The power of Indigenous literature: Strengthening the resilience of Indigenous students in university

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Source http://www.pickyourown.org/CN.htm
Self-in-Relation

“Nanastewiskwew”

From what “place” do I speak?

What do I feel I have to contribute to my people, community, and nation?
Research Area:

Aboriginal Students’ Resilience in Education

Aboriginal Literature

Mamatowasowin (Inward exploration)

Miyo-Pimatisiwin (The Good Life)
What is resilience?

The ability to bounce back from trauma and persist through difficult life circumstances to live a good life.

Being attentive to wholistic growth and balance of the four areas of self: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual.
Indigenous writers demonstrate how they have persisted through hardship without giving up hope.

Their stories exemplify the realities of Aboriginal students’ lives.

Facing similar circumstances requires that Indigenous students remain hopeful about the future and make use of positive coping strategies to get through difficulties.
How many of you had the opportunity to read literature in school that was written by Indigenous writers?

Thomas King
Tomson Highway
Drew Hayden Taylor
Louise Bernice Halfe
Maria Campbell
Richard Wagamese
Richard Van Camp
Eden Robinson
Nohkom and Nimosom
Are going dancing
Tobacco offerings
Ribbon cloths
Elder’s murmuring
Prayer songs.
Nohkom wears pony beads
Flowing flowered dress
A wide beaded belt with
Hanging silver trinkets.
Campfires
Muskeg tea boiling
Smoke
Meat drying.
Nohkom and Nimosom are going dancing.

Elder’s Waltz, from Bear Bones and Feathers by Louise Halfe
“When your innocence is stripped from you, when your people are denigrated, when the family you came from is denounced and your tribal ways and rituals are pronounced backward, primitive, savage, you come to see yourself as less than human. That is hell on earth, that sense of unworthiness. That’s what they [residential schools] inflicted on us.”

_Indian Horse by Richard Wagamese_
For our people, stories are used in three ways:

1. **The sharing of general stories** - The sharing of general stories allows individuals to personally discover whatever meaning in the story relates to them.

2. **The use of humour** - The use of humor supports the release of tension, energy and knowledge development since much can be learned from the laughter stemming from particular situations.

3. **Role modeling** - Meanwhile, role modeling through the telling of stories is “indirect, non-confrontational and supportive” (Hart, 2002, p. 57).
We enjoy reading literature (books, poetry, drama, short stories) that resembles our own life circumstances.

Why are we getting an education?

What does a successful life mean to Indigenous people?
PROBLEM STATEMENT

Research shows that a combination of factors affect Aboriginal students’ resilience in education (and employment), creating a recognized success gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

**Colonization effects & historic trauma**
- Residential school era/Foster Care
- Settler-Indigenous relationships
- Outlawing of spiritual practices

**Euro-centrism**
- Worldview as the norm in curriculum, language, etc.

**All FORMS OF RACISM**
- Internalized racism
- Societal, Structural/Systemic, and Institutional Racism
• Intergenerational trauma & grief
• Overt & covert discrimination and prejudice
• Need for culturally relevant curriculum & culturally relevant teaching methods
• Need for increased minority instructors, more supportive peers, and stronger family support structures
• Need for growth in self-esteem and self-confidence
• Demonstration of ineffective social skills (in wider society)
• Perceived difficulty with English language skills
• Need for (more adequate) academic preparation
• Lower standard of income
• Culture shock
INDIGENOUS PARADIGM

Mosakana Wikaskwa (Picking Sweetgrass): self-preparation, ethics, gathering, sorting, combining, storing, use for well-being

Source: Retrieved from www.tryonfarm.org
Research goal

Understanding how reading Indigenous literature with a fictional or non-fictional autobiographical voice has influenced the resilience of Indigenous students at the University of Saskatchewan.
Three themes
1. Coping with personal and academic challenges

[Reading *In Search of April Raintree*] influenced me in a positive way, because although it has a sad ending for one of the girls... one of the girls lost her life and one of the sister(s) continued living. She kept going with her education and she kept following her goals no matter how much racism she endured. So I kept that... with me just to help me pursue 

(Nohkom Kanehkan Apit- Cree “Grandmother who sits at the front”).
Coping with personal and academic challenges continued.

Reading and books and education were an escape for me because my home situation wasn’t always great. I grew up in a rough situation. And for me,... I would rather be at school then at my current home situation. And yeah, ... for me books became an escape and it wasn’t just Aboriginal books, it was other books as well.

(Chris, on reading in high school).
2. Student engagement

With [Indigenous] authors, in reading their works, it is like they are telling stories based on true events. Going back to Richard Van Camp’s novel, reading his book reminded me of real life [problems]. He does not beat around the bush, he talks about racism, discrimination, abuse of all levels, consequences of peoples’ actions... His book is revolved around the realities of the lives of Aboriginals in this modern day and age, but focused towards those who are hurt and suffer from the things like poverty.

(Adjgaliaq- Inuit “Created by hands”)

2.(a) Sub-theme: Approaches of professors validating Indigenous literature and experiences

This moniyaw-iskwew [white woman] went out of her way to get us interested in [Indigenous] literature... I never really had that experience before in other ways... I just thought it was really interesting. And it was nice, reading about it with other [First Nation] students because you get to see their points of view and how they interpreted it and what it meant to them.

(Cindy, Cree)
3. Personal growth and transformation

When you’re talking about colonialism in literature, and you never heard about that before. And you don’t know what it is, you don’t know anything about it, like all the elements in colonialism. Then it helps you realize that everything that you’ve been told, or everything you’ve thought before, it’s not true. Like all the negative things [about First Nation people].

(Jimmy)
SUMMARY - Three ways university students are empowered by reading & relating to Indigenous literature:

1. Coping with personal and academic challenges

2. Student engagement
   Sub-theme: Approaches of teachers/instructors validating Aboriginal literature and experiences

3. Personal growth and transformation
From an anti-racist lens, how can non-Indigenous students benefit from reading Indigenous literature?

- **Building understanding, decreasing stereotypes and racism.**
- **Learning the worldviews of Indigenous people in Canada.**
- **Learning about colonization and historic trauma and their relevance to current situations & relationships.**
- **To become well-informed allies in promoting equality for Indigenous people in Canada.**
• Indigenous literature serves as a powerful tool to influence the identities, self-concepts, and self-esteem of Indigenous students and teachers/professors.

_Do you agree/disagree? How would you see this happening?_

• Indigenous literature, as a form of Indigenous storytelling, corresponds to the Indigenous knowledge that students are taught within their own families and communities.

_Do you agree/disagree? How does Indigenous literature bring out/acknowledge Indigenous knowledge and what are the benefits of this?_

• Indigenous literature has the power to help Indigenous students to begin to heal or to simply learn new ways of dealing with difficult circumstances, ways that may help them throughout their lifetime.

_Do you agree/disagree? What ways would literature help Indigenous students deal with difficult life circumstances and begin to heal?_