

Report Summary

Indigenous Land-Based Education and the COVID-19 Pandemic

When COVID-19 was declared a pandemic in Canada, Indigenous community members were advised that they should self-isolate, socially distance, and avoid “non-essential community and cultural gatherings”. As Indigenous Elders, health practitioners, leaders and community members know, cultural practices, including land-based activities, are central to the well-being of Indigenous people. Knowing this, Indigenous land-based educators and knowledge keepers and the schools, organizations and communities they are associated with were faced with the question, *How can we safely continue to provide land-based learning and cultural programming to our youth during the pandemic?*

This report presents findings from a survey of Indigenous land-based educators and knowledge keepers in Canada that explored their answers to that question. Survey respondents were asked to describe ways in which their practice has been impacted by COVID-19; what they’ve found most challenging about the pandemic; how they’ve adapted their practices to reduce risk of exposure to COVID-19; and which changes worked well, and which did not.

The survey participants live and work in the Northwest Territories, Yukon, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario and Quebec. Most are in rural areas, including First Nations, and nearly all are associated with K-12 schools or post-secondary institutions. As elsewhere in Canada, responses to the pandemic in their communities or regions have focused on mitigating or minimizing risk of exposure to and transmission of COVID-19. The response has varied widely. For example, in some territories, regions and First Nations, borders were closed to all but essential travel. Some schools remained open, following public health guidelines, and others (including all post-secondary institutions) moved to remote learning.

Survey respondents reported that, in either context, students have struggled during the pandemic. They noted that many of their students have felt stressed and anxious during the pandemic, and some pointed to youth and children who are in the care of child and family services, or who are 2SLGBTQI+ (two groups that, as adults, are overrepresented in the population experiencing homelessness) as particularly vulnerable. In schools that are open, students are uncomfortable with many of the new protocols and rules (masks, maintaining social distance, avoiding physical contact, limiting group sizes, hand sanitizing, sanitizing shared surfaces or objects, etc.). In schools that have moved to remote learning, students seem less engaged. As one commented, “Everything that has been a draw for students has been taken away or limited”.

Some respondents have been able to continue land-based programming. On the land, as in their schools, they followed public health guidelines, which presented many challenges. Land-based activities are usually done as a group. It is difficult to maintain a six-foot distance between participants when holding a talking circle, harvesting medicines, gathering at a firepit or sharing a tent, or to prepare food and eat together or



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share a smudge ceremony when shared objects must be sanitized each time they are passed between participants. Many knowledge keepers, who pass on traditional knowledge and life skills to students, are Elders, and at higher risk if exposed to COVID-19. During the pandemic, transportation services ordinarily used to bring students to land-based learning sites have not been available in some communities, and, where transportation is available, social distancing guidelines have dramatically reduced the number of students that can be carried in a vehicle.

The survey respondents' commitment to continue to nurture their students' relationship with the land has led them to develop creative workarounds and adaptations of their practice. An educator who can transport no more than two students at a time to their land-based site wants to make sure that every student has a chance to be on the land, so she makes more trips to the land. Another who can only take a few students onto the land at once uses that time to teach skills that require detailed explanation, such as waterfowl hunting or firearm safety. Larger groups of students can be organized into 'bubbles'. At one site, land-based educators and youth participating in a 'hide camp' created cohorts, assigning each to specific zones of the encampment. Another focuses on activities that allow students to easily maintain social distancing, such as ice fishing or checking traplines.

Educators who are working remotely have collaborated with Elders and knowledge keepers in online presentations, webinars and other audio-visual resources. Some have recorded their own harvesting or hunting activities. Others have come together online with their students for talking circles and ceremonies, to cook or bake, or to make medicine bags, moccasins, rattles, or drums. In a post-secondary program, students explored and researched their own neighbourhoods, towns or farms, then reported what they had learned in their synchronous online class.

In K-12 schools that have remained open but are no longer taking students out to their usual land-based learning site, educators are using the land outside their door. One walks with their students through their community, observing the impacts of changes in the weather or seasons on the landscape, adopting and caring for a treeing, or looking for the nests of animals. Another designed a "scavenger hunt", providing students with a list of locations to visit in their community. One has set up outdoor cooking sites on the school grounds for students in their food lab. Others simply encourage their students (individually or with family or friends who are part of their 'bubble' to spend time outside, exploring and experiencing the land around them.

In addition to a discussion of workarounds and practice adaptations shared in the survey by land-based educators, the report includes a curated list of webinars, videos, podcasts, toolkits, teaching materials and other resources related to Indigenous land-based education, including resources specifically related to the impacts of COVID-19 on Indigenous land-based education.

For more information or a for a full copy of the report, please contact Dr. Alex Wilson at alex.wilson@usask.ca



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