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# Two-Spirit Resurgence - Finding Belonging in SOGI Inclusive Frameworks

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In 2021, SOGI 123 began the journey of Indigenizing our SOGI (sexual orientation and gender identity) inclusion work through ongoing consultation within circle. These Indigenous SOGI Dialogue Circles are a space for Two-Spirit, Indigiqueer and LGBTQ+ Indigenous peoples and their allies to safely offer relationality and reflection to one another, work collaboratively toward a vision of SOGI inclusive education that disrupts colonial constructs of identity, sexuality and gender, and aims to offer culturally safe resources to schools in a way that weaves the myriad of Indigenous and 2SLGBTQ+ experiences throughout.

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This introductory educator resource, while not exhaustive, is one of the outcomes of this ongoing work, and is meant to help provide some baseline information on the intersection of SOGI and Indigeneity. In 2023, we asked educators if they believed **Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer students see themselves represented positively in classrooms and schools as a whole**, and nearly **70% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed**. We hope this resource, and our many others, can be useful in your journey toward changing this, and creating even more inclusive SOGI frameworks within your work.

If a student has come out to you as Two-Spirit or Indigiqueer, and you're unsure how to best support them, we can help with that. The most important things to remember are to express thanks for the student being willing to share this about themselves, to be curious about what that means to them, and to offer your support.



Perhaps a parent is curious about what a SOGI-inclusive school really is. We've got you covered with the Parent's guide to SOGI in Schools, which can help open the door toward meaningful conversations between parents and their children by dispelling myths and providing useful information.

We know that SOGI-inclusive schools provide additional safety for all students, not just 2SLGBTQ+ ones. We know that using a student's name and pronouns reduces suicidality and depression. We also know that educators feel a lot better about SOGI-inclusion when they have support and resources readily at their disposal.

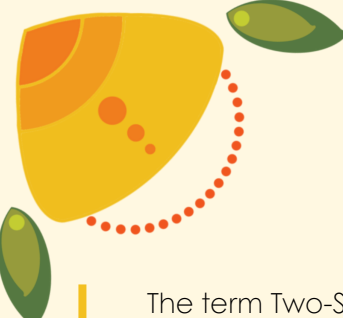
The intent of this resource is to ensure **you can turn information into motivation** to ensure your school is Indigenizing your approach to SOGI-inclusion. It also provides even further resources for you to utilize and share.

You don't have to wait until a student comes out to you. Being proactive is a great way to begin the journey of deepening your SOGI inclusion work.

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This resource contains information about the impacts of colonization, which could be emotionally challenging for some readers. We encourage you to take your time, care for yourself and pause as needed. You'll find a glossary at the end of this document, along with other helpful resources.



# 'Defining' Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer

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The term Two-Spirit was coined first by Dr. Myra Laramée, who proposed its use during the Third Annual Inter-tribal Native American, First Nations, Gay and Lesbian American Conference, held in Winnipeg in 1990. The term is a translation of the Anishinaabemowin term *niizh manidoowag*, two spirits. It is meant to describe the intersection of Indigenous and LGBTQ+ identities, and create a bridge between Western and Indigenous understandings of SOGI. Many Indigenous languages have their own terms for this, and some folks may choose to use those. No one word works for everyone, and many Indigenous languages do not even have gendered pronouns.

Indigiqueer was first coined in 2004 by TJ Cuthand. It has gone on to be used widely among Indigenous folks for whom Two-Spirit simply did not fit, or where communities have specific responsibilities tied to the term Two-Spirit that individuals may not have capacity to take on or are in the process of learning prior to claiming the term.

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Neither of these terms are meant to be used by non-Indigenous folks. According to Dr. Laramée, Two-Spirit is said to mean a person who embodies both a male and female spirit. This, for some, still implies a gender binary, and therefore, may not align with their identity. For others, there is a felt difference between growing up as an urban Indigenous person, and being connected to the land of your ancestors, that may cause them to choose one term over the other. Some may choose not to identify with the 2SLGBTQ+ acronym at all because of its attachment to colonial language. Any of these folks may choose to use Indigiqueer, or, as previously mentioned, their own language may have a term that suits them best. Whenever someone tells us who they are and how they identify, we should respect that, and reflect it back to them.

Each person will have their own sense of how a term fits for them specifically. Some may use them to describe their orientation or attraction. Some may use them to describe their sense of gender identity. All of these are the right way to use the terms, because they are meant to be holistic, and express the ways the physical, spiritual, mental and emotional converge in one's sense of identity.

Indigenous people are not the only folks with a culture that makes space for more than two genders; some religions even recognize multiple genders. There are many such identities across the world with their own terminology to match – many of which were colonized. The following is by no means an exhaustive list, but is a good starting point for learning more. It is important as educators to know and understand that many students, beyond your Indigenous ones, may have cultural understandings of SOGI that exist outside the Western paradigm. Hopefully, this short list is inspiration to learn more, and support students in deeper, more culturally relevant ways. Remember, culture, religion or nation of origin isn't a sure way to sort out someone's identity, so avoiding assumptions is important. Always defer to people's own ways of referring to themselves.

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# 'Defining' Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer

Country/Culture of Origin	Word(s) for Third Gender/Trans Identity
Cook Islands	<i>Akava'ine</i>
Democratic Republic of Congo	<i>Mangaiko</i>
Ethiopia	<i>Ashtime</i>
Hawaii	<i>Mahu Wahine</i>
Indonesia	<i>Waria, Bissu</i>
Kenya	<i>Mashoga</i>
Madagascar	<i>Sekrata</i>
Mexico	<i>Muxe</i>
New Zealand	<i>Whakawahine</i>
Oman	<i>Xanith</i>
Pakistan	<i>Khawaja Sara</i>
Philippines	<i>Bayot, Agi, Bakla</i>
Samoa	<i>Fa'afafines</i>
Saudi Arabia	<i>Mukhannathun</i>
Siberia	<i>Ergi</i>
South Asia	<i>Hijra</i>
Thailand	<i>Kathoey</i>



# The Impacts of Colonization on Indigenous Pedagogies of SOGI

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While some may think of colonization is a thing of the past, the truth is that it has ongoing impacts on Indigenous communities today. One of the ways this has played out is on Indigenous notions of gender and sexuality. While many Indigenous languages have terminology for folks who fall outside cis-heteronormativity, Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer are two well-known English terms some folks may choose to use as well. While these do not suit every single Indigenous person in the 2SLGBTQ+ community, we will use these here for ease and consistency. It is best to use someone's self-defined terminology once it is offered.

## **Cis-heteronormativity and Paternalism**

Cis-heteronormativity implies a view of sexuality as strictly heterosexual and to a gender binary that aligns with sex assigned at birth, largely ignoring the existence of intersex people. Gender identity, gender expression, gender roles, and sexual orientation exist within a rigid, binary, male–female gender conceptualizations. While cis-heteronormativity as a social construct is bad for all people, it is selectively used to regulate some people more than others.

Paternalism is a system under which an authority undertakes to supply needs or regulate conduct of those under its control in matters affecting them as individuals, in their relations to authority, and to each other. Without a doubt, there is a clear connection to paternalism and the colonization efforts across Turtle Island.

## **Purity**

Commitments to 'purity' are also part of a larger system of paternalism and cis-heteronormativity within colonialism. The idea of purity even extends to the land, where 'pure' lands are those untouched by 'civilization' – erasing Indigenous ways of knowing and centering colonized practices. Internalising these ideas can change the way people view themselves and the world around them. This extends to concepts of racial purity as well. Purity culture assumes people are naturally bad and do wrong things, but by adhering to what the status quo deems pure, one may be accepted and find belonging. This sense of belonging can keep people stuck in Western paradigms, shunning long-held knowledge on Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer identities.

## **Gender Binary**

Disregarding the gender binary caused fears within western society, ultimately leading to gender policing to maintain the idea of binary gender. This continues today and is perhaps, stronger than ever. 'Man' and 'woman' as categories cannot exist without the other to enforce what they are and are not. Deviation from normative expression, of either gender or sexuality, can be met with varying degrees of violence. Femininity is nearly always viewed as inferior to masculinity in this case.





# The Impacts of Colonization on Indigenous Pedagogies of SOGI

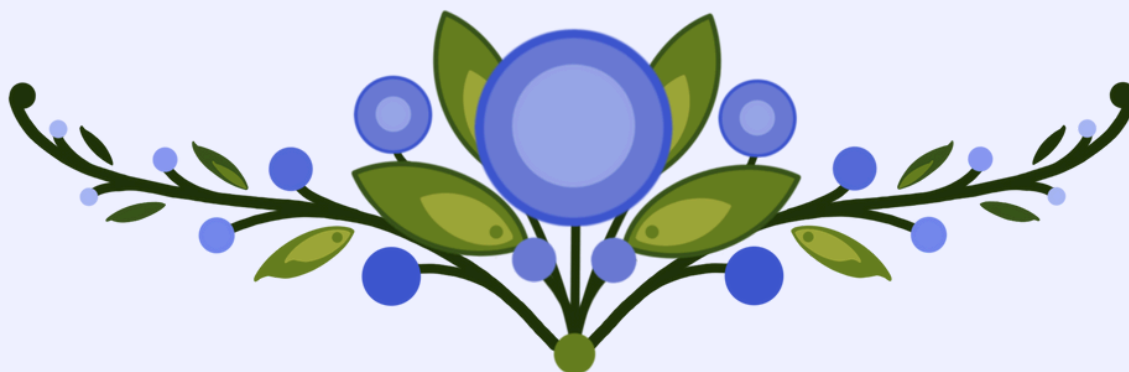
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## **Systemic Oppression**

Residential schools were one method of forced assimilation imposed on Indigenous peoples, which also aimed to enforce Western, colonial concepts of cis-heteronormativity. Legislation against cultural practice and language was also imposed, creating a rift in intergenerational knowledge. Then, there was the institutionalization of Indigenous children via child protection agencies. Many folks know about the 60s Scoop, but we rarely discuss the Millennium Scoop, or even the targeted ad campaigns encouraging folks to “Adopt Indian and Métis” children out of their Indigenous families. We also know that Indigenous peoples are incarcerated and go missing at disproportionate rates, deepening this fissure in cultural kinship.

## **Protocols**

Many Indigenous cultures have community roles, cultural traditions, and protocols tied to sex assigned at birth. This can sometimes cause harm to Two-Spirit folks, who are left to either be excluded, or choose one set over the other where they may not feel alignment. The knowledge of Two-Spirit roles in community has, in many cases, been lost, or simply not considered, given the impacts of colonization on Indigenous notions of gender and sexuality. Recently, some Nations and territories have begun hosting Two-Spirit Powwows and Sundances to be more inclusive. Similarly, some Elders now hold space in ceremonies for Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer folks. It is important to offer grace to folks who are relearning the importance of their Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer relatives, and seek to understand their ways of knowing before jumping to conclusions about what we might perceive as a lack of inclusivity or acceptance.







# Roles In Community

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Two-Spirit people would have held a variety of roles within their distinct communities. For some, knowledge of these roles has been lost due to the ongoing impacts of colonization. However, within many nations, we know Two-Spirit peoples held similar, highly valued roles. While we cannot say this is true of all Indigenous peoples across Turtle Island and beyond, here are some examples that we know of:

- **Healers – of body, mind, emotions, spirit. Might utilize plant medicines, smudge, prayer, etc.**
- **Mediators/Counsellors – to heal personal and community ills.**
- **Visionaries – Each nation and community have their own unique traditions, and visions and dreams were sometimes believed to come from the spirit world, which is not necessarily separate from the physical world.**
- **Medicine People – called on to heal physical, mental, or even social problems.**
- **Caregivers – to orphaned children for example, and often to siblings in early years.**
- **Ceremonial leaders – may have had special roles at Sundance or other ceremonies.**
- **Conveyors of oral traditions – storytellers and Knowledge Keepers.**
- **Name givers – In some traditions, it involves a fasting ceremony, where an Elder is asked to provide a name based on what they envision during ceremony.**

All of these are incredibly important roles within a community, and it is important for modern Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer folks to know that they, too, can have these meaningful responsibilities, and be respected among their people. Equally important is that they find value within themselves, even if they choose not to take on these roles – knowing their ancestors and Elders were important members of their Nations can be a part of that. We hope this brief introduction to Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer roles in community can help you share this history with all your students and colleagues.

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# Speaking Truth to Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer Realities

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Because of the intersection of Indigenous and LGBTQ+ identities, Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer people may experience significant marginalization. This document details this reality for Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer folks, in hopes that this knowledge will better equip you to be inclusive in your own classrooms, schools and districts/divisions, and provide insight into why this work is so important.

In an UNYA survey, **73%** of the respondents believe that negative stereotypes in school leads to drop-outs of Two-spirit youth, and **78%** of the respondents believe their community needed more education with respect to sexual/cultural diversity. Unfortunately, **38%** stated they did not feel accepted in their community, and **37%** indicated that the First Nations community is not accepting of its Two-Spirit people. The survey also found that most Two-Spirit people are terrified of someone finding out that they are Two-Spirit.

Many are suffering from depression. Most do not feel safe within their communities.

Many believe that negative stereotypes and peer pressure in schools leads to fear of exposure and a higher dropout rate for Two-Spirit students.

Many believe that there needs to be more visible and accessible Two-Spirit Elders in the community.

Many believe that they have a right to belong in their community and want to learn more about Two-Spirit history.

In a report from Safe and Caring Schools Society, Two-Spirit students indicated they felt unsafe in change rooms, washrooms, hallways, classrooms, and school yards, and reported frequently experiencing homophobia, bullying, sexual and verbal harassment, physical fights and assaults, exclusion and rejection, destruction of personal property, and discrimination due to race and physical appearance. Despite going through all this, students indicated they did not feel safe talking to staff about it, as they felt they were unlikely to intervene. All of this impacts a student's sense of belonging, identity and well-being, and can lead to poorer long-term outcomes.







# Speaking Truth to Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer Realities

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**In the Walking in Two Worlds Report, 56% Two-Spirit transgender participants report attempting suicide, 46% reported being rejected by family, 45% reported family violence, and 74% reported losing friendships due to being Two-Spirit.**

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These statistics can feel difficult to overcome, but shifting school cultures toward acceptance and belonging is a long-term project. Your inclusion efforts don't just make a difference – they can potentially save lives. LGBTQ youth who report having at least one accepting adult were 40% less likely to report a suicide attempt in the past year, and using chosen names and pronouns reduces suicidality and depression. According to a report from the Representative for Children and Youth in BC, children and youth who are affirmed and well supported in family, school and community can have positive life outcomes that are similar to their peers. Rest assured, your efforts are noticed and appreciated by your students – and they are making a difference every day.





# Glossary

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## **Intersectionality:**

A framework for understanding how groups' and individuals' social and political identities result in unique combinations of discrimination and privilege. The term intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989.

## **Colonialism:**

The pursuing, establishing, and maintaining of control and exploitation of people and resources by a foreign group of people. Colonization keeps the colonized territory and people socio-economically othered and subordinate to colonizers.

## **Gender policing:**



Is the imposition or enforcement of normative gender expressions on an individual who is perceived as not adequately performing, through appearance or behavior, their gender or sex that was assigned to them at birth.

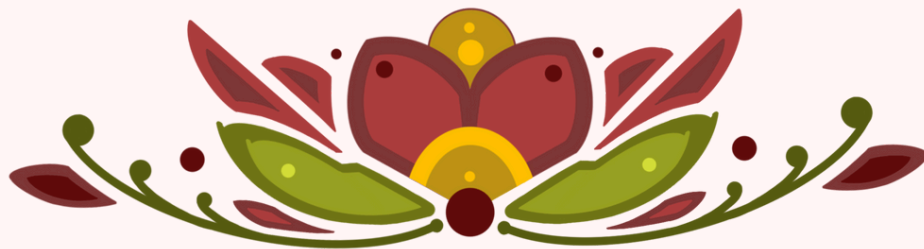
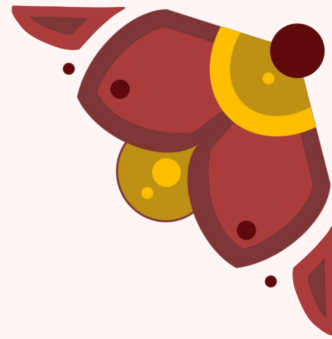
## **Further Resources:**

[When a Student Comes Out to You](#)  
[Parents Guide to SOGI in Schools](#)  
[Lesson plan / Learning Burst](#)

## **Cited materials:**

[Two-Spirit Youth Speak Out!, 2004](#)  
[Safe and Caring Schools for Two-Spirit Youth, 2011](#)  
[Walking in Two Worlds: Understanding the Two-Spirit and LGBTQ Community](#)  
[The Right to Thrive: An Urgent Call to Recognize, Respect, and Nurture Two Spirit, Trans, Non-Binary and other Gender Diverse Children and Youth, 2023](#)  
[The Trevor Project: Accepting Adults Reduce Suicide Attempts among LGBTQ Youth, 2019](#)  
[Chosen Name use is Linked to Reduced Depressive Symptoms, Suicidal Ideation and Behaviour among Transgender Youth, 2018](#)  
[MN Department of Health: Using a Person's Correct Pronouns Saves Lives, 2022](#)  
[Gay-Straight Alliances and School Safety, 2019](#)  
[EGALE Every Teacher Project, 2015](#)





*Disclaimer: This project was funded by the Government of Canada's Community Services Recovery Fund.*

*Thank you to everyone who has participated in our Indigenous SOGI Dialogue Circles since 2021. This work would not be possible without you.*

*Artwork and formatting by Kaija Heitland, Indigenous Nouveau.*

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