

# Honoring Story, Land, and Community: Rethinking Indigenous Literacy Education

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## Abstract

In a Western schooling context, literacy education is often narrowly framed through reading and writing, privileging text-based practices grounded in Eurocentric assumptions about knowledge, learning, and achievement. For many Indigenous children, such framings do not acknowledge the relational, embodied, and land-connected ways literacy is lived and learned within family, community, and culture. In this literature review, we engage scholarship on Indigenous literacy education to examine how storytelling, land, kinship, community, and creative expression open broader understandings of literacy. Rather than approaching these as separate themes or as culturally responsive additions to Western literacy instruction, we consider them as interdependent literacies that reshape how meaning-making, teaching, and learning can be understood. We argue that rethinking literacy in these ways invites educators, particularly non-Indigenous educators, to move beyond deficit and classroom-bound frameworks toward more relational, culturally grounded, and collaborative literacy practices with Indigenous students, families, and community.

## Introduction

Consider that for more than a century, Indigenous students have been part of a forced assimilation plan—their heritage and knowledge rejected, suppressed, and ignored by the education system. (Battiste, 2019, p. 23)

Indigenous students' learning and levels of achievement in Western education institutions are an ongoing dialogue in academic literature. Many scholars have brought forward their concerns regarding the achievement gap between non-Indigenous and Indigenous students, which frames the latter within a deficit position (Battiste, 2019; Brice, 2020; Deer & Heringer, 2023; Goulet & Goulet, 2014; Hare, 2012, 2021; Skeete & Conrad, 2025). Across this work, scholars continue to point to the literacy achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and to the damaging ways deficit discourses are reproduced when Indigenous learners are measured against Western norms of literacy alone. Yet the problem is not simply that Indigenous students have been insufficiently included in existing literacy frameworks. More deeply, literacy instruction grounded within Western ideologies and knowledge systems often fails to acknowledge, or co-create space with, other ways of knowing, being, and doing. As described by Indigenous scholar Dr. Willie Ermine (1995), Western ideologies are grounded in "fragmentation," which he cautions is harmful for Indigenous students in education (p. 110). Ermine draws our attention to the disconnectedness of Indigenous students' cultures and traditions within Western-dominated curriculum and pedagogy; hence, Indigenous students' cultures and traditions are

not part of their literacy learning experiences within schools. Indigenous scholar Dr. Sharla Mskokii Peltier (2024) brings forward how there is a “huge emphasis on written language as knowledge in our schools. So, traditional Indigenous ways of coming to know are based on experience and storytelling, and these have been largely untapped and unacknowledged in the classroom” (10:34). As a result, it is imperative that non-Indigenous educators engage in critical work to deepen their understanding of how these structures in education impact students’ literacy learning.

In Alberta’s education system, literacy education is defined as “the ability, confidence and willingness to engage with language to acquire, construct and communicate meaning in all aspects of daily living” (Alberta Education, 2025). Alberta Education (2025) further asserts that “when children enter the public school system, literacy education takes place within the Language Arts classroom” and is a “shared responsibility among all educators” (Alberta Education, 2025). This is important for educators to understand for two reasons. First, literacy is positioned as central to all learning experiences, meaning that every content area contributes to students’ literacy development. Second, locating literacy primarily within the English Language Arts classroom risks narrowing where literacy learning takes place (Alberta Education, 2025). While literacy is taught in classrooms, framing it only within these spaces closes the door on many of the landscapes where literacy learning unfolds.

For Indigenous students, literacy learning is not restricted to a classroom; rather, it is a holistic and embodied way of learning that is woven through multiple relationships and places (Hare, 2021; Peltier, 2024). As Brubacher and Filipek (2025) remind us, Indigenous children “need to engage in learning that is land-based, narrative, experiential, and intergenerational” (p. 89). This understanding invites educators to rethink both what literacy is and where it happens, moving beyond the classroom walls to engage in authentic partnerships with students, families, and community. Literacy learning is an important part of students’ daily lives, in their relationships and on multiple landscapes, as learning does not end when they leave the classroom.

The purpose of this literature review is to support educators in rethinking these assumptions by engaging with Indigenous scholarship on literacy as relational, embodied, and interconnected with story, land, family, and community. Rather than treating these as separate themes, this review approaches them as interdependent literacies that can guide more culturally grounded and collaborative approaches to literacy education. Through this lens, educators are invited to re-imagine literacy learning in ways that honor Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing. This paper is intended to serve as a learning resource for educators to re-imagine their approach to literacy education both in the classroom and across landscapes.<sup>1</sup>

## Literature Review

### Western Literacy Education and Indigenous Learners

A consistent thread across the literature is the literacy achievement gap between non-Indigenous and Indigenous students. Wright (2022), in “Western Literacy and First Nations Education,” argues that the public education system presents significant challenges for Indigenous learners, particularly in literacy. They note that “many First Nations people in Canada struggle in the acquisition of the skills associated with Western literacy, that is, with the skills necessary to communicate through reading, writing, and numeracy in either English or French” (Wright, 2022, p. 2). Wright makes clear to the readers that the experiences of Indigenous students in their literacy education contribute to the uneven literacy achievement gap between Indigenous students and non-Indigenous students. Similarly, in their work on literacy, Hare (2012) argues, “Indigenous children do not experience the same success in [western] literacy as their non-Indigenous counterparts” (p. 389). As a result, Indigenous students are unable to obtain the literacy skills and knowledge they need to function in today’s society. Hare (2012) notes that 60% of Indigenous peoples over the age of 16 “failed to meet the basic standard Level 3, a level considered necessary for participation in everyday work and life” (p. 390). This achievement gap is ongoing. In the monograph *Honoring Our Students*, Brice (2020) echoes these concerns, stating that “the statistics around the literacy learning of Indigenous people paints a grim picture for the academic achievement of Indigenous children and youth” (p. 11, referencing the Canadian Council on Learning [2007, 2008] and the Canadian Educational Statistics Council [2009]).

Across these studies, scholars point to the deep colonial roots of these disparities. Wright (2022) emphasizes that “the causes of low literacy levels are deep rooted and complex, and have their origins in Canada’s colonial past” (p. 2). The ongoing presence of colonial structuring in today’s school systems continues to subject Indigenous learners to a Western curriculum that privileges Eurocentric knowledge systems. Peltier (2017) highlights this tension, noting that “when a binary opposition of Western literacy versus Indigenous orality is perceived, Aboriginal cultures are defined as oral traditions and the discourse follows that they are non-literate societies” (p. 6). This framing not only misrepresents Indigenous knowledge systems but also reinforces deficit narratives that position Indigenous learners as lacking.

The literature further emphasizes how these tensions manifest in classrooms. Hare (2012) notes that when Indigenous students’ home and community literacies differ from the “literacy expectations and practices of formal school, children do not do well” (p. 390). Anderson et al. (2016) similarly argue that literacy education is often shaped by “middle-class, Western, and/or Eurocentric values and ideologies” (p. 4), creating a mismatch between school-based literacy practices and the relational, culturally grounded literacies Indigenous children experience in home and community. McKnight (2023) extends this critique, asserting that the “‘English’ curriculum in particular is a colonial project” (p. 259), reinforcing the dominance of Western knowledge systems in education.

Collectively, the literature evidence reveals a concerning achievement gap in literacy outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners. More importantly, it shows that this gap is not a reflection of Indigenous learners' abilities or cultural practices, but of the pedagogical structures that fail to support Indigenous learners. Western literacy education continues to position Indigenous families' cultures and traditions as lesser than, thereby silencing the "life experiences, histories that shape how [Indigenous] children and families make sense of their world" (Anderson et al., 2016, p. 6). This article calls for a re-imagining of literacy education, one that honors and recognizes Indigenous literacies in authentic, relational ways to support all learners.

## **Non-Indigenous Educators and Literacy Education**

In turning toward non-Indigenous educators, a common theme in the literature is the need for a deeper understanding of Indigenous students as literacy learners. Schools continue to be dominated by "settler-colonial agendas" as a result of a limited understanding of residential schools and the impacts still being experienced in Indigenous communities today (Bang et al., 2018, p. 8). As Bang et al. (2018) note, "non-Indigenous educators and administrators often lack an understanding of the history of schooling with respect to Indigenous communities or the ways in which schools continue to be shaped by and reflect settler-colonial agendas," resulting in the unpreparedness of educators to engage with Indigenous learners in "culturally responsive ways" (p. 8).

These systemic conditions shape everyday classroom practice. Gannaway (2022) argues that non-Indigenous educators who are positioned within the dominant culture in society may unknowingly reproduce those norms in their teaching, positioning one knowledge system above another, creating conditions "from which deficit discourses and disrespect for students' cultures can take root" (p. 226). Hare (2012) similarly observes that educators often lack familiarity with Indigenous cultures and literacy traditions, contributing to a lack of meaningful cultural learning opportunities because "educators struggle to move beyond dominant literacy paradigms, particularly in this age of high-stakes testing and outcomes-based accountability measures" (p. 391). Battiste (2019) extends this critique, emphasizing that culturally relevant learning requires educators to "become more aware of the systemic challenges for overcoming Eurocentrism, racism, and intolerance" (p. 28).

Research evidence shows several ways literacy education often fails to be meaningful for Indigenous students, not only because of missing "content and perspectives," but because dominant school literacies are grounded in epistemologies that differ fundamentally from Indigenous cultures and traditions (Leddy & Miller, 2023, p. 29). When lesson plans exclude Indigenous story, land, and kinship relations, they do more than omit culture; they disrupt the relational framework through which many Indigenous learners come to understand the world. Indigenous students describe literacy instruction as "irrelevant" and "disconnected" from their daily experiences, cultures, and traditions because school-based literacy is often treated as an individual, text-centered skill rather than a practice embedded in relationships, land, and community (Wright, 2022, p. 2). Educators' desire for ready-made lesson plans "that makes it all safe and easy to do" reflects the continued reliance on standardized approaches that cannot account for literacy as a living, place-based rhythm (Leddy & Miller, 2023, p. 29). When these deeper connections

are overlooked, literacy becomes detached from the very relationships they grow from, and which hold the potential to reshape how educators understand meaning-making alongside Indigenous literacy learners, their families, and community.

Educators must take initiative to engage in critical thinking that supports the unlearning and relearning of their understanding of literacy education. As bell hooks (2010) reminds us, “thinking is action . . . the heartbeat of critical thinking is the longing to know—to understand how life works . . . it is an interactive process” (pp. 7–9). This work cannot be done in isolation and requires authentic collaboration and partnership with Indigenous students, their families, and the community. The following section, “A More Hopeful Story In Literature,” turns to the literature not as a set of steps but as an invitation for educators to pause, notice, and re-imagine literacy learning and their own work alongside all learners. These examples from the literature open space for wondering about how we come to know literacy and new possibilities alongside Indigenous literacy learners. This section encourages educators to reflect on the assumptions that shape their practice and to re-image literacy learning that is grounded in relationality, respect, and partnership.

## A More Hopeful Story in Literature

While the literature presents the tensions regarding the literacy learning experiences of Indigenous students, this section illuminates the possibilities of creating more culturally relevant literacy experiences. Figure 1, “Literacy Learning,” gathers threads from the literature in a shared image, not to prescribe but to open space for educators to re-think what becomes possible when literacy learning is co-created with Indigenous learners, families, and community members (Bang et al., 2018; Goulet & Goulet, 2014; Hare, 2012; Peltier, 2017). This graphic gestures toward stories; land literacies; Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing; and creative expressions. It is not meant to serve as a “one size fits all” or “how to” approach, as the authors acknowledge the diversity of Indigenous peoples, their cultures, and traditions on the land. This conversation with the literature is intended to offer the reader possibilities to reflect on and inform their pedagogical literacy practices while coming alongside students and families in ways that honor Indigenous knowledges.

Figure 1 illuminates storytelling, land literacies, and Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing as interconnected with family and community. This connects with the literature, which makes clear that these are not separate themes but interdependent literacies. Story emerges from the land—its histories, rhythm, and teachings—and is carried forward through the relationships children hold with family and community. As Styres (2018) reminds us, the land is storied and relational, offering teachings that are read, interpreted, and retold through oral traditions. These stories live because families and communities embody them, shaping how children come to know themselves and their place in this world (Hare, 2012; Peltier, 2024). When understood together, storytelling, land, and family form a relational literacy rhythm in which meaning-making is rooted in place, carried through kinship, and enacted through story. This framing moves beyond treating these practices as illustrative, separate examples and instead positions them as an interconnected lens for re-imagining literacy education.



Fig. 1: Literacy Learning

(Adapted from Barnes & Cardinal, 2023; Banister & Begoray, 2013; Brice, 2020; Hare, 2012, 2021; Anderson et al., 2016; Peltier, 2024, 2017; Sianturi & Hurit, 2024; and Styres, 2018)

## Storytelling

Storytelling in Indigenous cultures and traditions is sacred and “possess[es] the power of meaning making” and “shape[s] how [Indigenous peoples] engage with and make sense of our lives. The stories we are told, and those we tell, both frame and reflect our understandings of ourselves, of the world around, and our place within it” (Hampton & DeMartini, 2017, p. 247). What we can glean from Hampton and DeMartini’s insights is a need to re-imagine storytelling as literacy grounded in relationality. Stories do not come into existence in isolation; rather, they emerge from embodied experiences on the land and are carried forward through family and community relationships.

Turning toward education, storytelling is a learning partnership between students and educators. As Peltier (2024) describes, “together we engage in a critical process of learning and unlearning.” Similarly, Weenie (2024) affirms that “stories are an opportunity to share important events that are meaningful to children . . . children can be given an opportunity to share their stories, which can be changed into teaching moments” (p. 47). These insights echo Hare’s (2012) observation that “Indigenous children draw on their rich cultures, traditions and ancestral languages to provide them with meaning-making experiences that shape how they make sense of their world and contribute to their socialization in early literacy practices” (p. 394). Families carry stories drawn from the land, teaching children to read and learn from the land as a living text. Storytelling, then, becomes an intergenerational literacy practice—co-created, shared, and remembered through relationships with people and place. When understood in

this way, oral storytelling is not simply an instructional strategy but a way of knowing that binds land, kinship, and literacy together. Storytelling can create and sustain rich literacy learning environments for all students. The following section invites readers to consider the ways storytelling can be woven into the daily learning rhythms for students and educators alike.

### ***Story Circle (Peltier, 2024)***

In their virtual presentation *Bundle Knowledge Workshop*, Peltier (2024) describes story circles as “traditional Indigenous ways of coming to know . . . based on experience and storytelling.” The story circle “process involves listening, sharing, inner dialogue and reflection, deep meaning-making, remembering” (Peltier, 2024, 10:24) and can be engaged with learners from Kindergarten to Grade 12. Peltier (2024) also offers guidance for circle protocol, emphasizing the importance of creating a space that “brings belonging, a sense of safety, and a respectful community” (23:49).

To illustrate this rhythm, Peltier (2024) describes creating a class land acknowledgement within a story circle. Students are first invited to find a “green space” on the playground and “sit quietly for 10–20 minutes.” They are encouraged to “observe, listen, feel, and reflect” and “then move around the area and select something that resonates with them,” asking themselves, “is there something natural that is speaking to them, that is calling their attention?” Students may then “bring that back to the classroom,” where “Grandfather rock is passed person to person as they share” (Peltier, 2024, 30:49).

Peltier (2024) explains that this land-based learning experience naturally transitions into the classroom through oral storytelling. Sitting together in a circle, each student has the opportunity to share the object and the meaning it holds for them. Moving clockwise, students bring “nature into this space and . . . talk about how they connected” with the item, demonstrating how story circles co-create relational, reflective, and land-rooted literacy practices (Peltier, 2024, 39:51).

### ***Talking Circles (Goulet & Goulet, 2014; Weenie et al., 2024)***

In their work alongside educators, Indigenous students, their families, and community, Goulet & Goulet (2014) identify talking circles and storytelling as central practices for “standing up to open spaces for student voices” (p. 143). They describe talking or sharing circles as meaningful learning experiences that support the oral literacy of all students and as a way of “reinforcing traditional Indigenous processes and communication patterns in the classroom” (Goulet & Goulet, 2014, p. 151). Within these circles, students take up leadership roles, position themselves as speakers within the classroom community, and find opportunities to “bring their experiences and culture in the classroom” (Goulet & Goulet, 2014, p. 151). Goulet and Goulet (2014) further note that talking circles are an “effective language arts strategy to develop listening and oral language skills, as well as writing skills,” while also creating a community of learning in which students want to listen to one another (p. 151). In this sense, talking circles are not merely pedagogical techniques; they enact relational, participatory, and culturally grounded approaches to literacy that challenge dominant, text-centered approaches.

Building on this framework, Indigenous scholar Ida Swan (Weenie et al., 2024) offers additional insight into how talking circles can be implemented as a storytelling strategy in the classroom.<sup>2</sup> Swan explains that students sit in a circle, and there is an object “such as a talking stick” which is passed between students (Weenie et al., 2024, p. 48). A teacher may introduce questions or events where students can then “take turns discussing” with one question per round (Weenie et al., 2024, p. 48). Swan emphasizes that the circle creates space for choice and agency, where students are allowed to pass and must be respectful of others while staying on topic. Storytelling circles can be woven into instruction at the start of a lesson or unit or at the end to “finish off the unit in a good way” (Weenie et al., 2024, p. 48). Swan cautions that while the talking circle may offer teachers insight into students’ thinking, “it is not used as an assessment strategy on the students. The talking circle is in keeping with oral tradition and the circle connotes connectedness” (Weenie et al., 2024, p. 47).

Together, these authors illustrate how talking circles are not simple instructional activities but relational frameworks grounded in Indigenous cultures and traditions. They position oral storytelling as a dynamic and relational literacy practice that can occur both within the classroom and across school landscapes. Talking circles create spaces where students’ voices are honored, where confidence can grow, and where literacy emerges through connection rather than isolation. As we are reminded by Swan, “using Indigenous approaches that are derived from Indigenous worldviews or practices will result in good teaching” (Weenie et al., 2024, p. 49). In this way, the literature reveals storytelling as a relational approach to literacy that is grounded in relationships and respect as guided by Indigenous cultures and traditions.

These stories do not exist apart from place; they emerge from and return to the land, a living text that carries teachings across generations. Storytelling cannot be separated from the land and kinship relations that give it life; as the next section brings forward, land itself is a storied text through which stories are read, remembered, and carried.

## **Land Literacies**

The literature emphasizes the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the land as one grounded in “deep connection to language and stories for Indigenous communities” (Mussi, 2023, p. 666). Drawing on Okanagan author Jeanette Armstrong, Mussi (2023) highlights that this connection emerges from the understanding that the “land holds all knowledge and constantly speaks” to Indigenous peoples who listen to its teachings and language (p. 666). In their work, Styres (2018) brings forward the ways literacy and land are interconnected; they write, “Land is an articulation of ancient knowledges grounded in the experiences of self-in-relationship to place” (p. 25). Further, they go on to affirm that what is written does not encompass what is found all around us in the “cosmos” (Styres, 2018, p. 25). The storied landscapes draw the reader’s attention to how “the land is at once storied and relational, informing the social, spiritual, and systemic norms and practices of a particular culture-sharing group in relationship to their places” (Styres, 2018, p. 28). In connection with storytelling and literacy, the land contains the footprints of ancestors, which can be “read” and present within all living and non-living entities in the natural environment (Styres, 2018, p. 28). Styres offers a way of understanding land as a place where literacy unfolds. In Indigenous cultures and traditions,

land is storied, relational, and alive. Mussi (2023) and Styres (2018) extend this understanding, drawing attention to the land as a living site through which literacy learning takes shape. When families are on the land together, they learn to read the world through the stories it holds.

***Land-Based Learning (Hare, 2012, 2016; Weenie et al., 2024)***

In their research alongside Indigenous families and children, Hare (2012) affirms that land-based learning is inseparable from storytelling and culture, noting that “Indigenous knowledge is inherently tied to land, where meaning and identity are constructed through landscapes, territory and land formations” (p. 392). They note that Indigenous children “learn to inscribe meaning onto landscapes through stories and land-based experiences, shaping their understanding of the centrality of land to their identity and way of life” (Hare, 2012, p. 394). These insights are illustrated through rich examples of intergenerational storywork on the land. In Hare’s work with families, one parent explained, “I make up stories, like when we’re walking in the woods . . . [I] keep their main character Wild Woman [cultural character] but I just put a slight modern twist on it,” demonstrating how cultural narratives are adapted and kept alive through everyday encounters with place (Hare, 2012, p. 402). Elders also visited children to share local stories and teach traditional practices, “such as preparing medicines, berries, and fish,” grounding literacy in lived relationships with land and community (Hare, 2012, p. 402). During walks through the bush, caregivers pointed out cedar bark and explained “how it could be stripped and used to make baskets, hats and other artifacts of their culture” (Hare, 2012, p. 403). Seasonal teachings further connected children to place, as families spoke about gathering salmonberries in the spring and herring roe in the fall.

These insights illuminate how land-based learning is inseparable from storytelling, family, and community. The land becomes a literacy text that children learn to read through their experiences, cultural teachings, and intergenerational relationships, with literacy emerging as a relational, place-based way of knowing. Building on these examples also demonstrates how land-based learning enriches students’ literacy learning by creating connections to their culture and traditions. Through oral storytelling, the land is rich with literacy where students, families, community members, and educators can read and speak aloud about what they see, feel, touch, hear, taste, and remember—stories carried across generations and held within place.

Ida Swan (Weenie et al., 2024) speaks to the importance of “ways to build stories in the classroom” and notes that land-based teachings “are an essential aspect of First Nations schools” because of the rich learning that grows from these experiences (p. 47). Turning toward the classroom, Swan goes on to inform us that “students can use their experiences to build their own stories and make their real-life experiences connected to the in-class activities” (Weenie et al., 2024, p. 48). This includes making a rabbit snare, snowshoes, and “in each case, the teacher can either access an Elder or Elder’s helper to tell the stories as the student makes the item” (Weenie et al., 2024, p. 47).

Swan's words gesture toward the possibilities that open when classroom learning remains in relationship with the land. Her reflections invite educators to re-imagine classrooms as places where students' stories, movements, memories, and experiences continue to embody their relationship with the land; where their experiences are not translated into tasks, but held as living stories of the land that shape how learning unfolds.

### ***Land and Student Storytelling (Peltier, 2024)***

Peltier's (2024) work beautifully invites educators to honor students' stories and oral storytelling in connection with time spent on the land. In her *Bundle Knowledge Workshop*, Peltier (2024) describes how the "school yard became the earth teaching lodge," a place where students encounter teachings held in the land itself (4:30). Grandfather rocks, described as "the oldest part of the earth," become more than objects: they are knowledge carriers that connect students to ancestral presence and to the stories embedded in place (17:14). Through their work, Peltier shows us how land-based experiences are not separate from storytelling, but are the ground from which students' stories emerge, shaping how they understand themselves and the world around them.

A key thread in Peltier's (2024) work is the invitation for students to go to a "green space outside" (30:49), a practice she frames as "a pedagogy of land in an urban or rural schooling context" (31:05). When students spend time on the land, listening, observing, and attending to what calls their attention, they begin to read the world through a relational, sensory, and storied way of knowing. Peltier (2024) explains that "when the children storied about their experience out in the school yard, these words and concepts were expressed" in the story circle (31:41). In this way, land-based experiences do not come before literacy; they are literacy, shaping the meanings students bring into the classroom. The transition from land to classroom is not a shift from experience to learning, but a continuation of relational literacy practices. As Peltier (2024) notes in describing story circles, "we share so that our stories are layered, just as the footprints of our ancestors are layered in the earth under our feet" (34:41). Students embody their stories from the land that emerges from their encounters with place, and these stories become the foundation for oral storytelling in circles. Through this process, students engage in meaning-making that is grounded in relationships with land and community.

Peltier's (2024) teachings open our eyes to land and storytelling as interconnected literacies rather than separate. Land becomes a teacher, story becomes a relational practice, and students become holders of knowledge whose experience of the land shapes the stories they share. This framing moves beyond the "how to" model of literacy and instead offers a theoretical orientation in which literacy is understood as relational, embodied, and place-based. Her work provides opportunities for educators to engage in "unlearning" and "re-learn" (Peltier, 2024, 8:51) in ways that disrupt colonial embedded ideologies of Indigenous children's literacy learning. Just as land-based learning is intergenerational and relational, storytelling and kinship continue to shape how children read the land and understand their place within it.

## **Indigenous Students' Community and Cultural Traditions**

The literature makes clear that family and community are inseparable from literacy learning; they embody Indigenous literacies, ways of knowing that are lived, practiced, and passed from one generation to the next (Bang et al., 2018; Hare, 2012; Anderson et al., 2016). As Boivin (2023) reminds us, “intergenerational storytelling has been around since the beginning of time” (p. 560). Hare (2012) further affirms, “Indigenous families want their children to become successful in the dominant literacy practices of schooling,” yet they also emphasize that literacy “exist[s] for Indigenous learners outside of school” (p. 409). These out-of-school literacies are deeply relational and grounded in cultures, traditions, and land-based knowledge such as storytelling, gathering medicines, and walking the land with family. In these moments, children engage in literacy that is intergenerational, embodied, and place-based.

Building on these understandings, the literature also emphasizes the responsibility of educators to co-create spaces that honor the literacies that children bring from home and community into school landscapes (Anderson et al., 2016; Pelter, 2017). This requires educators to reflect on their own experiences and assumptions, and to co-create learning that honors Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and doing. For literacy learning, co-creating spaces and learning opportunities that include students' cultures and traditions leads to more meaningful and successful engagement with reading and writing skills in school. Importantly, this work highlights the vital role of families and community members in children's educational experiences and emphasizes the need to strengthen connections between home and school (Anderson et al., 2016). In this section, we draw forward key insights from the literature that open possibilities for educators to re-think and re-imagine how they come into relationship with families, students, and community in relational, culturally grounded ways.

### ***Elder Storytelling and Partnership (Boivin, 2023; Hare, 2012; Goulet & Goulet, 2014; Peltier, 2017)***

Elders have a central role in this relational literacy work. As Hare (2012) writes, “Elders are highly regarded in the community and have the responsibility for ensuring the preservation and transmission of knowledge” (p. 393). Peltier (2017) describes how a “transformative process of educator action and reflection emerges when educators and practitioners initiate contact with Elders, keepers-of-the-language, and knowledgeable people in the community and embody a listening and observing stance” (p. 14). When Elders lead culture-based and land-based learning, they “model traditional forms of teaching” (Goulet & Goulet, 2014, p. 156) and this “is one way in which elders can engage with younger children” in intergenerational storytelling (Boivin, 2023, p. 559). These partnerships also help teachers become more “responsive” to students' strengths and abilities (Goulet & Goulet, 2014, p. 156). Taken together, the literature highlights that working with Elders is not a separate approach, but a relational practice grounded in respect, reciprocity, and humility. Educators learn alongside their students, honoring oral transmission of knowledge and co-creating spaces where Indigenous ways of knowing guide and shape literacy learning.

### ***Indigenous Family Roles (Bang et al., 2018; Kavanagh, 2008)***

Bang et al. (2018) remind us that “families are the heart of Indigenous nations and communities” (p. 1) and “the primary contexts in which Indigenous children learn who they are, Indigenous ways of knowing, and what is expected of them as they become adults and eventually become good elders” (p. 2). Collaborating with families is therefore imperative to the learning achievement and success of students and requires expanding the narrow definition of “family” to include the multitude of relationships that make up children’s support systems, not just “parents” (Bang et al., 2018, p. 13). As Bang et al. (2018) note, “multigenerational and community learnings are key aspects to Indigenous pedagogy and ways of knowing and being” (p. 14). These insights echo Kavanagh’s (2008) reminder that “parents are their child’s first teachers” (p. 9). For non-Indigenous educators, this means reflecting on which knowledge systems are centered in their instruction and recognizing that Indigenous children’s learning unfolds across multiple landscapes, not only within classroom walls. When educators honor family knowledge and partner with communities, they co-create more relational and culturally grounded literacy experiences with Indigenous children and their families. These relational literacies, rooted in story, land, and community, also take shape through creative expressions that invite learners to engage with these teachings through embodied, imaginative practice.

### **Creative Expressions**

In this section, we draw attention to discussions in the literature that highlight creative expressions that hold deep cultural significance for Indigenous learners, families, and community. Rather than positioning creative expressions as a set of classroom strategies, these discussions illuminate how tangible items, artifacts, and artistic practices carry story, memory, and relationship. They reveal how literacy can take shape through forms that remain connected to land, kinship, and lived experience, inviting educators to re-imagine literacy learning in relation with Indigenous students, families, and community.

### ***Story Bundles (Barnes & Cardinal, 2023)***

In their article, Barnes and Cardinal (2023) draw on Swanson’s (2013) description of story bundles, guided by Anderson’s work, to illustrate how stories live within people. As Swanson (2013) writes, “metaphorically, the story bundle represents the stories each person carries. The story bundles . . . throughout the text are pieces of my story, lived and told in relation with others and stories yet to be created” (p. 428). Story bundles, then, are not artifacts but living expressions of relational literacy.

Barnes (2023) extends this understanding through their reflection on role-playing games (RPGs): “my interaction with the narrative of the game and its responses to my in-world actions are relational; they are not two separate objects” (p. 432). They go on to describe how “the healing knowledge and stories I learned on the land with my grandmother reciprocally permeate my experience of the affective, RPG gamespace, describing how to use the ways story bundles can be represented” (p. 432). Through this lens, digital storytelling becomes a site where land-based teachings and contemporary literacies intertwine, demonstrating how story bundles can take form in both embodied and virtual worlds.

Cardinal (2023) similarly illustrates how creative practices such as beading and sewing carry a story. She writes, “I learned to bead and sew moccasins out of moose or elk hide, and my new creations became the lived and living story that came from within me and was told through me” (Barnes & Cardinal, 2023, p. 435). She goes on to describe how these practices allowed her to “reconnect to my hands, to the wisdom of the aunties who I had sat watching throughout my childhood” (Barnes & Cardinal, 2023, p. 435). Through this reflection, Cardinal illuminates how creative expression is interconnected with kinship, memory, and land-based knowledge, illuminating it as a relational form of literacy rather than a purely artistic activity.

Taken together, Barnes and Cardinal (2023) invite us to understand story bundles as relational literacies that move across land, body, memory, and digital space. Whether expressed through beadwork, sewing, or role playing, they reveal how stories live within us. Their work invites educators to see creative expression as a way of knowing—one that honors intergenerational teachings and relationships. Through this lens, creative expressions become powerful sites of literacy learning, expanding school-based literacy practices and opening space for culturally grounded re-imagining of literacy learning.

### ***Representations of Learning and Storytelling (Peltier, 2024; Whiskeyjack, 2021)***

Peltier’s (2024) work demonstrates how creative expression can serve as a powerful site of relational learning. She shares the work of a university student from one of her courses whose drawing emerged from *biophilia*, or “the love of nature,” using color, plant forms, and key words and phrases. In another example, a student sculpted a “grandfather rock” to represent their learning from the course, a piece Peltier contextualizes within both Indigenous worldviews and Western schooling. Across these examples, Peltier emphasizes that each creative expression is a story of learning; of connection to culture, traditions, and the land; and a reflection of the student’s autonomy in shaping how their knowledge is shared. Her work invites educators to re-think how students demonstrate their learning, recognizing creative expression as a form of oral and visual storytelling.

Visual storyteller and Indigenous artist Lana Whiskeyjack, ipkDoc,<sup>3</sup> from Saddle Lake Cree Nation, similarly illuminates how story lives within creative works. In discussing her painting series *We Are the Medicine*, she reflects that her “favorite part is just painting these matriarchs who are teaching me so much through just the act of creating” (Whiskeyjack, 2021, 5:08). Whiskeyjack (2021) explains that the series is rooted in her exploration of *nêhiyaw*, the Cree Thirteen Moon calendar, through which she explores “womanhood within the 13 moons’ teachings,” and portrays women as “courageous, incredible, and powerful matriarchs” (0:28, 1:22). She also describes working from “this three generations perspective . . . that whole belly button connections that I’ve always tried to honor through my work” (2:45). Whiskeyjack’s reflections reveal how visual art becomes a site of intergenerational storywork, where teachings, memory, and identity are brought forward through creative expressions.

Together, Peltier (2024) and Whiskeyjack (2021) illuminate how visual and creative expressions are not supplementary activities but relational literatures grounded in story, land, and kinship. These forms of storytelling reveal how knowledge is carried in the body, in memory, and in creative practice, offering

students meaningful ways to represent their experiences and identities. When educators recognize creative expression as a legitimate and powerful literacy practice, they move beyond narrow, text-centered definitions of literacy to open space alongside Indigenous learners to tell stories in ways that honor their cultures and traditions. In this way, creative expression becomes not only a mode of representation but a pathway for re-imagining literacy education itself.

## Moving Forward

In looking toward a more hopeful story of Indigenous students' literacy learning, the literature invites us to understand literacy learning not as a set of discrete practices, but as relational rhythms grounded in storytelling, land, and family. Literacy learning emerges from children's lived experiences on the land and is embodied in the relationships they hold with family, Elders, and community members. Land, in turn, is not separate from this learning, but a living text that holds histories and teachings, made visible through intergenerational stories and storytelling.

For educators, this relational understanding requires a shift away from seeking certainty or finding the "right answers" in literacy instruction. It leans more toward embracing co-learning with children, families, and community. As Leddy and Miller (2023) remind us, "perhaps the kindest thing you can do for yourself and your students, Dear Reader, is to acknowledge that this is something that you are learning about as well—you don't need to know it all! You can be a co-learner with your students" (p. 29). Their words emphasize the reciprocal nature of this work: learning is co-created through active listening, humility, and open engagement.

While the literature illuminates the historical and ongoing challenges Indigenous students face as literacy learners, as Tuck (2009) cautions, this is not to be framed as a deficit narrative of Indigenous peoples. This article offers an opportunity for readers to let the works drawn from the literature reverberate across the pages onto their own pedagogical practice with students, their families, and community in ways guided by Indigenous cultures and traditions.

## Notes

- 1) Learning landscapes for this literature review include, but are not limited to, learning that takes place within school classrooms, hallways, playgrounds, home, community, land, and parks.
- 2) In their discussion of talking circles, Swan cites First Nations Pedagogy Online.
- 3) Lana Whiskeyjack received her iyiniw pimâtisiwin kiskeyihtamowin doctorate (ipkDoc) from the University nuhelot'jine thaiyots'j nistameyimâkanak Blue Quills.

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