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## Indigenous trauma and resilience: pathways to ‘bridging the river’ in social work education

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### ABSTRACT

The traumatic effects of colonization on generations of Indigenous peoples and communities are referred to as intergenerational trauma. Alongside intergenerational effects of trauma experienced by Indigenous peoples and cultures across the globe is the capacity for individual and collective resilience, whereby an individual has good life outcomes despite having been subjected to situations with a high risk of emotional and/or physical distress. In North America and globally there have been calls to action for social work to find pathways toward reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. The purpose of this paper is to share the conceptual foundations of an innovative Master of Social Work program, currently in its sixth year. The program was designed to bridge Indigenous worldviews and social work by: creating links in the curriculum between neuroscience research in Western treatment modalities and Indigenous/traditional healing practices throughout the globe; fostering communication among all age groups; developing respect, kindness, and communication across all races; uncovering resiliency in understanding intergenerational trauma; understanding attachment difficulties created through colonization and rebuilding support systems; and creating learning objectives that address wellness. The objective is to prepare social workers to work with individuals, families and communities across the globe affected by intergenerational trauma.

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## Introduction

Indigenous peoples have a collective legacy of trauma due to colonization leading to their physical and cultural genocide (Bombay et al., 2014; Brave Heart, 1998; Brave Heart et al., 2011; Dupuis-Rossi, 2021). Intergenerational trauma and its impact on Indigenous populations has been linked to large-scale violent assimilation strategies forced upon Indigenous populations in the United States and Canada, including residential schools (Bombay et al., 2014; Brave Heart, 1998; Brave Heart et al., 2011; Woolford & Benvenuto, 2015), opening in the 1880s and the last ones closing in the 1990s. Children as young as three were forcibly taken from their families and communities to live in these schools, where they were forbidden to speak their language and engage in their culture and where they did not receive adequate education (Woolford & Benvenuto, 2015). The children

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‘were subjected to daily racism and cultural shaming, physical and emotional neglect, and many endured various forms of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse’ (Bombay et al., 2020, p. 64).

As residential schools were closing in Canada, there was ‘mass removal of Indigenous children and youth from their homes, predominantly into non-Indigenous households, often without the knowledge or consent of families and band councils’ (Navia et al., 2018, p. 147). During this period termed the Sixties Scoop, children were placed in foster care and adopted into non-Indigenous families throughout Canada, the U.S., and overseas (Bombay et al., 2014).

In North America and globally there have been calls to action to acknowledge the colonizing influence on social work education, research, and practice (Australian Association of Social Workers., 2020; National Association of Social Workers. Sovereignty, Rights and the Well-Being of Indigenous Peoples, 2020; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Having played a role in the process of social and cultural disruption (Choate et al., 2020; Sinclair, 2020), social work has its own truth and reconciliation to face, as Indigenous people are wary of the profession (Thibeault, 2019). In Canada and throughout the globe, there has been a recent push to decolonize social work practice and education by integrating Indigenous knowledge with western theory and practice, creating programs grounded in Indigenous epistemology (Choate et al., 2020; Fernando & Bennett, 2019).

It is recognized however, that Western educational institutions are sites that perpetuate institutional racism and the power structures associated with colonialism. Indigenous people face microaggressions, ‘purposeful’ ignorance, isolation and lack of representation and spaces that feel safe and trauma-free, due to institutional racism in universities (Bailey, 2016; Bordelon & Atkinson, 2020; Styres, 2020). In addition to the need for Indigenous knowledge in the curriculum as well as Indigenous representation throughout universities including in policy and planning, Indigenous safe spaces must be created and protected (Fernando & Bennett, 2019; Styres, 2020). Indigenous issues must be understood through the perspectives of Indigenous people (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Styres, 2020), a process which must be ‘Indigenous-driven and Indigenous-led together with the support of those individuals who understand how to be effective and supportive allies’ (Styres, 2020, p. 169).

The purpose of this paper is to share the conceptual foundations in creating a learning experience in a Master of Social Work program, grounded in Indigenous cultures, and linked with Western views and therapeutic interventions (Duran, 2019; Linklater, 2014). In this paper Indigenous (upper case I) refers to Aboriginal Peoples, namely, First Nations People, Métis, and Inuit peoples in Canada, and the term indigenous (lower case i) applies to indigenous peoples globally (Anuik & Gillies, 2012). The term “Indigenous Peoples” recognizes that, rather than a single group of people, there are many—separate and unique Nations’ (Antoine et al., 2018, p. 1). The language of Indigenous identity has changed over the years. In Canada, Indigenous peoples have self-identified as ‘Native,’ “Aboriginal” and more recently “Indigenous.” Originally identified as “Indians” in the United States, this identity is now recognized as “American Indian” or “Alaskan Native”. When we use ‘indigenous’ we are referring to global indigenous populations that identify as part of a distinct cultural group with ancestral ties to lands and natural resources, which are linked to their identities, wellbeing, and survival. In

their countries of origin, these populations have been subjugated, marginalized, and dispossessed due to their difference from the dominant culture and way of living (UNPFII, 2015).<sup>1</sup>

The Indigenous Trauma and Resiliency field of study in a Master of Social Work program in Toronto Canada, is founded on North American Indigenous teachings and values of belonging, cooperation, respect, and kindness, encompassed in the medicine wheel.<sup>2</sup> The field of study, however, is intended for students across global indigenous populations. The key objective is to prepare advanced social work practitioners to work with individuals, families and communities that have been affected by generational trauma resulting from intrusion into indigenous ways of living and being. The curriculum and learning experiences were developed to build capacity in indigenous communities across the globe. The field of study is designed to build bridges: linking Indigenous wisdom, knowledge, and healing practices in North America and throughout the globe to Western methods of healing and current research in neuroscience, interpersonal neurobiology, and effective psychosocial treatment modalities. The focus is on finding commonalities across indigenous experiences, enhancing global understanding and support, and creating allies invested in goals of reconciliation.

## Literature review

### *Cultural genocide*

According to Rafael Lemkin (2008), who coined the term ‘genocide’ in 1943, this most heinous of crimes need not involve mass killings: ‘It is intended rather to signify a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves’ (p. 79).

The ‘cultural genocide’ associated with government policies eroded Indigenous ways of life and culture (Woolford & Benvenuto, 2015). In Canada, beginning in 1830, the ‘*Doctrine of settlement*’ ‘gave the colonizing immigrant settlers the right of settlement on the Indigenous peoples’ land who were put in reserves’ (Ojha, 2003, p. 1276). In the United States, the ‘*Indian Removal Act of 1830*’ led to the forcible removal and relocation of Native Americans to clear land for settlers (Egiebor & Foster, 2018), which became known as the Trail of Tears (Egiebor & Foster, 2018). Having lost their source of sustenance, Indigenous peoples were forced to clear the plains and move onto reserves, making way for settlers (Hubbard, 2014). Through the reserve system Indigenous peoples were dislodged from their lands, spiritual linkages, and culture (Ojha, 2003).

In the United States and Canada, children were institutionalized from a young age in government and church controlled and operated boarding schools and residential schools respectively (Olson & Dombrowski, 2020; Woolford & Benvenuto, 2015). The boarding and residential schools ‘entailed forced assimilation and cultural destruction’ (MacDonald, 2014, p. 308). The widely documented traumatic effects on successive generations of Indigenous children, youth, adults, Knowledge Keepers, and Indigenous communities, of forcibly removing Indigenous children from their homes and culture resulted in what is referred to as intergenerational, multigenerational, trans-generational

(Fast & Collin-Vézina, 2010), or historical (Brave Heart, 1998) trauma. Recognition of the legacy of Indigenous trauma has come to the fore in Canada through the Truth and Reconciliation Process (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

Studies highlight the extraordinary similarity of experience of indigenous peoples around the globe (Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit, 2003). The process of transforming independent healthy societies to 'people treated as squatters, currently on the verge of cultural and physical extinction' (Samson & Short, 2006, p. 171), has led 'indigenous representatives to describe their *present* situation in terms of genocide' (Short, 2010, p. 838). In Africa and Asia, where decolonization occurred by handing over power to favoured ethnic groups that formed a political elite, independence was designed to operate within the same colonial power structures (Samson & Short, 2006). In this process Africa's indigenous populations, particularly hunter-gatherers, faced pressures 'similar to their counterparts elsewhere to give up their lands for agriculture, resource extraction and "national parks" within a largely European postcolonial order' (Samson & Short, 2006, p. 170). Likewise, the indigenous populations of India, categorized as 'primitive' or 'backward' by the British and as 'demons' and 'untouchables' by traditional Indian narratives, have been cut off from government resources and are losing the rights to their ancestral lands and their only source of livelihood (Dutta, 2018).

### ***Indigenous peoples and historical and intergenerational trauma***

There is growing evidence of a pathway from initial trauma to intergenerational psychological distress affecting cultures and religions throughout the world and across human history (Danieli et al., 2016, 2017; Middleton-Moz, 1989; Song et al., 2014). Traumatic events are transmitted across generations through social, dynamic, family systems, epidemiological, sociological, and biological means (Danieli, 1998; Lehrner & Yehuda, 2018), 'in word, writing, body language, and even in silence, it is as old as humankind' (Danieli et al., p. 2). Through this process the manifestation of trauma becomes normalized and incorporated into the expression and expectations of successive generations (Stout & Kipling, 2003). Detrimental generational effects of the trauma experienced by Residential and Boarding School Survivors in Canada and the United States, respectively, and by people in cultures across the world include depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicide, substance abuse, family dysfunction, physical and sexual abuse, and criminal activity (Bombay et al., 2009; Danieli et al., 2016, 2017; Sangalang & Vang., 2017; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). These effects can result in significant social and economic differences between populations that face intergenerational trauma and those that do not (Bombay et al., 2014; Brave Heart, 1998). Lehrner and Yehuda (2018) note, however, that in response to trauma and stress, children may demonstrate vulnerability and/or resilience.

### **Indigenous knowledge, teaching and learning: applications to social work education**

There is a growing body of social work literature on Indigenous teaching and learning (Abolson, 2010; Fernando & Bennett, 2019). Given the diversity of Indigenous peoples, there is diversity in their respective ways of being (experiencing), knowing (interpreting),

and learning (understanding) (Battiste, 2002; LaFever, 2016). ‘Indigenous knowledge’ (Battiste & Youngblood Henderson, 2009), which informs Indigenous teaching philosophy, and subsequently efforts to ‘Indigenize’ curriculum and teaching practices, resists universal conceptualizations (Antoine et al., 2018; Herring et al., 2013; Sinclair, 2020). Nevertheless, there appear to be themes considered fundamental in Indigenous pedagogy.

Indigenous knowledge (Dumbrill & Green, 2008) is broadly built on the notion of holism—the interconnection among key elements comprising connection, respect, mutuality, oral traditions, subjective and collective wisdom, introspection and growth, humility, and intergenerational production and communication of knowledge (Battiste, 2002). Indigenous worldviews define spirituality as a deep connection with Creation and the earth and recognize that ‘all of life has spirit and is sacred’ (Abolson, 2010, p. 78; Battiste, 2002; LaFever, 2016).

### ***Integrating Indigenous knowledge: being trauma-informed***

Sinclair (2020) suggests that Indigenous social work practitioners have a responsibility ‘to engage in a healing journey in order to be able to embark upon the tasks of helping others whether it is in the field or in the classroom’ (p. 17). Khan (2019) and others further challenge the social work profession to assume the ethical responsibility of developing education and practice that incorporates Indigenous knowledges, including knowledge of trauma that ‘is imprinted on the soul and passed through generations’ (Choate et al., 2020, p. 11).

According to Duthie (2019), a trauma-informed approach and creation of culturally safe spaces are essential to the process of embedding Australian Aboriginal knowledge into social work curricula. These principles are consistent with the recognition that students in the Australian as well as other contexts may have their own trauma histories (Fernando & Bennett, 2019) and that educators have a responsibility to not retraumatize students. As all students, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, are at risk of secondary traumatization (Carello & Butler, 2014), they may need support ‘to move through trauma stories that are essential to understanding the intersections between the social work profession, colonization, and Indigenous peoples’ (Choate et al., 2020, p. 10). Creating safe spaces is especially important for Indigenous students as immersion in learning experiences that introduce material similar to initial trauma events may trigger trauma responses (Duthie, 2019; Fernando & Bennett, 2019). While cultural competency and trauma-informed practices are not new (Mattar, 2011), integrating Indigenous content and knowledge requires the additional work of accepting the truth of indigenous experiences and moving toward reconciliation (Choate et al., 2020).

### ***Addressing trauma in the classroom***

Recommendations on integrating trauma content into graduate level social work programs (Vasquez & Boel-Studt, 2017) can inform creation of safe practices in the classroom.

For example, Newman (2011) describes strategies for teaching a graduate course on traumatic stress studies that can be applied to other programs. She highlights the importance of structure and predictability in the classroom to help create and model

safety for students and advocates implementing affective and intellectual processing techniques to 'help students recognize, accept, and manage their reactions to trauma-focused material' (p. 238). Time is spent preparing students for the material with additional time given if students need time to process. Newman advises students to assume that both trauma survivors and perpetrators of violence are likely in the classroom, which students must consider as they interact. Zurbriggen (2011) provides practical recommendations for clinical education, such as thinking about the timing of classes, managing issues of confidentiality and disclosures, providing students information on secondary trauma at the outset, and limiting exposure levels by varying the intensity of material. Other recommendations include promoting self-care, mindfulness, and empowerment (Zurbriggen, 2011), and encouraging use of social supports (Bordelon & Atkinson, 2020; Carello & Butler, 2014) and counseling services (Zurbriggen, 2011).

Carello and Butler (2014) propose several principles to consider when developing trauma-informed educational practice, including identifying learning as the primary objective for which emotional safety is a required condition. Findings of a study on the impact of intergenerational trauma on education outcomes of Indigenous students, suggests that students with trauma histories may be affected in their academic functioning (Gaywsh & Mordoch, 2018).

### ***Emotional safety leads to cultural safety***

Responding to the need for emotional safety with a cultural understanding and perspective contributes to cultural safety. Bordelon and Atkinson (2020) examined ways to support Native American students attending a tribal college in accessing and succeeding in social work education in mainstream universities. They propose embedding Native American content into the social work curriculum, developing an understanding of culture and a sense of belonging among students, and ensuring students have access to resources, including social support.

LaFever (2016) considers the spiritual as a key component to bringing balance within a medicine wheel framework in creating a post-secondary curriculum that supports Indigenous knowledge. Creating culturally safe spaces in which students are not re-traumatized can be considered a requisite for good learning outcomes.

### ***Narratives of resilience***

Integrating Indigenous knowledge and content into social work curricula not only promotes cultural safety, but also creates space for narratives of survival and endurance of Indigenous peoples and cultures (Choate et al., 2020). Alongside intergenerational effects of trauma experienced by Indigenous peoples throughout the globe is the capacity for individual and collective resilience. An individual who is resilient has good life outcomes despite having been subjected to situations with a high risk of emotional and/or physical distress (Lehrner & Yehuda, 2018; Tousignant & Sioui, 2009; Ungar, 2008). Students who experienced intergenerational trauma in Gaywsh and Mordoch's (2018) study identified factors that helped them survive, which included having empathy for others experiencing adversity, being assertive for oneself and Indigenous rights, being motivated to begin healing, having awareness of history and its effects on Indigenous

peoples, wanting to obtain education, feeling responsible to be a model for their community and children, and having self-discipline. These have commonalities with other research findings (Ungar, 2008).

Remembering and highlighting narratives of individuals and communities that have shown resilience is essential, as it 'implies adaptability, strength, or flexibility in the face of a stressor' (Lehrner & Yehuda, 2018, p. 23).

## Field of study background and description

One of six fields of study in a Faculty of Social Work, the aim of the Indigenous Trauma and Resiliency field is to prepare trauma-informed social workers to work with Indigenous communities in Canada and globally and to empower community members to intervene effectively. The curriculum offers Indigenous knowledge and healing practices alongside current neuroscience research that addresses attachment, trauma, and resiliency, and effective psychosocial treatment modalities. Candidates require a bachelor's degree, experience (voluntary or paid) in the social services or related fields and it is recommended that they have knowledge of critical social issues. This field of study was developed in response to the pressing need for competent practitioners who provide culturally appropriate services with individuals, families, and communities to address the unresolved trauma of global populations.

A partnership between a training and consulting institute serving a global indigenous population, a community-based Indigenous organization and an academic school of social work is fundamental to the field of study's development, delivery, and sustainability. The impetus came from women within the Indigenous community who believed that community could change if trauma and healing practices were approached from a culture-based and community-driven lens. In engaging with the faculty of social work it became evident that the approaches aligned, and they agreed to develop a field of study within the Master of Social Work program. The institute contributed the vision and community-based experience, the organization contributed the strategic and cultural knowledge, and the faculty housed the vision and contributed social work knowledge and principles.

This two-year field of study is designed to ensure access to applicants including professionals who may be working and embedded in communities, and who may be reluctant or unable to leave their communities for graduate studies. A hybrid curriculum is delivered to approximately 50 students per year, distributed across two cohorts of 25 students. Over the two years, students enrol in five or six required online courses depending on whether they have a BSW,<sup>3</sup> and five in-person six-day intensive courses. Many of the courses are offered online to allow students to remain in their communities. Students attend the intensive courses to: 1) develop a circle of support and experience the strength of community; 2) engage in coursework that deepens and complements the online courses, (e.g. 'Trauma-Informed Schools, Community Intervention and the Healing Power of Ceremony,' 'Indigenous Perspectives on Grief, Loss and Unattended Sorrow', 'Sexual Abuse, Sexual Assault and the Family'); and 3) connect with the academic community in the faculty and the University. The six-day intensive courses include academic and experiential learning, along with wellness reflection and assessment. As each intensive course builds on previous courses, the courses are taken in

sequence. While the curriculum focuses on direct social work practice with individuals, families and communities, the intensive courses are unique to this field. Practicum placements can be arranged in the students' communities or their workplaces, which allows them to remain in their communities and to continue to sustain themselves and their families.

### ***The concept of bridging***

The focus of the field of study is to bridge traditional/Indigenous worldviews with Western views and therapeutic/clinical interventions (Duran, 2019; Linklater, 2014). According to a recent systematic review, despite divergent ways of understanding mental health and mental illness, traditional healers and biomedical practitioners acknowledged the complementarity of these approaches (Green & Colucci, 2020). Similarly, in the social work literature, it is maintained that effective engagement with Indigenous individuals and communities can occur when mainstream practitioners and services address trauma, racial bias, and racism and recognize culture as fundamental (Herring et al., 2013).

In cities and communities throughout North America, rivers may separate people based on factors such as culture or socioeconomic status. On one side of the river is the mainstream social work knowledge gained through psychosocial and neuroscience research that addresses attachment, trauma, and resiliency, and effective treatment modalities. On the other side are the ancient healing wisdom and traditions of the Indigenous peoples of North, Central and South America, Tibet, Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Scotland, Ireland, and countless other cultures and countries across the world.

We educate students to understand the effects of current and historical trauma, while recognizing and acclaiming the strength and resiliency of the human spirit. Concentrating on the values, effects, resiliency, and strengths of trauma in one's own cultural and/or ethnic background, the field of study provides opportunities for students to increase their understanding by engaging with others from differing cultural backgrounds. This shared experience broadens personal awareness and enhances each student's ability to communicate with others. Such integration ensures the honouring of each student's own cultural strengths and fosters an environment of respect and understanding (Herring et al., 2013).

### ***The power of attachment: 'connection is the correction' (Middelton-Moz, 1999)***

Safety (Carello & Butler, 2014), attachment and a sense of belonging (Bordelon & Atkinson, 2020; LaFever, 2016) and relationships (Fernando & Bennett, 2019; LaFever, 2016) are considered integral to learning outcomes when discussing trauma and to creating cultural safety. This field of study is designed to provide students with layers of safety. Considering the intergenerational trauma addressed, students inevitably will be triggered. Integral to the learning is understanding that students/practitioners must recognize and address their triggers to engage in effective work, particularly when dealing with generational trauma. Students begin to develop wellness plans during the first intensive course by identifying their emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual wellness, to help them recognize their triggers. Students are provided with the unique opportunity

to assess their learning, safety, and emotional regulation through daily reflections/trigger journals, which they submit to the instructor in all intensive courses and in many online courses. Instructors read students' reflections/trigger journals daily to track progress on wellness plans and determine with the student whether they need additional support to engage in the learning. Aligned with 'bridging the river', additional support includes Western (e.g. counsellors, social workers) and traditional (e.g. Knowledge Keepers, ceremony) supports.

Fundamental is a commitment to creating an environment in which individual narratives, including trauma, can be honoured, understood, and witnessed. The links are made explicit between Western knowledge such as attachment theory (Marshall & Frazier, 2019) and Indigenous concepts such as the need for warmth and support from faculty and staff to gain a sense of safety and belonging (Bordelon & Atkinson, 2020). Instructors make use of culture, ceremony, and community both in and outside of the classroom to teach practice and to validate, process, and integrate unresolved trauma.

A central question in relation to an individual's ability to learn is whether the classroom is a safe place in which students can think, speak, and feel without fear (Carello & Butler, 2014). A key principle is that students have a choice whether to share and speak in small or large groups. Instructors prioritize making sufficient time to debrief and process learning experiences. As part of preparing and ensuring safety and time to debrief during the intensive courses, a predictable cycle unfolds over the day and week; safety is built in at the beginning, after which intense topics are covered, and the day and week each ends on empowering notes.

The instructors model a classroom in which adults are respectful and consistent, and work toward building a circle in which everyone has a voice and feels a sense of belonging. An integral aspect of building strength in the circle comes with ceremony in the intensive courses over the two years. Students can explore the power of family and community found in the circle through life teachings of group members from around the globe.

The field of study emphasizes worker and organizational wellness, essential in forming attuned and connected relationships and the foundation for safety through which healing can occur. In assessing 'wellness', students reflect on their emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual wellbeing with a focus on the connection among these four aspects. It is recognized that people who experience trauma not only suffer emotional or psychological or spiritual distress but also exhibit symptoms of trauma in their bodies (Van Der Kolk, 2015). Ever mindful that connection, attachment, and safety (Carello & Butler, 2014; Duthie, 2019) are critical elements in learning, the values of belonging and inclusion are implemented consistently.

### ***Trauma-informed teaching***

Multigenerational experiences are shared by indigenous communities worldwide (Danieli et al., 2016, 2017; Middleton-Moz, 1989; Song et al., 2014). The field of study is grounded in an understanding that individuals who suffer from post-traumatic stress or complex trauma are too frequently blamed and treated with disrespect by mental health and educational systems. Rather than understanding the underlying causal issues of trauma, the focus of the work with individuals and communities who experience

multigenerational effects of trauma, has historically been the symptoms. Trauma has consequently been traditionally misdiagnosed in education and mental health systems (Maté, 2010; Middleton-Moz, 1989; Van der Kolk, 2015).

The importance of individuals being seen, felt, and respected for their unique experiences, culture, beliefs, and adaptation to traumatic experiences is emphasized and modeled, as is awareness that a healing relationship is built on attunement, understanding, empowerment, respect, and choice (Atwood & Stolorow, 2014). Attuning to individuals includes accounting for diversity of learning styles (Silver & Perini, 2010). The teaching thus integrates a blend of lectures and PowerPoint, and storytelling, as well as experiential and kinesthetic (physical/body-based activities), bridging Western and Indigenous forms of teaching.

The instructors understand that when studying the impact of trauma on the individuals, families, and communities they serve, the students may for the first time, become aware of their own intergenerational trauma. Sanders (2021) reviews trauma-informed recommendations in social work education such as recognition that students may be retraumatized when learning about trauma and adversity. An awareness that survival patterns are learned and automatic is explored (Middleton-Moz, 2010). Students, like those they serve, are often unaware of their behaviour, verbal, and non-verbal communication, or of their impact on others. Instructors understand it is essential that students' survival adaptations and the impact of their communication be confronted in a supportive, honest, and empathic manner.

While always considering the effects of historical and complex trauma, students are guided to view the individuals, families, and communities they serve with a lens of respect for survival and resilience. To this end, challenging behaviours are understood as healthy survival responses to an unhealthy and painful life, normalizing rather than pathologizing tension reducing behaviours that may have previously worked, but no longer work well (Middleton-Moz, 1989, 2010; Van der Kolk, 2015).

## ***Main principles***

### ***North American Indigenous foundation values***

As noted, the field of study is grounded in North American Indigenous values of belonging, cooperation, respect, and kindness. These values, encompassed within ancient teachings, are captured in a worldview, and handed down through generations. Having learned from Knowledge Keepers, many of the instructors carry this way of being into the courses.

### ***Belonging***

All human beings are children of our Mother the Earth. The field of study welcomes students from the Four Directions<sup>4</sup> and honours their place in the Circle of Life, which signifies the worldview in which there is interconnectedness among all living things. "While it is recognized and accepted that students are not always connected to their origins, each student is respected as an essential part of creation. Identity and belonging, coupled with the power of connectedness, are keys to wellness. Thus, for instance,

a student who has a death in the family is held up and supported by the circle. If a student must leave the circle temporarily because of illness, their chair is blanketed to signify that they are still an integral part of the whole.

### **Cooperation**

An Indigenous appreciation for the interconnectedness of all creation is modeled. Instructors model the formation of a safe container for learning and healthy norms (encouragement to find one's voice, honouring choice of emotional expression, respecting personal decisions and boundaries), which in turn provides an environment that supports an experiential learning model. Through teaching, modelling, experiencing, and sharing in an atmosphere of safety, faculty members and students engage in a cooperative learning process. A student who might fear speaking in the larger Circle, is not called on publicly but rather, has the opportunity to build confidence within a consistent small group. Alternatively, students who dominate large group participation are valued for their contribution, while at the same time are encouraged to create space for others to participate fully in the circle.

### **Respect**

From the teachings of Knowledge Keepers, respect is to 'look twice.' Behaviours often communicate what words cannot. Informed by this viewpoint, instructors have discussions with students and, with empathy, provide an 'honest mirror' with direct and kind feedback on student comportment (Middelton-Moz, 2010). Such discussions allow the student to reflect and adjust their behaviour. For instance, a student who comes to class clearly disengaged, is taken aside and offered an 'honest mirror' (Middelton-Moz, 2010) of current behaviour. Through this practice, the instructor reinforces a positive image of self from a place of compassion and respect. The instructor might say for example, 'I am concerned about you. You have been sitting with your arms crossed, staring out the window and disengaged from the group. How are you?'

### **Kindness**

Following the teachings of Knowledge Keepers of 'honest kindness' and 'kind honesty,' we understand 'honest kindness' as authentic and given genuinely, not at the expense of self. For example, the student who assumes responsibility for others, with little consideration for their own wellbeing, would be guided as part of their wellness plan to spend significant time and attention on self-care. The term 'kind honesty' reminds us to be aware that harsh, unkind words can be spirit wounding. While not making judgments about behaviour, the instructor does not lose sight of expectations and if required, will deal with consequences in a kind and honest manner. Students who arrive late to class are welcomed by faculty: 'Welcome. So glad to see you, we are glad that you made it safely.' Kindness is a fundamental value of the field of study. Kind honesty and honest kindness are central to understanding that kindness must come from an authentic place and in turn, honesty is given with great kindness. The importance of offering feedback and kind confrontation in growth and healing is well documented (MacCluskie, 2010), and 'honest mirrors' (Middelton-Moz, 2010) are provided as a way of supporting continual growth and change.

### ***Wellness—emotional, physical, mental, spiritual***

Students are invited to share in the view that excellence involves embracing ongoing wellness. A fundamental belief in the field of study is that working effectively with others requires that we first heal ourselves. ‘Cleaning our basements’ (Middelton-Moz, personal communication, 2016) is essential in developing and maintaining relationships based on attunement and connection and is the foundation for safety through which healing occurs. Wellness plans focus on the four key areas of emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual wellness, and students are instructed to select two goals in each area and three in the area which they believe requires the most consideration. Wellness plans include a timeline for each goal, frequency, who to involve and how they will know when they reach their goal. The intensive course instructor reviews the wellness plan every three months over the two years. During the intensive courses, students complete daily reflections/trigger journals for the instructor to review their assessments of emotional, physical, mental and spiritual wellness. Students also choose a wellness coach from within the cohort. Wellness coaches support each other to stay on track and provide peer support throughout the program.

### ***Areas for consideration/limitations***

An important part of understanding what is being accomplished by this field of study is evaluating its impact. Conventional program evaluation procedures can assure quality of the education, and annual evaluations guide our ongoing reflection and program development. An important focus of evaluation is student perspectives on the extent to which their educational experience is inclusive and consistent with principles of anti-racism and cultural safety. The cultural foundation of this field of study, however, requires evaluation grounded in Indigenous principles and epistemologies—relationships, individual and community transformations, and present and future outcomes. All of these principles are foregrounded in a program evaluation designed and implemented by the community-based Indigenous organization and will inform future research exploring long-term outcomes for program alumni.

Such an endeavour is not possible without attention to the institutional dynamics that marginalize Indigenous students. Gaudry and Lorenz (2018) note that many academic institutions gesture toward ‘Indigenization’ but do not venture beyond inviting Indigenous peoples to assimilate into alienating academic environments. This field of study required commitment to ‘decolonial indigenization’ (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018, p. 219) that prioritized balancing power relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. The institutional commitment to shifting power relations has included designing a curriculum that foregrounds academic and other knowledge developed by Indigenous people, and constituting a faculty complement of Indigenous instructors with deep experience working in Indigenous communities. In addition, the field of study admits student cohorts in which individuals self-identifying as Indigenous to Turtle Island are always the majority, and a range of nations, genders, sexualities, ethnicities, and other identities are represented. These shifts from conventional practices that marginalize Indigenous knowledge, exclude Indigenous expertise, and isolate Indigenous students are efforts toward balancing and

sharing power between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Such efforts are necessary contributions to the long-term tasks of universities achieving reconciliation and justice with Indigenous communities.

## Conclusion

In the paper, we place the Indigenous Trauma and Resiliency field of study in the context of integrating Indigenous knowledge into graduate-level social work education. By developing a field of study based on integrating Indigenous knowledge and wellness with trauma and social work there is a natural focus on resilience. Delivering such a field of study requires specialization in not only Indigenous knowledge but also in social work and trauma-informed teaching and practice.

Following the wisdom of North American Indigenous Knowledge Keepers, wellness begins with the self, moving to the family, the workplace, the community, the nation, and the world. Bridging in the field of study refers to: creating links in the curriculum between the latest psychosocial and neuroscience research in Western treatment modalities and Indigenous/traditional healing practices throughout the globe; fostering communication among all age groups—child, youth, adult, and elder; developing respect, kindness, and communication across all races, the essence of reconciliation; uncovering the strength of resiliency in understanding intergenerational trauma; understanding the lack of attachment created through colonization and rebuilding the circle and support systems; and creating learning objectives that address balance and wellness emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually. Trauma-informed teaching and learning is the foundation for a safe learning experience that contributes to personal growth and resilience. Graduates leave this field of study with self-awareness, and new knowledge and skills to address critical issues facing their communities, becoming community activists who focus on strength, wellness, and resilience. While the program has a foundation in the North American Indigenous values of the medicine wheel, the four parts come together to create global understanding and support, resulting in allies and reconciliation.

The conceptual and methodological components we have detailed were made possible by a partnership among academia and community organizations, institutional commitment, and support in making the field of study accessible to global Indigenous students who may face significant barriers to accessing graduate education (Bordelon & Atkinson, 2020), and other students who often share equally complex social, financial, and/or cultural challenges. In Canada, the United States, and throughout the globe, it is recognized that the social work profession must find pathways toward reconciliation with Indigenous peoples (Choate et al., 2020). The recent discovery of over 1,200 unmarked graves in Canada containing the remains of Indigenous children at the sites of former residential schools has, again, immersed the Indigenous community in devastation and trauma (Cardoso, 2021). Indigenous communities around the world similarly endure ongoing, recurrent, and reawakened traumas. We are at a moment in time when destructive histories that implicated social work can be bridged to a future in which a transformed social work can be part of healing in global indigenous communities.

## Notes

1. There are times throughout the paper where Indigenous (uppercase I) and indigenous (lower case i) are used interchangeably as we are citing sources that refer to both.
2. The medicine wheel traditional to Indigenous cultures, comes in more than one form, and its significance and use is culture specific. Medicine wheels represent the balance and interconnectedness of the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual realities (Twigg & Hengen, 2009). The circular shape represents the interconnectivity of all aspects of one's being and puts the 'focus of...[one's] world view on relationships and balance' (Twigg & Hengen, 2009, p. 14).
3. Students admitted into the field of study with a Bachelor of Social Work are not required to take one course which they will have completed in their BSW and are required to participate in one rather than two practicum placements.
4. Four Directions refers to welcoming Indigenous students from across the globe as part of the Indigenous value of inclusion and belonging.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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