn at a specific time. With a spiritual base as a starting point, all other concepts can be addressed.

A hypothetical community training model that could be developed may include the following characteristics.

1. A spiritual component led by Elders would encourage Indigenous youth to honour our Creator and understand their role in life while seeking wisdom and guidance. The concept of wahkootowin would be enhanced through teachings from the Elders and community members.

2. In order to provide the physical part of training, capacity and infrastructure must be in place. Capacity development at the institutional level would require Indigenous communities and school systems to partner and collaborate with local Indigenous resource people, Elders, teachers, institutions, and government

to provide, develop, and implement programs conducive to developing skills required for successful employment. As Beatty et al. (2015) suggest, collaboration and partnerships between public and private institutions and industry are important in developing opportunities and training for Indigenous youth. Initial training should incorporate Elders and community members who are skilled in the cultural way of earning a living off the land. Training could be done at the local school facility, then move to the land for developing traditional and practical knowledge and skills. Once the knowledge and skills are developed, a practicum could be completed with supervision by the Elders and community members who earn their living from the land. The concept of *wahkootowin* will ensure a successful understanding and create success and learning of Indigenous culture and tradition. This would generate interest and would motivate Indigenous students to attend school and may provide higher graduation rates.

3. A study of industry employment needs should be carried out to determine what trades and technology courses are required. Courses at the high school level could then be developed and implemented within the school system. The theory component of trades and technology would require qualified vocational-education teachers who are experts in their fields. Once students learn the theory, the practical hands-on learning could take place. Practical projects could come from local housing developments, where a variety of the trades are required and would potentially fit with the programming. Local tradespeople could also be utilized to provide their expertise and training from an Indigenous perspective. Elders could be utilized as advisors, providing guidance, counselling, and support as the students' progress through their training.

4. My experience in the education field has convinced me that the best way to educate our children is in Indigenous school systems within the local communities. In order for Indigenous students to be successful they need to be taught in a culturally relevant way that they can understand.

For this hypothetical model to be successful, partnerships with industry; First Nations governments; provincial, territorial, and federal governments; and community colleges and universities are key in providing training, funding, resources, projects, apprenticeship credentials, and potential employment. Second, it is imperative that the training component be local in order to accommodate secondary students. Beatty et al. (2015) agree, as they argue that youth success will be inextricably linked to having training and development opportunities located in their own communities. Further, students who are successful in the secondary level training initiative and who want to move on to higher levels of education, should also be able to access training within their communities. This opens the possibility for further post-secondary training models being developed at the community level. These post-secondary training models must be developed with complete funding and certification being provided by federal, provincial, and local First Nations initiatives. It also paves the way for Indigenous control of Indigenous education and, in the longer term, economic self-sufficiency. Kendall (2001) recognizes that Indigenous People acknowledge that economic self-sufficiency is an important step to self-determination and self-government.

Conclusion

The concepts of *wahkootowin*, *mitho-pimachesowin*, and *mitho-pimatisiwin* are integral to the well-being of Cree youth. This kinship and family relationship along with extended family must continue to play a role in preserving Cree tradition and culture. *Wahkootowin* also plays a role in the training, teaching, and passing down of Traditional Knowledge to ensure the Indigenous way of life is an option for Indigenous youth. The results of passing down this Traditional Knowledge in the *wahkootowin* spirit will provide the skills necessary to obtain and complete training in both the traditional and modern economies.

The cycle of poverty in many communities can be addressed through providing training and engaging the Indigenous community as a whole, thus providing land-based education to provide skills for the traditional economy while at the same time providing the knowledge and skills required to pursue employment in the Western economy. *Wahkootowin* is an integral part of all training as it will provide the stability of Elders and community in providing counselling, encouragement, and advice to ensure that our Indigenous way of life, language, and cultural traditions are passed on to future generations. A renewed sense of cultural identity and training may lead to new employment opportunities that may be the catalyst in turning around the Third World conditions and high unemployment of many of our northern communities.

Economic success in the traditional ways as well as in trades and technology also ensures that Indigenous youth will attain the self-confidence to achieve the dreams and goals that may have been previously unattainable. There is a bright future for our Indigenous youth in Canada. There is light and hope at the end of the tunnel. Hope coupled with action will enable Indigenous youth to flourish and take their rightful place in society. It will also present them with the opportunity to find *mitho-pimatisiwin* through *mitho-pimachesowin*. It is by earning a good living and understanding and promoting cultural identity and Indigenous Knowledge that Indigenous people truly can have and engage in *pimatisiwin*.

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