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INDIGENOUS AND WESTERN WORLDVIEWS

Fostering Ethical Space in the Classroom

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Originating from German philosopher Immanuel Kant, the concept of worldview refers to the way people make sense of the things that happen around them.[1] A worldview is a collection of beliefs, norms, and values held by an individual or group of individuals. It is a holistic conception of the intricacies of the world; it is a lens through which one perceives and interprets life. It is a type of cognitive schema used when reflecting upon or contemplating personal experiences, local events, and happenings in one's life. This all-encompassing, pervasive, personal standpoint is influenced by such things as life experiences, culture, language, religion, spirituality, gender, gender performance, environment, family, and friends.

The worldview under which a person functions is usually taken for granted. It is often an unconscious internal influence that escapes direct questioning.[2] Nonetheless, understanding and interrogating various types of worldviews is empowering, for a number of reasons. To facilitate successful communication, fruitful relationships, and greater respect between individuals and within groups, it is important to appreciate multiple worldviews. Possessing a better understanding of others' worldviews sparks conversation, ignites curiosity, and evokes creativity; it promotes the growth of the self and others. As people become sensitive to the intricacies of other worldviews, they tend to become less critical of the beliefs, values, actions, and cultures of others.

Understanding core similarities and differences among worldviews assists in promoting rich relationships, cultural respect, and communal harmony. This knowledge is highly beneficial in educational settings, particularly in First Nations schools or off-reserve schools with Indigenous students. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada has called upon governments to close the educational gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and to develop culturally appropriate early childhood education programs for Indigenous families. But how can curriculum developers and educators cooperate with students and parents if the two groups do not understand each other? What follows is a descriptive account of the Indigenous and Western worldviews – the core values, norms, and perspectives embedded within each standpoint. Although there is no single Indigenous worldview but diverse worldviews, non-Indigenous educators need to understand how their worldview fundamentally differs from that of Indigenous peoples before there can be true reconciliation in the classroom.

A Note on Terminology

The word *Indigenous* is often used within international discourse, discussions, and protocols when referring to the original inhabitants of a country or particular geographic territory. The very title of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* exemplifies the global inclusiveness of the term *Indigenous*.[3] Over the past decade or two, the word *Indigenous* has become increasingly popular within political and academic domains throughout the world and in Canada; however, the Canadian government still uses the word *Aboriginal* in legislation such as the Constitution Act, 1982, in which *Aboriginal* refers to First Nation, Métis, and Inuit peoples in Canada.

The term *Western* is associated with a societal philosophy that emerged in western Europe during the Age of Reason. In *Voltaire's Bastards*, philosopher John Ralston Saul explains that this way of thinking reflected the merging of historical epochs, including the Age

of Christianity, the Renaissance, and the Age of Enlightenment. During that time, the political, economic, and social systems of western Europe radically changed as science became powerful and explorers set out to catalogue and conquer the world.[4] Schmuel Eisenstadt argues that the Western worldview reflects an evolutionary array of chronological influences that converged into the modern hegemonic norm that permeates present-day economy-driven societies.[5] Herein, the term *Western worldview* is synonymous with *European worldview*.

It is important to keep in mind that Indigenous and Western worldviews are not monolithic philosophical entities. Among the various and diverse people who hold a particular worldview, there are subtle, sometimes conflicting differences in beliefs, values, intuition, and perceptions. It is also important to keep in mind that both worldviews are equally valid and can be compatible. Elmer Ghostkeeper, for instance, examines the potential for *wechewehtowin* (a Woodland Cree word for "partnering") between Indigenous wisdom and Western scientific knowledge in "Weche Teaching."[6] Aligned with Ghostkeeper's ideas, the intention here is not to present one worldview as superior to another. Propagating better-worse binaries for belief systems limits the possibilities that exist when two worldviews are respected. That being said, the basic concepts of Indigenous and Western worldviews are presented here in a somewhat dichotomous way in the hope to provide simplified descriptions as a starting point for future explorations, whether in the realm of the intellect or classroom.

The Indigenous Worldview

The Indigenous worldview can be expressed in two simple words: interconnected wholeness. As Richard Atleo, hereditary Chief of the Ahousaht First Nation, succinctly states, "Everything is one."[7] Indigenous peoples hold two core beliefs: everything is alive, and everything is related.[8] All things in the universe are imbued with one shared, omnipotent energy, making everything interwoven and inseparable.

All societies and communities operate in a state of relatedness. Kinship, lifestyle, and oral traditions reinforce this connectedness. Human behaviour reflects intimate kinship with an all-living cosmos. According to Indigenous ways of knowing, everything in the universe is animate, whether it be a spider, a blade of grass, a patch of dirt, or a rock, and each individual has a unique relationship with all surrounding animate and inanimate forces. The earth does not belong to humans; rather, humans belong to the earth. Nature is universal. It is not an individual, ethnic, or national property. Because there is no separation between nature and humanity, all forms of creation possess one consciousness.[9] The two-legged, four-legged, and winged; the swimmers and crawlers; and rocks and plants live together harmoniously on Mother Earth. Land, animals, and spirits are the consciousness of the universe and are part of the circle of life.[10] Coexisting in perfect unity, all matter is connected via shared energy, which dynamically radiates both within and throughout every human being. It is each person's responsibility to allow this spiritual radiance to flow through him- or herself and onward towards everyone and everything else, thereby sustaining the flow.[11]

The concept of the Sacred Circle (or simply "the circle") is one way to convey the full meaning of connected wholeness.[12] The symbol of the circle, which possesses no beginning or endpoint, represents wholeness, harmony, and eternity, cosmic order, communal energy, and the interconnected web of life.[13] The symbol of the circle is a metaphor for sun, planets, moon, asteroid belts, and orbital rotations performing a harmonious universal round dance. The circle incorporates the four spirits – earth, air, fire, and water – the essential elements of creation that sustain life. These sacred elements unremittingly and simultaneously reconstruct and deconstruct existence. The circle represents the infinite reoccurrence of ecological processes, exemplified through the water cycle, the carbon cycle, the food chain, and photosynthesis. It represents a balanced, divine rotation of creation and destruction. Within this infinite rhythm, people are invited to live in harmony and universal perfection.

The circle and its divine symmetry represent the reoccurrence of time, which can be depicted through the perpetuation of life. Human life is a synergy of the past (one's ancestors), the present (the current generation), and the future (one's children's children).[14] In *Research Is Ceremony,* Shawn Wilson argues that the identity of Indigenous peoples depends on maintaining a relationship with the land, returning ancestors to the land, and ensuring that future generations will experience the land.[15] Humanity is not simply the people on Earth today but an unending cycle of birth, youth, adulthood, and elderhood that spans generations.[16] Boundless successions of life are reflected through natural occurrences such as the rising and setting of the sun, the transition of day into night, the phases of the moon, the rhythm of the tides, the migration of birds, the life cycle of a forest, and the ring marks in every tree trunk. Through these examples, the circle represents environmental perseverance, longevity, sustainability, and ultimate beauty and perfection.

Like the Sacred Circle, the Medicine Wheel, as a symbol, is a type of mirror from which everything is reflected.[17] In *Medicine Wheels: Ancient Teachings for Modern Times,* Roy Wilson explains: "There are many Medicine Wheels. The universe is a Medicine Wheel. Our own solar system is a giant Medicine Wheel. The earth is a Medicine Wheel. Every nation is a Medicine Wheel. Each state is a Medicine Wheel. Each family is a Medicine Wheel. You are a Medicine Wheel, for every individual is a Medicine Wheel."[18] With its emphasis on the individual, the Medicine Wheel reflects the journey of the human spirit and conveys how this journey is embodied in the physical realm.[19] Messages from the Medicine Wheel articulate the path to a balanced vibrant life.[20] In other words, the Medicine Wheel is an individualized learning model through which personal empowerment, healing, and wellness can be achieved and maintained.

It is important to recognize that the Medicine Wheel and its features are depicted and understood in a variety of ways by different Indigenous cultures. For example, various North American Indigenous groups physically illustrate the Medicine Wheel using particular colours

or animals. As Elder Francis Whiskeyjack notes, "people have different interpretations in their medicine wheel and they are all right. No one is wrong."[21] It is also important to note that some Indigenous cultures don't refer to the Medicine Wheel at all. For instance, some Canadian Inuit instead depict life's journey through a circular blanket.[22]

Despite this diversity, some generalizations can be made. The Medicine Wheel contains four equal quadrants and four cardinal directions: east, south, west, and north. Each of these directions corresponds with lessons pertaining to life stages, seasons, animals, medicines, human races, and principles of life. For example, the four quadrants of the Medicine Wheel represent spring, summer, autumn, and winter. They also represent child, youth, adult, and Elder. A balanced life can be achieved by focusing equally on the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of wellness. In *Reclaiming Youth at Risk,* Larry Brendtro, Martin Brokenleg, and Steve Van Bockern use the Medicine Wheel to depict the four universal needs of belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity.[23] Different cultures use different colours and life principles to represent different quadrants. According to Mi'kmaw Elder Noel Milliea, yellow represents the east, the principle of respect, and the sacred medicine of tobacco; blue (or black if in mourning) represents the south, the principle of honesty, and the sacred medicine of sage; red represents the west, the principle of trust, and the sacred medicine of sweetgrass; and white represent the north, the principle of love, and the sacred medicine of cedar.[24] Also, Medicine Wheel colours (yellow, blue/black, red, and white) can represent a unified, multihued vision of the ethnicities of humankind: Asian, African, Indigenous, and Caucasian.[25] As a final point, the Medicine Wheel expresses the sacredness of the number four: the four directions, the four seasons, the four elements of life, the four stages of life, the four universal needs, the four life principals, the four sacred medicines, and the four ethnicities on Earth.

In addition to the Sacred Circle and the Medicine Wheel, the Indigenous worldview encompasses other perceptions, values, and beliefs. For example, Indigenous knowledge is predominantly passed

on through oral narratives, oral histories, and the act of storytelling.[26] In Indigenous cultures, storytelling is often a spirit-focused way to preserve and transfer historical knowledge, including protocols, language, and tribal customs.[27] Sometimes, stories are told in song or dance and often explore the themes of self-identity, family lineage, and relationships with the land.[28] In *Decolonizing Education,* Marie Battiste identifies storytelling as "the most important way of sharing the experience of Indigenous peoples, who locate their identities in an alternate knowledge system built within different ways of learning."[29]

As part of the Indigenous worldview, the learning process is the experience of life itself. Indigenous peoples affirm a type of teaching in which learning is a natural and social event through which knowledge and comprehension are acquired. It is relevant, hands-on, and experiential. Children and youth observe, experience, and participate in demonstrations, cooperative events, group discussions, reflection, talking circles, games, apprenticeships, and other activities. During the learning process, an Indigenous worldview promotes the ethics of noninterference and noncompetition to foster positive interpersonal relationships and discourage physical, verbal, or psychological coercion. Jo-ann Archibald, an Indigenous studies scholar from the Stó:lō Nation, explains that, for Indigenous peoples, rich learning opportunities are achieved through the promotion of independence, self-reliance, observation, discovery, and respect for nature.[30] The knowledge and skills gained from life experience are used to promote the wellness of families and communities.

Another core aspect of the Indigenous worldview is spirit. For Indigenous people, spirituality pertains to a belief in a higher power or purpose, a sense of interconnectedness to all things, and the ongoing development of one's identity through spiritual awareness.[31] For individuals, there can be no separation from knowledge and spirit, because "spiritual identity is connected to Land/Mother Earth, to one's inner self/soul, and the physical and social surroundings."[32] Spiritual knowledge is gained by being open to the teachings of nature

and participating in Indigenous ceremonies and rituals, which often involve dance and song. The physical act of dancing is a form of prayer, connecting body, mind, emotions, and soul to the spirit world. As a part of dance, song, and ceremony, the rhythm of a drumbeat represents the harmonic pulse of Mother Earth and the pulse of one's own heartbeat. Ceremonies (e.g., sweats, potlatches, feasts, sun dances) confer rights to hold sacred knowledge and wisdom to promote the wellness of the community and its members.[33]

Within the Indigenous worldview, dreams, visions, and intuition are forms of divine guidance. As Margaret Kovach states in *Indigenous Methodologies*, "within Plains Cree knowledges, dreams matter."[34] Betty Bastien explains that, for Blackfoot peoples, dreams are a primary source of knowledge, which is often prophetic, filled with warnings or personally relevant information.[35] Dreams, visions, prayer, and inward ways of knowing sometimes involve the offering of tobacco to honour and facilitate communication with the Creator.[36] It should be emphasized that knowledge that is gained from these types of spiritual experiences is deeply personal and particularized and therefore difficult to communicate or generalize.[37]

The Western Worldview

The Western perspective tends to categorize the world and all its matter into two types of entities: animate (e.g., humans, animals, plants) and inanimate (e.g., rocks, mountains, sky, land, water, and wind). It divides experience into two separate states of being: the physical (or natural) and the spiritual (or supernatural).[38] It depicts life as being two-layered and hierarchical, with humans at the top of the pyramid and other forms (i.e., animals and vegetation) occupying tiers below.[39] Because of this hierarchical authority, humans can and do influence and manipulate their environment.[40] Having stated such in his study of the Medicine Wheel, Roy Wilson points out that humans dominate animals and plants in the Western worldview, but they still have a moral duty of stewardship towards nonhuman life

forms.[41] The spiritual (or supernatural) is sometimes ignored in Western-based societies, because it cannot be explained via logical, measurable, scientific means.[42] When spiritual knowledge is accepted and revered, it is commonly done through religious institutions or forums and framed within rules and formalities.

The Western worldview supports the primacy of the individual and the limitless potential housed in each person.[43] Competition, winning, and losing are not only acceptable features of life, they are considered valuable experiences, because they foster personal and professional growth and development.[44] When analyzing one's place in the world, Westerners do so through the lens of anthropocentricity, a view that supports the notion that humans have ultimate authority over the universe and the creative ability to mould the future; they are innately driven to advance, change, and become smarter than past generations.[45]

In Western societies, education is an individualized, academic process within demarked contexts. Education is predominantly institutionalized in terms of management, curricular content, and the slotting of predetermined timeframes. The educational practices of public schools and postsecondary organizations promote learning as an experience that often involves competitiveness, individuality, status projection, and outside judgment.[46] In this formal system, success and self-confidence are qualities that are to be developed, honed, and demonstrated as a part of the student experience. In the process, students learn to value their individuality and defend their unique thoughts and ideas.[47] Success is often defined by things that can be manipulated, controlled, and seen, and Western educational systems are renowned for promoting measurable outcomes, experiences, and skills.[48] Tests, teacher-focused feedback, and the provision of formal grades or comments are the predominant mechanisms used to summarize the learning experience.[49] Within Western systems, teachers must acquire formal certification. Educational systems approve a set of bounded curricula and pedagogical acts and decide upon the specific outcomes recognized for a specific set of learnings. In other

words, only accredited people and recognized institutions can confer knowledge and credentials (through grades, diplomas, and degrees), which, in turn, are proof one's personal advancement.

In the Western worldview, time and space have demarked, finite boundaries. Time is a linear concept, and space is a three-dimensional physical entity. Years are divided into months, months into weeks, and weeks into days, which are further compartmentalized into hours, minutes, seconds, and milliseconds. Within this linear framework, teaching and learning are delivered within preauthorized units of time.[50] Meetings are scheduled, objectives are set, and deadlines assist in the completion of tasks. The ability to solve problems, ensure accuracy, and produce results is a useful attribute in achieving defined goals. Life is linear in the sense that a person is born, develops, and dies.

The Western quest for knowledge and supremacy over nature requires that natural systems and events be broken down and studied within individualized entities or parts. The properties of a given system (e.g., physical, biological, chemical, social, economic, mental, linguistic) are determined or explained by subprocesses or subcomponents. For example, from a biological perspective, the body is broken down into organs and tissues. Tissue is made from cells, which have a nucleus and cytoplasm. Within the nucleus, there are chromosomes, which, in turn, have genes; the genes contain DNA, which, in turn, is made up of chemical bases. Because of its attention to things at a molecular level, the Western worldview has generated much knowledge pertaining to the unique individualized parts of living systems.[51] As a result of the microanalysis of issues, scientists and academics have specialized knowledge of content-related topics and have gathered infinitesimal data about distinct topics.

Academic research in the Western world is conducted predominantly through rational and intellectual methodologies. Western research commonly presents data through categorical or thematic results.[52] The scientific process follows the prescribed steps of reflection, formulating questions, developing a hypothesis, articulating a

step-by-step procedure, and writing a final report to communicate results.[53] In general, Western knowledge "is pragmatic and grounded in scientific evidence that can be quantified and empirically studied."[54]

Another feature of the Western worldview is the notion that humans have great potential to create and process new ideas, that humankind has bountiful intellectual abilities. As evidenced throughout history, artistic, scientific, and technological innovation reflect humankind's vast ability to create. As articulated via a Western worldview, "there is no question that human reason has an enormous capacity to discover and advance knowledge."[55] With an innate desire to continuously create and expand new knowledge, it is believed that humans are flexible and can adapt to new, innovative environments.[56] In fact, effective organizations are systems that adapt practices, processes, strategies, and structures so that their internal capacities successfully withstand the turbulent markets and address the ever-changing needs of consumers.[57] It is because of the Western worldview and its tenet of constant improvement that many modern-day conveniences have been invented and utilized.

The way people experience the world depends on their worldview, which consciously and unconsciously encompasses personal views, needs, desires, and prejudices. To make space for the opinions and knowledge of other people, each of us needs to reflect on our personally biased experiential worldview and voluntarily consider the realities and mindsets of other people. Understanding Indigenous perspectives and Western perspectives, upon which the current educational system has been built, is mandatory if educational systems are to renew, improve, change, and reform. Interlinked with the hope to improve and renew education, there is a need to establish and promote *ethical space*. Indigenous scholar Willie Ermine describes ethical spaces as ethereal locations where different views, cultures, and life experiences are recognized equally within a mutually respected, balanced team of

diverse people.[58] Ermine explains, "Ethical space is formed when two societies, with disparate worldviews, are poised to engage each other."[59] Dialogue grounded in ethical space is an exciting way to examine the diverse positioning, cultures, and ways of knowing that reside within Indigenous and Western societies. Within this space, the cultural and spiritual diversities of Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups merge into an empathetic, respectful, and harmonious existence. Creating and using this ethical space begins by understanding the differences and similarities threaded within Indigenous and Western worldviews.

Teachers, administrators, and educational leaders need to recognize the features and implications of Indigenous and Western worldviews. Within the larger school community, this understanding and appreciation will stimulate greater respect for cultural diversity within a variety of collaborative teams, including ministerial teams, school boards, faculty and staff associations, school-parent associations (e.g., school councils), and student teams (e.g., extracurricular sports). The result will be a healthier, safer, more inclusive classroom and school, where the vibrancy of humankind is recognized and celebrated.

Notes

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