

Am I Anishinaabe Enough?

By Dr. Catherine M. Pulkinen

As I sat at my desk contemplating and reflecting on my doctoral final project along with the research process, I began to realize what a precious gift I have, an education. The research process was a long journey for me filled with laughter, countless tears, and immeasurable healings. Throughout my life, nothing has been as difficult and as rewarding all in the same breath. This long road was not without its bumps as well as important people to lift me up, brush me off, and send me on my way. To me, the interconnectedness of indigenous people is and always will be a beloved way of being and leading.

My doctoral dissertation titled, *Leadership Experiences in Indigenous Language Immersion Contexts*, catapulted me into an area of research and study that I had not considered for myself. My study sought to examine indigenous language immersion leaders' lived experiences making program decisions during the development and implementation of their immersion program. Professionally, I was trained as a Special Education teacher; but, more importantly, personally, I was not ready for what the journey would entail. It was a journey of self-discovery, acceptance, and revitalization not only with the Anishinaabe language, but, with a reconnection to my past and who I was, am, and will be. Nonetheless, despite the positive healing direction of this journey, it was neither easy nor without countless emotions. Many times, the research process confounded and disturbed me because of the deep sentiments it invoked.

Indigenous language revitalization efforts today stem from an enduring history of policies and laws that suppressed their use in the United States; thereby, largely promoting their assimilation into the dominant English-speaking culture. As a result, many indigenous communities in the United States do not have fluent speakers. A strong commitment to developing effective leadership within indigenous settings could prove to be an additional strategy in our efforts to save endangered languages.

Indigenous language revitalization efforts are concerned with self-determination, healing and survival of indigenous cultures. As an Anishinaabe woman and educator, I am humbled and reminded how limited my own language abilities are when hearing fluent Anishinaabe speakers. As a result, I embarked on my own language learning path with reverence and trepidation during my research. Throughout this process, I began to wonder: what are we here for or what is our purpose on earth? I came to believe, with clarity, that we are here to live a good life and to make life better for future generations. Each of us determines how to fulfill this ideal. Effective indigenous leadership might simply rest in being responsible for ourselves while recognizing and appreciating the many paths to truth (Bergstrom, Miller-Cleary, & Peacock, 2003). It is about self-determination both individually and collectively as human beings.

Through my doctoral journey, I found little evidence in the literature regarding indigenous leadership. More research is needed to evaluate the impact of leadership instruction as seen through the lens of indigenous people. What is the definition of leadership in an indigenous culture? Do indigenous leaders emerge or do they have talents that prepare them for leadership? Do leaders, whether indigenous or not, improve their leadership skills when taught from an indigenous perspective? If so, what is the

impact on our children? Is there a difference between dominant models of leadership instruction and indigenous leadership?

In conclusion, identity issues permeated my experiences throughout this research project and transported me back to my adolescent years. I often questioned my Nateness or indigenousness—was I, *indigenous/Native* enough to be asking or entering into this research especially using the language of the colonizer? When I consider myself and visualize *indigenous*, I envision someone else. This is an instantaneous and natural response for me; consequently, I frequently remind myself of my value and trust I am a *real* indigenous person who has many dimensions... I am Anishinaabe, a human being, a woman, a mother, a wife and a leader.

Reference

Bergstrom, A., Miller-Cleary, L., & Peacock, T. D. (2003). *The seventh generation: Native students speak about finding the good path*. Charleston, WV: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools.