

# The Five R's of Indigenous Pedagogy; Reciprocity, Relevance, Responsibility, Respect and Relationships

*Abridged Version* written By: Dr. Shelly Niemi

Indigenous Education Department – Greater Victoria School District No.61

---

The original Four R's of Indigenous Pedagogy (Reciprocity, Relevance, Responsibility and Respect) were first introduced by Indigenous scholars Verna J. Kirkness and Ray Barnhardt (2001) in their research into the learning experience, success, retention and connection of Indigenous students within post-secondary and public education. Later the fifth R of Relationships was added overtime in research by Indigenous scholars Harris and Wasilewski (2004), Restoule (2008), and Styres and Zinga (2013).

The Four R's originally outlined by Kirkness and Barnhardt (2001) were a response to institutional Western approaches towards Indigenous students. Problematically, institutional approaches centered on the ideas that Indigenous students would fare best if well-integrated into the school system and well-adapted to school values, with the ultimate goal of retaining Indigenous students until graduation. Such approaches can be likened to a form of assimilation, requiring that Indigenous students distance themselves from their traditional community values, at least while at school and focusing on institutional approaches that focus on Indigenous students adapting to the school's values (Willett, 2007; Huffman, 2008).

The Four R's developed by (Kirkness and Barnhardt, 2001) demonstrate an alternative to the typical school-based approach. Their research suggests that education should accommodate and adapt to Indigenous students and Indigenous knowledge and learning, instead of the other way around. For (Harris and Wasilewski, 2004) the Four R's are critical components of Indigenous learning as opposed to the "Two P's" 'Power and Profit' that tend to inform dominant institutional practice. Since their inception by Kirkness and Barnhardt (2001), the Four R's, now with the inclusion of the 5<sup>th</sup> R of Relationships, have been revisited by Indigenous scholars, educators, and curriculum developers as the core foundations for Indigenous education.

Listed below are the Five R's of Indigenous Pedagogy and some key elements and considerations for us to examine as we begin to weave together Indigenous Education within and across public education.

## ***Respect***

In the context of the Five R's, respect refers to the need to recognize and respect Indigenous cultural norms and values and their identities as a People. Importantly, Indigenous worldviews are holistic, meaning that hierarchies and separation between beings are not inherent. For Indigenous cultures, a holistic worldview encompasses attitudes towards nature, community, and education. Therefore, schools can be a cultural mismatch for Indigenous students. Some considerations for respect as it relates to Indigenous pedagogy may include:

- Am I respectful of the cultural context for where my school is located?
- Do I include the Indigenous community and voice within my school community?
- Do I know the composition of my Indigenous school community?
- Do I have cultural integrity and is this reflected in programs, services and decision making?

*“educators must reject colonial curricula that offer students a fragmented and distorted picture of Indigenous peoples, and offer students a critical perspective of the historical context that created that fragmentation. In order to effect change, educators must help students understand the Eurocentric assumptions of superiority within the context of history and to recognize the continued dominance of these assumptions in all forms of contemporary knowledge” (Battiste, 2013, p.186).*

## ***Reciprocity***

Indigenous educators underline the significance of reciprocity as imperative for Indigenous Education and the dichotomy between the producers and consumers of knowledge. Emphasis on Reciprocity for Indigenous Education is a result of decades of Indigenous Nations being exploited by researchers and education institutions for historical and exploitative one-sided projects that simply aimed to accomplish academic milestones while often ignoring the goals and concerns of the Indigenous community. Reciprocity is applied as being fundamental to Indigenous Education, as it should frame curriculum design, pedagogy, and the relationship between the teacher and student. Emphasis is on making teaching and learning a two-way collaborative process opening up new understandings and connections for both. Some considerations for reciprocity as it relates to Indigenous pedagogy may include:

- Do I have a relationship with the Indigenous community within my school and how would they define that relationship (one sided, two-sided)?
- Do the Indigenous students within my school community feel seen and heard and how might they respond to the following questions: Do you love school? Does school love you?
- Do I consider reciprocity as a component of my decision making and curriculum design?

## ***Relevance***

The centrality of Indigenous Education is pertinent to relevance. This is where learning should be relevant for Indigenous students and is reflective of Indigenous worldviews, perspectives and ways of knowing and being. This includes the inclusion of authentic Indigenous voice in all areas of education as it relates to the education experience for Indigenous students; social, emotional, physical, and mental well-being. Indigenization and relevance refers to the meaningful inclusion of Indigenous knowledge(s), in the everyday fabric of the education system, from policies and governance, decision making, school and classroom communities, curriculum, and resources (human and material) that support Indigenous Education. Some considerations for reciprocity as it relates to Indigenous pedagogy may include:

- Do we include Indigenous authors, scholars, researchers, educators, knowledge keepers and Elders within our school community to support and inform the content in the curriculum and the overall educational experience as it relates to Indigenous Education?
- Is the educational experience and curriculum relevant for Indigenous students and are they able to identify and see themselves reflected within the school community that they belong to, and the curriculum that they are learning?
- Am I aware of Indigenous worldviews and perspectives and am I able to identify areas where I may require further support to improve relevance of Indigenous Education?
- Is the learning experience “hands-on” (project-based, inquiry-based), collaborative, and less individualistic?

*“Relevance can be considered a decolonization process, by where there is active rejection to ongoing colonization processes that impact Indigenous students, by decolonizing our pedagogy and practices, we begin to provide a way for us to address cultural misappropriation in our education systems” (Battiste, 2013).*

## ***Responsibility***

In Indigenous Education, both the educator and learner have a responsibility to recognize and uphold Indigenous values, worldviews, perspectives and ways of knowing and being. Further, students have personal responsibilities and relationships, such as to family and community members whom are also vital to the role that they have in the responsibility in shaping the daily experiences of the learner. While responsibility towards upholding Indigenous worldviews, perspectives and ways of knowing and being is essential for Indigenous Education, the application of this fundamental R for districts, schools and classrooms is nuanced by the

additional responsibility of navigating through the public education system. Some considerations for responsibility as it relates to Indigenous pedagogy may include:

- Am I aware of, support, and practice the 9<sup>th</sup> standard of the BCTF Professional Standards?

**Educators respect and value the history of First Nations, Inuit and Métis in Canada and the impact of the past on the present and the future. Educators contribute towards truth, reconciliation and healing. Educators foster a deeper understanding of ways of knowing and being, histories, and cultures of First Nations, Inuit and Métis.**

*“Educators critically examine their own biases, attitudes, beliefs, values and practices to facilitate change. Educators value and respect the languages, heritages, cultures, and ways of knowing and being of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis. Educators understand the power of focusing on connectedness and relationships to oneself, family, community, and the natural world. Educators integrate First Nations, Inuit and Métis worldviews and perspectives into learning environments.”*

- Am I aware of the TRC Calls to Action on Education and where I can positively impact and shift student learning experiences through reconciliation?
- Am I aware of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and how UNDRIP influences Indigenous Education?

### ***Relationships***

Relationships are fundamental to all aspects of Indigenous Education and the learning experience for students, and as one of the Five R's it can only truly be realized through the conscious efforts and tending to the relationship (this cannot be performative). This includes the relationships between the Indigenous community, families, the educator, the learner, the community, the classroom, the school and the public education system. System transformation requires not only recognition of the responsibilities that the public education system has to Indigenous learners, but also to their communities and this transformation can only occur through the ongoing development of and tending to the relationships that support the needs of Indigenous learners. Some considerations for relationships as it relates to Indigenous pedagogy may include:

- Am I aware of what performative relationships are and how they can impact my relationship with the Indigenous communities I serve?
- Am I aware of the protocols established to foster these relationships and what may be expected of me in my role in relation to the Indigenous communities I serve?
- Am I seen as an active participant with the Indigenous communities I serve?

*“Education is not a neutral enterprise, Indigenous students at times, must engage knowledge as a border crosser, as a person moving in and out of borders constructed around coordinates of difference and power- these are not physical borders, they are cultural borders historically constructed and socially organized within maps of rules and regulations that limit and enable particular identities, individual capacities, and social forms. In this case, Indigenous students cross over into borders of meaning, maps of knowledge, social relations, and values that are increasingly being negotiated and rewritten as the codes and regulations which organize them and their student learning experience” (Giroux, p.169).*