


# For the love of our children: an Indigenous connectedness framework

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## Abstract

This article draws on Indigenous literature to develop a conceptual framework that makes visible Indigenous child wellbeing. A process of qualitative content analysis identified and examined the core concepts and mechanisms of Indigenous wellbeing. Central to the framework is the concept of connectedness. The premise of this article is that deepening our understanding of Indigenous connectedness can assist with the restoration of knowledge and practices that promote child wellbeing. When children are able to engage in environmental, community, family, intergenerational and spiritual connectedness, this contributes to a synergistic outcome of collective wellbeing. The Indigenous Connectedness Framework may be particularly useful to Indigenous communities that directly serve children. The hope is that communities can adapt the Indigenous Connectedness Framework to their particular history, culture, stories, customs and ways of life.

## Keywords

connectedness, Indigenous wellbeing, child wellbeing, spirit

The past is not a burden; it is a scaffold which brought us  
to this day. We are free to be who we are—to  
create our own life out of our past and out of the present.

We are our ancestors. When we can heal ourselves,  
we also heal our ancestors, our grandmothers, our  
grandfathers and our children. When we heal ourselves,  
we heal Mother Earth

Grandmother Rita Pitka Blumenstein, Yup'ik, Tununak, Alaska,  
*International Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers*

## Introduction

Indigenous peoples are not trapped in a traumatic past. Grandmother Rita tells us when we heal ourselves, we also heal our ancestors, relatives, children, future generations and Mother Earth. It's a reminder that we are all connected. The term *connectedness* is a concept used by the People Awakening Team and researchers from southwest Alaska that closely matches what Grandmother Rita is teaching in the quote above. Connectedness is “the interrelated welfare of the individual, one's family, one's community and the natural environment” (N. V. Mohatt, Fok, Burket, Henry, & Allen, 2011, p. 444). Awareness of connectedness has been found to be a protective factor for Alaska Native youth from alcohol abuse and suicide (Allen et al., 2014; G. V. Mohatt et al., 2004; N. V. Mohatt et al., 2011). Certain actions and activities create and nurture connectedness. In Grandmother Rita's quote, the process of healing ourselves cultivates connectedness. Deepening our understanding of connectedness and the mechanisms that uphold it may contribute to the

growing wellness literature that is advocating for transformational change (Hodge, Limb, & Cross, 2009).

It is incredibly humbling to see the ways Indigenous communities have maintained connectedness despite the onslaught of colonization. Indigenous peoples have endured and continue to endure the colonial traumas of child removal, assimilation, relocation, institutional racism, patriarchy, environmental degradation, stolen lands, neo-liberalism and hierarchical epistemologies (Bang et al., 2014; Evans-Campbell & Walters, 2006). Despite colonization, something has sustained Indigenous people. This article asserts that connectedness, the interrelated welfare of everyone and everything, has been one of the keys to Indigenous survival and wellbeing. In this article, I argue that concept of connectedness is worthy of exploration as we work to destabilize the impacts of colonial disruptions to Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Through the study of connectedness, we begin to see how the disruption of connectedness has been harmful to everyone, not just Indigenous communities.

Focusing on the promotion of connectedness for children is strategic because children can unify people. Many tribes view children as gifts from the Creator with a sacred

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purpose (Cajete, 2000; Day, 2016; Red Horse, 1997). Children are the “future keepers and practitioners of sacred knowledge” (Kawagley, 2011a, p. 298) and the “bringers of light and good fortune to the community” (Cajete, 2000, p. 96). Children change and create people’s roles in communities. With a birth of a child, you also have the birth of a mother, a father, a grandparent and multiple relationships. These roles and relationships are important because they influence the identity and development of a collective. The continued existence of families, tribes and communities rely on the presence of children (Indian Child Welfare Act, 1978). Setting an intention of raising healthy children is strategic because they will become healthy families, communities and just societies (Powers & Faden, 2006).

Through a comprehensive literature review and qualitative content analytical process, this article attempts to make child wellbeing visible through an Indigenous Connectedness Framework. This framework adds value to the already existing Indigenous wellbeing literature because it identifies mechanisms of connectedness in a purposeful way when explaining what the core concepts mean. It is important to acknowledge that children are as diverse as the beautiful landscapes of the earth. The intention is to identify commonality across groups so that the connectedness framework can be adapted to contain specific community values, histories, teachings and practices.

To follow the Indigenous research protocol of reflexivity, I recognize that my background completely influences the story I share. I am a descendant of the Native Village of Wales (Kingigin) on my mother’s side and a tribal member of Nome Eskimo Community (Sitnasuak). My father’s side of the family has ancestral roots in Switzerland, Germany and France. I have actively engaged in the recovery process of our Kingikmiut songs, dance, language and epistemology. The more I learn, the more I try to live a life of connectedness. Who I am as an Inupiaq woman, a social worker, a mother and previous child welfare worker influenced the organization, analysis and visual depiction of the Indigenous Connectedness Framework in this article. The hours spent studying this topic was for the love of our children.

## Methods

### *Research questions and hypotheses*

The research questions and hypotheses were developed after reading the N. V. Mohatt et al. (2011) article on connectedness and speaking with Terry Cross about his Relational Worldview Model, which identifies four domains and mechanisms of wellbeing that resemble a medicine wheel (personal communication, May 12, 2017). The research questions that guided the initial literature search were (a) How is Indigenous child wellbeing conceptualized and how does it align with the People Awakening Team’s description of connectedness? and (b) What are the key mechanisms for connectedness and Indigenous child wellbeing? My hypotheses included the conceptualization of Indigenous child wellbeing as an ecological framework of child, family or kinship, community and land or place connectedness with wellbeing

mechanisms that nurture a person’s mind, body, spirit and context as described by the Relational Worldview Model (Cross et al., 2011).

### *Literature selection*

To narrow the scope, literature pertaining to Indigenous populations from the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand were included because of the shared history of boarding schools and colonial oppression that have affected generations of children. The University of Washington library and University of Alaska Anchorage consortium library databases, as well as Google Scholar were used to identify literature with the following combinations of search terms: Indigenous, American Indian, Alaska Native or Aboriginal AND wellbeing, wellness, resilience, child wellbeing, or connectedness. The literature review became an iterative process where chosen articles provided references that were subsequently searched, selected and reviewed. Another key piece to gathering literature was through consultation with fellow scholars, community members and research committee members. The initial database search resulted in a collection of approximately 20 articles, and expanded to over 65 books, articles and dissertations for analysis. Very few articles used the term “Indigenous connectedness” or solely addressed child wellbeing, so the first selected articles had to meet the following criteria: (a) the wellbeing knowledge was from and for Indigenous people, (b) focused on wellbeing, and (c) included multidimensional concepts that were dynamically connected.

### *Analytical approach*

Qualitative content analysis (QCA) involves the examination of core concepts and aides in the descriptive conceptualization of the content (Drisko & Maschi, 2015; White & Marsh, 2006). QCA can be both deductive and inductive with established hypotheses and an analytical approach that expands upon the latent content and generates deeper meaning (Drisko & Maschi, 2015). The first 20 selected articles were organized in a table that identified the article, noted any referenced wellbeing frameworks and unpacked conceptualizations of wellbeing. Screenshots of wellbeing models were included in the table if they existed. To help identify core domains that should be included in the Indigenous Connectedness Framework, I analyzed all of the visual wellbeing models that were initially found in the literature search. Table 1 provides an overview of the common wellbeing concepts found in the literature.

Authors defined Indigenous wellbeing in holistic, collective and interconnected ways. Through a process of cross-comparison and content analysis, Indigenous wellbeing included the hypothesized concepts of family, community and environmental connectedness. The literature also had intergenerational, cultural and spiritual concepts that expanded upon the initial Indigenous Connectedness Framework. A decision was made to include cultural

**Table 1.** Qualitative content analysis of Indigenous wellbeing.

Wellbeing concepts	Absolon (2010) Indigenous wholistic theory	Blackstock (2011) Breath of life theory	Cross et al. (2011) Relational worldview	Hazel and Mohatt (2001) AK Native worldview	Kawagley (2006) Yupiaq worldview	Mark and Lyons (2010) Conceptual model of Maori health and illness	McGregor, Morelli, Matsuoka, and Minerbi (2003) Ecological model of Hawaiian wellbeing	Priest, MacKean, Davis, Briggs, and Waters (2012) Socioecological model of child wellbeing
Individual	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Family	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Community	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Environment	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Intergenerational	X	X				X		X
Spirit	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Culture	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Child focus								X
Collective	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

connectedness within the concept of spiritual connectedness because the way the authors described the concept and mechanisms of culture and spirit seemed to fully overlap. Spirit as a concept is preferred because culture is a newer concept linked to colonization (Duran & Duran, 1995). Overall, the examination of the first eight wellbeing articles aided the selection of the core connectedness concepts for the Indigenous Connectedness Framework. After identifying the core concepts, an additional literature search was completed to examine intergenerational, family, community, environmental and spiritual connectedness in greater depth. Connectedness concepts were interwoven with the mechanisms. The next analytical move unpacked the actions, activities, or mechanisms to underline the ways connectedness was fostered.

## Results

### *Intergenerational connectedness*

Intergenerational connectedness involves an embeddedness in a continuous history. Many kinship practices teach children about their connection to their ancestors and future generations (Absolon, 2010; Blackstock, 2011; McCubbin, McCubbin, Zhang, Kehl, & Strom, 2013). Naming practices, knowledge of ancient songs and spoken Indigenous languages are examples of historical practices that link children to past and future. Senungetuk (2017) stated, "Practicing the ways of the ancestors in the time of the present, ensures that the ancestors of the future will maintain their sense of interconnectedness with Inupiaq ways of being" (p. 237). This relationship with the past and future creates an awareness of responsibility to do the best we can, not just for ourselves, but for all generations.

History is about power (Smith, 1999). Colonial history has marginalized many Indigenous groups (Smith, 1999). Children need to know the truth of why things are the way they are today by learning about their history from an Indigenous perspective (Wexler, 2009). Knowledge of

family and community history can help youth understand where they fit in this cultural disruption and repair process (Fryberg, Covarrubias, & Burack, 2013). Knowledge of the real history can shift the gaze off individual struggles to the need for a community level response (Evans-Campbell, 2008; Kirmayer, Gone, & Moses, 2014; Schultz, Cattaneo, et al., 2016; Wexler, 2009). Truth can help people move past anger and fear and shift to love and determination. This is why changing the narrative is vitally important. Youth need to learn about their communal strength and resilience and that there is a reason they are here today.

Intergenerational connectedness develops through an awareness of a continuous history, an ability to speak the language of the ancestors and generational knowledge of the land. Children that have intergenerational connectedness will have a grounded identity, guidance on how to live a good life based on generations of experience and will lead to the passage of knowledge for the children to come. Intergenerational connectedness leads to an awareness that we are never alone in this universe.

### *Family connectedness*

A family unit can be a biological and/or spiritual relationship between two or more people (Red Horse, 1997). The establishment of familial relationships happens through blood, clans, adoption, namesakes, marriage, friendship and community (Absolon, 2010; Day, 2016; Kawagley, 2006; Kral, Idlout, Minore, Dyck, & Kirmayer, 2011; Red Horse, 1997). Indigenous families share a nurturing bond and mutual interdependence that extends beyond the nuclear family (Hand, 2005; Kral et al., 2011; Lucero & Bussey, 2016). Being part of a family assigns certain responsibilities to persons based on role, generational standing and cultural values (Hand, 2005; Red Horse, 1997). "Every age cohort is accorded respect because each fulfills critical functions in the community" (Red Horse, 1997, p. 245). In many Indigenous communities, all Elders

are referred to as grandparents, all youth are brothers, sisters and cousins, all non-parental adults are aunts and uncles and everyone is responsible for the care and safety of the children (Bigfoot & Schmidt, 2010).

Families are essential to child wellbeing. The family structure provides the foundation for a child's cultural identity as well as a conduit for passing on values, beliefs and family traditions and practices (Hand, 2005; Martin & Yurkovich, 2014). Relationships with family members socialize children (Martin & Yurkovich, 2014). Grandparents provide an invaluable role of telling stories to children, which pass on tribal knowledge and values (Robbins, Scherman, Holeman, & Wilson, 2005). Cajete (2000) said all adults in a family were a child's parent because everyone was responsible for teaching and guiding children. Some of the tribal values taught by family members through stories and modeling include love and respect for nature, respect, showing appreciation, courage, unselfishness, hard work, balance and spirituality (Robbins et al., 2005).

The family connectedness develops in several ways. In one study, healthy families were "close-knit," spent time together, helped each other and provided a sense of belonging (Martin & Yurkovich, 2014). Another study found that good communication between family members, visits, going on the land together, sharing food and participation in many family activities promotes family connectedness and wellbeing (Kral et al., 2011). Naming ceremonies are another mechanism of family connectedness because they help children maintain connections to their ancestors, relatives and link families together whether they are blood related or not (Craig, 1996; Kawagley, 2006). The Indigenous concept of family connectedness indicates that children need to build strong relationships with family outside the parent-child dyad.

### *Community connectedness*

The concept of community has been described as a social group that is based on location and/or social relationships and provide a sense of belonging to a collective (Cajete, 2000; Goodman, Bunnell, & Posner, 2014; Hill, 2006; McGregor, Morelli, Matsuoka, & Minerbi, 2003; Roffey, 2011; Schultz, Cattaneo, et al., 2016; Senungetuk, 2017). Communities shape both individual and collective identities (Hill, 2006; Kirmayer, Simpson, & Cargo, 2003; Priest, Mackean, Davis, Briggs, & Waters, 2012). Communities have a common history that supports relatedness (Haakanson, 2002). Most people are members of multiple communities (Goodman et al., 2014). For example, a child might belong to a tribal community, a school, a neighborhood, an athletic team or a LGBTQ community. Relationships grow within families and communities.

Cajete (2000) stated, "Through community Indian people come to understand 'personhood' and their connection to the 'communal soul' of their people" (p. 86). Cornthassel (2012) describes personhood as the "interlocking features of language, homeland, ceremonial cycles, and sacred living histories" (p. 89). The core elements of sovereign nations also contain these features of personhood (McGregor et al., 2003). Individual and community

identities overlap, and communities provide the foundation for sovereign nations to thrive.

Community connectedness is the foundation of many Indigenous social structures (Schultz, Cattaneo, et al., 2016). Communities instill cultural values surrounding responsibility and accountability (Roffey, 2011) and define the rules and social norms (McGregor et al., 2003; Schultz, Cattaneo, et al., 2016). Healthy communities provide a support system and safety net (Finlay, Hardy, Morris, & Nagy, 2010; LaFromboise, Hoyt, Oliver, & Whitbeck, 2006). Many community organizations facilitate community connectedness for children (Priest et al., 2012). When families are unable to give children guidance and support then the community steps in because everyone has a part in uplifting the health and wellbeing of children (LaFromboise et al., 2006). Lucero and Bussey (2016) state that children who "continue living in their tribal community are often able to retain their family, kinship, clan, community and cultural bonds" (p. 116). Each member of a community has a role and gift to share that ensures each person's needs are met (Campbell, 2002). Prior to western education systems, youth connected with community members through apprenticeships that fostered their natural gifts and specialties (R. Atuk, personal communication, December 18, 2017; Ongtoogook, 2000). Children belong to families and communities and affect the wellbeing of both.

Several activities and common cultural practices support children's community connectedness. Communities host celebrations, ceremonies and gatherings (Mayo, 2002). Subsistence activities often bring communities together through ceremonial processes and sharing (Noongwook, 2002). The ability to speak tribal languages support a sense of belonging within a community (Cornthassel, 2012). The creation of a sense of belonging is important for children because it teaches the interdependence and interrelatedness of everything (Hill, 2006). This awareness of community shapes children's choices, behavior and breaks down a barrier of false separation.

Evans-Campbell (2008) and Schultz, Walters, Beltran, Stroud, and Johnson-Jennings (2016) stress the importance of expanding our health and wellness interventions to include a person's family and community. Western ontologies focus too much on the individual alone. McGregor et al. (2003) stated, "What happens to an individual affects the family. This in turn, affects the community, and vice versa. Thus cohesive, healthy, functional families generally produce healthy individuals, who ultimately contribute to healthy communities" (p. 110). Within an Indigenous worldview, each person is vital to the community and is part of an interconnected whole. A community-centered approach to wellbeing recognizes the reciprocal relationships that exist between individuals and a collective. The implementation of multidimensional interventions that focuses on the whole may prove to be more successful in Indigenous communities.

### *Environmental connectedness*

The environment is both a natural setting of land and water and a socially determined sense of place (Kemp, 2011; McMahan, Reck, & Walker, 2007). One place can have



several names that represent the “voice of the land” with exact descriptions and instructions on how to relate with that landscape (Anungazuk, 2007, p. 190). Herbert O. Anungazuk (2007) from Wales, Alaska said, “We have an alliance with the earth. Each one of us does and some of us as a people have continued to grasp this alliance and have anchored it into our hearts, our minds, and souls” (p. 189). The alliance that Mr. Anungazuk speaks of is the recognition that the earth provides the means for our life and survival through food, air, water and shelter. As Bang et al. (2014) emphasized, “The land is, therefore we are” (p. 9). This relational difference is very significant because the land is not a separate other.

For Indigenous Peoples, the land is inseparable from the concept of being and includes a physical and spiritual bond for the sustenance of life (Brown, McPherson, Peterson, Newman, & Cranmer, 2012; Kawagley, 2006; McGregor et al., 2003). Even when tribal people move to urban settings, they carry their connection to ancestral lands and ways of knowing with them (Senungetuk, 2017). In Alaska, the name of the land is within many tribal people’s collective name, which demonstrates the way land is at the core of Indigenous identity. The environment provides a foundation for human identity and way of life.

Indigenous connectedness to land is key to health and wellbeing (Gran-O’Donnell, 2016; Mark & Lyons, 2010). Indigenous language, culture and identity are constructed and learned through relationship with the land (Bang et al., 2014; Cajete, 2000; Goodkind, Gorman, Hess, Parker, & Hough, 2015; Kawagley, 2006). As elucidated by Walters, Beltran, Huh, and Evans-Campbell (2011),

The earth (or land) is both literally and figuratively the first and final teacher in our understanding of our world, communities, families, selves and bodies. With such understanding it can be argued that as the land or relationship to land is impacted—physically or metaphorically—so are bodies, minds, and spirits. (p. 167)

This connectedness to the land follows an eco-spiritual perspective that derives from Indigenous knowledge of the environment and spirituality (Coates, Gray, & Hetherington, 2006). Cajete explained, “The Native view of the landscape is a metaphoric map of place that is humanistic, sacred, feminine, in motion, creative, nurturing, and the source of all their kinship” (p. 186). The land is not simply a physical place or a separate “other.”

Land connectedness assists with efforts to revitalize and reclaim culturally specific knowledge and practices (Goodkind et al., 2015). Traditional ecological knowledge teaches the interrelatedness to all of creation (Schultz, Walters, et al., 2016). The environment provides histories, memories, meaning and ways to think and be in the world (Bang et al., 2014; Kemp, 2011; Mark & Lyons, 2010; Schultz, Walters, et al., 2016). Indigenous ways of life are highly specific to the land that their community has lived on for centuries (Cajete, 2000). The ceremonial practice of songs and dances represent a connection with ancestral lands and animals of a specific region and place (Senungetuk, 2017). Land contains Indigenous ancestral

knowledge (Schultz, Walters, et al., 2016). An example of ancestral knowledge on the land is the existence of inuksuit, which are giant rock formations that identify places to hunt, mark passageways, or ward off intruders (Hallendy, 2000). The ancestral presence in the land also exists within tools, homes, camps and technologies that were developed and passed on to future generations (Kawagley, 2006).

Many activities promote environmental connectedness. Children need to engage in outdoor play and exploration (Kawagley, 2011b). To have relationship with the land includes a kinship with animals and plants that co-exist with human beings (Absolon, 2010; Anungazuk, 2007; Brown et al., 2012; Kawagley, 2011a). Children are taught land-based knowledge through subsistence skills and activities in a spirit of love and respect (Kawagley, 2006). Environmental connectedness is so important for children because it acknowledges the source of life, the miracle of creation and shifts the worldview away from a belief that the environment is an object to extract, exploit or sell. The health of everybody and everything completely depends on the health of the earth.

### *Spiritual connectedness*

The human spirit has been described as the “breath” (Napoleon, 1996) or life force energy (Cajete, 2000). Everything has spirit (Cajete, 2000; Wolsko, Lardon, Mohatt, & Orr, 2007). Feral (1998) stated that when we think about physics, there are not any “things,” only connections that exchange energy, which shows how we are all part of one “inseparable web of connections” (p. 253). While it is difficult to describe spirit in definitive ways, spirituality is generally understood to be a protective factor (Evans-Campbell & Walters, 2006; Grandbois & Sanders, 2009; Hovey, Delormier, & McComber, 2014) and spiritual practices help people achieve balance and harmony in their lives (Cajete, 2000; Cross et al., 2011; Hodge et al., 2009; Mark & Lyons, 2010). Spiritual connectedness is the “unity of mind, body, and spirit” (Mark & Lyons, 2010, p. 1757).

People’s cultural way of life and spiritual connectedness seem to be synonymous. Many cultural practices are spiritual practices. Spiritual activities include participation in ceremonies and rituals (Cross et al., 2011; McMahan et al., 2007; Red Horse, 1997), connection with the land (Coates et al., 2006; Kawagley, 2006; McGregor et al., 2003), and storytelling (Cajete, 2000; Cross et al., 2011; Rountree & Smith, 2016). At an Alaska Native child welfare conference, Yup’ik elder, Harold Napoleon shared that spirits need love, humor, truth and beauty and our ideas and ways of doing this are based on specific cultural beliefs and spiritual practices (personal communication, April 9, 2008). Culture includes natural laws, knowledge, set roles and day-to-day activities. Culture and spirit can be observed and experienced through art, names, beauty, dance, songs, music, history, foods, clothing, home structures, games, transportation, science, education, hairstyles, tattoos, subsistence lifestyle and language. Cultural and spiritual connectedness are interchangeable. While culture and spiritual practices change over time, culture and spirit never cease.

The revitalization of Indigenous languages is a mechanism for maintaining spiritual connectedness. Indigenous languages are spirit medicine, identity, life breath and connection to the ancestors (Twitchell, 2013). The foundation of a culture and community is in the language (Pingayak, 2003). Waziyatawin (2005) said,

In the beginning, the Great Mystery gave us our languages. Through our languages we were given a way to name, categorize, conceptualize, and relate to the world around us. Through our languages we were given a way of life . . . In saving our languages, we will be saving our ways of life and our ways of relating with the universe. We will save ourselves. (p. 109)

Language influences a person's ontology, axiology and epistemology (Leonard, 2011). Indigenous language speaking influences spiritual connectedness because it fosters the development of traditional knowledge, spirituality, communication skills and self-esteem (John, 2011). People learn how to relate with one another through language and culture (Martindale & Mork, 2011). For example, it is a common practice for Indigenous people to introduce themselves in their language by identifying their family and place where their family comes from and this process "makes their spirits stronger" (Martindale & Mork, 2011).

Language learning shapes who children are (John, 2011; Kawagley, 2011b; Martindale & Mork, 2011). Children that can speak their Indigenous language can communicate with Elders about traditional family ties, clans, ancient stories and songs, ceremonies, subsistence skills and traditional laws (John, 2011, p. 283). Speaking a language is the same as speaking a heritage (John, 2011). Indigenous languages preserve Indigenous histories (Sampson, 2011). Kawagley (2011b) stated, "By maintaining our languages, we are sustaining the ultimate standard of health and endurance of the human species" (p. 276). Children need to learn Indigenous languages to have easier access to cultural and spiritual teachings.

Language also comes from the land and nature (Anungazuk, 2007; Kawagley, 2011a). Kawagley (2011a) states, "As we lose our languages, more and more of us begin to take part in the misuse and abuse of nature" (p. 296). Children that learn their language and their connection to place will take better care of the earth (Kawagley, 2011a). Singing, dancing and drumming in the Indigenous language bring people to the spiritual level, and it is not just for the people, but also for the land and animals that make life possible (Kawagley, 2011b).

Spiritual connectedness includes the day-to-day activity and expression of love. Children need love, respect and belonging for their spiritual connectedness and wellbeing (Blackstock, 2011; Day, 2016; Hill, 2006; Priest et al., 2012; Red Horse, 1997; Robbins et al., 2005). Love and respect provide the energy and foundation for a good life. These expressions vary based on the cultural practices. The messages that children need to receive to build their spiritual connectedness are that their gifts, talents and contributions are valued and that families and communities care about them (Roffey, 2011). This process involves close observation, spending time with youth,

providing them with an education and acknowledgment of their contributions (Kawagley, 2011b). Kawagley (2011c) said that love balances the outer and inner ecologies of the young person (p. 307).

The balance of inner and outer ecologies is a shift from a false duality between "me" and "you" and sees the connectedness of "we" and "us" in everything. Spiritual connectedness is the integration of all the elements of Indigenous connectedness and provides a collective and holistic relationship with mind, body, spirit, family, community and environment. Spiritual connectedness is collectivist wellbeing (Coates et al., 2006; McCubbin et al., 2013). Kawagley (2006) states, ". . . time and time again the stories have said that all of the living and non-living parts of the Earth are one and that people are part of that wholeness" (p. 11). Making a worldview shift from the individual to a collective way of being changes the way we live. Collective living involves relationship, reciprocity and responsibility for the best interest of the land, community, family and children. To live and exist on this planet, we need to respect the interdependence and interconnectedness of all life.

Many Indigenous Peoples believe that life was made possible by a higher spiritual power that is often spoken in creation stories. Others have called this higher power a Great Spirit, Great Mystery, Creator, Universe, and God. This spirit is in everyone and everything. Elders have instructed Indigenous youth to "know who you are and where you come from," because their hope is that children will find their place within spirit and the web of Indigenous Connectedness.

Almost all of the cited authors in this article identify spirit and spirituality as a vitally important catalyst for wellbeing. Despite the stated importance of Indigenous spirituality, this is a topic that is frequently left out of social service discussions with families and communities (Cross, 2002; Hodge et al., 2009). Some people have lost the connection and understanding of what spirit and spirituality are. Other words are often used in place of "spirit," such as the word "culture," or "religion." Changing the word from spirit to something more westernized almost makes it seem like this element of who we are as spiritual beings is a choice or an option, when it's a fundamental part of what makes us *real human beings*.

Spiritual connectedness is found within all the other Indigenous connectedness concepts and brings connectedness together in a collective and holistic way. Spirit is the glue that binds everything together. This is where the epiphany shines through that the promotion of child wellbeing is collective wellbeing, and the promotion of collective wellbeing is what leads to child wellbeing. It's important to return to Indigenous knowledge and teachings about what makes us well so that ongoing harm ceases and restoration of wellbeing can take place. Each community has their own wisdom, practices and activities that assist with these efforts.

### *Connectedness mechanisms*

The analysis of the connectedness concepts included an intentional search for the actions or activities that promote

Connectedness Mechanisms				
<b>Family</b>	<b>Community</b>	<b>Land/Place</b>	<b>Intergenerational</b>	<b>Spirit</b>
Language	Language	Language	Language	Language
Spending time together	Celebrations	Hunting	Part of a continuous history	Ceremonies
Relational Roles	Dancing/Singing	Gathering	Awareness of historical trauma	Cultural values
Responsibility	Ceremonies	Teaching children	Responsibility to future generations	Art
Namesakes & Nicknames	Service to others	Learning from Elders	Learning ancestral teachings to pass on to younger generations	Stories
Adoption	Mentoring	Exploration	Participation in cultural and community activities	Love, Humor, Truth
Togetherness	Rules, values, norms	Observation	Knowledge of family lineage	Beauty
Trust and safety	Safety nets	Travel		Dance
Sharing and support	Family relationships	Care for animals		Subsistence foods
Helping Elders	Social groups	Stories		Songs/Dance/Drum
Stories, family history	Collective belonging	Playing outside		Connection to ancestors and future generations
Recognition of personal talents	Cooperative Teams	Access to clean water		Collective mentality
	Subsistence sharing	Fish camp		Spiritual teachings
	Strong leadership	Survival skills		

Figure 1. Connectedness Mechanisms.

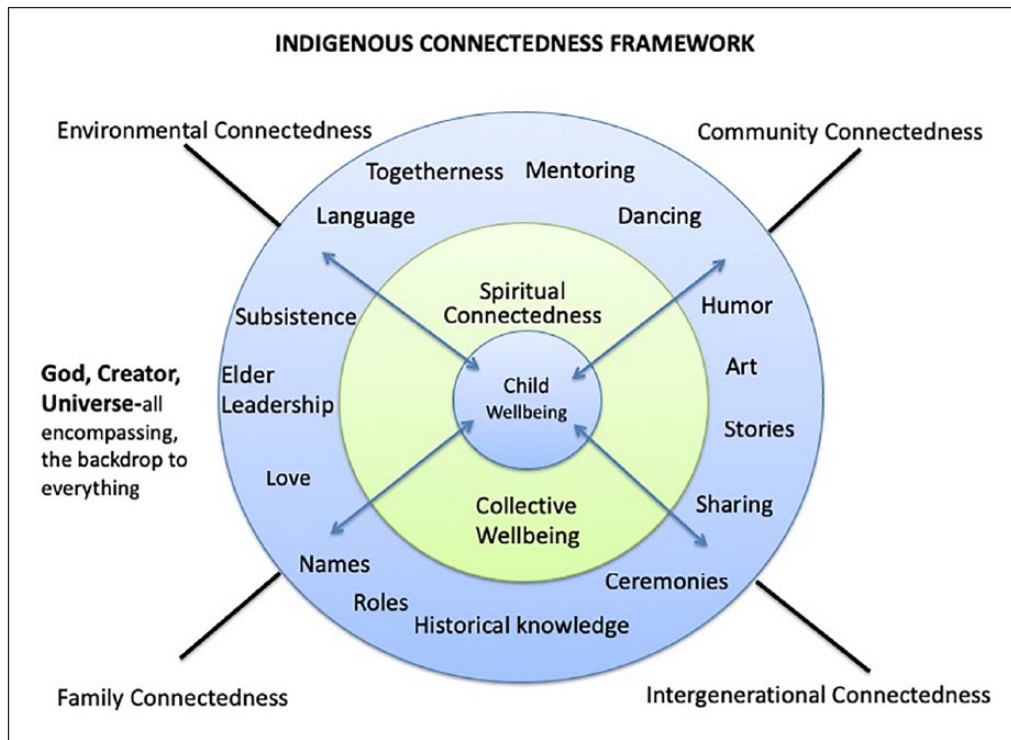


Figure 2. Indigenous Connectedness Framework.

connectedness. Figure 1 provides a detailed table of connectedness mechanisms. Language was a connectedness mechanism that applied to all five domains. Not all of these mechanisms may be applicable to diverse Indigenous communities, but they could help provide ideas for community-based wellbeing interventions. The practice of some mechanisms may be less strong due to colonization, so providing a sense of hope, overcoming shame and preparing to support community members with historical trauma response features may be important in revitalization efforts. What is most reassuring is that the connectedness practices

and activities are still strong and can remain strong for future generations.

*Indigenous connectedness framework*

The Indigenous Connectedness Framework represented in Figure 2 is an illustration depicting connectedness concepts, mechanisms of connectedness and the reciprocity that exists between child and collective wellbeing. It takes the form of a symbol that was found in old Inupiaq and Yup'ik tools, jewelry and artwork (Jones, 2003; Nelson,



1900). The intention of using this symbol is to represent Indigenous wellbeing in a holistic way. This circular symbol is similar to what is used in the Yup'ik Elluarrluteng Ilakutellriit model of healthy families (Association of Village Council Presidents, 2010), but the content of the framework is vastly different because their use of the circle is representative of a traditional life cycle.

In this model, God, Creator and Universe are the source of all of life, spirit and creation. The outer spokes represent intergenerational, family, environmental and community connectedness. The outer circle of the Indigenous Connectedness Framework represents some of the key mechanisms that build connectedness to environment, community, ancestors and future generations, family and spirit. The next inner circle represents what happens when connectedness is established and the false separation between all living things collapses. This second inner circle symbolizes the awareness of a spiritual and collective identity that remains central to who we are and where we come from. The innermost circle represents the individual child nested within everything. To live in an interconnected, interdependent world that places children in the center of all we do, promotes the wellbeing for all.

## Discussion

The Indigenous Connectedness Framework is a representation of common concepts of wellbeing across Indigenous communities and epistemologies. By identifying common etic concepts of Indigenous wellbeing, the Indigenous Connectedness Framework could be a tool that communities fill in with their own emic stories, worldviews, history, spiritual practices, connectedness mechanisms and visual models (Hawkins, Cummins, & Marlatt, 2004). The ongoing discussion of adaptation will need further guidance from Elders and Indigenous communities, knowing that Indigenous knowledge and ways of life do not remain static over time. Elders, fellow scholars and community members provided feedback and contributed to the study of connectedness and the depiction of this framework over the course of a year.

As this work on the Indigenous Connectedness Framework has been presented in various venues, people have brought forward very poignant questions pertaining to language revitalization, tribal sovereignty, suicide prevention, education reform, climate change, ongoing historical trauma, urban and rural differences and community organizing. Having a theoretical orientation of Indigenous wellbeing may be of some assistance to communities that are facing current challenges. Many Indigenous researchers are already embarking upon this work. It will take a community of researchers to modify, adapt and deepen our understanding of Indigenous connectedness and collective wellbeing.

## Limitations

This study of Indigenous connectedness has limitations. The initial search terms used for did not include Native American, which may have limited the number of articles

generated. The concepts chosen for the framework might not be the best fitting domains or terminology. For example, environmental connectedness includes both the land and place as important concepts, which may have limited the in-depth examination of each. Also, each connectedness concept could have been an entire article or book on its own, and this article provides more of an overview of the literature of that concept. Finally, some concepts such as spiritual connectedness are difficult to define and measure and yet they are a key component of wellbeing. By identifying some of the tangible mechanisms of connectedness, the Indigenous Connectedness Framework can assist with bringing theory back down to earth and provide something that is useful to Indigenous communities.

## Conclusion

In presenting Indigenous Connectedness to diverse elementary school students, it's fascinating to see children light up and be proud of their unique differences and find their common humanity. All children need to "know who they are and where they come from" so they remember and maintain their connectedness to family, community, past and future generations, the environment and spirit. Indigenous teachings contain what it means to be collectively well and could provide guidance to everyone on the ways we can rise above trauma rather than succumb to it. Living a life of connectedness could dramatically change the way we care for children, which will lead to healthy families, communities and a healthy Earth, just as Grandmother Rita Blumenstein eloquently stated. The time has come for us to continue to build upon the wisdom of our diverse and collective ancestors, for the love of our sacred children.

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