



WENESH NIIN *(Who am I)*

Laying the Foundation of Spirit Within the Child



YVETTE MANITOWABI | JACINTA MANITOWABI

NOW Play

Published by NOW Play

Cite as:

Manitowabi, J & Manitowabi, Y. (2024). *Wenesh Niin (Who Am I): Laying the Foundation of Spirit Within the Child*. Toronto, ON: NOW Play.

Copyright 2024 the authors and NOW Play.

Educators may distribute this document in its original form, electronically or in print, provided that no alterations are made to the content and that this copyright notice remains intact.

Any unauthorized reproduction, distribution, or alteration of this document is strictly prohibited without prior written consent.

Contents

Introduction	4
Learning Language in Context	5
Gifts of Children, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers	7
<i>Children</i>	7
<i>Elders and Knowledge Keepers</i>	8
<i>Zander's Story</i>	8
<i>Seven Grandfather Teachings</i>	9
Gifts of Plants	10
<i>The Medicine Wheel and the Four Directions</i>	10
<i>Prayer and Medicine</i>	11
<i>Functional Language</i>	12
<i>Anishinaabe Morning Prayer</i>	13
Gifts of Animals	14
<i>Learning at the Gete Aadziwin</i>	
<i>Fall Festival</i>	14
<i>Land Based Learning</i>	17
<i>Writing About Land Based Learning</i>	19
<i>Documenting Learning</i>	20
Closing Thoughts	26
About the Authors	27

Introduction

Aanii,

Jacinta Manitowabi miinwaa Yvette Manitowabi ndizhnikaazmi. Wiikwemikoong ndo jibaami. Mkwa ndodemnanig. Ekinoomaaget ndo aawimi miinwaa niitawisag ndo aawimi.

(Hello. Our names are Jacinta Manitowabi and Yvette Manitowabi. We are from Wiikwemkoong Territory. We are of the Bear Clan. We are educators and cousins.)

We are members of the Three Fires Confederacy, Ojibway, Odawa, and Potawatomi, and we teach for the Wiikwemkoong Board of Education. In our culture, we believe every child is born with gifts, and as teachers, we must uncover and develop these gifts. *Wenish niin* (who am I?) is a guiding concept to understanding Anishinaabe *ndo aawimi* (our identity) and central to all the activities in this book. Our role is to give back to our Anishinaabe language and culture by instilling pride in our children concerning who they are.

This book is structured around gifts. We start by sharing our cultural understandings about gifts, those of our children and those of Elders and Knowledge Keepers. We present the holistic nature of Indigenous teaching and learning by sharing our understandings about our relationships with animals and plants and *bimaadz-iwin* (living in a good way).

The activities included within this book reflect the Odawa language of our tribe while connecting to the current Ontario curriculum. Readers will learn how we learned to speak our language as young children, and how we learned about our culture by participating in real-world experiences. We use as many resources as possible, both within the school setting and in the wider community, to share our language and culture with students. We consider the community to be an extension of our classroom environment.

We hope that teachers will use the ideas presented in these pages to create learning environments that motivate students to engage in meaningful writing experiences. Our culture and approaches to teaching students in Ontario's north offer new ways of engaging children in language, writing, and culture.

Miigwech,

Jacinta Manitowabi and Yvette Manitowabi

Learning Language in Context

It is a fact that indigenous languages are being lost. The loss of the language began in the colonial era when the teaching of these languages was suppressed. Today, our language, like many minority languages, must stand against the near-universal use of English that's driven largely by the internet and the immersive, globalized media culture available through our devices.

With loss of language comes a loss of culture. We Anishnaabemowin do not live the lives that our ancestors did. As a result, the culture that produced that language along with our traditional beliefs can easily become lost if we do not intentionally pass our cultural inheritance onto our children.

Learning in context helps students to understand the meaning of words and activities, and aids in retention.

As educators, we teach Odawa, and our traditional culture by using the language as part of the classroom environment, and by taking students into nature and to community events where they can experience the language used as part of traditional activities. For example, in the classroom, medicines are referred to by their traditional names. For example, sweet grass is called *wiing-hashk*.

Learning in context helps students to understand the meaning of words and activities, and aids in retention. Classroom learning turns what otherwise might be uninteresting theory into real life experiences. Since most students in the classroom are Odawa, they gain an understanding concerning the ways our language works, what our people have traditionally believed, and how they can live as good people.

For example, when Jacinta teaches the calendar every morning in her kindergarten class, children come to understand that counting on the calendar is not the same as counting numbers by rote. Grammatically speaking, our language distinguishes the animate from the inanimate—the things with life from the things without life. Days are animate. Each day has life, as the calendar numbers are connected to the sun and the moon in relationship to the earth. The first day of the month is not called *bezhik* (one). It is not an inanimate object; it is something born. We call it *maadigizaa*, the beginning of the new moon. (*Giizis* is the sun and *dibik giizis* is the

moon, which means the night sun.)

We believe that our Anishnaabe language is one of the greatest gifts. Our Elders tell us that children are born knowing the language. In the same way we sought to learn our language, we see many of our fellow community members trying to learn Odawa, and in the process, gain a stronger connection to who they are and how their ancestors lived.

As we learn the language together, we and the children are actively taking part in revitalizing Anishnaabemowin. By taking the classroom outside and learning in nature, some of the words learned in our childhood are coming back to us. We live the language when we use the word in context.



Children Learning Outside

Children walk closely with Creator; they are driven by the Spirit within. We remember that it is the children's Spirit who speaks to us when they reach out to tell us how they feel and when they question the world around them. Oh, to be a child of curiosity and wonder.

Above: Children take their drawings of medicine wheels outside to learn on the land.

Gifts of Children, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers

As Anishinaabe people, we give thanks for everything we receive from Mother Earth. The animals sacrifice their lives so we can have food to eat and fur to keep us warm. These are gifts. The air we breathe and the water we drink, those are gifts, too. Medicines are gifts. Everything is a gift. Anishinaabe give thanks for everything we receive from Creator. That's why gifts are so important to the Anishinaabe people. Children, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers are gifts, and they are each gifted in unique ways.

Children

The Ontario provincial kindergarten curriculum tells us that we should put children at the centre of classroom experiences and consider each child's unique way of learning. In our Anishnaabe culture, we go beyond these concepts and expectations in the curriculum. We view the concept of each child's uniqueness as *aa-diziwin* (a way of seeing, doing, and being through the eyes of an Anishnaabe child). For example, we grew up understanding that when we have children, they are gifts from Creator who are on loan to us. Each child's identity involves more than a unique way of thinking, learning, feeling, and doing. As a gift from Creator, the children are also unique in their spiritual connection to Creator and hold the responsibility to become contributing members to society in *a good way*. Living in a good way means that children will use their gifts responsibly and respectfully in their relationships with others and with the living and non-living—the animate and the inanimate.

Children are born with multiple gifts. These gifts are talents, perspectives, interests, and the spirit they possess. They find their gifts over time. One of the roles of teachers is to help children discover those gifts. We do this by creating a rich environment that guides all children towards a strong understanding of identity and positive attitudes, and to help them develop confidence and self-efficacy throughout their lives. We strive to help children use their gifts to have a positive impact in their community today and in the future. With the concept of *bimaadziwin* (living a good life) guiding what we do, we provide an image for children to mirror.

It is the children who teach us; they are our natural teachers as we record their playfulness in life. It's empowering as we watch children and listen to them respectfully, learning when it is safe to go into their space and guide them. We let children know that we believe they are capable. We let them struggle and make mistakes sometimes. We see children as active collaborators in learning.

Elders and Knowledge Keepers

Some of the children become Elders and Knowledge Keepers, whose teachings help us to gain the gift of wisdom. It is important to allow our Spirit—what some people call our soul—to guide us toward the gifts of the teachings of the Elders and Knowledge Keepers. Based on ancient knowledge, these teachings smooth our path and provide clear direction for us. The ancestral teachings in our community, as an example, come from the land and the animals, as well as their Anishnaabe cultural gifts, such as the Seven Grandfather Teachings and Medicine Wheel teachings that encompass all life. These teachings speak to whatever we need at the time we receive these gifts. We acknowledge that each community understands the teachings in their own way.

Zander's Story

I noticed that a piece of art on my desk was broken, and I asked my kindergarten students who had broken it. Everyone said, "Not me." I asked again and assured the students I wasn't upset but would like to know who did it.

It was recess, and the children were excused. During recess, Zander approached me. "Ms. Manitowabi, it was me," he said. "I did it." His face was red, his eyes were red.

I asked Zander to sit beside me.

"*Gazaagin*, Zander (I love you), and I respect you for being honest with me and, more importantly, with yourself," I said. I let him know how proud I was that he showed bravery, courage, and humility to come to me.

It was then that I spoke to Zander about how he had just shown all the Seven Grandfather's Teachings. I mentioned the ways he showed Truth, Honesty, Humility, Bravery, Respect, and Love. And there was one more. He smiled and said, "Wisdom."

"Yes, this is the gift you now carry."

I asked if I could share his story with the class and use his story of how he learned the teachings and gained wisdom. He smiled a big smile and said, "Yes."

Seven Grandfather Teachings

We Anishnaabe strive to live according to the spirit of the Seven Grandfather Teachings. Implementing the teachings into the curriculum helps guide the children to live a good life.

To cherish knowledge
is to know **Wisdom**.

To know **Love**
is to know peace.

To honour all of creation
is to have **Respect**.

To face life with courage
is to know **Bravery**.

To walk through life with integrity
is to know **Honesty**.

Humility is to know yourself
as a sacred part of creation.

Truth is to know all of these Things.

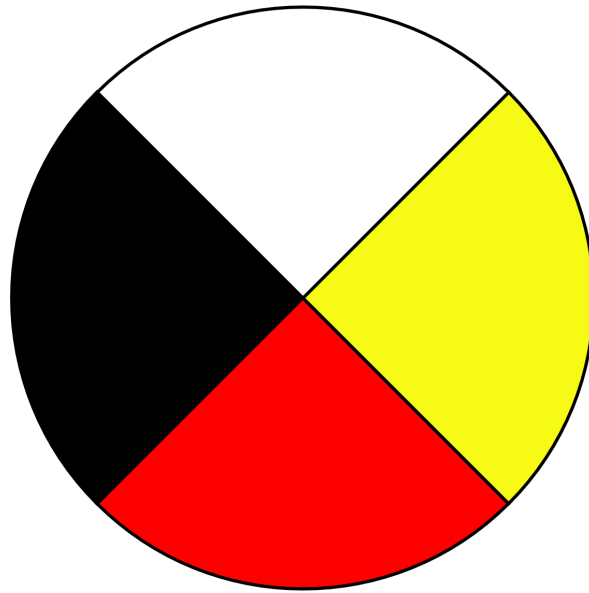
Gifts of Plants

Plants are one of the gifts provided to us by Creator. For example, cedar provides medicine, birch provides shelter, and mullein plants, which are often considered a weed, provide lung medicine. Other plants give us salves and balms. These gifts are obvious. But even a nuisance plant like poison ivy is a gift. We honour it because it helps other plants grow. It is the same with certain trees, like the willow tree. Its roots can destroy a septic system, but the tree also shelters other plants so that they can grow. We teach our students that everything on the Earth has a purpose, including the plants that provide food, shelter, and medicine for us.

The Medicine Wheel and the Four Directions

The Medicine Wheel represents how our people view the world. Traditionally, the wheel is represented as a quartered circle. One is black, one is red, one is yellow, and one is white. The circle has many symbolic meanings, such as the circular nature of history and the encompassing nature of the shape. The colours symbolize aspects of our lives and our world. In our classes, we talk about how the wheel's colours represent the Four Directions: *Waabanang* (east/yellow), *Zhaawanong* (south/red), *Epingishmok* (west/black), *Giiwednong* (north/white). These directions are labelled in Anishinaabemowin on each wall in our classrooms.

The Medicine Wheel and the Four Directions offer another way of teaching our language in context. For example, Jacinta speaks about the directions in relation to the day. We always know where the *Waabanang* is because it is where the sun rises when we wake each day. Around lunchtime, the sun is hottest because it is shining from *Zhaawanong*. After school and during supper, the sun starts to drop down from the sky. We always know where *Epingishmok* is if we watch the movement of the sun. We go to bed at night and the sun is hiding in the direction of *Giiwednong*, and that is why it is dark. Our bodies need the dark to rest. When the sun has disappeared, that is Mother Nature's way of telling us to get some rest, too.



The Medicine Wheel

Prayer and Medicine

We pray in our classes. Students learn to pray in their original language, Anishinaabemowin. The prayer we use in our classes gives thanks to the water beings, the four-legged, the winged, the crawlers, and the plant beings. This is one way Jacinta and Yvette demonstrate the traditional use of the four medicines *semaa* (tobacco), *giizhik* (cedar), *mshkoodewaashk* (sage), and *wiinghashk* (sweet grass).

Jacinta always starts the prayer with the Four Directions by giving thanks to *Waabnoong* for the new day. She starts here because our day begins when we rise with the sun. Students learn about the cycles of the day through this daily prayer. It helps them begin to understand the concept of time, in addition to observing the movements of the sun. This is but one example of the ways in which students learn Anishinaabemowin in context by living the language.

Students learn the prayer one sentence at a time. On the first day, they learn the first line of the prayer. A picture representing the meaning of the line is included at the end of the line. This helps students understand the meaning of that line in Anishinaabemowin.

Each day, the class repeats the line from the previous day and adds one new line with a new picture depicting the meaning of that line. As students learn about the meanings of each line, the teachers speak about the reasons we give thanks to each of these gifts. We speak about life without such blessings using open-ended questions. For instance, we might ask, “Why is it important to give

thanks for the air we breathe?”

It is at this point when important conversations about caring for *Shkakimi Kwe* (Mother Earth) and caring for *nbii* (water) and *nesewin* (air) occur. These conversations help students understand the importance of living in harmony with all beings by caring for *Shkakimi Kwe*. Prayer creates an opportunity to teach about *msh-kiki* (our traditional medicines) that have been provided to us by *Shkakimi Kwe*. While learning to pray, students learn about how to use *semaa*, *giizhik*, *mshkoodewaashk*, and *wiinghashk*, the traditional medicines used in prayer to smudge.

In our culture, smudging is a spiritual activity. We use smudge to send our prayers to *Gzhemindoo* (Creator). To smudge, we put the medicines in a bowl and burn them. The smoke offers a symbolic cleansing. We smudge our eyes to help us to see only good in people. We bring the smoke to our ears so that we hear only good from other people. We bring the smoke to our mouth so that we say only good things. We bring it to our head so that we have only good thoughts about people, and about our universe. We bring it to our heart so that we have good feelings for one another and good feelings for the universe. We smudge our entire body so that our body is taken care of spiritually. Once students are done smudging, the prayer is said in Anishinaabemowin.

Functional Language

We try to give students as much functional language in the classroom as possible. Yvette teaches the language when she opens her classes with smudging and a prayer song. Jacinta teaches the language in context. She doesn't use flash cards. In fact, the students don't need to learn to read and write a prayer, so she teaches it to them in a spoken language. Similarly, they don't need to learn to read and write about cleaning and tidying. Instead, these daily routines are spoken in Anishinaabemowin. This language training helps to create phonemic awareness among the children. They hear words they might hear at home, and they practice sounding out syllables in ways that help them enunciate in both English and Anishinaabemowin.

These conversations are the introduction to our outdoor learning excursions. During our excursions, we reference the many beings that we speak about in our prayers. These excursions provide ample opportunity for students to make connections with the land, community, and themselves as Anishinaabek. Through these outdoor excursions onto the land and into the community, students learn to pay attention to their environment and have memorable experiences that they can later document in class.

Gifts of Animals

As Anishinaabe people, we respect the animals. They all have spirit, and they all have a purpose. We use animals to sustain us, and we also learn from what they do. Animals tell us what the weather patterns are going to be like. If the geese start migrating early, we know that the season is going to change very early. If they come back early, then they're telling us something else. We look at how the bees and wasps build their nests. Are they building them high in the tree or are they building them low to the ground? That tells us what the winters going to be like. The spider has taught us that we can catch food in a web. Fishermen mimicked the spider and created nets to catch fish to sustain their communities. The animals teach us how to hunt and how to live, but they also provide us with food to sustain ourselves and furs and pelts to help keep us warm. These are teachings from our ancestors.

Learning at the Gete Aadziwin Fall Festival

The school engages in many land based learning activities. One of the biggest activities happens every year in mid-September and is called the *Gete Aadziwin*. At this festival, *binoojinhag* (children) learn about the gifts of the animals and traditional practices, like bullrush bundling, soapmaking, fish skin tanning, outdoor cooking, as well as wampum teachings, clan teachings, games and entertainment, and more. The community sets up activities at the ball field where children can learn how to lye Indian corn, which involves boiling the corn in hardwood ashes until it is safe to eat. *Ninoog* (Anishnaabe Knowledge Keepers) teach people how to harvest and smoke fish, and they offer samples for the children to try. The children sample caribou, beaver, deer, smoked fish, and moose cooked in a variety of different ways.

In another area, *Ninoog* teach how to skin otters and foxes and prepare the hides. *Binoojinhag* observe and participate in removing the *wiin* (fat) from a moose hide that is draped over a big pole. *Binoojinhag* see how heavy the hide is as adults lift it over the pole. *Ninoog* also have furs on hand to show what the processed

furs looked like.

Before attending the festival, Yvette and the *binoojinhag* talk about *wesiinhag* (animals in the fall and winter), like foxes, that live in the *mtigooki* (bush) around their *endaaying* (community/home). They discuss what they might see at the event, what *wesiinhag* eat, and the purposes of the parts of the *wesiinh* (animal). For example, Yvette shows them the sinew of a *waawaashkesh* (deer). She explains that it had come from *waawaashkesh(ag)* and is used to sew clothing, such as ceremonial regalia, *mjikaanag* (gloves/mittens), *mukluks* (winter boots), and moccasins.

After the event, Yvette brings her grade One and Two students back to the school where they make a necklace from bones and sinew. Together, they talk about recognizing that the animal had given the gift of its life for food and clothing. She teaches children to acknowledge the animal as a gift of Creator and to give thanks.



Building a Bat House

It is important that children feel connected to their community and to the land and all its relations. When teachers bring children to participate in their community, they strengthen their relationships with the community and their sense of identity as a member within it. This is particularly powerful in small communities where the activities are likely to be led by family members of the children. For example, when Jacinta brought her students to the Lands and Resources office to build bat houses, one student's grandfather was a facilitator. He built the bat house with his grandson.



Learning at the Fall Fair

A classroom collage of skinning and butchering beavers at the Gete Aadziwin Fall Fair. Students witnessed skinning a beaver and later helped to skin the pelt and learned how the beaver is used for food.

Land Based Learning

Land based learning is another extension of the classroom in which we take the children out to learn in nature. When we extend the classroom to the outdoors, the children reconnect with nature. They learn who they are as people and how to navigate their way through the elements. They also learn to connect and embrace the elements and become one with nature.

With land based learning, we incorporate our cultural traditions into the school environment. Our children are losing what it means to be Anishinaabe, and they are forgetting how to live with the land. By taking the classroom outside and learning from the land, we're instilling traditions back into our students' lives.

One of our traditions is trapping. Trapping is a way of life. Land based learning provides opportunities for students to learn how to set traps and snares in order to harvest animals. In our outdoor learning, the children learn to set snares to harvest rabbits. Land based instructors teach the children how to harvest deer and bear, and how to skin and butcher the meat. They learn how the bear fat is used to make medicine. They learn how fur is used to keep us warm. The fur on the deer is made into hide. The sinew in the moose and the deer is used for sewing. Students learn to harvest as much of the animal as possible without wasting it. All of these activities bring students into a context where they can see and participate in living traditions, like trapping.

Land based learning provides opportunities for students to take the lead in their learning. Their curiosity takes us places. We ask our students: "What do you want to learn about when we're outdoors?" They say they want to observe the changes in nature during each season. So, we take them into the woods. For example, students help to build a *quinzhee* (shelter) in the woods.

Land based learning provides opportunities for students to take the lead in their learning. Their curiosity takes us places.

Inside the Quinzhee

The children make a big mound of snow and dig a hole in it and crawl in. We can fit 15 children and a couple of adults inside the quinzhee (shelter). The students learn that when the sun beats down on that quinzhee, a hard pack of ice forms, which helps to make the shelter durable. They learn what our ancestors knew by discovering it for themselves.

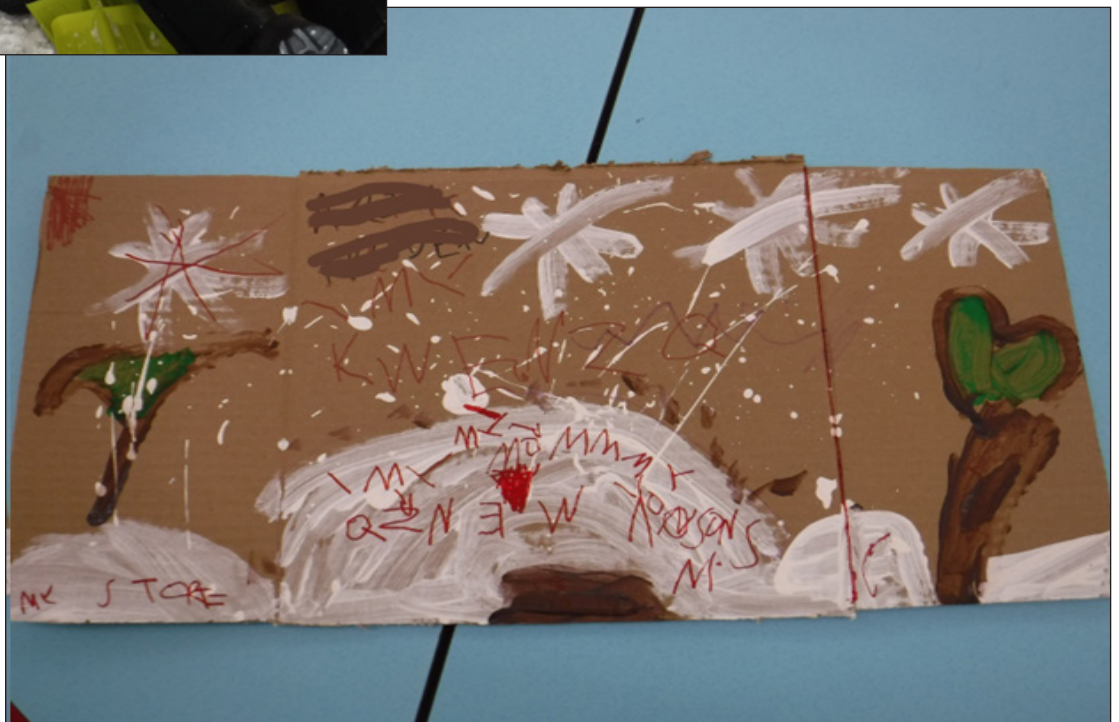


Above: A child exits the quinzhee.



Left: Children and an adult family member inside the quinzhee.

Below: A child's drawing of building the quinzhee.



Writing About Land Based Learning

We want these experiences to resonate with our kindergarten students. We want them to remember what do, especially given the fact that they're young and could easily forget these teachings, we get them to document what they do. Jacinta will say to students, "OK, we went to the ball field, and mommy and daddy don't know what we did. They don't know what you saw. So, let's write a story. Draw me a picture of what we did at the ballpark." She doesn't tell them what to draw. Instead, she'll usually say: "What was your favourite activity? What did you like the best at the ballpark? What was most interesting for you? Draw what you remember the most."

Jacinta sits down with them and supports them in labelling their drawings. This is done by helping them stretch out their words. Jacinta says to them: "Tell me about your picture." Together, student and teacher sound out words and use letters that they're familiar with to include simple texts in order to convey those messages. Some students, who are only learning how to write, make marks on the paper. They will make a few scribbles and say, "This is me, I'm hammering my bat house," because they don't know how to write yet. But they understand that if they put something on paper, they can tell a story to you. Other, more experienced students, attempt to write down what they experienced outside. "This is us standing by the teepee at the marsh," a student writes under a drawing. "This is us singing at the marsh."

A teacher should not correct the writing or comment on spelling. The point is not to stress perfect writing practices or correct usage. The goal is to get students to reflect on their experiences with learning on the land and to share their thoughts through writing and drawing.

To encourage more attempts at writing, drawing, and storytelling, Jacinta presents the writing to the class in a celebration circle. Students get to go up in front of their peers and talk about what they drew and what they wrote. She posts these pictures and writings on the wall for others to see. The work motivates students, and it motivates each new writer, who wants to do more because they see their work on display.

Documenting Learning

Students are encouraged to write about real-world experiences. After students participate in activities, they return to class and work on recording and retelling what happened. Students are provided with an opportunity to document their experiences by drawing pictures. The efforts of senior kindergarten students are supported by doing a retell of their drawings and labelling the pictures. Words are sounded out by stretching them out. Students identify the letter sounds they hear in the words and write them down. This type of activity also helps students develop their memories of these activities. It can also be used as an assessment of emergent writing, as shown in the following examples.



Harvesting Beavers

At the Fall Festival and in the classroom, students learn traditional ways of harvesting beavers and write and draw about their experiences. Above, Mr. Nathan demonstrates tools used for harvesting beavers.

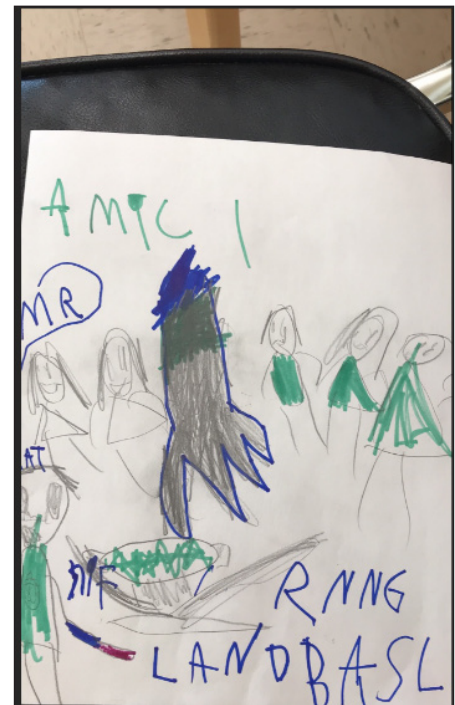
“AMIC”

In this drawing, a student illustrated her experience with the harvesting of the beaver while at land based learning. She drew a detailed picture of the beaver on the table to be skinned. When she was finished drawing, she labelled her drawing with support from the teacher. For example, she drew a picture of Mr. Nathan holding a knife in his hand. She labeled the knife using the sounds she heard in the word knife. She labeled the picture of Mr. Nathan and she sounded out his name and wrote the letters she identified. She drew a picture of a beaver on the table. She labelled the beaver in English and Anishinaabemowin again stretching the words out and writing the letters she heard.



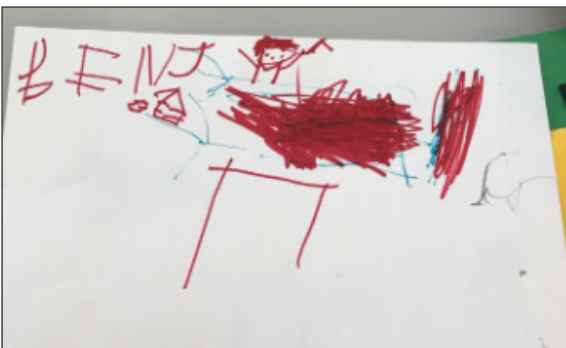
Writing about Land-based Learning

Students motivate one another with writing. For example, this student watched her peer label her drawing with the title “Land Based Learning.” She, too, labelled her drawing “Land Based Learning.” She also labelled her drawing “Amic” (beaver, also spelled “BEVR”) by sounding the word out while working beside her peer. In this student’s drawing, Mr. Nathan is holding a knife which has been labelled “nif.”



Skinning the Beaver

This drawing is a retell drawn by a senior kindergarten student. His drawing includes details that he remembered about his experience, such as the beaver on the table and the Land Based Learning instructor holding a knife in his hand to skin the beaver. He tells his story with a drawing and not with words.





The Talking Stick Teaching of Respect

Students are taught to listen to the Spirit as they walked in the fields and bush and find the stick that is for them. When they return to class, students learn about Mother Earth, how she provided the stick to them, and how the deer provide hide, bones, and sinew. The birds also gave their feathers to help decorate the Talking Stick. Students also learn about the regalia and fans used while dancing.

Making Maple Syrup

In these images, students learn how to tap a sugar maple tree, collect the sap, and taste and boil down the sap until we have pure maple sugar. They learn how this, too, is used for medicine.





Drums

One of the students showed interest in singing the “pow-wow” songs. Together, the students sang, using wooden block sticks as the drum stick and the box as their drum. The interested student taught another when to drum hard and when to drum softly.

The class watched YouTube videos of children singing round dance songs. One student recognized his cousin in the video. At this point, one of the students noticed different techniques being used by the hand drummers and how the drummers tapped their drumsticks on the side of the drum in order to make a different sound. The videos captured the interest of other students in the class. Once the students were finished drumming, they gathered at the carpet to sing together.



Frying Smelts

Students participate in the cleaning process of the smelts. They work alongside the teacher and Early Childhood Educator. The children are provided with scissors to cut off the heads and open the bellies of the smelts. Each child cleans five smelts and are always full of questions. “Which one is the daddy? Which one is the mommy?

Why is one yellow inside? How come this one does not have yellow inside?”

Students are taught to wash their hands so they do not contaminate the flour. They learn what contamination means. Each child measures their flour to coat their smelts. They learn that flour will make the smelt crispy and delicious to eat. Each child brought their coated smelts ready to fry. While they waited for their fish to fry, they cleaned up the area to play. The class fried the smelts on a single hot plate. Children wanted to place the fish in the frying pan. The teachers discussed safety in the classroom and keeping a safe distance from the hot oil. All students had the chance to taste the smelts even if it was a tiny bite. One student could not get enough.



Closing Thoughts

We are striving to revitalize Anishinaabemowin language and culture within our communities. Beginning in kindergarten, it is our duty as Knowledge Keepers to teach what was given to us so that the children understand who they are: Anishinaabek. The Grandfather Teachings and the Medicine Wheel teachings are our guiding principles. They are key to revitalizing life as Anishinaabek. We are learning to pass on the skills of our ancestors to our children.

We hope this book offers guidance to new teachers, as well as non-Anishinaabek teachers, about how to bring this cultural understanding into the classroom. Remember, our Elders are always willing to help teachers learn about our culture and to find ways to share this knowledge with the children in our schools. With the support of community Knowledge Keepers, such as hunters and trappers, our culture and language continue to pass on to the next generation. Our Elders have maintained our way of life and given back so that we become Knowledge Keepers and carriers of tradition. We give all these gifts to our students so they may carry on our culture and traditions.

About the Authors

Yvette Manitowabi is from Wiikwemkoong, Ontario, of the Three Fires Confederacy, Odawa, Ojibway, Potawatomi Nation, land of the Robinson Huron Treaty Territory. She is an Anishinaabe Kew, Nokomis (Grandmother), Knowledge Carrier, and teacher who is approaching her next stage of life as an Elder as she is giving back to her community. She has been instrumental in bringing locally developed courses to the local high school. She has taught in Section 19 behavioural classrooms, primary, junior level, play-based kindergarten classes, and is currently teaching self-retained eight classrooms. Her journey has come full circle, and she continues to help students develop a strong sense of identity and to connect with their ancestral language and their Creator.

Allow your Spirit to guide you toward the gifts left for us in the form of teachings from our Elders and Knowledge Keepers! Our Elders will smooth the path for clear direction as Knowledge Carriers continue to help educators create a rich environment and guide children to attain a strong understanding of identity, develop positive attitudes, mature into greater confidence and self-efficacy throughout their lives. And, guided by the Seven Grandfather's Teachings and Medicine Wheel teachings that encompass all life, have a positive impact in their community.

When you are listening, you are learning; when you are learning, you are gaining knowledge; when you gain knowledge, you have wisdom—a gift that now belongs to you.

I say “Miigwech” to Professor Shelley Stagg Peterson for inviting me to participate in the NOW Play project. This work has provided me with the opportunity to listen and watch our children play, and play along with them.

Thank you also to Shelly Trudeau-Odjig who worked with me in SK/JK.

It is our children who teach us; they are our natural researchers as we record their playfulness in their lives. They are driven by their Spirit within and question the world around them. Oh, to be a child of curiosity and wonder. As we listen and watch children, remember it is our children's Spirit who speaks out to us. It's empowering. Become a respectful listener, let them speak; we are their mirror image. Live a good life. (Biimadizwin)

Jacinta Manitowabi was born and raised on Wiikwemkoong Unceded Territory, and was fully immersed in her Anishinaabemowin language and culture as a child. She left her community to gain Early Childhood Educator qualifications and worked in a variety of capacities, including Student Liaison at Cambrian College's Binoojiiyag Kinoomaadwin Early Childhood Program and Supervisor in a Daycare in Constance Lake First Nation, where she was asked by the Education Director to teach kindergarten. She then became a qualified teacher. Shortly thereafter, she decided to give back to her community and moved home to work as a resource teacher in the community daycare. Currently, she is an Anishinaabemowin Immersion Kindergarten Teacher. She has been given the gift of Anishinnabe language and feels it is her duty to pass it along to children within her community.

“As we learn the language together, we and the children are actively taking part in revitalizing Anishnaabemowin. By taking the classroom outside and learning in nature, some of the words we learned in our childhood are coming back to us. We live the language when we use the word in context.”

2024

NOW Play