



**SILR**

SUPPORTING  
INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE  
REVITALIZATION

# The Search for Wellness through Ancestral Languages

## **SILR National Research Study**



In January of 2021, the Supporting Indigenous Language Revitalization (SILR) research team was formed to carry out a systematic literature review designed to ask:

**“What is the relationship for Indigenous people in Canada between the knowledge and use of their traditional languages and their individual and communal well-being?”**

The Supporting Indigenous Language Revitalization project is led by the Office of the Vice Provost Indigenous Programming and Research, University of Alberta.

# Research Team

*With guidance from the SILR Advisory Council, the research team transcended the research process from a standard systematic literature review to a searching process based on orality to foster a fundamental element in speaking one's own Ancestral language(s).*



**Dr. Davina Rousell**  
Research Lead



**Sherryl Sewepagaham**  
Graduate Research Assistant



**Joline Bull**  
Graduate Research Assistant



**Vevalee Georges**  
Graduate Research Assistant



**Crystal Wood**  
Graduate Research Assistant

# SILR Advisory Council

The SILR Advisory Council is fundamental in providing traditional wisdom, knowledge and teachings in guiding the research team in the searching process.

Dr. Elmer Ghostkeeper suggested not using the word 'research' because of the many past and recurring negative experiences of Indigenous peoples with research and to more accurately reflect that we are taking part in a searching process not re-searching.



**Doreen Frencheater**  
Daychief



**Dr. Elmer Ghostkeeper**



**Mary Cardinal Collins**



**Molly Chisaakay**

January 2024 Verification of Final Findings (Pictograph) and Knowledge Sharing

**Jun 26, 2023 Consulted with Advisory Council Committee and Verified Preliminary Findings**

**Jan 2022: SILR Research team is formally created**

Apr 20 - July 2023 Conducted Visitings, and Analysis Based on Orality and Being on the Land

Jan - Sept 2022 Begin Conducting Systematic Literature Review



**March 17, 2023 Consulted with Advisory Council Committee; Review Indigenous Study and Process**

**Sept 29, 2022 Consultation Session with Advisor Council - Decide to Conduct Indigenous Study**

March 1, 2023 Submitted Ethics Application to Conduct Indigenous Study

Sept 30, 2022 Presentation in Adelaide, Australia World Indigenous Peoples Conference on Education

**Nov 4, 2022 - Presented at Queens University's 24th Indigenous Knowledge Symposium**

## Hiring of Indigenous PhD Students

## Inclusion of Ceremony

## Consulting with the SILR Indigenous Advisory Council

## Sharing Circles

## SILR Team Members Lived Experience

# Decolonizing

the systematic  
literature review



### Acknowledgements

It is important to our team to begin by acknowledging the work of those who have joined and moved on from this work, we thank you for your contributions! The SILR research team also continues to look forward to working with the Indigenous Advisory Council to ensure that the work is done in a good way.

### Introduction

The United Nations General Assembly has proclaimed 2022-2032 the International Decade of Indigenous Languages, drawing urgent attention to supporting the preservation, revitalization, and promotion of Indigenous languages before it's too late! Heeding this call and embracing the inherent rights of Indigenous peoples to use their ancestral languages, the University of Alberta established the Supporting Indigenous Languages Revitalization (SILR) project which included our research team that is using a systematic review of the literature (Gough & Thomas, 2016) to identify and examine what is known about the relationship for Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island between the knowledge and use of their ancestral languages and their individual and communal well-being. This western approach to a systematic literature review is characterized by an iterative three-step process: (1) gathering, (2) analyzing and (3) synthesizing. In this presentation we unpack how and why we are decolonizing/Indigenizing our literature review practices and processes.

### Situating the Team

Velvalee Georges - Tan'isi Niootemtik, Kiyatimiskatinaw, Velvalee Georges nitsiskasoon, Sakl'wak Saskatchewan Canada n'ya oschl. I am Metis and speak a little of my ancestral language, Northern Michif. I'm a PhD Candidate planning to explore Indigenous language teachers' understanding of learning growth in elementary schools.

Crystal Wood is a member of Eiidj K'ijé First Nation in the Northwest Territories and resides with her family in Treaty Six Territory on Turtle Island. She currently is a PhD student in the Indigenous Peoples Education program at the University of Alberta. Her educational background, and previous experience working at a First Nations institution ignited an aspiration to support Indigenous language efforts for the generations forward.

Sherryl Sewepagaham is from the Little Red River Cree Nation in northern Alberta, Canada. She has dedicated her education career, study, and research in Indigenous music education and developed numerous educational resources for teachers and Cree songs for children. Sherryl will focus her 2023 PhD study on decolonizing and Indigenizing music education from an Indigenous lens.

Dr. Davina Rousell grew up on a farm in northern British Columbia on Treaty 8 territory. Over the past 18 years, Davina has had the honour of working with and learning from Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Holders that have been teaching her about how she, an ally, Caucasian, queer, and community-driven researcher, can contribute to disrupting the colonial legacy of racist ideologies and practices.

### Decolonizing the Literature Review

It is widely acknowledged that Indigenous knowledge is marginalized in mainstream education because Eurocentric education systems fail to acknowledge Indigenous histories and non-western ways of knowing, being, and learning (Scully, 2012). In addition, colonialism is continually perpetuated through the perception that land and people are separate instead of understanding people as an extension of the land on which they live (Scully, 2012; Gaudet & Chilton, 2018). Therefore, in addition to limiting our scholarly review to "Turtle Island" (English translation), the term many Indigenous people use to refer to the continent of North America, we plan to engage Indigenous knowledge and language keepers in a variety of ways. Like there are diverse origin stories of Turtle Island, we expect to find varied interpretations of revitalization, health and wellness. This is one of the ways we plan to disrupt the replication of colonial logics (Garcia, 2021) and begin to privilege Indigenous knowledge embedded in ancestral languages and center conceptions of health and wellness rooted in our lands and languages.

### Practices & Processes

#### Sharing Circles

The SILR research team integrates an Indigenous practice of the 'sharing circle' to facilitate deep, reflective and respectful discussion (Rothe, Ozegovic, & Carroll, 2009).

#### Hiring of Indigenous students

This process supports cultural integrity to include an Indigenous lens and knowledge base, and to authenticate the presence of Indigenous students in higher education.

#### Indigenous Advisory Council

Comprises Elders and Knowledge Keepers situated across Turtle Island in Canada and provides guidance to the SILR research team.

#### Future practices

The process of decolonizing a systematic literature review is a continuous and evolutionary process that the SILR research team looks forward to exploring.

#### Considerations of lived experiences

Indigenous research practices encourage the researcher to situate 'ourselves' by considering own Indigeneity, cultural knowledge and lived experiences to the work we are doing, and contribute to a knowledge base that challenges the dominance of western and colonial views of knowledge (Parter & Wilson, 2021).

#### Inclusion of ceremony

The Indigenous Advisory Council provides insight, teachings and ceremonies that will be helpful to the longevity of this work.

When we center Indigenous ways of knowing and being in our systematic literature review and research process through a decolonial lens, we venture beyond the limitations of a western worldview of research and allow for space and the inclusion of traditional knowledge and deep wisdom that is weaved within Indigenous languages. In an Indigenous research paradigm, Elders, Knowledge and Language Keepers are the rightful sources of information and this oral knowledge and wisdom transferred through teachings and storytelling includes life and experience that expands and deepens research and contextualizes findings (Wilson, 2008). The Advisory Council has a pivotal role and impact in guiding the decolonizing process in this research and is an example of how oral languages allow for life-long learning opportunities and the sustainability of Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous languages in language revitalization, which must be considered as vital to this systematic literature review process.

# RESEARCH PROCESS

## Systemic Literature Review

In January 2021, the Research Team was formally established and asked to conduct a systematic literature review (Gough & Thomas, 2016).

## Research Question

What is the relationship for Indigenous peoples in Canada between the knowledge and use of their traditional languages and their individual and communal well-being?

## Research Parameters

Focus on scholarly and gray literature found within the Great Turtle Island, Australia and New Zealand.

## Preliminary Findings

Preliminary findings illustrated a significant gap in the literature. The research team decided to continue the systemic literature review and conduct an Indigenous research study to be able to more fully answer the original research question.

# SEARCH PROCESS

## Use of the phrase 'Ancestral Languages'

The phrase 'Ancestral language(s)' is used instead of 'traditional languages' or 'Indigenous languages' to encompass the deeper meaning of the connection of the languages spoken on the Great Turtle Island since time immemorial.

## Enhanced Research Question

A research ethics application was submitted and approved for a study using Indigenous methodologies and paradigm with a revised research question, asking: In what ways does knowledge and use of Ancestral language(s) foster individual and community well-being (body, mind, emotion, and spirit)?

## Visitings

Initial visitings (Gaudet, 2019) were carried out with the SILR Advisory Council members followed by additional visitings with individuals recommended by the initial participants. In total, 23 visitings were conducted.

## Preliminary Findings

The preliminary findings are presented as a pictograph to intentionally move the findings away from a predefined list of themes and the use of Roman Orthography.

# Our Journey

- **Lack of Evidence**

Throughout the systematic literature review the research team found evidence of a correlational relationship between knowing and speaking one's own Ancestral language(s) and experiencing health. However, the studies predominantly did not use Indigenous methodologies or paradigm.
- **Guidance**

The research team consulted and asked for guidance with members of the SILR Advisory Council in September of 2022 at kihcihkaw askî-Sacred Land in Edmonton, Alberta.
- **Change of Process**

The research team was advised to change the approach to looking for the answers to the research question by speaking with Ancestral Language Speakers, and to be out on the land.
- **Approvals**

Steps were taken to attain approval from the University of Alberta's Research Ethics Board to conduct a study using Indigenous methodologies and paradigm.

# Indigenous Methodology

## Artwork

The process evolved to include an Indigenous methodology with the use of artwork. After every visiting an art sketch was designed by the team members that encompassed key learnings, phrases, and themes.

## No English Words

During the early stages of the searching process, Elder Elmer Ghostkeeper, asked the research team not to use English words or Roman Orthography to articulate the findings as the searching inquiry was based on conception of Ancestral languages, not the English language.

## Pictograph

It was decided to continue using artwork and have a pictograph created for the preliminary findings. Through a series of drafting sessions with an Indigenous graphic artist, a pictograph was created.

## Professionally Edited Videos

As a small way to give back and say thank you, we professionally edited and polished each visiting so that every participant had a copy of their visiting for their own personal use. We also created a licensing agreements with various Indigenous musicians to ensure Ancestral languages, from the participants' land, were included in each recording through songs.

# Our Reflections

*The connection to the land and how the ancestral languages are alive and thriving within our teachings of our history and ways of knowing. Language and land is the connections of the foundation for understanding any ancestral language, because it is in the way of life and way of living for Indigenous peoples. Our teachings come from the land and the languages need to be the focus for retaining, sharing, strengthening, maintaining and enhancing the language spirit.*

*Joline Bull, Graduate Research Assistant, SILR*

*This journey has been one of transformation, as well as humbling and spiritually nurturing. I have a in-depth understanding of the importance of our ancestral languages, and will forever be an advocate to supporting our ancestral languages on Turtle Island.*

*Crystal Wood, Graduate Research Assistant, SILR*



Ay-Hiy  
Ish-Nish  
Miigwetch  
Mahsi  
Marrsi  
Thank you

SILR

## References

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