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Teaching Activist Thinking in Canadian Education: The Limitations of Play-Based Learning and Radical Potential of Indigenous Land-Based Learning

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ABSTRACT

Amidst a climate crisis induced by settler colonialism and capitalism, education is key to developing new tools and envisioning solutions. Fostering skills for children to critically engage with systems of power is fundamental to how the next generation will address urgent global issues. Drawing on decolonial methodologies outlined by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) and Zoe Todd (2016), I question whether play-based models are successful in teaching activist thinking in Canada. As an educational framework, play-based learning is gaining interest, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic that required children to adapt to outdoor learning. Forest Schools Canada is one example that claims to revolutionize how children interact with the natural world to develop eco-stewardship skills in an age of ecological collapse. However, I find that mainstream play-based methods are not necessarily radical when examined alongside Indigenous land-based learning. Both frameworks prioritize intergenerational relationship-building, immersive storytelling, and hands-on learning outdoors, but the intention behind Indigenous land-based learning is inherently decolonial and anti-capitalist by necessity; conversely, play-based learning can inadvertently perpetuate these damaging systems. Using auto-ethnographic professional experience, governmental policies, and Sandra Harding's (2016) work on standpoint theory, I critique current examples of Canadian play-based education concerning their effectiveness in teaching activist thinking. I rely on Indigenous scholars in New Zealand and Turtle Island to inform academic theories of land-based learning with examples, supported by interviews with former Indigenous colleagues in eastern Canada. My narrative-like writing and inclusion of practice-based methodology—two video conversations—deviates from traditional qualitative research to foreground relationships consistent with the frameworks I discuss. Though play-based learning shows limited promise in deconstructing harmful structures of power, especially within established western contexts like public schools, storytelling has potential to generate meaningful change if layered with intention, such as naming root causes, linking to current affairs, and inviting creative solutions through play.

KEYWORDS

play-based learning, Indigenous land-based learning, storytelling, outdoor education, activism

1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose

Education is key to addressing systemic challenges and is an established priority in response to national issues in Canada, notably reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples after centuries of colonization with ongoing effects in academia (Todd, 2016, p. 14). Justice Murray Sinclair, former chair of

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Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission said, "education got us into this mess, and education will get us out" (Saunders, 2021), referring to the aim of learners emerging from educational experiences with the motivation, understanding, and ability to respond to the urgent challenges of our time. In addition to repairing the relationships caused by colonialism, I am particularly concerned with Canadian education's ability to respond to capitalism-induced climate change. Both issues are expressions of imperialism that cause active harm today (Smith, 2012, p. 21).

Colonialism refers to the historical and present-day exploitation and suppression of Indigenous Peoples (Smith, 2012, p. 21). The devastating impacts are evidenced by lasting injustices in Indigenous nations across Turtle Island. Mass graves from Canadian residential schools are only now uncovered, bearing hundreds of Indigenous children (Unmarked Graves Archives - APTN News, n.d.).1 Given the established relationships of Indigenous Peoples to the land, the links between colonialism and climate destruction are clear (Smith, 2012, p. 21). Indigenous governance favours "cultural traditions, place-based connections, and land stewardship" over "resource extraction practices" (Lamb et al., 2022, pp. 3). Conversely, imperialism prioritizes capitalist "economic expansion" (Smith, 2012, p. 21), defined by technological advances at the cost of ecological collapse.

The result is pervasive climate destruction and precarity (Tsing, 2015). The latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report links the global climate crisis and long-lasting environmental disasters to resource exploitation (Carrington, 2022). These grave realities highlight the urgency with which current systems need re-thinking, especially through the use of new tools with which to respond (Tsing, 2015, p. 25).

In education, what and how youth learn in schools and co-curricular programs—meaning the tools and frameworks they are taught—are foundational to the ways that colonialism and capitalism-induced climate change will be addressed in the critical years to come. As play-based learning grows more prevalent, I question whether integrating its theory into educational policy and curriculums is sufficient for teaching children the necessary skills to tackle these serious systemic issues, particularly in mainstream educational spaces like universities and public-school classrooms.

1.2 Background

When I was eleven, my family immigrated from our hometown of Hà Nội to Toronto, Canada. I handled the stress of the move by escaping into stories, which drew me to the children in Hogwarts shirts in the front yard of my school. The teacher present, named Mr. O, told me they were part of an afterschool program he had created called League of Champions (known casually as "league")2 (Ouellette, 2014, 00:11 - 00: 40). League, my defining experience with play-based learning, was designed for children between seven to twelve years old with high school students as counsellors (called "prefects"). The program taught sports and leadership skills through inventive games weekly throughout the school year. I began to volunteer as a Ravenclaw prefect and worked as a site supervisor (called a "professor") for a decade, until the COVID-19 pandemic shut the program down.

Between 2010 to 2020, I saw league effect positive change in the community, from rewarding kindness to helping children stand up to playground bullying. Personally, the program shaped my leadership skills, values, and character. My interest in league as a transformative educational space

1 This live national news source from APTN (Aboriginal Peoples Television Network) was chosen to highlight the impact and community response from Indigenous nations in Canada as discoveries continue to be made across the country.
2 I will be referring to this program as "league" throughout the essay to remain consistent with the language that I, and those within this community, know it best by.

developed at the same time that play-based learning became increasingly prioritized in Canada (Burke et al., 2021, p. 28). Ontario's latest Kindergarten Program (Government of Ontario, 2016) is one indicator of the growing popularity of this educational framework nationally, with educators noticing how it "is requiring less 'buy in'" (Burke et al., 2021, p. 29).

Figure 1: *Photograph from League of Champions (2012) featuring a group of Slytherins with their prefect in the foreground and Ravenclaw house in the background*

Given its ranging manifestations across contexts and my examination of varying educational spaces, I have resisted providing a static definition of play-based learning in favour of identifying its notable values and characteristics instead. Section 2 of this paper will discuss the recurring traits of play-based learning alongside another educational framework, whose similarities and key differences serve to highlight the limitations of learning through play: Indigenous land-based learning. As a settler, I became interested in the latter through conversations with Indigenous colleagues at workplaces centred on experiential program delivery for youth, much like league. I noticed parallels between play-based practices and Indigenous land-based learning that led me to this research. Importantly, engaging with these two frameworks made me question their potential to re-envision education in Canada—a pressing concern given the current climate outlined in the introductory section.

1.3 Methodology

I seek to answer whether play-based education is effective in teaching children activist thinking skills by examining Canadian play-based learning spaces alongside examples of Indigenous land-based learning—spaces led by and for Indigenous Peoples. I use comparisons between both frameworks to understand how play-based learning is limited in its ability to address the systemic issues outlined in the previous section. As a settler, I attempt to address gaps caused by my positionality by relying on Indigenous Peoples to define land-based learning and its implications in their own terms.

Academic literature alone was insufficient to inform this research and was incongruent with Indigenous epistemologies communicated via "oral storytelling, social interactions, ceremonies, storytelling" (Bowra et al., 2021, p. 137). To maintain methodological consistency and resist perpetuating colonial norms in a paper about decolonization, I used embedded video conversations with Indigenous peers instead of including excerpts from interview transcripts. My intention is to mitigate extraction and claiming ownership over knowledge—practices in academia that have caused centuries of harm to Indigenous Peoples (Smith, 2012, p. 1). In this way, my methodology deviates from conventional research. I aim to tell a story aligned with the priorities and values of subjects I discuss.

I honour this goal by including in this paper two video conversations with distinct groups via Zoom recordings. Though cited as sources, the identified passages are practice-based research and essential components of my work. I recorded both talks in November 2021: one focuses on play-based learning with former colleagues from the League of Champions program,3 and the other on Indigenous land-based learning with former Indigenous colleagues from a non-profit organization.4 I have included our talks in their original video format, noted with time-stamped clips to watch as you move through this paper. My hope is that you will keep both videos open on the side as you read to simulate listening to a conversation.

Figure 2: *Screenshot from our conversation on play-based learning*

While initially intended as data collection to be transcribed, I realized that our collective thoughts—not only captured in words but also preserved in tone, expression, laughter, and body language—were crucial to maintaining methodological consistency with the play-based and Indigenous land-based practices I discuss. The depth of conversation was enabled by our social interactions. In particular, body language (including voice) contributes to reinforcing and clarifying the statements expressed in a manner inseparable from the words themselves (Lecoq et al., 2019, p. 71).

Eliminating the body and its movements when extracting data reinforces colonial norms and is necessarily diminutive, given that many cultures rely on oral or non-verbal communication pre-contact with colonizers. In India, writing was introduced by foreign scholars and literature told through writing only became the dominant model during the British regime (Kambar, 1994, p. 110). Though various transcription systems exist using formatting and punctuation to capture nuances of voice, volume, and extra-linguistic features, problems remain unsolved—notably in capturing verbal phenomena of speech that transcribers must distinguish and represent in a readable manner, with no empirical standard as to what that means (Flick et al., 2004, p. 251). Relying on transcription upholds the assumed authority of writing at the cost of those most excluded to begin with and bestows authorial power to another settler researcher (in this case, me) perpetuating an extractive process of colonial violence.

Including the videos incorporates those outside of traditional academic spaces, at least in how they showed up in that moment. I am mindful of citing only thinkers that rely on a "European intellectual heritage" to express ideas that Indigenous Peoples outside institutions can speak to equally well

3 Please see Appendix A for an introduction to the six people contributing to this discussion.
4 Please see Appendix A for an introduction to the two people contributing to this discussion.

(Todd, 2016, p. 8). Academia historically practices the erasure of Indigenous bodies by filtering ideas through outsider intermediaries (Todd, 2016, p. 7-8). My inclusion of embedded footage to simulate a conversational space is one attempt at remedying these harmful traditions. In the same way, I have made efforts to cite and quote Indigenous academics directly (Todd, 2016, p. 7). My autoethnographic approach and grounding in former experiences echoes the way that marginalised scholars, like Métis writer Zoe Todd, use personal "vignettes" to write about ongoing structural colonialism in academic spaces (2016).

Importantly, the talks were intended to be unstructured interviews: non-linear and naturally occurring with few prepared questions. This format aligns with how Indigenous land-based learning has occurred naturally for millennia before being formalized into programs that receive funding under a capitalist system—to be revisited in Section 3 (Bowra et al., 2021, p. 138). Our casual "informal conversations" honour knowledge that surfaces unplanned, which challenges narratives taught in traditional schooling and gives "a greater voice to those on the margins" (King & Swain, 2022, p. 14).

Figure 3: *Screenshot from our conversation on Indigenous land-based learning*

These conversations did not take place among traditional scholars but nonetheless fostered critical dialogue with learners of shared communities to understand what makes play-based or Indigenous land-based learning distinct. Centring relationships across ages was key to maintaining ease and flow—another trait of Indigenous land-based learning discussed in Section 1—as human interactions are not isolated (Bowra et al., 2021, p. 136). Despite spanning over a decade in age, most of us had established relationships from a previous workplace or school. Our rapport and emotional bond with shared past experiences added to the quality of the discussion, which enabled meaning to emerge. Aspiring towards the elimination of bias runs counter to the prioritization of learning with relationships in Indigenous nations that recognize "purity is not an option" (Tsing, 2015, p. 27). Not only is lack of bias impossible but "any attempt at definitive untangling . . . is likely to lose the point" (Tsing, 2015, p. 52). The interactions in these videos reinforce this point, as our connections were critical to thought.

Throughout this process, I tried to not position myself as an interviewer with a privileged perspective but rather sought to integrate as part of the group. This intention is obviously limited by necessary structures, such as signing consent forms and talking in a virtual recorded space. Marlo acknowledges this incongruence partway through our talk (Land-Based Learning Chats, 2021, 15:02 - 15:24).

Though some hierarchy is inevitable, our relationships allow us to voice concerns openly and engage in an evolving process (Bowra et al., 2021, p. 136). I made it clear that participation was voluntary at every stage and remained open to questions before, during, and after the recorded talks took place. As this paper moved through iterations, I kept participants informed. Several people expressed enjoying our conversations together, which I found fundamental to our success in engaging in intimate and critical chats.

1.4 Scope

The literature I examine centres mainly on Canada, a settler colonial nation defined by ongoing colonial rule and the systemic repression of Indigenous rights under a modern-day settler society (Lamb et al., 2022, p. 3). Research from settler colonial nations like New Zealand and the US as well as one source from India (previously mentioned) are included to inform theories of decolonial methodology. Differences may arise from distinct contexts across Nations that I am not able to identify, unless stated. Similarly, unless authors of the texts self-identify as Indigenous or settlers, I cannot account for the authors' positionality. These limitations and my own positionality as a settler were strongly considered in conducting my research, hence the inclusion of the conversation-based methodology explained in Section 1.3.

In terms of policy and living examples, I focus on how play-based and Indigenous land-based learning are currently applied in the modern-day Canadian educational landscape, as detailed in academic articles that provide relevant examples of both frameworks in action. My review of policies includes the Ontario Kindergarten Program (Government of Ontario, 2016), which outlines how to practice play-based learning in a mainstream educational setting, and the Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework (Government of Canada, 2016). I also examine a system of "Forest Schools" across the country that have proven to be important players in this field, particularly in outdoor spaces (Burke et al., 2021, p. 28).

While thinkers like Freire and Boal also speak on how storytelling and dialogue combat systems of oppression, I will not discuss their theories, as they relate to strategies and cultural contexts beyond the scope of this paper. Similarly, John Dewey's foundational work on hands-on learning is only considered insofar as providing the basis for such programs to be applied in modern-day Canada; the Ontario kindergarten program cites his ideas (Government of Ontario, 2016, p. 37).

It is worth noting that land-based learning is an Indigenous-centred framework, led by and for Indigenous Peoples. I will not focus on how it can be emulated, or even if it should be, in mainstream learning. Rather, it is considered as a tool of comparison. Ultimately, I concluded that despite admirable shared traits, key distinctions in intention make Indigenous land-based learning effective in provoking structural change in ways that differ from play-based learning.

2. Key traits of play-based and Indigenous land-based learning

2.1 Youth-led, intergenerational, and relationship-based learning

My conversation on Indigenous land-based learning with Andy and Marlo opened with the importance of a "youth-led" approach, building off the "groundwork" established by generations prior (Land-Based Learning Chats, 2021, 1:33 - 2:27). This idea of intergenerational sharing has surfaced in several descriptions of what makes Indigenous learning distinct. The notion of "community-initiated, community-run" and "Indigenous youth involvement" are embodied in land-based practices (Bowra et al., 2021, pp. 136–137). I witnessed these values in action when supporting a conference

on addressing anti-Indigenous racism within healthcare systems in June 2021 (Canada, 2021); the event opened with a youth panel that highly-ranked professionals in the field referenced throughout the sessions.

The centering of relationships in land-based learning is grounded in the belief that "every person, regardless of age, has knowledge that can be shared and used by the collective". Importantly, learning is not seen as a transactional exchange of knowledge but rather a nurturing of constantly evolving relationships (Bowra et al., 2021, p. 136). My own discussion with Andy and Marlo was built on relationships sustained over three years (as was my conversation with the group on play-based learning). Because of these values on age and community, I resisted defining my age group in this paper and sought perspectives from a wide range.

The mixing of age groups at league was also a thread that also carried throughout our discussion of what makes the program meaningful (Play-Based Learning Chats, 2021, 13:34 - 15:40). Jordan uses the word "diffusion", which I interpret as a dissolving of margins that do not necessarily matter outside of modern-day school systems, allowing us to question whether separating learning by year is arbitrary. This point was embodied in the flow of our conversation. Opinions were equally valued, despite what could be perceived as significant gaps in life and work experience.

Ontario's 2016 kindergarten program also positions teachers as "co-learners". This shift from "lead knower" to "lead learner" is noted as a recent change from "traditional" approaches5 (Government of Ontario, 2016, p. 10). Responsive relationships are encouraged, as is treating children as competent individuals with something to teach us. This framework is cultivated through a "culture of inquiry" that builds on naturally occurring questions to develop critical self-direction. Teachers provide tools and "notice and name the learning" (Government of Ontario, 2016, p. 25). Within league, this process typically entailed pausing and discussing live events, then relating them to the real world (Play-Based Learning Chats, 2021, 16:49 - 17:46). However, I would argue key differences exist when examining how youth-led, intergenerational, and relationship-based learning plays out in classrooms.

Though educators inspire curiosity and build relationships with youth, clear roles are nonetheless present—student and teacher—forming a distinct divide. In most cases, children part ways with teachers after one year and do not engage with other grades.

By contrast, the extracurricular nature of league facilitated that fundamental nurturing of relationships, core to Indigenous land-based learning. Including prefects, houses spanned from primary to high school, with children staying in the program for years. Serena explicitly names the value of friendships in learning, which leads to a reflection on league facilitating relationships across ages and roles while maintaining healthy boundaries (Play-based Learning Chats, 2021, 52:36 - 56:46). Without this foundational friendship, this video could not exist.6

Intergenerational relationships are valuable in questioning power. Anton uses the phrase, "paving the way for those that come after you" when speaking of leading by example (Play-based Learning

5 Although the text does not acknowledge it, readers are expected to understand this statement as referring solely to western traditions, given that distinctions between traditions of other cultures are not discussed. Notably, no mention is made of the many Indigenous cultures that have always prioritized responsive relationships and inquiry-based learning, as detailed in this section.
6 If you keep watching from 57:32 - 58:48, you can see a live example of us laughing when Morgan shares an old photo. The ease of my comments and shift in body language illustrates the closeness of us within the league community, both present on the call and beyond.

Chats, 2021, 1:06:21 - 1:06:39), gesturing to how learning is not "simply a way of preparing young people for future employment, but rather it is a nation-building practice" that relies on kinship to refute individualistic tendencies (Bowra et al., 2021, p. 136). Under current systems, capitalistic goals pose challenges to the implementation Indigenous-led methods, including the prioritization of "reciprocal relationships" in learning, which do not "readily contribute" to "economic profit" (Bowra et al., 2021, p. 138). Teaching empathy for younger generations offers another perspective within educational spaces to counter the dominant perspective and priorities.

Though today's classrooms are not ideal spaces to nurture longstanding bonds across ages, this distinction lies less within the nature of play-based learning than the structure we operate in, which enforces binaries in teacher-student roles. Forest School Canada advertises a program model that can be implemented "with varying age groups" (Burke et al., 2021, p. 28) but does not elaborate on how these relationships are supported and sustained.

2.2 The fabric of stories

Included among the twenty-five Indigenous projects outlined in "Decolonizing Methodologies" are naming, storytelling, and envisioning[7] (Smith, 2012, pp. 145–158), which show up prominently in play-based and Indigenous land-based spaces. Smith cites Freire's saying, "name the word, name the world" and relates it to the restoration of geographic Indigenous names (Smith, 2012, p. 158). The use of Indigenous languages, especially in oral storytelling, is central to the way values are taught; distinctions arise in languages that favour verbs over nouns, the reverse being a more western approach (Bowra et al., 2021, pp. 137–138). Learning through stories from Elders also ensures appropriate context (Harrison & Greenfield, 2011, p. 70). Creating a sacred space of storytelling further relates to the importance of ceremonies like smudging[8] (Richardson et al., 2012, p. 75). These examples illustrate how the words and stories we use to describe our environment shape both the space itself and our position within it.

Figure 4: *Ravenclaw prefects talk to their house (League of Champions)*

7 Connecting is also one of the projects, which relates to the relationship-building discussion of the previous section.
8 My experience of smudging within Indigenous-led spaces on Turtle Island involves clearing the negative energy from a space by lighting sacred plants (cedar, sage, sweetgrass, and tobacco) in a shell and wafting the smoke over and through our bodies.

League relies on the language of stories to maintain the emotional buy-in of the program, as Morgan describes when comparing a difference of terminology (Play-Based Learning Chats, 2021, 22:35 - 22:58). Calling the balls "spells" is not a quirk but rather the thread that holds league together and differentiates it from other sports programs. That magical atmosphere relies on ceremony and ritual, such as costumes and candlelight (Play-based Learning Chats, 2021, 31:10 - 32:14). Storytelling also makes lessons of compassionate leadership and fair play stick (Play-based Learning Chats, 2021, 25:52 - 27:03). Notably, while the Harry Potter series was used as a backdrop, league's magic extended far beyond the books and did not lose that fantastic quality post-rebranding that removed explicit traces of Harry Potter altogether (Play-based Learning Chats, 2021, 32:21 - 36:19).9

Not all play-based learning models in Canada centre storytelling in the same way, but related subjects like art and creative expression are deemed important—at least in kindergarten (Government of Ontario, 2016, p. 105). Narrative-building comes up in Forest Schools when children define their natural environment (Burke et al., 2021, p. 36). In this study of outdoor learning in Canada, the authors also cite Indigenous scholars who view "the study of experience as story"; this informs how their research allows for multiple voices, with participants positioned as co-researchers, as I have done in my video discussions (Burke et al., 2021, p. 8). The idea of varying truths leads to the potential of envisioning different futures.

This capacity for imagination is essential to resisting oppressive systems like colonization, since it is the act of re-creating our world (Smith, 2012, p. 203). Imagining not only questions what alternatives exist[10] but also provides hope and shared language for communities to bond over, often in the form of art (Smith, 2012, p. 154). League achieved this envisioning through the mythology of our games. For example, "gnome skirmish" was a creative way for opposing gnome clans to resolve their conflicts as a substitute for war. Likewise, I facilitate creative writing workshops with Story Planet (About Us | Story Planet, n.d.), an organization that serves underprivileged students in Toronto classrooms. As a rule, we discourage themes of law enforcement in our stories in order to promote inclusive, joyful community-based alternatives to conflict resolution. The intentionality behind this solutions-based storytelling is key. Unlike league and Story Planet, many play-based spaces, like kindergarten classrooms, do not frame storytelling as potential for envisioning what our world could look like. Indigenous land-based learning, however, uses storytelling as a decolonial tool to purposefully re-name and re-imagine the past, present, and future.

2.3 Learning actively outdoors

Learning outdoors was arguably the most discussed component when examining how play-based learning is applied in a modern-day Canadian context.[11] The benefits of active time outdoors are plentiful and often cited (Government of Ontario, 2016, p. 34). Forest School Canada grounds their educational model in this idea of nature-based learning (Burke et al., 2021, p. 28).

A surface-level glance at this framework shows many similarities to Indigenous land-based learning. Activities outlined at Forest Schools include hikes, maple tapping, and tracking animals (Burke et al., 2021, p. 36). The idea of land as teacher is explicitly named, as is fostering a sense of environmental stewardship and relationship to the earth (Burke et al., 2021). "Land as first teacher" is identified as a

9 Notice how at 32:42, Jordan says that Anton came along because "you've always liked Mr. O", which gestures to an intergenerational student and teacher connection that originated in a classroom setting but required an alternative space to grow.

10 Though beyond the scope of this paper, the popular literary genre of Afrofuturism exemplifies this idea.

11 Though league took place indoors (for the most part), it did prioritize active learning.

commonality among Indigenous land-based programs, with ideas of interconnectedness and balance at the heart of this learning (Bowra et al., 2021, p. 35). Notably, environment is considered as “third teacher” in Ontario’s kindergarten program, which indicates a hierarchal difference in prioritizing students’ relationships to land (Government of Ontario, 2016, p. 29).

Another interesting distinction between these articles’ definitions is the positioning of urban space. While Forest School Canada views “urban societies” as an impediment in play-based learning (Burke et al., 2021, p. 27), that perspective is not necessarily shared among Indigenous nations, where “being on the land, in both urban and rural contexts, assists people with uncovering the layers of relationships that continue to exist even as the physical landscapes change over time” (Bowra et al., 2021, p. 136). This distinction points to a crucial variance. While the former views “land” as our natural environment, the latter considers it part of our selves. As Marlo says, returning to the land is inextricable from being Indigenous (Land-Based Learning Chats, 2021, 27:44 - 28:39).

Centuries of colonization, however, have disrupted that connection profoundly (Land-Based Learning Chats, 2021, 25:32 - 27:07). Urbanization is a factor, but forcible displacement and violence against Indigenous Peoples is most significantly responsible for the harmful severing of people’s connections to the land visible today. Marlo speaks of reconnecting to her family’s land as a process of re-embodiment (Land-Based Learning Chats, 2021, 6:34 - 10:16). This healing process is critical to understanding how Indigenous land-based learning differs from play-based programs like Forest Schools Canada. Consider how Marlo and Andy describe land-based activities that could easily be incorporated into mainstream outdoor curriculums—then make a pivotal transition into the intentionality of re-building identities and communities in the face of colonialism (Land-Based Learning Chats, 2021, 2:36 - 5:32).

Land-based programs in Indigenous-centered spaces, such as Nuna School, explicitly state how this learning “connects or reconnects Indigenous children to their cultural lands, languages, communities, and identities” (Burke et al., 2021, p. 33), which is itself decolonial. By comparison, Waldorf Schools focus on play-based learning with integrated arts and physical movement and prioritize wholistic education but incorporate no mention of activist, decolonial, or anti-capitalist values (What Is Steiner Waldorf Education?, n.d.). Given the urgent need for new tools to address the critical systemic problems of today’s world, namely the ongoing exploitation of natural resources and Indigenous Peoples (Tsing, 2015, p. 25), the failure to frame and teach what is at stake and enact repairs with intention limits the perspectives with which children understand global issues. Admittedly, Forest Schools Canada does acknowledge their problematic history of delivering land-based learning with no relationships to local Indigenous nations and are actively working on rebuilding this trust and co-creating programming with local Mi’kma’ki nations (Burke et al., 2021, p. 33).

However, Forest Schools Canada also remarks that parents “choose” to pay private fees for this alternative education (Burke et al., 2021, p. 33)—as if every parent can make the same financial decision. They are one example of a mainstream play-based learning school that does not recognize their role in perpetuating class inequalities due to the prohibitive cost of their programming, of which league is also complicit. The program ran in predominantly white middle-class neighbourhoods around Toronto’s High Park neighbourhoods. Without the intention of challenging structures of power, these often-lauded spaces are simply “western education . . . moved to the outdoors” (Bowra et al., 2021, p. 139), ultimately reinforcing the same capitalistic and colonial systems.

3. The limitations of play

3.1 Necessary radicalness of Indigenous land-based learning

A co-created and jointly released government framework affirms that providing Indigenous children with the best possible start in life requires programs and services that support "the cultural continuity of First Nations communities and nations". The Inuit framework identifies the need for "cultural revitalization that can connect Inuit with their land, culture, language, and histories" (Government of Canada, 2018). This intention to re-imagine a colonial world underlies every part of Indigenous land-based learning. In a key segment of our conversation, Andy speaks to how Indigenous learning inextricably links with responding to colonialism (Land-Based Learning Chats, 2021, 10:59 - 12:16).

Naming this intention outright changes the way learners can identify root causes when thinking about systemic issues and power. This difference is apparent in approaches to addressing the climate crisis. Forest Schools Canada says that "looking at a snail through a magnifying glass creates a deeper sense of environmental stewardship and a moment of reflection of our own role as humans on the planet" (Burke et al., 2021, p. 30): a position that still centres the individual human. Compare this phrase to how climate change is referenced in Indigenous spaces:

> "Indigenous communities are currently facing, and will continue to face, the most serious impacts of climate change. This increased susceptibility is due to their deep connection with the land, the historical and intergenerational trauma caused by settler colonialism, and their inhabitance of geographical areas that are highly impacted by climate change." (Bowra et al., 2021, pp. 33–34)

Colonialism is explicitly named as a cause of the climate crisis, which takes our thinking beyond personal responsibility and extends it to a challenge of systems. The latest report by the IPCC states in no uncertain terms that the "smoking gun" for solving climate change is "immediate and deep" cuts to fossil fuel emissions—not planting trees or taking individual action. In fact, "a net zero future can be achieved . . . bringing millions out of poverty, but the finance needed is missing", making clear that only structural solutions will work (Carrington, 2022).

The ability to take this critical wider perspective derives from Indigenous Peoples being most harmed by present-day systems, as touched on above. This advantage is a central point of Sandra Harding's work on feminist standpoint theory. Though originally developed to distinguish between the experiences of men and women, this theory can also be applied to distinctions between colonizers and Indigenous Peoples:

> "If human activity is structured in fundamentally opposing ways for two different groups (such as men and women), one can expect that the vision of each will represent an inversion of the other, and in systems of domination the vision available to the rulers will be both partial and perverse." (Harding, 2016, p. 120)

If we apply this theory to the differing viewpoints between Indigenous-led and settler-led spaces of learning, then Indigenous Peoples have a clear epistemic advantage. In spaces of Indigenous land-based learning, radical critiques of power are inevitable when our colonial and capitalist economy "benefits from the displacement of Indigenous Peoples specifically in areas where resource exploitation is rampant" (Bowra et al., 2021, p. 138)—practices at the heart of climate destruction (Carrington, 2022). Without tackling these underlying causes, no meaningful change can be achieved.

Harding further points out:

> "Women's oppression, exploitation, and domination are grounds for transvaluing women's differences because members of oppressed groups have fewer interests in ignorance about the social order and fewer reasons to invest in maintaining or justifying the status quo than do dominant groups. They have less to lose by distancing themselves from the social order; thus, the perspective from their lives can more easily generate fresh and critical analyses." (Harding, 2016, pp. 125–126)

This line of thinking directly applies to Indigenous Peoples' ability to approach climate justice from a more effective perspective than settlers, due to their lack of investment in current systems—something the IPCC has acknowledged. Conversely, "the IPCC warns fossil fuel investors they are on track to lose trillions of dollars if governments act as they must" (Carrington, 2022). These clear links between imperialist systems of extraction and exploitation that have led to ecological collapse (Smith, 2012, p. 21) are not named in many play-based spaces that claim to promote eco-stewardship and connection to nature—good qualities that will not be enough to effect the necessary change.

Understanding these differences makes me consider the impacts of league's themes of honourable play and citizenship. In leading the program, I spoke about honesty during the games, of booing opponents and cheering on teammates, which flowed into current events like Trump's presidential win in the US in 2016. League helped children redefine what leadership can look like. Our intention built an admirable culture of good character and responsibility—but my talk with the league group never reached a systemic critique of power. Without explicitly naming harm caused by colonialism or capitalism, play-based learning itself cannot address structural problems in a consequential manner.

3.2 Effecting change in a capitalist world

It is hard to see what emulating the intentions of Indigenous land-based learning resembles in a mainstream space, despite the potential positive implications (Land-Based Learning Chats, 2021, 30:37 - 31:19). Indigenous scholars have criticized the very act of formalizing land-based learning, arguing that programming is "a westernized way of thinking . . . rooted in western funding and definitions of organization"; land-based learning has existed naturally for millennia (Bowra et al., 2021, p. 138). As discussed, established structures of schooling can limit flexible power dynamics or intergenerational sharing. However, we cannot discount structure altogether. Marlo raises an example of structure as especially supportive with regards to accessibility (Land-Based Learning Chats, 2021, 15:32 - 18:52). In league, structure was also essential in supporting rather than hindering play (Play-Based Learning Chats, 2021, 1:04:30 - 1:05:46).

Interestingly, one article advocates for bridging "separate cultural spaces to create a new third space based in hybridity and cultural difference"[12]: in this case "land-based experiential learning and text-based learning" (Bartmes & Shukla, 2020, p. 147). Valuing both Indigenous knowledge and academic learning is framed as "two-eyed seeing" (Bartmes & Shukla, 2020, pp. 156–57). The (non-Indigenous) authors argue that this immersion is "transformative" in expanding the students' interpretation of knowledge and reality (Bartmes & Shukla, 2020, p. 158–59).

I do not disagree with this outcome but question the extent to which "two-eyed seeing" is truly meaningful. "Academic learning" is still positioned against Indigenous knowledge; would it not be better

[12] This definition is the text's understanding of a "third space"; my own interpretation of it is in flux and lies beyond the scope of this paper.

to expand the definition of what academia means and who gets to participate? The text itself acknowledges the limitations of incorporating Indigenous knowledge "in an education system that remains entrenched in Eurocentric paradigms of teaching and validating knowledge" (Bartmes & Shukla, 2020, p.158). This tension is apparent in discussing how students felt frustrated and stressed when engaging with land-based learning, because they did not know how to meet the academic requirements of their course work (Bartmes & Shukla, 2020, p.158), highlighting the challenge of breaking from the established structures of education ingrained in us today.

Considerations of structure must be central for both policymakers and educators, as western systems of measurement and evaluation described above are limiting to how play-based and Indigenous land-based learning can be meaningfully enacted. Presently, these principles are applied in established educational spaces—public-school classrooms (Government of Ontario, 2016), universities, and Forest Schools—that reinforce existing structures with little critique or attempt at systemic change. These institutions reproduce themselves in their own image—traditionally exclusive of Indigenous Peoples—meaning attention must be paid to deconstructing the routinised aspects of educational spaces built on colonial standards (Todd, 2016, p. 13).

The ongoing harm of traditionally academic institutions must be acknowledged head-on to make way for "processes and structures that are attentive to and accountable for the ongoing impacts of colonial rule" (Todd, 2016, p. 15). Ideally, as policymakers and educators work with local Indigenous Peoples to determine what these frameworks look like, "explicit credit" and appropriate context should be afforded without replicating Indigenous knowledge to conform to western norms (Todd, 2016, p. 17), hence the need for systemic solutions.

4. Conclusion

I find it difficult to disagree with Andy and Marlo's perspective that progress involves handing power and resources over to Indigenous Peoples.[13] As settlers, this process of relinquishing requires trusting Indigenous-led efforts, which ties into the aforementioned relationship building (Bowra et al., 2021, p. 136). Such a radical shift could spur a healthy re-envisioning of systems and solutions that play-based learning alone cannot achieve—an important point for policymakers and educational leaders when developing curricula in climate education, Indigenous issues, or in incorporating play-based learning in classrooms.

While I was initially excited by the growing prevalence and potential of play to provide students with tools for critiquing power, play-based learning not only fails to address systemic issues in both public schools and alternative educational spaces but can also perpetuate capitalist and colonial systems. Indigenous land-based learning differs; it inherently responds to modern-day issues because Indigenous Peoples are most harmed by them, thereby providing more nuanced perspectives and willingness to divest from the status quo. Though play-based learning shares traits of intergenerational relationship building, storytelling, and active learning outdoors, the key distinction between these frameworks lies in explicit intention, such as naming root causes and inviting creative, joyful solutions—such as Story Planet's approach to anti-incarceration and policing. Notably, these successes are achieved through storytelling and art, which the Ontario Kindergarten Program deems essential (Government of Ontario, 2016, p. 105). It is worth examining in further research whether policymakers and educators continue to prioritize these artistic subjects and methodologies in older age groups.

[13] The LANDBACK movement advocates for such a transfer of decision-making power to Indigenous Peoples (LANDBACK, n.d.).

Striving to dismantle existing power structures is not a core component of play-based learning, but it is of Indigenous land-based learning. This crucial distinction questions what radical learning looks like in established mainstream settings like schools. However, such limitations do not outweigh the value of trying anyway (Land-Based Learning Chats, 2021, 20:36 - 20:47). Fostering intentional opportunities for Indigenous Peoples to learn on stolen land is vital, and co-curricular programs like Story Planet and league build character and envision a better world. Based on these examples, I especially see potential for community-based storytelling to create alternative solutions to large-scale real-world problems of our time. Perhaps imagination is the liminal space of radical re-envisioning, to be further explored.

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Appendix A

Overview of participants contributing to the play-based learning conversation from League of Champions (Play-Based Learning Chats, 2021)

Please watch the first six minutes of this video for an introduction to the seven participants and our relationships to league and each other. In summary, they include:

- Morgan, a prefect who worked at league alongside me in high school (currently a primary school teacher with the Toronto District School Board)
- Serena, a site supervisor ("professor") at one program location during her undergrad years (currently a social worker with children in hospice care)
- Anton, a prefect who worked at league throughout his high school years
- Jordan, a prefect who worked at league throughout high school; he also worked as a "professor" in university
- Alyssa, a prefect who worked at league throughout high school
- Alexandra, who came through the program as a child and continued as a prefect through high school (until the pandemic closure)

With some exceptions, most people in the room know each other well. For example, Alexandra notes that Anton was her prefect when she came through the program. I completed my supervisor training with Serena and supervised Anton, Jordan, and Alyssa for several years. Several of us have also been close friends since childhood.

Overview of participants contributing to the Indigenous land-based learning conversation (Land-Based Learning Chats, 2021)

Given the intimate group, we did not do introductions at the start of this talk. Andy, Marlo, and I met in June 2018 as colleagues at a Canadian youth development program. While we all left the organization, we remained in touch as friends. Andy and I also worked together from March to August 2021r at Indigenous Services Canada, in the First Nations and Inuit Health Branch.