

RANJAN DATTA

## EMPOWERMENT: INTERCULTURAL ACTIVITIES IN A COMMUNITY GARDEN

My Indigenous<sup>1</sup> identity, cross-cultural socialization, unique interdisciplinary education, interdisciplinary research skills, and passion for understanding the concept of *empowerment*<sup>2</sup> as derived from *intercultural activities*<sup>3</sup> in a community garden make me uniquely suited to write this paper. Through my experience as an immigrant in Canada and food harvesting in a community garden, I have found that land-based intercultural activities can empower a community by enhancing children's interspecies communication, building community belonging, and developing decolonization<sup>4</sup> and reconciliation<sup>5</sup> skills

---

<sup>1</sup> I acknowledge that there is no accepted official definition of "Indigenous" adopted by any UN system (United Nations 2017) because of the diversity of Indigenous peoples. Instead, the system has developed a modern understanding of this term based on the following: self-identification as Indigenous peoples at the individual level and acceptance by a community as a member; historical continuity with pre-colonial and/or pre-settler societies; a strong link to territories and surrounding natural resources; distinct social, economic, or political systems; distinct language, culture, and beliefs; membership in a non-dominant group in society; and determination to maintain and reproduce ancestral environments and systems as distinctive peoples and communities. My identity as an Indigenous person from a different country connects me with the land and assists me in building trustful and respectful relationships with Indigenous culture, knowledge, and communities.

<sup>2</sup> The term *empowerment* in this paper refers "to increasing the spiritual, political, social, or economic strength of individuals and communities. It often involves the empowered developing confidence in their own capacities" (Sanderson 2012: 17). Like Sanderson (2012), I have not used the concept to imply a specific goal: "empowerment is not a destination, as the saying goes; it is a process – a lifelong process" (25).

<sup>3</sup> The concept of *intercultural activities* refers to various communities of people learning to value their own cultures, languages, and beliefs as well as those of others. Within intercultural activities, people from a variety of communities come to understand how personal, group, and national identities are shaped, and to appreciate the variable and changing nature of culture (Gondwe and Longnecker 2015). These activities involve people in learning about and engaging with diverse cultures in ways that recognize commonalities and differences, create connections with others, and cultivate mutual respect. Studies (Bartleet, Sunderland, and Carfoot 2016; Murphy and Rasch 2008) have defined intercultural activities as learning tools to describe the conditions that are required to produce positive intercultural outcomes between culturally diverse students and community members.

<sup>4</sup> Decolonization is a historical process specific to land and place (Tuck and Yang 2012). Tuck and Yang (2012) suggest that decolonization is not a metaphor that can be applied to social justice projects that do not result in changes in land distribution, use, and especially relationships. Here I use the term decolonization to indicate a process of healing, resisting, reclaiming, thriving,

(Draper and Freedman 2010; Robinson-O'Brien, Story, and Heim 2009; Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny 2004). I do not attempt to extract any generalizations from this study's findings, nor do I have any intention of making logical predictions about the lives of other communities (Datta 2017). Rather, I share narratives regarding how cross-cultural activities at our community garden became celebrations for our community gardeners and my family.

The purpose of this research paper is to document and communicate immigrant, refugee, Indigenous, and non-Indigenous community gardeners' experiences of empowerment through intercultural activities, such as Elders' and Knowledge-holders' stories; music, dance, and art activities; harvest-sharing; and cross-cultural ceremonies. The objective is to apply relational participatory action research (PAR) methodology to

- 1) explore how children build empowerment from their relationships with other species;
- 2) explore how gardeners build, engage, and envision their sense of belonging; and
- 3) determine whether and how community garden intercultural activities contribute to decolonization and reconciliation learning (Datta et al. 2015).

I have discussed the term *relational* as a conceptual theoretical framework for working with Indigenous communities in relation to issues of nature, land, and sustainability elsewhere (Datta 2015). This framework asserts that things are materially and spiritually connected through interactions with each other. I suggest that a relational way of understanding "centres on relationships and spirituality as a means of explaining not only actors but actions as well. Both actor and actions, in a relational ontology, cannot be explained without considering interactions with other actors" (Datta 2015: 103).

To explore these objectives, I first situate myself as researcher by answering two important questions: 1) How do community garden/land-based activities connect with my understanding of empowerment? 2) Why do I need to reclaim land-based empowerment as an immigrant in Canada? Secondly, I discuss why I chose relational PAR as my research methodology. Thirdly, I present some of the significant research findings. Finally, I conclude by discussing the significance of empowering tools for immigrants, refugees, and Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

## 1. SITUATING THE RESEARCHER

The concept of empowerment has various meanings to our Indigenous communities in Bangladesh. I can remember from our many Indigenous community Elders' stories that our intercultural activities in the community garden were an important part of our

---

protecting, learning, unlearning, imagining, remembering, connecting, sharing, and loving (Datta 2017). As a relational researcher, "I have learned that decolonization is not a checklist as knowledge is relational; it must be constantly communicated, negotiated, and agreed upon, with honest and sincere hearts" (Datta 2017: 3).

<sup>5</sup> Reconciliation can encompass regeneration, namely cultural regeneration and political resurgence (Simpson 2011). Here I use the term reconciliation to indicate a lifelong process of unlearning and relearning, becoming, and multiple of ways of knowing which can be seen as tools of empowerment for both researcher and participants.

empowerment, incorporating our spirituality, identity, language, culture, education, and food sovereignty.

The meaning of empowerment to our community was living, working, and acting together with the land (Datta 2015). For instance, our community garden/land was for both humans and non-humans (i.e., humans, plants, insects, and animals). In our cultural practice of collectivity, we (i.e., plants, water, insects, animals, and humans) all have agency; in other words, all have the ability to lead a life (Datta 2015). For instance, I learned from my Mom that “we need to respect all plants and animals; they are our gods.” This quote suggests that non-humans (i.e., animals, plants, Sun, Moon, Wind, and so on) have more ability than humans in our cultural practice. In our cultural practice, we shared our land with non-humans, and we were all connected by the land.

Empowerment is a relational responsibility in our traditional practice. We used to share our harvests with our community, particularly those who were unable to participate in cultivation. I remember that we did not need to go to the local market for food such as vegetables, fish, and meat. As a community we used to collect from our communal lands, rivers, and lakes. Most importantly, we did not need to harvest vegetables. My Mom used to collect vegetables from our surrounding land. She used to cook vegetable curry with 101 different vegetables, and all of these vegetables were collected from our surrounding land. We used to collectively protect our vegetation and fishing areas for both humans and non-humans; this was our first responsibility to our community.

My childhood and our community garden activities are mutually interconnected. I cannot describe who I am today without exploring my relationships with our community garden. Whenever I think of my relationships with my community garden, it empowers me regarding who I am; it guides what I need to do in critical moments; it provides me with mental strength; and it reminds me of my strong relationships with various plants, insects, and animals. I can remember from my childhood that if anybody ruined my plants in our garden, I would cry a lot. I used to dream about relationships with plants and insects; I still do.

Our community is spiritually interconnected with our community garden. I remember when my Mom used to tell me, “Every morning you need to pray to our community’s plants, animals, and insects as they are our gods who not only provide food for our survival but also keep our community connected, and provide learning and sharing space.” We used to start our day by praying to the Mother-land.

The community garden was a sacred place for our community. Our ancestors used to show us our surrounding lands and tell us, “We came from this land and will go back to this land. If we are able to take care of our land, the land will take care of us.” Our Elders and Knowledge-holders used to use our surrounding lands as our community garden: a teaching and learning place. I remember that they shared many spiritual and ceremonial stories in our garden. All of these stories provide me with strong mental support in my critical moments. Our stories reconnect me with the land, which is empowering for me.

Our Indigenous community’s land-based empowerment has been seriously disturbed by mainstream<sup>6</sup> peoples’ illegal activities in our ancestral lands, including illegal

---

<sup>6</sup> I use the term *mainstream* here to indicate the Muslim people in Bangladesh (Human Rights Congress for Bangladesh Minorities 2016). Minorities (i.e., Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, and various Indigenous communities) face many difficulties when it comes to equal land rights, policymaking, and education in

land-grabbing and settlement, forceful displacement, and profit-generating projects (Adnan 2004; Chakma 2010; Datta 2016). Like other minority families, our family was displaced three times from our land. We lost many community and family members because of mainstream people's exploitations. Mainstream people's land-grabbing destroyed our traditional sense of land-based empowerment by creating serious poverty, gender discrimination, mental stress, deforestation, and social inequality in our Indigenous communities (United States Department of State 2016). Because of mainstream peoples' illegal activities on our land, our traditional means of empowerment are under serious threat (Adnan 2004; Datta and Chapola 2017).

## 2. RECLAIMING LAND-BASED EMPOWERMENT

Many communities in Canada, particularly Indigenous, immigrant, and refugee communities, are living under poverty, mental stress, and discrimination (George, Thomson, Chaze, and Guruge 2015; Kirmayer et al. 2011). International students' families are economically, socially, and culturally more vulnerable than non-immigrants' families in Canada (Neborak 2013). For example, as an immigrant and international student family, we faced many challenges in Canada related to education, rent, food, jobs, and so on. We did not have an opportunity to connect with the land and land-based learning through growing our own food. With limited income most of the time, we were not able to think about fresh fruit and vegetables. When we needed to go shopping, we used to look for the cheapest and/or junk vegetables and fruit in the store. All of this created invisible mental stresses in our everyday life.

In addition, 2016 and 2017 reports by Canada's national public broadcaster indicate that immigrants and refugees might hold negative stereotypes about Indigenous peoples in Canada (CBC News 2017) and that "newcomers ...pick on the stereotypes existing of indigenous people" (CBC News 2016). Many international students' families, particularly from immigrant and refugee communities, do not have proper knowledge about Indigenous people, Indigenous culture, and Indigenous treaties in Canada (Datta 2016). In some cases, students hold incorrect ideas about reconciliation and Indigenous issues. For instance, Indigenous scholar Marie Battiste (2013) claims in her book *Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit* that "most Saskatchewan students came to university [University of Saskatchewan, Saskatchewan, Canada] with little or no understanding of the treaty relationships that their ancestors had negotiated and benefited from, and little understanding of how Aboriginal peoples had suffered" (126). She also suggests that this form of ignorance can create racism as these attitudes have negative impacts and place blame on the victim. Battiste (2013) sees this incorrect information or

---

Bangladesh (Human Rights Watch 2015). Minorities are often displaced from their original land, oppressed in their everyday practices, and excluded from any kind of major decision-making process in relation to their land (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2015).

ignorance regarding Indigenous issues in Canada as a form of colonization, which is “violent, ongoing, and traumatic” to Indigenous people (138).

The concept of a community garden and intercultural activities provided an empowering space for my family, which reconnected us with the land, provided food security, created land-based education, and facilitated opportunities to learn from and develop relationships with Canada’s Aboriginal peoples.

### 3. METHODOLOGY: RELATIONAL PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH (PAR)

I used relational participatory action research (PAR) methods to conduct this study and to discuss the intercultural community garden activities my family and I have been involved with for the last seven years. I chose PAR for this study as it empowers participants by respecting and giving importance to participants’ thoughts, experience, and spirituality (Blodgett, Schinke, Smith, Peltier, and Pheasant 2011). I have discussed elsewhere that

PAR is a collaborative process where participants and researchers both benefit. For example, PAR research methodology is helpful in providing researchers with insight into participants’ needs, values, and customs; it also improves community capacity, creates critical understanding of self-consciousness, and increases community-based participation and social action outcomes (Datta et al. 2015: 2).

Through intercultural community garden activities, I have learned that relational PAR can lead to empowerment for both researcher and participants as it serves participants’ needs, engages participants in the research processes, and provides a shared space (Datta 2015; Torre and Ayala 2009).

In relational PAR, I am both participant and researcher. My family and I came to the city of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada, in 2010 and obtained a University of Saskatchewan (U of S) residence in 2011. My international student family lived under the poverty line and most of the time we could not afford to purchase fresh vegetables and fruit from the local market. Right after we moved to the U of S residence, we got involved in our intercultural community garden.

The term *community garden* within this paper refers to a land-based practice, providing multiple opportunities to explore the role of community in a larger cross-cultural community. A community garden builds a strong opportunity for becoming, for multiple ways of knowing, and for sharing our own culture with other people. More importantly, I consider community gardens as a way to bridge different cultures, languages, and knowledge as an ongoing process. The community garden has countless benefits for a community beyond simply harvesting food. These benefits include access to fresh food, cultural or spiritual practices, financial gains, socialization, and education.

We (i.e., my family along with two other families from two different countries) started our community garden in 2011. With our community garden, we had an opportunity to harvest fresh vegetables for three months. In 2012, I created our community garden board to increase the number of community gardeners and develop intercultural bridges among the gardeners’ communities. We grew to include 40 community gardeners from 10 different countries. In 2015, our community gardeners increased to 60 families from 15 different countries, including 200 adults and 20 children. In 2016, our community garden had 120 gardener families from 25 different countries, including 400 adults, 100

children, and 20 Elders. As active gardeners, my family and I developed strong relationships with other gardeners. We did not differentiate between *we* and *they* in our garden. We considered all of us as *we*.

In relational PAR, we use our expert eyes and our understanding of community to work right in the middle of the community. We respond to what the community identifies as the issues it is facing, so instead of the questions always coming from a researcher who is curious about something, they are either co-created or come entirely from the community.

In this relational PAR, we told many stories together and we owned our stories equally. For example, we are currently collectively writing an academic book and reports for the City's Urban Development programs, and we present at community and academic conferences. I have often seen (Datta 2017) how relational PAR can offer social justice by building intercultural bridges for, by, to, and within participants as co-researchers, where participants become a part of the research, sharing community needs, contributing to community-building, and caring for the environment. Relational PAR helps to find ways to support – effectively, ethically, and appropriately – inclusion of cross-cultural communities' relational practice into environmental justice initiatives. The relational PAR in this research engages the question, "Why intercultural activities?" by focusing on relational ways of knowing communities' practices and cultures.

#### 4. METHODS

Following relational PAR in our community garden, this study used four data collection methods: a blanket exercise, art-based activities, individual and collective story-sharing, and a commonplace book. Here I describe why I chose these methods as being effective for this research.

The *blanket exercise* played a significant role in this relational PAR study because it helped to centre participants' spiritual and relational stories, memories, personal experiences, and expectations (Kovach 2010). We (i.e., Indigenous Elders and gardeners) stood on blankets that represented the land. We (as international students, immigrants, and refugees) shared our gardening stories and learned Canadian Indigenous pre-contact, treaty-making, and colonization stories. Through the blanket exercise, we also learned how Indigenous people create resistance, how to build reconciliation, and how to fulfill our responsibilities towards the land.

*Art-based* research activities (i.e., dance, music, and drawing) led to action-oriented outcomes for our community gardeners that were fundamental to our relational PAR. Art-based activities are an effective method of strength-based (Huss 2009) learning, stressing what people do well in their lives, and are therefore enjoyable for people to participate in. We organized many art-based activities for the children's land-based environmental science learning, building a bridge between formal and informal learning. This method also leads to culturally appropriate learning. For instance, through dance, music, and art activities, both children and adults had opportunities to get involved in an active process of meaning-making that is likely to have transformative potential in their everyday lives.

Individual and collective *story-sharing* is another effective relational PAR method, as it leads to culturally appropriate knowledge (Lavellée 2009; Simpson 2011). For instance,

through story-sharing we had opportunities to learn various relational stories regarding the significance of native plants, relationships with native plants, children's relationships with insects, spiritual stories, and land-based environmental science and health education. The story-sharing method began with a research topic of importance to the community with the aim of combining knowledge and action for social change (Christensen 2012; Lavalée 2009).

A *commonplace book* is a type of journal that is helpful for collecting personal experiences, feelings, ongoing interaction among co-researchers and other participants, and any other information related to traditional culture (e.g., poems, photographs, drawings, etc.) (Sumara 1996). Unlike a typical journal, a commonplace book was used in this study to engage individuals in everyday practice – activities involving the land, insects, plants, wind, water, sun, children, Indigenous stories, and so on. The commonplace book provided a space to represent a variety of experiences in a variety of forms. This choice was made because it enabled participants to have a better understanding of the research objectives by participating in the research data collection and analysis, and other research processes. In this research, my personal commonplace book was used for data analysis.

## 5. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Participants were involved in determining the thematic direction of data collection, collected and analyzed data through intercultural activities, verified results, and disseminated their findings in a public exhibit. We hoped that engaging community members in data collection and analysis and reporting procedures would contribute to equity by enhancing community empowerment, and that community members would be exposed to new knowledge and skills which could contribute to an enhanced understanding of, engagement with, and changes to their social engagement and environmental sustainability (Castleden, Morgan, and Lamb 2012; Castleden, Morgan, and Neimanis 2010). Most of the data used in this study is from the last six years of participatory activities, including the blanket exercise, art-based activities, individual and collective story-sharing, and the commonplace book. The following themes were used during individual and collective story-sharing:

- Why did you join this community garden?
- How does a community garden impact your everyday decision-making processes?
- How does your garden impact your physical, spiritual, mental, cultural, and economic life?
- Why are the community garden's intercultural activities important for your children's learning?
- How does your garden create belonging in a foreign land?
- How can community garden intercultural activities build a cross-cultural bridge among visible and invisible communities: First Nations, immigrant, refugee, and other?
- How does a community garden offer a bridge between formal and informal learning?

Thematic analysis of the transcripts involved deconstructing participant responses by identifying and grouping key words or phrases throughout the analysis. A continuous consent process was maintained throughout data collection, transcription, feedback, thematic analysis, and report writing.

## 6. RESULTS

This section includes the findings from the thematic analysis of intercultural activities. Three main themes were identified as significant elements of community empowerment in a community garden, including 1) children's interspecies communication and relationality as a form of empowerment, 2) building a sense of community belonging, and 3) development of decolonization and reconciliation skills.

### *Children's Interspecies Communication and Relationality as a Form of Empowerment*

Through my six years of community garden activities, I have learned that a community garden can create a bridge between classroom learning and practice that integrates the relational meanings of empowerment as a form of interspecies communication for children, providing a relational learning space, cross-cultural knowledge exchange, diversity, empowerment, and mental wellbeing. I see a community garden as a relational teacher who can teach us how we can live together, share, and care for each other. Here are some relational stories:

#### With Ladybugs

The children, including my two daughters, tried to build relationships with ladybugs. If any ladybug was separated from its family, the children tried to get it back to its family. The children tried to build relationships with ladybugs so that they could understand the ladybugs' needs. I used to observe that when my children went to the garden, they would run to the children's plots. I asked, "Why are you running?" They answered, "I want to say hi to my plants and ladybugs. I haven't seen them for a while."

#### With Butterflies

In summer, our community garden used to be full of different colours of butterflies. The children tried to find out which garden flower the butterflies liked best and why. I used to sit beside children who sat silently, trying to find out if a butterfly would sit on their hand. If a butterfly sat on their hand, the children were happy, seeing themselves as a good friend of butterflies. One of my daughters told me that butterflies test their food with their feet. She thinks that butterflies' feet are like their hands.

One of the children wrote the following poem to explain her relationship with butterflies:

I dance and play with my friends.

I move with my friends.

I am surrounded by all my friends; they are my family.

We love each other; we need each other; we are connected with each other.

We are one family with many members.



We are the same, but we look different in colour and size.

We share our space, food, and friends.

This poem explains well how a community garden plays an important role in building children's relationships with insects.

#### With Ants

Relationships with ants helped both children and ants. The children tried to find out why ants ran in groups and where they went. They followed ant activities closely and tried to find out how so many ants worked together. One of the children told me, "I like how ants like and help each other."

The children's discussions showed that ants' relationships can be used as a teaching tool for children to learn. A child said, "They [ants] are from the same family." Other children asked, "How can they be from one family? The family would be so big." Another child responded, "Maybe they are friends and they love each other so much." On a similar point, another child raised her hand and said, "I know why ants run together. Ants run all together so that they can collect more food and protect themselves if there is any danger." She showed us and said, "Look at this large piece of food and how many ants are carrying it. If they didn't work together, the food would be too heavy for one ant." I asked the children what else we know about ants. One child answered, "Ants can inform us if it will be a rainy day. If we follow ants, we can collect rainwater and save the water for our garden." I asked how she had learned about ants and rain. She told me she had learned from her mother and grandparents that "if there is a possibility of rain, ants won't be outside. If we don't see ants outside, there is a high possibility of rain."

#### With the Wind

The wind helped build relationships with plants. For example, one of the children said:

*The wind blows through my body, my hair, eyes, skin, mind, hands. When the wind comes, I feel that I am flying with the wind, dancing with all the plants. When the wind blows, I also feel I become we. This we includes different plants, insects, big trees, etc. We dance and sing together.*

#### With Bees

Relational activities with bees played a significant role in building the children's understanding about bees. For example, one of my daughters asked me, "Daddy, why don't we come to the garden after school every day?" I asked her, "Why do you want come to the garden?" and she replied, "Well, we can play in the garden and learn about different types of plants and insects." Again I asked, "What else do you want to do in the garden?" and she replied, "We can see how different insects and plants live together. We can also learn how we can live together and protect each other." I asked her if she could give me any examples: "Why should we care about insects?" She gave an excellent example that I did not expect: "I learned from my school teacher that bees are so important for our plants and we are not protecting them. If we [their classmates and teacher] could come here [to the community garden], I could explain and show my friends how to protect them [bees] and why." I again

asked her, “How are we [adults and the university] not protecting bees and how can we protect them?” She said, “Look. Your university is building and building, cutting down the bees’ plants and putting in green grass.” She asked me, “Can you show me one bee in this whole grassy field?” Then she said, “Look how many bees are in this garden.” I didn’t teach her about the relationship between bees and gardens. She might learn about bees from her school or friends, but in our community garden she is able to connect her knowledge with practice. Through this garden, she not only knows what we are doing wrong but also what we should do.

### *Building a Sense of Community Belonging*

Participants consistently suggested involvement in the intercultural activities in the community garden provided many opportunities to build relationships with other gardeners, non-gardeners, Indigenous Elders, and others beyond the garden through common interests in produce, harvesting, composting, learning, and sharing. Through intercultural activities in the community garden, we created a sense of community and an understanding of inclusiveness, and fulfilled community needs.

### Building a Sense of Community

Building a sense of community is one of the significant parts of a community garden. Our community garden brought together various cultures, traditions, and ceremonies through music, dance, art, and story-telling activities. The Elders’ story-telling became a teaching tool in our garden, and it provided community-building opportunities for our gardeners. For instance, one of the gardeners said,

*As an immigrant, we were given new life in a new country. This community garden has given us a space for creating belongingness with the land and communities. Here we created a family away from our family. We created a community away from our community. We created culture away from our community, and we created a home away from home.*

Another gardener explained building a sense of community through the community garden program by saying, “For me, learning from diverse peoples has made me feel more connected to my family and helped me to understand more of what community is all about.”

The above quotes indicate how participation and involvement in intercultural activities in a community garden provide the opportunity to create a sense of belonging in a foreign land. This is particularly significant for immigrant and refugee communities who have been forcibly displaced from their family, land, and culture. Through cross-cultural activities, the community garden has proven to be an exemplary place for immigrant, refugee, and international student families to connect with one another, access campus and city support, and participate in ceremony.

### Building Inclusiveness

Inclusiveness became an important part of our community garden. For instance, we have 120 gardener families from 28 different countries, including 400 adults, 60 children, and more than 10 Elders. Our 120 gardeners are from diverse backgrounds; for example, there

are gardeners from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) community, single people and families, and First Nations. Through this diverse inclusiveness, we have learned how to create a sense of community that cares about diversity. By creating these forms of inclusiveness, we have seen how inclusiveness can address many static barriers such as gender, religion, age, and nationality. One of the immigrant Elders said, "Inclusiveness is important for all immigrant and refugee communities who want to call Canada home." This Elder also said, "Inclusiveness does not only refer to current generations; it shows a direction for future generations."

## Building Programs

From 2013, we introduced various intercultural activities in our community garden: first, decolonization through the blanket exercise and anti-racist workshop; second, learning through music, dance, and children's art activities; third, community-building through cross-cultural cooking programs, harvest-sharing, and networking; and fourth, building environmental responsibility through Indigenous story-telling, composting, and water and bee protecting. All of these activities were developed through city immigrant and refugee centres, an Indigenous community garden, and other environmental organizations. All of these new programs positively changed our understanding of community, empowerment, and culture. These new programs stimulated dialogue, encouraged learning, and supported collaborative actions by building community among immigrant, refugee, Indigenous, and non-Indigenous people. One of the gardeners explained how our new programs empowered her:

*This community garden's intercultural activities are new for me. Prior to this community garden, even back home, I was not able to connect with other people because of cultural barriers, but this community broke these cultural boundaries. I do not feel gardeners are outside of our community. I know all of the gardeners, they care about us, and we care about them. This gives me lots of strength. I can talk about many challenging issues in our life with my fellow gardeners, and I can find many solutions.*

The above comment highlights this gardener's sense of belonging and relationship through the intercultural activities with other community gardeners and through working collaboratively.

### *Developing Decolonization and Reconciliation Skills*

The research findings indicate that intercultural activities in a community garden lead to gardeners' decolonization and reconciliation.

## Decolonization Skills

The Canadian history of decolonization shared by Indigenous Elders and Knowledge-holders with immigrant and refugee communities was significant for both building relationships with Indigenous communities and creating a sense of belonging for immigrant and refugee communities. Through the blanket exercise, our gardeners had numerous opportunities to meet directly with First Nations Elders and Knowledge-holders and hear stories of colonization in Saskatchewan. Immigrant and refugee communities also

had opportunities to learn about our responsibilities for decolonization. Elders explained why decolonization stories were important. They explained how “decolonization is a continuous life-long unlearning and relearning process.” One of the gardeners wrote a poem regarding how immigrant and Indigenous Elders’ stories are important for her learning: “I love the way you teach me through stories, songs, and drumming.”

### Building Reconciliation

The concept of reconciliation is not clear for many new immigrant and refugee communities. One of our Indigenous Elders said, “Without proper knowledge, it can be easily misunderstood.” Our community garden’s Indigenous Elders used to come to our garden and explain the importance of reconciliation for immigrant and refugee communities. One of the Indigenous Elders said, “Reconciliation is not only for Indigenous people but for all Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Education is the key to reconciliation.” According to this Elder, “Reconciliation is a continuous and intergenerational healing and relearning process. Through reconciliation we need to reconnect with land, ancestors, and spirituality.” Similarly, the Elder also emphasized the intercultural community garden initiatives. He said a community garden should not only be used for harvesting food; “It can be used as a relearning and reconnection with the Motherland.”

In reflecting on Indigenous Elders’ and Knowledge-holders’ stories, gardeners found reconciliation to be a very important learning piece. For instance, one gardener explained his reflection on Indigenous Elders’ and Knowledge-holders’ stories about reconciliation by saying, “The speakers who are Indigenous Elders and Knowledge-holders are fantastic. They help me to keep thinking about what type of community member I want to be and spark lots of thoughts about education as a whole.” Another gardener said:

*I learned that there is always more to learn. Indigenous Elders and Knowledge-holders have a lot of very important things to say and I am glad that, even though I am new to this country, I get to see and do all of these things as a responsible community member now. I truly believe that Indigenous Elders’ and Knowledge-holders’ stories are crucial for my empowerment in this country with proper responses and knowledge.*

Both quotes emphasize the importance of reconciliation for immigrant, refugee, and non-Indigenous communities in our community garden.

## 7. DISCUSSION

The concept of empowerment has many meanings for our community gardeners, particularly how we want to live our lives given that the structures we wish to transform are structures that persist (Kabeer 2000; Begum and Khondaker 2008). Our intercultural activities in the community garden were essential components in exploring the meaning of empowerment, and our activities helped us to explore opportunities beyond research for Community-based learning and reflection on land relationships. We explored the concept of empowerment as a process for strengthening our community voice, developing our

collective wisdom, encouraging our agency to share our knowledge with others, and inspiring action to address critical learning issues that impact our lives.

### *Relationality*

Relational practice in a community garden is fluid (Datta 2015; Wilson 2008); it can form a bridge between education and practice in respecting the land. Louv (2005) claims that children who are close to nature have less physical and mental illness than children who are disconnected from nature through urbanization. Being close to nature is significantly beneficial for children's emotional support. In connecting with nature, children make friends and develop the ability to protect themselves. Pelo (2009) says our disconnection from the land and the natural world has brought about many kinds of physical problems that are positively connected with social dysfunction. Children's interspecies relationships in our community garden show that our children are connected to the land; they can feel, smell, and hear their relationships. One of the Elders suggested that children's relationships with the environment are significant for developing environmental responsibility (i.e., protecting the environment, animals, and traditional sustainability culture). Indigenous scholar Shawn Wilson (2008) indicates that in real life we are all relational. He suggests that our relationships define who we are. In our community garden, the children's relationships with insects demonstrate how our children are developing a sense of responsibility toward the environment.

### *Community-Building*

The theme of community-building relates to the role community gardens can play in building relationships and facilitating intercultural integration in communities. Relationships are interconnected with positive behavioural, social, spiritual, and mental health outcomes (Christensen 2012). Community-building through intercultural activities is of particular importance in our community garden, especially as we give importance to community voice. The community lives through whatever it is that's going on and they have powerful stories to tell. Communities know about the needs and the agencies that work directly with them. In our community garden, community knowledge is privileged and valued. Similar to findings by Glover, Shinew, and Parry (2005) and Kingsley and Townsend (2006), this research demonstrates that intercultural community gardening can help bridge the gap between diverse communities. It is clear that there is potential to learn and generate new ideas by connecting with each other, particularly through connections between Indigenous and non-Indigenous immigrant, refugee, and international student families. This intercultural knowledge can then be applied to one's own gardening context, among one's friends and family, or to building a sense of inter-cultural community.

### *Decolonization and Reconciliation Skills*

Decolonization and reconciliation are important factors for social, environmental, and physical wellbeing, particularly for new immigrants', refugees', and international students' families (Harris et al. 2014; Louv 2005). Community-building intercultural activities, such as music and dance, are often described as crucial in re-making, re-interpreting, and re-enacting cultural identity in diasporic contexts (Purewal and Lallie 2013). Purewal and Lallie's (2013) study on music and empowerment in the UK, USA, and Canada demonstrated that music and dance are of paramount importance in building an

intercultural community. Studies (Poole 2004; Mooney 2008; O'Neill 2015) suggest that practising traditional music and sacred songs serves another significant purpose: it brings empowerment for the community. In the oral exegesis offered by Elder members of the community, dance represents a condensed form of enlightenment. Likewise, Indigenous Elders' and Knowledge-holders' stories in our community garden led to a direct connection to alternative stories of Canadian colonization and our responsibilities for immigrant, refugee, and non-Indigenous children and adults. According to Indigenous Elders, "Decolonization is the first step in (re)building relationships with the land." Greenwood (2013) says that decolonization and reconciliation through land-based practice is more than a political goal; this process is living and it provides a sense of belonging. Indigenous scholar Linda Smith (1999/2013), in her book *Decolonizing Methodology: Research and Indigenous People*, observes that, "Coming to know the past has been part of the critical pedagogy of decolonization. To hold alternative histories is to hold alternative knowledge" (34). Another land-based scholar, Louv (2005), discusses how the process of decolonization can challenge our ways of knowing: *Who am I? Where am I coming from? Why am I here? What are our relationships with our land?* As Smith and Thornton discuss, decolonization not only creates a new common space for all; it is also about challenging power and uneven relationship networks.

Our community garden's intercultural activities, including music, dance, artwork, blanket exercise, and story-telling, were helpful to a land-based decolonization and reconciliation practice. Our Indigenous and immigrant Elders' story-telling in the community garden deconstructed Canadian stories in empowering ways so that immigrant, refugee, and international students' families could create belonging in a new land. Indigenous and immigrant Elders explored questions such as, "Who were its [this land's] original inhabitants, both human and other-than-human? What are Indigenous people's stories of the place? What were – and what are – Indigenous place-relationships, and how did these relationships, and the place itself, change or persist over time?" (Greenwood 2013: 97).

I learned that children's empowerment through relational activities in the community garden not only provided multiple ways of learning but also created critical thinking skills for the children. Through garden activities, the children showed many examples of how they can be engaged in critical discussions and how they can learn from each other without having a teacher. Therefore, I agree with Louv (2005) that relearning our relationships with the land from everyday practice can empower us and bring peace into one's self and community.

## 8. CONCLUSION

Focusing on intercultural activities lens on the immigrant, refugee, Indigenous, and non-Indigenous student communities in the city of Saskatoon unravels the meaning of empowerment. This study recommends rethinking the broad narrative about the concept of empowerment since many subcultures and marginalized Indigenous communities' identities have been subsumed under the hegemonic and taken for granted. Through the intercultural activities in our community garden, we attempted to uncover the complex entanglements between refugees, immigrants, and non-immigrants (Indigenous and non-

Indigenous) by accepting responsibility, which included building a relationship with Indigenous land-based knowledge, culture, and practice; respecting Indigenous treaties; accepting accountability for unlearning and relearning as a continuous process of reconciliation; and building a transnational community by challenging the issues of class, caste, gender, and ethnicity that regulate our home away from home.

## REFERENCES

- Adnan, Shapan. 2004. *Migration Land Alienation and Ethnic Conflict: Causes of Poverty in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*. Dhaka, Bangladesh: Research & Advisory Services.
- Bartleet, Brydie-Leigh, Naomi Sunderland, and Gavin Carfoot. 2016. "Enhancing Intercultural Engagement through Service Learning and Music Making with Indigenous Communities in Australia." *Research Studies in Music Education*, 38 (2): 173-191.
- Battiste, Marie. 2013. *Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit*. Saskatoon, SK: Purich Publishing.
- Begum, Nurun, and Mahfuzul I. Khondaker. 2008. "Immigrant Bangladeshi Communities and Intergenerational Conflict: The Need for Multicultural Education." *PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning*, 1 (17): 19-36.
- Blodgett, Amy T., Robert J. Schinke, Brett Smith, Duke Peltier, and Chris Pheasant. 2011. "In Indigenous Worlds: Exploring Vignettes as a Narrative Strategy for Presenting the Research Voices of Aboriginal Community Members." *Qualitative Inquiry*, 17 (6): 522-533. doi:10.1177/1077800411409885
- Castleden, Heather, Vanessa Sloan Morgan, and Christopher Lamb. 2012. "'I Spent the First Year Drinking Tea': Exploring Canadian University Researchers' Perspectives on Community-Based Participatory Research Involving Indigenous Peoples." *The Canadian Geographer*, 56 (2): 160-179.
- Castleden, Heather, Vanessa Sloan Morgan, and Aelita Neimanis. 2010. "Researchers' Perspectives on Collective/Community Co-Authorship in Community-Based Participatory Indigenous Research." *Journal of Empirical Research on Health Research Ethics*, 5 (4): 23-32.
- CBC News. 2016, January 28. "Meeting with Newcomers Aims to Counter Stereotypes of Indigenous People." *CBC/Radio-Canada*. Retrieved from <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/meeting-with-newcomers-aims-to-counter-stereotypes-of-indigenous-people-1.3423438>
- CBC News. 2017, May 15. "Journalist Bridges Connection between Refugees and Indigenous People." *CBC/Radio-Canada*. Retrieved from <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/journalist-bridges-connection-between-refugees-and-indigenous-people-1.4115311>
- Chakma, Bhumitra. 2010. "The Post-Colonial State and Minorities: Ethnocide in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh." *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 48 (3): 281-300.

- Chapola, Jebunnessa. 2008. *Labour Migration, Inter-Ethnic Relations and Empowerment: A Study of Khyang Indigenous Garments Workers, Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh* (MPhil Thesis). University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway.
- Christensen, Julia. 2012. "Telling Stories: Exploring Research Storytelling as a Meaningful Approach to Knowledge Mobilization with Indigenous Research Collaborators and Diverse Audiences in Community-Based Participatory Research." *The Canadian Geographer*, 56 (2): 231-242.
- Datta, Ranjan. 2015. "A Relational Theoretical Framework and Meanings of Land, Nature, and Sustainability for Research with Indigenous Communities." *Local Environment: The International Journal of Justice and Sustainability*, 20 (1): 102-113. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13549839.2013.818957>
- Datta, Ranjan. 2016. "Community Garden: A Bridging Program between Formal and Informal Learning." *Journal of Cogent Education*, 3: 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2016.1177154>
- Datta, Ranjan. 2017. "Decolonizing Both Researcher and Research and its Effectiveness in Indigenous Research." *Research Ethics*: 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1747016117733296>
- Datta, Ranjan, and Jebunnessa Chapola. 2017. "Indigenous and Western Environmental Resource Management: A Learning Experience with the Laitu Khyeng Indigenous Community in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), Bangladesh." *Native American and Indigenous Studies*, 4 (2): 52-80.
- Datta, Ranjan, Nyojy U. Khyang, Hla Kray Prue Khyang, Hla Aung Prue Kheyang, Mathui Ching Khyang, and Jebunnessa Chapola. 2015. "Participatory Action Research and Researcher's Responsibilities: An Experience with Indigenous Community." *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 18 (6): 581-599. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2014.927492>
- Draper, Carrie, and Darcy Freedman. 2010. "Review and Analysis of the Benefits, Purposes, and Motivations Associated with Community Gardening in the United States." *Journal of Community Practice*, 18 (4): 458-492.
- George, Usha, Mary S. Thomson, Ferzana Chaze, and Sepali Guruge. 2015. "Immigrant Mental Health, A Public Health Issue: Looking Back and Moving Forward." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 12 (10): 13624-13648.
- Glover, Troy D., Kimberly J. Shinew, and Diana C. Parry. 2005. "Association, Sociability, and Civic Culture: The Democratic Effect of Community Gardening." *Leisure Sciences*, 27: 75-92.
- Gondwe, Mzamose, and Nancy Longnecker. 2015. "Scientific and Cultural Knowledge in Intercultural Science Education: Student Perceptions of Common Ground." *Research in Science Education*, 45 (1): 117-147.
- Greenwood, David. 2013. "A Critical Theory of Place-Conscious Education." In *International Handbook of Research on Environmental Education*, edited by Robert B. Stevenson, Michael Brody, Justin Dillon, and Arjen Wals, 93-100. New York, NY: Routledge.



- Human Rights Watch. 2015. *Annual Report 2015*. New York, NY: Author. Retrieved from [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/news\\_attachments/english\\_annual\\_report-2015.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/news_attachments/english_annual_report-2015.pdf)
- Huss, Ephrat. 2009. "A Case Study of Bedouin Women's Art in Social Work: A Model of Social Arts Intervention with 'Traditional' Women Negotiating Western Cultures." *Social Work Education*, 28 (6): 598-616.
- Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. 2015. *Bangladesh: Indigenous People and Religious Minorities Still Affected by Displacement*. Geneva, Switzerland: Norwegian Refugee Council. Retrieved from <http://www.internaldisplacement.org/assets/library/Asia/Bangladesh/pdf/Bangladesh-Overview-Jul09.pdf>
- Iva, Irfath Ara. 2010. *Status of Minorities in Bangladesh, 2010: Annual Report from SAHR*. Dhaka, Bangladesh: South Asians for Human Rights. Retrieved from <http://www.southasianrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/Status-of-Minorities-Bangladesh-2010.pdf>
- Kabeer, Naila. 2000. *The Power to Choose: Bangladeshi Women and Labour Market Decisions in London and Dhaka*. New York, NY: Verso.
- Kingsley, Jonathon Yotti, and Mardie Townsend. 2006. "'Dig In' to Social Capital: Community Gardens as Mechanisms for Growing Urban Social Connectedness." *Urban Policy and Research*, 24 (3): 525-537.
- Kirmayer, Laurence J., Lavanya Narasiah, Marie Munoz, Meb Rashid, Andrew G. Ryder, Jaswant Guzder, Ghayda Hassan, Cécile Rousseau, and Kevin Pottie. 2011. "Common Mental Health Problems in Immigrants and Refugees: General Approach in Primary Care." *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 183 (12): E959-E967. <https://doi.org/10.1503/cmaj.090292>
- Kovach, Margaret. 2010. "Conversational Method in Indigenous Research." *First Peoples Child & Family Review*, 5 (1): 40-48.
- Lavalée, Lynn F. 2009. "Practical Application of an Indigenous Research Framework and Two Qualitative Indigenous Research Methods: Sharing Circles and Anishnaabe Symbol-Based Reflection." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8: 21-40.
- Louv, Richard. 2005. *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin.
- Mooney, Nicola. 2008. "Aaja Nach Lai: Performing and Practicing Identity among Punjabis in Canada." *Danse au Canada*, 30 (1): 103-124.
- Murphy, John W., and Dana Rasch. 2008. "Service-Learning, Contact Theory, and Building Black Communities." *The Negro Educational Review*, 59 (1-2): 63-78.
- Neborak, Jacklyn. 2013. *Family Reunification? A Critical Analysis of Citizenship and Immigration Canada's 2013 Reforms to the Family Class* (Working Paper No. 8). Toronto, ON: Ryerson Centre for Immigration & Settlement. Retrieved from [http://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/rcis/documents/RCIS\\_WP\\_Neborak\\_No\\_2013\\_8.pdf](http://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/rcis/documents/RCIS_WP_Neborak_No_2013_8.pdf)
- O'Neill, Susan. 2015. "Youth Empowerment and Transformative Music Engagement." In *The Oxford Handbook of Social Justice in Music Education*, edited by Cathy Benedict, Patrick Schmidt, Gary Spruce, and Paul Woodford, 388-405. Toronto, ON: Oxford University Press.

- Pelo, Ann. 2009. "A Pedagogy for Ecology." *Rethinking Schools*, 23 (4): 30-35.
- Poole, Adrian. 2004. "South Asian Music Education in Essex: An Ethnography of Bhangra." *British Journal of Music Education*, 21 (1): 7-24.
- Purewal, Navtej Kaur, and Hardinder Singh Lallie. 2013. "Sikh Kirtan in the Diaspora: Identity, Innovation and Revivalism." In *Sikh Diaspora: Theory, Agency, and Experience*, edited by Michael Hawley, 381-403. Leiden: Brill.
- Robinson-O'Brien, Ramona, Mary Story, and Stephanie Heim. 2009. "Impact of Garden-Based Youth Nutrition Intervention Programs: A Review." *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 109 (2): 273-280.
- Saldivar-Tanaka, Laura, and Marianne E. Krasny. 2004. "Culturing Community Development, Neighborhood Open Space, and Civic Agriculture: The Case of Latino Community Gardens in New York City." *Agriculture & Human Values*, 21 (4): 399-412.
- Sanderson, Joan. 2012. "Women for Women: Stories of Empowerment Activism in Northern Saskatchewan." *Pimatisiwin: A Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health*, 10 (1): 17-26.
- Simpson, Leanne. 2011. *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence*. Winnipeg, MB: Arbeiter Ring Publishing.
- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. 2013. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed Books. (Original work published 1999).
- Sumara, Dennis J. 1996. "Using Commonplace Books in Curriculum Studies." *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 12 (1): 45-48.
- Torre, Maria Elena, and Jennifer Ayala. 2009. "Envisioning Participatory Action Research *Entremundos*." *Feminism & Psychology*, 19 (3): 387-393.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353509105630>
- Townsend, Charles M. 2014. "'Keeping the Faith Alive': Teaching Sikh Kirtan in America." *Sikh Formations*, 10 (3): 335-354.
- Tuck, Eve, and K. Wayne Yang. 2012. "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1 (1): 1-40.
- United Nations. 2017. *Who are Indigenous Peoples?* Retrieved from [http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/5session\\_factsheet1.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/5session_factsheet1.pdf)
- United States Department of State. 2016. *Bangladesh 2016 Human Rights Report*. Retrieved from <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/265744.pdf>
- Wilson, Shawn. 2008. *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishers.