Volume 1, Issue 2

# Tribal College and University Research Journal

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Tribal College and University Research Journal

Volume 1, No. 2

# TRIBAL COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY RESEARCH JOURNAL
**Volume I, Issue 2**

The Tribal College and University Research Journal is published by the American Indian College Fund, with funding from the Lilly Endowment. The College Fund believes it is critical to support tribal college faculty in conducting research that benefits Native communities, and disseminating research to both Native communities and the wider research community. Lead authors on manuscripts are current faculty and staff at tribal colleges and universities. Manuscripts are reviewed anonymously by an editorial board of scholars within a range of fields. The Editor-in-Chief works with authors to prepare manuscripts for publication.





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# Welcome

***Cheryl Crazy Bull, President & CEO***
***American Indian College Fund***

Mitakuyepi.
Greetings, relatives.

"Research" in the Lakota language is both a verb, *pasi*, and a noun, *wopasi*. *Pasi*: to follow or trace something, inquire, or investigate. *Wopasi*: research or investigation. *Woonspewicakhiye* is a teacher. In our Native languages, we have words for research and for teachers, because we have always been researchers and we have always recognized teachers.

When I began my career in tribal education in the early 1980s, we were in many ways just beginning the journey of melding tribal research and scholarship with the educational institutions developing in our tribal communities. We had scholars working throughout our systems, gathering knowledge and developing curriculum, occasionally publishing manuscripts in the form of spiral-bound books, and sharing presentations at regional and national educational conferences.

Many excellent journals developed over the years, supported mostly by higher education institutions with emerging Native Studies, education, and political science or law programs, and through our Native scholars who forged a path for the sharing of knowledge through research publications. The idea of a peer-reviewed publication by tribal college faculty and researchers was practically unheard of. Often tribal college faculty and their students engage in valuable research about teaching and learning, sciences, social issues, and their communities. Most publications have focused on narratives that tell stories — a relevant way to share knowledge, but not the only way.

With this volume, the American Indian College Fund continues its support of tribal college faculty sharing research and scholarship in a peer-reviewed process. We are proud to have received contributions from tribal colleges that allow us to publish multiple volumes of this journal before we even have to have another call for papers.

We continue to honor our ancestors, the researchers and teachers, who set us on the journey of inquiry that improves lives today.

Wopila, thank you.

# Introduction: *Research as Enactment of Self-Determination*

***Ethan Yazzie-Mintz, Editor-In-Chief***
***Tribal College and University Research Journal***

*This article tells the story of an integrated research, education and service project conducted on the Fort Peck reservation*…So goes the opening of *Fort Peck Buffalo Project: A Case Study*, the first article in this issue of the *Tribal College and University Research Journal.* Integrating research, education, and service describes much of the work of Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs): the way in which students are educated, the research conducted by faculty, and the role that TCUs play in their communities.

The uniqueness and special value of TCUs --- what distinguishes TCUs from other similar institutions, as well as from each other --- is their connection to the communities in which they are situated. Most TCUs, as tribally-controlled institutions of higher education, are situated in --- and authorized by --- tribal communities. As such, students are provided an education rooted in the language, culture, and values of these communities. Therefore, each of the Tribal Colleges and Universities, while structurally similar and driven by common purposes, looks different on the inside, based on tribal community, geography, priority, language, and culture. The same can be said of the research that emerges from TCUs.

The opening of the first TCU, Navajo Community College (now Diné College), in 1968 signaled "a new era of self-determination for Native American students" (Penn Center for Minority Serving Institutions, 2015). Historically, the story of American Indian education in the United States is one of assimilation and indoctrination, an effort to make invisible the knowledge, identities, values, languages, and cultures of Native children, families, and communities. At the higher education level, TCUs were created and designed to provide an education based in Native cultures and communities --- one that is rigorous, of high-quality, and meets standards

of accreditation, while making visible the knowledge central to the tribal communities in which the TCUs are situated.

Research produced at TCUs pursues the same purposes. As teaching-focused institutions, research is not a requirement of the work of TCU faculty or staff. However, creation of knowledge is the foundation upon which teaching and learning is designed, and many TCU faculty and staff, committed to the ideals, purposes, and origins of TCUs, conduct original research. Self-determination in teaching and learning is driven by self-determination in research and inquiry. The research conducted at TCUs is focused largely in the institutions and communities in which the TCUs are situated, and the results of this research serve these communities as well as the broader research community.

The breadth and depth of research emerging from TCUs is extensive. This is the fourth issue in the American Indian College Fund's *Tribal College and University Publication Series*, and the second issue in the open-call, peer-reviewed *Tribal College and University Research Journal (TCURJ)*. This effort has produced 22 published research articles, conducted by current or former TCU faculty and staff; a requirement of the *TCURJ* is that the lead author must be a current TCU faculty or staff member. The initiative is designed with two purposes, one focused on publication and one focused on education. The publication goal is achieved by having authors from TCUs go through the process of having their manuscripts reviewed by their academic peers from a variety of academic fields and institutions. The education goal comprises a process of working with authors --- a number of whom have not published their work previously --- to teach them to use the peer-review process to strengthen their manuscripts to make them publication-worthy, and to prepare them to continue to use publication channels to share their knowledge and research with audiences beyond their TCUs.

The five articles in this issue reflect --- both in content and methodology --- the larger purposes of TCUs. Each of these articles investigates a community-centered project through participatory methodologies and/or action research. In each case, multiple members of the community (e.g., the tribal community, the TCU community, etc.) are involved in the inquiry, and the result of the inquiry is action that creates change. The research is participatory (in each case, the author is both researcher and participant), and the outcomes of the research are used to improve the project or initiative under study and the community in which the work is being done. This kind of research --- investigative, participatory, and relevant to the community in which it is being conducted --- is key to the enactment of self-determination through inquiry.

The authors of *Fort Peck Buffalo Project: A Case Study* --- Roxann Smith, Robert McAnally, Lois Red Elk, Elizabeth Bird, Elizabeth Rink, Dennis Jorgensen, and Julia Haggerty --- use the opportunity of the return of a herd of heritage bison to Fort Peck reservation lands to document efforts of the Fort Peck tribal community to connect and re-connect with their relations, *Tatanga/Tatanka Oyate*, the Buffalo People. The authors, from three different institutions, collaborated on their involvement in both the education and inquiry aspects of the work, in four areas: a study of the impact of buffalo restoration; a community education and outreach event; an oral history project; and a community perception survey of attitudes toward conservation and buffalo herd management.

These authors use a community-based participatory research framework for their investigation, making the case that these methods provide a means for research in Native communities to be relevant, respectful, and true to the values of these communities and TCUs:

> The community-based participatory research (CBPR) framework provides the foundation for established research studies with, for, and about Indigenous communities that have demonstrated the importance of Indigenous nations' proactive production of their own knowledge and

the need to ensure that research with Indigenous populations has relevancy for their culture and communities.

In *Connecting Educational Communities to Engage in Collective Inquiry: Creating Professional Learning Communities as Sites of Action Research*, Nahrin Aziz-Parsons of Northwest Indian College leads a collective inquiry that brought together partners serving young children in Lummi Nation in Professional Learning Communities, for the purpose of making the transition from early learning to the K-3 educational system a smooth and productive one for the children. Aziz-Parsons describes the foundational beliefs guiding both the work and the inquiry, as the community of early childhood educators worked on building multiple bridges for the students in their transition: *Bridge of Content and Curriculum*, *Bridge of Pedagogy*, *Bridge of People*, *Bridge of School Cultures*, and *Bridge of Cultural Differences*. Ultimately, this collective inquiry was a form of action research, impacting how this community of educators has created a stronger and more effective early learning system for these Lummi children.

Danielle Lansing has built the early childhood program at Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute around the *Teachers as Nation Builders* framework. In *Pathways to Authentic Community Engagement: Phases of Teacher Development on a Continuum of Practice Toward Nation-Building*, Lansing investigates the perceptions of her students of the impact of this framework and stance on their learning as pre-service teachers and their future work as teachers in Native communities. Through the six components of the framework --- *Revitalize*, *Renew*, *Relevance*, *Responsible*, *Relationship*, and *Responsive* --- Lansing investigates the ways in which this framework creates both teachers and nation-builders, who then can have a great impact within the schools and communities in which they work.

The perception that parents and families "just don't care" about their children's schooling and education is pervasive and often based on attendance at school-created events. In *Validating Lummi Children and Families: Connection as Foundational to Improving*

*Family Engagement in Early Childhood Education*, Shelley Macy of Northwest Indian College studies an early childhood initiative built on the Lummi values of connection and interconnectedness, in which "Lummi parents helped to define family engagement, shared responsibility for implementing family engagement strategies, and provided feedback throughout the process" --- what Macy calls a "fresh look at family engagement." Through collection and analysis of data over several years, and through a variety of qualitative and evaluative means, Macy finds that it is the institution's approach to family engagement, rather than attitudes of the parents and families, that needs strengthening, concluding that:

> Lummi parents love their children deeply and want to do absolutely the best for them. Engaging with other families in ways that validate all of their children in playful, culturally engaging ways supports that love, helps parents relax, and can provide excellent opportunities to support their desire to do their best….Lummi parents do indeed care deeply about their children, work hard for their flourishing, and desire support and connection and relaxed time to spend with them.

In the Iñupiaq community of Barrow, on the North Slope of Alaska, preparations for whaling season start in late February through early March, when the ocean is still frozen. The whaling crews, looking to set up their base camp in a good spot near the open water for the best chance to get a strike, work to cut a trail through the ice to get to their chosen spot:

> Armed with shovels and pick axes, crew members cut their way through the ice ridges, painstakingly carving out a winding trail to the desirable location, which can be several miles from the shore.

In *Breaking Trail for Community Impact: The Development of an Early Learning Program on the North Slope of Alaska*, Birgit Meany of Ilisaġvik College uses the metaphor of "breaking trail" to describe and analyze the process the community used to develop an early learning program on the North Slope. With competing interests, challenges

to the process, unexpected obstacles, and multiple partners (including Iḷisaġvik College, the North Slope Borough School District, several local government entities and other organizations, and community members), the success of the initiative depended on several key aspects identified by Meany: a shared vision, commitment to the ultimate goal, cooperation, and adherence to Iñupiaq values.

The metaphor of "breaking trail" is apt, not just for the whaling crews in Barrow and for the early childhood work on the North Slope, but for the work of TCUs and specifically for the work of the authors in this volume in bringing this research to publication. The action of breaking a trail through ice involves both the forging of a path through new ground, and collaboration and cooperation to achieve the goal. These authors are breaking new ground in both content and methodology, and collaborating and cooperating with multiple individuals and community organizations.

In the case of the Fort Peck Buffalo Project, the collaborators came from three different institutions --- Fort Peck Community College, Montana State University, and the World Wildlife Federation --- to create the Buffalo Project, and to study and write about it for other communities and generations to learn from it. The Buffalo Project continues, along with the dissemination of information about it (including the in-progress oral history project), with the cooperation of these institutions and many individuals within the Fort Peck tribes. The people of the Fort Peck tribes are writing their own story of their re-connection with *Tatanga/Tatanka Oyate*, the Buffalo People, and creating a sustainable education project for future generations.

The pieces on the early childhood initiatives at Northwest Indian College, Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute, and Iḷisaġvik College are forging new ground in early childhood education for Native children through their innovative, place-based, culturally-connected approaches to early learning within their communities. Partnerships and collaborations with community partners are essential

components of the development and success of these early learning efforts in the respective tribal communities. These early childhood education projects originated as part of an initiative funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation through the American Indian College Fund, who was a partner to the sites in funding, program development, and technical assistance throughout the grant period. The initial grant --- the *Wakanyeja "Sacred Little Ones" Tribal College Readiness and Success by Third Grade" Early Childhood Education Initiative* --- was followed by two others, the *Ké' Early Childhood Education Family Engagement Initiative* and the *Restorative Teachings Early Childhood Education Initiative*, the latter of which is still funding programming at these sites today. All of these initiatives are directed by Dr. Tarajean Yazzie-Mintz, formerly Senior Program Officer for Early Childhood Initiatives and Co-Director of the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, and currently Vice President of Program Initiatives at the College Fund, who put an emphasis on development of early childhood programming, cultivation of community partners, engagement of parents, families, and community members (including elders), and documenting and telling of the story of the projects. All of these pieces work to generate early learning and early childhood programming that originates from within the community, creating sustainability for future generations in ways that externally-procured programs could not.

The last piece --- documenting and telling the story of the project --- is what all of the articles in this issue do. They tell their own story. They do their own inquiry. They bring their knowledge, their analysis, their culture, language, and values to telling their stories. This creation and production of knowledge is the key to research as the enactment of self-determination. Knowledge and inquiry as a way of creating communal action.

At the American Educational Research Association annual meeting in April 2017, Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, Professor of Education at Harvard University, talked

about these issues of telling our stories, including multiple voices, and moving knowledge to action:

> I urge us to complicate and broaden our view of educational goodness....I urge us to honor and acknowledge the perspective and voices of researchers and advocates, teachers and students, and develop a broader, more inclusive conversation, one that builds the bridges between knowledge and action....I urge us to see diversity as a strength and work towards its realization in the institutions and communities we inhabit....I urge us to make ourselves and others visible, bearing witness and speaking out (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2017).

Tribal Colleges and Universities are beacons of self-determination in the quest for education for Native Americans. Research that emerges from TCUs is the enactment of self-determination, in the production of knowledge and the power to tell the stories of the work from within tribal communities.

These initiatives are always the products of collaboration, and we are grateful for the efforts of TCUs, particularly the TCU presidents, in encouraging faculty and staff to conduct inquiry and document their work, as well as the staff at the American Indian College Fund, in particular: Dr. David Sanders, Vice President of Research, Evaluation, and Faculty Development, who conceived of and has driven the *Tribal College and University Research Journal*; Dr. Natalie Youngbull, Faculty Development Program Officer, who provides opportunities and support for TCU faculty to do this work; and Dr. Cheryl Crazy Bull, President and CEO, who actively supports and encourages the production of research from TCUs.

This volume contributes to knowledge in both tribal communities and the broader fields of education and research methodology. Enjoy these powerful and insightful articles, and thank you for helping to make this work emerging from TCUs visible to the world.

## References

Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. (2017, April). *"Let the great brown river smile": Liberating frames and educational discourses: On view, voice, and visibility.* Distinguished Lecture at American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, San Antonio, TX.

Penn Center for Minority Serving Institutions. (2015). *Redefining success: How Tribal Colleges and Universities build nations, strengthen sovereignty, and persevere through challenges.* Philadelphia, PA: Author.

# Fort Peck Buffalo Project: A Case Study

***Roxann Smith, Fort Peck Community College***
***Robert McAnally, Fort Peck Community College***
***Lois Red Elk, Fort Peck Community College***
***Elizabeth Bird, Montana State University***
***Elizabeth Rink, Montana State University***
***Dennis Jorgensen, World Wildlife Federation***
***Julia Haggerty, Montana State University***

## Abstract

To the Nakoda and Dakota people, bison are seen as a people, *Tatanga/Tatanka Oyate*, or *Buffalo People*. In 2012, the Fort Peck Tribes in Montana (Sioux and Assiniboine) had the opportunity to bring back a herd of heritage bison from Yellowstone National Park to Fort Peck reservation lands; in 2014, an additional herd was returned to reservation lands. Seeing this as an opportunity to connect and re-connect with their relations, *Tatanga/Tatanka Oyate*, and to educate the young people in their communities about the historic and cultural importance of buffalo, the Fort Peck Tribes embarked on a community initiative in conjunction with the return of the buffalo to reservation land. In this article, Roxann Smith, Robert McAnally, Lois Red Elk, Elizabeth Bird, Elizabeth Rink, Dennis Jorgensen, and Julia Haggerty, collaborators from three different institutions involved in this initiative, document the efforts to educate about and re-connect with the buffalo, as well as their own research inquiry process, which involved utilizing community-based participatory research methods to investigate four strands of inquiry, education, and service: the impact of buffalo restoration on the Fort Peck Tribes, the Buffalo People Summit (a community education and outreach event), an oral history project documenting the history of buffalo restoration in Fort Peck, and the Buffalo Values Survey, an effort to understand community perception and needs regarding the management of the buffalo herds and wildlife conservation. This initiative, involving a collaboration among the Fort Peck Tribes, Fort Peck Community College, Montana State University, and the World Wildlife Fund, is collectively known as the Fort Peck Buffalo Project.

## Introduction

This article tells the story of an integrated research, education and service project conducted on the Fort Peck reservation and led by current and retired faculty of Fort Peck Community College (FPCC) in partnership with Montana State

University (MSU) and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). It describes four strands of interconnected work in the form of a meta-analytic case study, i.e., a case study that reviews the purpose and outcome of each of the strands in relation to each other and draws lessons from each strand and from the integrated whole to inform further research, education, and service initiatives. The connecting thread in these strands is the significance of the Fort Peck buffalo herds for the health and well-being of the Fort Peck peoples.

Faculty and staff of FPCC and MSU have been engaged in these several strands of work with diverse community partners, starting in 2013. Four key milestones in this collaboration, which serve as strands of inquiry in this study, include:

1) *Impact of Buffalo Restoration*: Qualitative research investigating the way in which the return of the buffalo to Fort Peck can improve individual and community health and well-being

2) *Buffalo People Summit*: Organization of a community educational outreach event, focused on re-building and strengthening knowledge of and cultural connections to buffalo, held during Native American Week in September 2015

3) *The Path Back: A History of Buffalo Advocacy by the Fort Peck Tribes*: An oral history research project documenting the recent history of buffalo restoration on the Fort Peck reservation

4) *Buffalo Values Survey*: A joint project with the World Wildlife Fund to survey the people of Fort Peck in summer 2015 to understand what they want from their buffalo herds' management, how the management can be improved, and attitudes toward wildlife conservation in general

All four of these strands of work exhibit collaborative strength-based strategies to improve community health, well-being and resilience. We refer to these initiatives collectively as "The Buffalo Project."

## Central Research Question

In 2012, FPCC was in the midst of a National Institutes of Health (NIH)-funded project in collaboration with Montana State University researchers called, *Ceremony of Research*, with which several of the authors of this article were involved. The purpose of *Ceremony of Research* was to build research capacity within the Fort Peck College and community, and in particular to establish a reservation-wide Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure any human subjects research happening on the reservation met ethical and cultural consonance expectations. This initiative built upon a longstanding partnership between Fort Peck Community College and Fort Peck Tribal Health Department in Poplar, Montana, and MSU in Bozeman, Montana, and had a Project Advisory Board (PAB) consisting of five individuals from the college (including author McAnally) and from the community, and a lead FPCC staff member (author Smith) working alongside the early MSU partners (authors Bird and Rink).

Simultaneously in 2012, the Fort Peck Tribes, led by its Fish and Game Department, gained an historic opportunity to improve the well-being of the Sioux and Assiniboine Tribes of Fort Peck through the return of a small herd of bison free of cattle genes from Yellowstone National Park (YNP) to Fort Peck reservation land; in 2014 the herd was expanded three-fold, adding 136 additional buffalo originating from YNP (see video of the historic 2014 event, and the work leading up to it, at: YouTube, 2012; YouTube, 2014). A World Wildlife Fund – Northern Great Plains Program Officer (author Jorgensen), also based in Bozeman, Montana, among other conservation NGOs, brought resources to bear on this process to facilitate the bison herds' transfer.

In reflecting on the return of buffalo to Fort Peck lands, *Ceremony of Research* PAB members identified a concern and a hope for the implications of the return of buffalo. We asked (to paraphrase), "What difference will the buffalo make for the

health (mind, body, spirit) of the people of Fort Peck?" In particular, we posed this as a research question: *How can we know and measure the impact the buffalo are having on the health of our people, and how can we enhance that impact?*

We wanted to enhance the Tribes' buffalo relationships, while answering western critics who had failed to fathom (or directly opposed) the value of the buffalo as our Nakoda (Assiniboine) and Dakota (Sioux) relatives. These questions arose in the context of long discussions in our IRB planning and training sessions. A question was proposed, with a deeply felt need to know if there could be such an impact, and off we went conducting a community based participatory research project.

## Background and Context for the Buffalo Project

For millennia, the buffalo held a primary role in American Indian daily life, traditions, culture and cosmology. In pre-colonial times American Indian tribes of the Great Plains, such as the Nakoda and Dakota, relied intensively on buffalo for their food, clothing, shelter and tools. Further, the buffalo were, and continue to be, at the heart of Nakoda and Dakota spirituality; the buffalo constitute a central figure in their stories and ceremonies. To the Nakoda and Dakota, the Buffalo (*Tatanka* in Lakota and Dakota and *Tatanga* in Nakoda) were a people, the Buffalo People (*Tatanga/Tatanka Oyate*), with which they shared a life: learning from, talking, praying and listening to, and relying upon the *Tatanka/Tatanga* (Deloria 2006; Sullivan 2003).

Buffalo were exterminated from the Assiniboine (Nakoda) and Sioux (Dakota) tribal homelands during the nineteenth century when the U.S. government was determined to eliminate or assimilate the northern plains' American Indian populations (Miller, Smith, McGeshick, Shanley, & Shields, 2012, pp. 121-122). Euro-American conquest and colonization of these profoundly place-based cultures, including the eradication of buffalo from the plains, have wrought historical trauma with its many manifestations of depression, loss of the sense of self-(or community or

cultural)-efficacy, fragility in many people's sense of identity and belonging, and pessimism and lack of social capital, all challenging constructive cultural evolution (Calloway, 2016).

Beginning in the late 1990s, after several years of social and political advocacy, the Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes of the Fort Peck Reservation acquired 100 buffalo from their Fort Belknap neighbors. These buffalo have mixed genetics reflecting early experiments of interbreeding cattle and buffalo for the purposes of livestock production. In 2012, the Tribes gained a significant opportunity to provide a home for expelled Yellowstone National Park buffalo which have the distinction of being among the few surviving direct descendants in the U.S. of the buffalo known to the Nakoda and Dakota ancestors (Gates, Freese, Gogan, & Kotzman, 2010). The Tribes manage these buffalo from Yellowstone separately from the herd they acquired in 1999 in recognition of this genetic distinction; the Yellowstone buffalo constitute the "cultural herd" while the others form the "business herd." Fort Peck's adoption of Yellowstone buffalo has special significance: it showcases the leading role the Fort Peck Tribes are playing in finding a solution to a decades-long dilemma involving buffalo that migrate out of Yellowstone National Park onto private land where they are not tolerated and have been culled in large numbers (Bidwell 2009; Lancaster, 2005). The Fort Peck nations and their buffalo relatives are thus working together to heal and grow from a traumatic past. By returning the buffalo to their reservation lands, the Fort Peck Tribes were, and continue to be, in a unique position to reconstruct their relationship with this cultural keystone species (Garibaldi & Turner, 2004a, 2004b; Platten & Henfrey, 2009). The Buffalo Project seeks to redress historical ills of colonization through a community-wide initiative that broadens and enhances the impact of buffalo restoration on Fort Peck lands.

In a recorded conversation, author McAnally describes the significance of the buffalo and the importance of the Buffalo Project:

The Indians believed that these People, these Tatanka Oyate, were put here as brothers and sisters to be helpful to us. And before anyone was taken, any buffalo was taken, there were several orders of prayers and ceremonies that were done of thanks. Okay, so the last buffalo [here was killed in] 1882 -- so in this century, now we began to develop our own buffalo herd. The first efforts were years ago to develop a herd here by the tribes as an economic potential. Also it was a health issue because it's been proven many times that buffalo meat is a leaner, higher protein meat, and therefore it would be good for diabetics and other people to have this meat available to them at no cost or low cost. So there were economic and health reasons to getting the buffalo back. But there was also a huge spiritual reason, a huge psychological, emotional reason that we told the United States, we told the State of Montana, that we needed these People back not only for our health, but our well-being, okay? Our psychological health, and to teach our history, teach our culture to go back to that way and say, "We are related." This is what we believe, we're related. Every… meaning not just people, but all animals, birds, everything. It's a natural spirituality. It's not a religion, per se, but it's a natural way of believing and living, and it's sustained millions of people for thousands and thousands of years, that daily belief.

So that was part of the reason for getting our buffalo herd started. And then we got the great opportunity to get the only purebred, or genetically pure buffalo in the United States up in Yellowstone Park who were quarantined for over five years, checking for brucellosis and everything else. Finally, through great effort on the part of our fish and wildlife director and his people and other people who were concerned, and the governor as well as [State of Montana] fish and wildlife officials, we were able to almost secret sixty-one buffalo up here, bringing them up, because we were going to be stopped by the court system because of the opposition by non-Indian farmers and ranchers who believed that bringing the buffalo up here would be a bad thing, brucellosis being only one of the conditions. But they're back, okay? They're here. They've been here a lot of years now. However, they're sequestered up north, forty miles north or more, which makes it difficult for us to visit with these People, to pray with these People, to look at these People, to smell these People, to hear these People. … But to me they're bringing back these People, it's an extraordinary event. You know, it's one of the biggest events we've had in over a hundred years on this reservation, yet

> it is not talked about in the general public, in the schools. You know, there are a smattering of discussions about it, but there's no real--that I've seen--buffalo plan, buffalo management, development, whatever you want to call it, plan. … But I think that these People, the Tatanka Oyate [Buffalo People] can be and should be really important in the lives of our elders and us and our young people. … I think we're sitting on a piece of our culture and our history that we're not doing anything with, okay? We're big on powwows, we're big on other ceremonies, but including the Tatanka is something that we haven't done yet.
>
> I know it's a long process, since they've been gone so long, but I think that now that they're back, we need to actually promote their presence more.

## Methodology

This paper offers a case study of a community-based participatory initiative. The community-based participatory research (CBPR) framework provides the foundation for established research studies with, for, and about Indigenous communities that have demonstrated the importance of Indigenous nations' proactive production of their own knowledge and the need to ensure that research with Indigenous populations has relevancy for their culture and communities (Christopher et al., 2011; Koster, Baccar, & Lemelin, 2012; Salois, Holkup, Fripp-Rumer, & Weinrent, 2006). The Buffalo Project is both community-based and participatory, exemplified by the fact that it is rooted in the engagement of community partners and initiatives well beyond FPCC, MSU and WWF. In addition, the Fort Peck (tribal) IRB reviewed and approved this manuscript prior to its publication.

The inception of The Buffalo Project was in 2013 when we conducted research on the ways in which the return of the buffalo to Fort Peck can improve individual and community health resiliency (Rink et al., 2015). In late 2014, as we considered fresh options of how to move forward from there, we were challenged by author Red Elk, who urged, "Let's not just talk about this. Let's do it!" We then began organizing for a "Buffalo People Summit" to share and strengthen the Fort Peck buffalo culture

through school field trips, story telling and reenactment, and a workshop for adults concluding with a community "Taste of Buffalo" feast. During this organizing period, authors McAnally, Rink, and Haggerty initiated complementary research to understand and document the history of these efforts in, *The Path Back: A History of Buffalo Advocacy by the Fort Peck Tribes*. Finally, aiming to build on the World Wildlife Fund's ongoing efforts to support sustainable management and expansion of the Fort Peck buffalo herds, we added the WWF Buffalo Program Officer as a collaborator. In particular, the interest of WWF lay in conducting a survey to understand the values, needs, and aspirations members and residents of Fort Peck Reservation hold with respect to buffalo and buffalo management, and more broadly their attitudes toward wildlife conservation. Other Buffalo Project participants informed and expanded upon the questions within this survey. These four pillars of the Buffalo Project constitute the four strands under study in this inquiry. The work on the first strand started in 2013, with much of the work on the additional strands taking place during 2015, and continuing. Current and future research inquiries aim to answer the original PAB's core question: *What difference will the buffalo make for the health (mind, body, spirit) of the people of Fort Peck?*

The Buffalo Project has been built on lessons learned from *Ceremony of Research* focus groups and the principles of collaborative strength-based research with tribal communities (Rink et al., 2016). Focus group participants indicated that any research that is carried out in their community should be: 1) relevant to Indigenous community needs and interests; 2) respectful of community history, customs, members and ways of knowing; and 3) in alignment with community ethics of reciprocity. Each strand of the Buffalo Project has followed these guidelines, and each is focused on investigating and supporting community strengths rather than highlighting problems to be addressed. A problem-focused approach has been criticized for perpetuating colonial attitudes (with its presumption of white/western culture's superiority) and

dependency relationships by emphasizing tribal community deficits (Jervis et al., 2006; Whitbeck, Adams, Hoyt, & Chen, 2004; Whitbeck, Chen, Hoyt, & Adams, 2004). Specific methods used for each of these Buffalo Project strands are described below.

*Strand 1: Impact of Buffalo Restoration*

To gather perceptions of community members, focus groups and key informant interviews were used in this study. These methodologies have been identified as effective ways of collecting data with Indigenous peoples because their descriptive nature allows research participants to share and exchange information through story telling and discussing their life histories, experiences and beliefs (Kovach, 2012).

The research team worked together to develop the focus group guide. Following review of focus group transcripts, a separate guide was used for key informant interviews. Questions in the focus groups had two parts: 1) What do you feel or believe is important about the role of the buffalo? 2) What are your thoughts about how people's relationship with the buffalo influences their well-being? The key informant interview guide asked for participants to elaborate regarding the Fort Peck peoples' relationship to the buffalo and the potential impact of their return.

One FPCC researcher and one MSU researcher facilitated the focus groups. Focus group participants were provided with a light snack and a small gift to thank them for their time and participation. One FPCC researcher and one MSU researcher also conducted the key informant interviews. Key informants received a small gift for their participation in the project. The presence of the FPCC primary researchers was critical to our success in eliciting in-depth and often profound responses.

The focus groups and key informant interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. After our analysis was completed all of the files were archived in the tribal archives at the James E. Shanley Library at FPCC. The Fort Peck Institutional

Review Board gave ethical approval for the focus group and key informant interview protocols. Ethical approval was also received from Montana State University. The focus group (N=41) and key informant interview participants (N=7) revealed that virtually all of the respondents (selected both based on diversity in cultural/community affinity and age, and by random off-the-street recruitment) yearned to have a relationship with the bison herd and characterized a potential relationship in terms of both physical and emotional/spiritual health.

*Strand 2: Buffalo People Summit*

During early winter of 2015, Fort Peck partners identified a community education and outreach agenda to accompany the previously initiated research related to hopes and aspirations regarding impacts of the return of the buffalo. Partners decided to organize a major community event aimed at re-building cultural connections and individual relationships with the buffalo as spiritual relatives and teachers. By spring, a loose-knit group of advocates named themselves the Pté Group (*Pté* translates into "female buffalo" in both the Dakota and Nakoda languages) and began organizing for a September 2015 "Buffalo People Summit" to be held during the local school districts' Native American week (in conjunction with the last Friday in September so designated statewide). MSU and WWF partners wrote grant proposals and gathered funds to support the summit. WWF funds in particular supported community organizing for the Summit as part and parcel of engaging the Fort Peck populace in the Buffalo Values Survey. During this time we also had many discussions concerning what shape the Buffalo Summit might take. We invited many people to participate with the Pté Group and ended up with a core group who attended our bi-weekly meetings.

The Pté Group envisioned the Buffalo People Summit as an opportunity to engage tribal members reservation-wide in a community building initiative intended to

rejuvenate ongoing and life-giving connections with their buffalo relatives. Our work was founded in the belief that as the bison prosper, so will all people who connect with them for learning, for spiritual development, and for physical and mental health and well-being.

Members of the Pté Group and partners organized activities aimed at building momentum for the Summit throughout the summer by convening three buffalo cultural activities:

1) Buffalo hunt and traditional butchering to feed the populace during the Summit (organized and conducted by the Fort Peck Fish & Game and Language & Culture Departments).

2) Dry Meat preparation class taught by a community elder.

3) "Winter count" buffalo hide painting, history, and culture class taught by the Fort Peck Cultural Resources Director, creating a replica of the historical/ancestral Lone Dog Winter Count.

Throughout the summer we worked out who and how best to recruit presenters for the Summit events. A key focus was always school children and how we could promote their interest and understanding of the buffalo and the land. We met with local school principals and superintendents about including the Buffalo Summit in their schedules for Native American week and arranging for transportation to the Turtle Mound Buffalo Ranch, which was to be the site of the school field days. We recruited tipi owners and builders to create the setting for the school field days. We worked with teachers to help them prepare their students for the Buffalo Summit adventure. We organized catering and recruited a number of community members to receive a portion of the buffalo meat to prepare their favorite dishes for all community members at the "Taste of Buffalo" meal. We developed a Buffalo People Summit logo for use on publicity and educational materials. There were more than

half a dozen of us working as primary organizers and publicizers (largely on Facebook), and twice that many more helping with ideas and resources and key tasks.

Considered in the context of the legacies of conquest, buffalo restoration to Fort Peck tribal lands offers profound educational opportunities, including the lessons of past generations that experienced buffalo as part of their economies, daily lives and spirituality—lessons that many community members cherish. Other educational foci of the Buffalo People Summit included the changing politics of nature in Montana, and buffalo management and natural history. Youth from schools on the reservation learned that before the bison were deliberately exterminated from the Assiniboine and Sioux (and other Plains) tribal homelands, as a US federal government strategy to eliminate or assimilate the northern plains' American Indian populations, the tribes had relied intensively on buffalo for food, clothing, shelter and tools in addition to honoring their central spiritual role. They learned the importance of the White Buffalo Calf Pipe Woman (Pté San Win) and the seven sacred rituals she taught. High schoolers attending the third field day had the opportunity to witness the first annual reunion of signatories to the Northern Buffalo Treaty. These tribal leaders from a dozen Montana, Alberta and British Columbia tribal nations were eager to come to Fort Peck and make their gathering a part of the Summit.

The five-day Buffalo People Summit reflected all these agendas and provided momentum for existing efforts by Fort Peck Community College and the Fort Peck Tribes' Language and Culture Department to greatly enhance the impact of the buffalo's restored presence on the reservation. A Sunday evening opening ceremony for families provided a reenactment of the Pté San Win story. After three days of school field trips there followed a day of presentations for adults, featuring similar content. The Summit concluded with the community "Fort Peck Taste of Buffalo" feast.

*Strand 3: The Path Back: A History of Buffalo Advocacy by the Fort Peck Tribe*

The oral histories collected as data in this strand of the inquiry seek to document the recent history of buffalo restoration on the Fort Peck reservation with a focus on environmental governance. Specifically, the project has been documenting in detail how tribal members and their allies worked to overcome the legal, political and institutional barriers to hosting buffalo at Fort Peck. Buffalo restoration was not an easy undertaking; it played out over many years and required persistence and leadership from a number of individuals and communities within Fort Peck. The approach also considers what systems and strategies the tribes have deployed to work with the buffalo upon their return. The theory driving our approach is that the process of clearing a path for buffalo to follow back to Fort Peck both drew upon and enhanced community resilience. Resilience is a broad term that generally describes capacity for recovery and persistence in the face of stressors and shocks. Features of community resilience include cultural adaptations, levels of social and financial capital, personal coping mechanisms, and governance processes that facilitate social learning, among many other social and cultural characteristics of communities and their members. Buffalo restoration was not an easy undertaking; it played out over many years and required persistence and leadership from a number of individuals and communities. The assembled oral histories can help explain exactly how it did so, thereby communicating positive messages about the capacity for contemporary Native Americans to assert sovereignty in ever-increasing and creative ways.

This research involved semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Author Haggerty supervised an undergraduate student at MSU in conducting document analysis. The partners conducted 20 semi-structured interviews during summer and fall of 2015. Interviewees were those who had actively participated in buffalo restoration efforts whether in formal tribal government or informal capacities. They were selected with a purposive sample approach and snowball sampling through

referrals. The Fort Peck IRB and MSU IRB gave approval for the research. Preliminary analysis of these interviews is in publication (Haggerty, Rink, McAnally, & Bird, 2017).

*Strand 4: Buffalo Values Survey*

The primary purpose of the survey was program evaluation for both the WWF Northern Great Plains buffalo restoration program, and the Fort Peck Fish & Game buffalo herds managers. It was conceived to inform their collaborative efforts to develop a business and conservation plan for the tribal buffalo business and cultural herds. Team members identified a need to secure a better understanding of the values, beliefs, and desires of tribal members in relation to buffalo and wildlife with the goal of enhancing future outcomes and benefits of tribal Fish and Game programs to community members by improving alignment and communication between the Fort Peck Fish and Game Department and community members. Partners hope this will result in greater community satisfaction and long-term buffalo program sustainability (financial, cultural, and environmental). World Wildlife Fund also sought to benefit from the survey as a means of assessing how it can be most effective at Fort Peck in its own efforts to contribute to tribal wildlife (particularly buffalo) restoration efforts.

Throughout the summer we reached out to the Fort Peck communities (six towns across the reservation) and presented the survey to the residents. We invited residents of Fort Peck to participate in the survey by organizing community feeds, through Facebook outreach, and personal contacts. Throughout the summer we didn't have many people coming to the community feeds, but those who did respond were happy to have a voice in putting together a strategic plan for the buffalo. In addition to the feeds, organizers elicited responses using both digital and paper versions of the survey distributed via social media and visits to community gatherings

such as senior center meals. People were encouraged to fill out the survey by being entered in a drawing for 60 $50 gift cards. The survey itself, both on-line and on paper, was anonymous.

Demographic questions sought to identify whether respondents were tribal members, which communities they lived in, gender, age, and income level. Four pages of survey questions were posed with a five-point Likert scale and one open-ended narrative question. Questions covered respondents' values regarding the purpose of a buffalo program, how the buffalo herds should be managed and to what ends (e.g. economic development such as eco-tourism, food, spiritual relationships), perceptions of the current management program, values regarding distribution of buffalo hunts, meat and products, patterns of current and preferred buffalo meat consumption, and general wildlife value orientations. Questions stemmed from the need for greater understanding of the values, perceptions, and desires held by tribal members in relation to buffalo to enhance the tribal buffalo program in the future, and the benefits delivered to tribal residents. The portion of the survey concerning wildlife values had been validated by Colorado State University's Department of Human Dimensions of Natural Resources, and tested extensively in the American West, though not specifically among American Indians, and around the world in diverse countries including China, Estonia, Mongolia, Thailand, Kenya, Uganda, and throughout western Europe (Manfredo, Teel, & Henry, 2009; Teel, Manfredo, & Stinchfield, 2007). Qualtrics was used by the MSU Human Ecology Learning & Problem Solving (HELPS) Lab to gather responses, and the qualitative question was analyzed by identifying themes.

## Data & Analysis

One common theme across the findings of each project strand is the enthusiasm among the Fort Peck population for connecting with the buffalo,

contrasted with a distinct lack of information about how to do so (for various purposes, such as ceremonies, hunt and buffalo product access, and simply observing the buffalo on the ranch). In addition, knowledge concerning common tribal buffalo songs, stories, protocols, and arts is limited among tribal members. These data suggest there is ample space and indeed demand on the reservation for educational programs, ceremonies and events that could help fill this gap between the desire to know and appreciate buffalo culture and the current availability and distribution of this knowledge.

*Strand 1: Impact of Buffalo Restoration*

The 2013 focus groups and interviews provided excellent opportunities to find out exactly how a variety of people felt and what their visions for the future might entail. There were a range of ideas expressed. On one hand, younger participants didn't know where the ranch was located; at least one hadn't heard the Tribes possessed buffalo. On the other hand, one respondent expressed a feeling of being upset about how disrespectful people can be in areas of fishing and hunting.

The following strength-based themes emerged from this 2013 qualitative exploratory research:

1) Buffalo were and are again important to material survival. They can improve our health if we learn to prepare and appreciate buffalo meat.
   - That buffalo sustained us. We were able to get everything that you needed from that buffalo. The food, they provided some shelter, provided the clothing, your basic necessities.
   - I think nowadays there's so much sickness, so much cancers, so many diseases. Way back, I don't think there was that much because people ate buffalo meat and not so much dairy, processed foods.

2) Buffalo are central to culture: they are key to many ceremonies. Research participants discussed a tradition of honoring buffalo through stories and

songs, noting that many of these stories pay homage to the historical role of the buffalo in supporting the survival of Native communities. Songs also honor the strength and beauty of the animal.

- I remember it was cold. It was snowing. Then it was raining. [The buffalo] come in. But it was interesting too when they got off that trailer. The bull, they put him off. He jumped off and he just stomped and he turned around. He looked at all of us ... And then he just walked out. Then some of them, they would run out. And after about maybe a half hour the Tatanka Oyate singers lined up and they sing a buffalo song. [The buffalo] were just running like this because I don't think they really knew. But the minute they started singing you should have seen them. I filmed it. They turned. They turned … The bull on this side, his legs were doing this … To the buffalo song. "The buffalo are coming dancing," is what the song was saying.

3) The buffalo are teachers – they model lessons on fortitude, endurance, and generosity. They teach through dreams, visions, medicine. They connect us to all of nature. We need them to help educate our youth, and create better times.

- [The Buffalo] also showed us a way of life…. And I always look at how headstrong Indian people are. The Buffalo don't run from a storm. They meet the storm head on. They don't turn around and take off and run the other way. They're there because they know. Because I really believe they have that connection and know exactly what's going to happen…. And I think for Indian people they've done that. When they talk about wars or they talk about Indians in your history that have had all these different things happen to them they've met them head on. And whatever those consequences after that or those outcomes they were what they were.

4) The buffalo are spiritual beings – a link to our Creator, our Source. Their return represents a continuation, renewal, of a spiritual journey.

- We pray to [the Buffalo] because he is with the Great One, this buffalo. We all come from him. Every animal--even them ants--come from the good Lord. Everything on this earth…. And we ask [the Buffalo] to

> pray for us. That's how we do it. That [the Buffalo] will also send prayers up to our Creator to help us.

5) Buffalo make us happy, contented. Watching them brings peace and joy. If we participate, they will help heal our people.

   - …. We have … an innate feeling, you know, towards animals…. They just bring their energy, they share their energy with us, you know?

Themes that demonstrated concerns have informed the more recent buffalo project strands:

6) *Self- Efficacy*. Most older focus group participants expressed considerable self-efficacy in their ability to maintain good relationships with land and animals. Younger participants expressed greater discouragement, or seemed to feel unable to comment on environmental values, inter-species relationships and cultural practices. This result motivated the key focus of the Buffalo People Summit, which was education of the youth about the importance, value and life-enriching potential of buffalo relations.

7) *Social Capital*. Social capital can be defined as shared community norms of reciprocity and mutual trust and multiple social network ties that lead to a "united view of a shared future" and capacity for collective action (Flora, Flora, & Gasteyer, 2015, p. 179). The theme of a struggle for social capital was manifest in lack of shared knowledge about the buffalo herd and how it was being managed; tension between people and their government structures; issues of community pride; lack of youth direction/investment; lack of social space where people can gather; changes in land ownership policies; and issues of infrastructure management. This theme informed the decision to mount the strength-based "Path Back" research that celebrates

social capital and resiliency evidenced in the buffalo's return; and the Buffalo Values Survey aimed at improving buffalo herd management practices and community knowledge about the herds.

*Strand 2: Buffalo People Summit*

The summer classes laying the foundation for the Summit were well attended. About 20 people participated in the hunt and butchering. About 50 people showed up for the Dry Meat class. And a solid half dozen Winter Count students succeeded in painting the Lone Dog replica. All of these events, along with the community meetings and publicity surrounding the Buffalo Values Survey, helped to build momentum and public interest in the Summit.

During the Summit itself, the Opening Ceremony and adults workshop day each brought about 100 participants. Over 1000 students and perhaps 60 teachers participated in the three days of field trips (each day inviting different grade-groups) to the Turtle Mound buffalo ranch in between those two plenary events. According to an informal poll, on the last day participants were about half local tribal members, one third non-Indian non-residents, and the remainder split between visitors enrolled elsewhere, and non-Indian reservation residents.

The Summit was evaluated through a one-page program evaluation aimed at the adult participants, a student worksheet for use by the teachers involved with the school field trips, and a teacher evaluation of the field trips which elicited summaries of student worksheet themes. The program evaluation sought data on how participants heard about the events, how they wanted the buffalo management program to communicate with them and ways in which the buffalo herds can benefit the Fort Peck communities. It elicited narrative feedback on what they learned from the Summit, what they would repeat or do differently. Thirty-four participants' evaluations were returned. The teacher evaluation elicited narrative responses

regarding what they learned, what they would repeat or do differently, what their students highlighted as "interesting things" about the field day, and what they observed at the buffalo ranch where the field days were held. Only four teacher evaluations were returned but we collected about 200 student worksheets as well.

Participants emphasized they learned about the importance of the buffalo in Fort Peck Tribes' spirituality, gaining an understanding that buffalo are relatives, understanding the significance of relationship with the buffalo, the buffalo's value to culture and how it can "affect the native community as a whole." Ten respondents mentioned a desire to see the buffalo, either with a tour to the ranch, or a local viewing herd. This was a sentiment heard more widely through word-of-mouth and from the students. Several suggested another summit include more cultural events, such as a "sweat", or a pow-wow or a "Wacipi - a dance/celebration." Several made "culinary" comments – asking for "more buffalo tastings," asking to "make sure all the people get to eat buffalo all the time," asking for a cooking class, and asking for a recipe book.

During the field days, the students had circulated through about 20 different "tipi [and outdoor] stations" with speakers on cultural, historical, and ecological lessons of the buffalo, singing, tipi pole scraping, games, and displays of a taxidermied buffalo and horses. The teachers appreciated the events very much, especially highlighting their students' response to active or hands-on lessons (*"Learning Nakoda Buffalo song," "scraping the lodge pole #1 favorite"*). One comment about what a teacher would have the Pté Group repeat was, *"All of it. Great Job!"* Oral feedback gathered informally at the end of each field day was overwhelmingly positive, despite organizational hiccups.

A significant disappointment for the students and teachers is that they didn't have any (or sufficient) opportunity to actually see the buffalo herd despite efforts by

Fish & Game personnel to herd some of the buffalo toward the field days site (the ranch includes thousands of acres). Requests for additional activities included:

- More story-telling (history). More drumming with identification and meaning of songs. More "hands-on" like the peeling of poles.
- Maybe how do you set-up the tipis.
- It would have been cool to have cooking over the fire - stew to enjoy and test taste.
- Wish we would have had the tour guide or story teller on our bus - that was a great idea!
- When have more buffalo could show kids how to scrape, tan, dry hides; cook buffalo recipes; make buffalo bags and many other items from the buffalo; etc. - More hands-on, most kids have trouble sitting & listening these days.
- Add more historical spiritualism.
- [The students] really enjoyed the horse and would like more opportunities to ride and be around horses. Horse (equine) therapy.

The students' worksheets highlighted the value of diverse tipi stations, some more than others, but most received some particular mention. The largest portion mentioned what they'd learned about the different uses their ancestors had made of all parts of the buffalo. A significant number mentioned learning a buffalo song and engaging with stories. Some students drew pictures of what they had observed out at the buffalo ranch. Many notable comments from students about what they learned suggest they paid close attention and were quite enthralled with their field day. Three of these students offered up memorable items of learning:

- That a tipi is a language.
- I learned about trust.
- That the land is perfect for the Indian tipis and that the buffalos are in a good place. The land is sacred and has sacred Rocks.

*Strand 3: The Path Back: A History of Buffalo Advocacy by the Fort Peck Tribe*

Presentations during the Buffalo People Summit described the history of the buffalo's 19th century devastation and the path of native (Yellowstone) buffalo back to

the Fort Peck reservation. An early Fort Peck buffalo advocate talked at the final day of the Summit, demonstrating with his story the long and complex history of the buffalo's return.

Preliminary analysis of *The Path Back* oral histories has examined how ecological restoration can have therapeutic and protective mental health benefits. These are achieved through reconnections and affective experiences of and with buffalo. The interviews highlight the importance of access to spaces of "affective ecologies" as well as personal investment in spiritual traditions among other avenues of reconnection with the buffalo people (Haggerty, Rink, McAnally, & Bird, 2017). Further analysis and findings from the interviews remain in progress.

*Strand 4: Buffalo Values Survey*

The survey asked what the people want for the future of our Buffalo Ranch. There were 369 participants who completed the questionnaire (161 paper; 208 internet), including 285 enrolled members. About half of these were from the west side of the reservation (largely Assiniboine) and half from the east side (largely Sioux). Respondents were 62% female; 37% male.

We had a variety of responses to conducting the survey. Analysis of responses has revealed some key findings about the Fort Peck people's perceptions of the buffalo on their lands. Among tribal member respondents, 88% valued buffalo as wildlife, 68% valued them as relatives, and 54% valued them as livestock.

Ninety-one percent of tribal members agreed that "we should encourage our youth to learn about buffalo and other wildlife for future jobs," 87% agreed "we should use buffalo for healthful food," 86% agreed "we should encourage our people to reconnect with buffalo through tribal traditions," 83% agreed that "we should help to restore buffalo to the grasslands of North America," and 78% agreed that "the return of buffalo will be a source of healing for our people."

Critique of the current buffalo herds management came through in the difference among the percent of tribal members who feel that "Tribal members should be consulted about goals for tribal buffalo management" (74%), those who feel that "I understand how the Fort Peck Buffalo herds are currently being managed" (44%), and those who feel that "Goals for tribal buffalo management are communicated clearly to all members" (32%). Similarly, 64% of Tribal members agreed they should be consulted about the process of selecting tribal recipients of buffalo meat and products, while only 30% said they understand how the Tribes select tribal recipients of buffalo meat and products, and only 25% agreed, "The process for selecting tribal recipients of buffalo has been communicated clearly to all members." Narrative responses to the open-ended question, "Please tell us about any concerns you might have about how the buffalo herds are currently being managed," largely confirmed the implicit criticism of the Tribes' buffalo program management. While 23 comments expressed appreciation for current management of the herds, 85 expressed criticisms and an additional 16 respondents said they didn't know enough to comment. Criticisms referenced the need for better communication about the management practices (17 comments), the need for greater management transparency (3 comments), concerns about meat distribution (14 comments), concerns about hunting opportunities and sale of such opportunities to non-tribal members (6 comments), other concerns about management (35 comments), and a handful of concerns about public education, economic development, and the herds' location and how this affects the Fort Peck people's ability to enjoy the buffalo's presence. Tribal members believe the "cultural herd" should be managed to:

- Provide for the ceremonial needs of tribal members (71%)
- Provide food for tribal members (69%)
- Earn money from tourism (58%)

It is clear that tribal members would like to eat buffalo more than they do now. Only 5% currently eat buffalo daily, weekly, or monthly, though an additional 59% responded that they do eat buffalo when offered. In contrast, 45% would prefer to eat buffalo daily, weekly, or monthly; 34% said they would prefer to eat buffalo when offered. Only 7% said they would never eat buffalo (a mark of acculturation of tastes).

Finally, 76% of tribal members agreed that "the buffalo herds and the land they graze on the reservation should be expanded," and 70% wanted the Fort Peck Tribes to "establish a herd for viewing that is more accessible," i.e., more easily seen and watched.

## Discussion

The findings show that buffalo culture remains strong among a portion of the Fort Peck populace, particularly concentrated among the older generations. At the same time results show that many more of the Fort Peck peoples would like to engage with buffalo culture, including knowing the stories, songs and ceremonies, watching the herd, hunting buffalo, eating the meat, and contributing to decision-making about the herds' management and the distribution of buffalo products.

Not evident from the data are the processes and relationships that have made each of these four strands of The Buffalo Project possible and successful. The collaborations between FPCC and other tribal members, including the Fish & Game Director, with non-tribal institutions – MSU and WWF – were key; collaborations and partnerships are integral elements of successful community-based participatory research. The *Ceremony of Research* project, funded through MSU, facilitated articulation of the motivating questions and funded the 2013 qualitative research. MSU personnel visits to Fort Peck to discuss strategies for further research generated the admonition from author Red Elk, "Let's not just talk about this. Let's do it!" ---

i.e., generate the connections with the buffalo that the Fort Peck partners were concerned were missing in their communities. The partnership between WWF and the Fort Peck Fish & Game Department gave rise to Summit organizing funds as well as the survey, which was integrated with the Summit organizing. MSU personnel raised most of the other funds that supported the Summit and helped the Pté Group to leverage significant contributions from FPCC and the Tribal Executive Board. Author Smith commented on the roles of other partners: "[Author]*Jorgensen has been an incredible resource for us."* The organizing skills of author Bird offered a role model and momentum for completing the Summit organizing: *"We wouldn't have done this without her being the [taskmaster], caring yet driven, such a blessing to us."* The MSU and WWF partners will always be considered *koda/kona* (friend) to the Assinibone and Sioux.

The elders and cultural experts on the team were critical as motivators and resources, reflected in comments about the process:

- [Author] Red Elk, I have never worked with someone like her before. She is knowledgeable educated and wise.
- [Author] McAnally's pessimism made us think hard about what we were doing... His fear was that the Council would not be on board. We found out that communication was essential and that we could do a better job with that next time.
- Ramey Growing Thunder (Director of the Fort Peck Language & Culture Department) and her crew took a political risk but the project gave her program a boost as well.
- John Morsette [an original PAB member who motivated The Buffalo Project] - his wisdom and prayers have always been with us [despite recent illness].

College administrative personnel were also critical to our success, as were the many elders and knowledgeable community members who contributed presentations during the school field days and the adults workshop. Our hearts are proud at what we accomplished.

Much inspiration for the way the Buffalo Project evolved came from the 2013 focus groups and interviews. The beauty of some of the responses was described by one author as "out of this world," as they were responses that we wouldn't have expected within a research project. We think of people who have passed away since we started this project: how much they contributed to this inquiry, and how they would be proud of what we pulled off. The process of asking our questions and listening carefully to the answers touched our hearts. We are deeply grateful these individuals opened their hearts and minds to us; a successful community-based participatory research project depends on this kind of openness.

This kind of research project often leads to the development of contacts, relationships, and interactions that go beyond standard researcher/participant relationships. In addition to the people we talked to through the initial work in 2013, we met so many incredible people along the way who have made significant efforts and sacrifices to be of assistance to the Buffalo Project. The gatherings prior, during, and after have melded friendships with a variety of people. We were honored to have been able to work with wise elders and very knowledgeable, energetic, and caring people --- people like Chief Robert Fourstar, who gave us his blessing for the buffalo summit, was on board from the beginning, and continued to support the work through the ups and downs of planning and listening to the critics. His blessing was heartfelt and gave us a much-needed boost. He passed away recently, but not until after playing a critical role in the school field days and Northern Buffalo Treaty reunion.

Anecdotal evidence of the impact of the Buffalo Project, as well as data from Summit evaluations, suggest that the school students were excited about being at the Turtle Mound Buffalo Ranch and learning about buffalo culture and that they want to come back, that many more individuals would have participated with the Treaty gathering and the adults workshop but hadn't been aware of or registered on all the

publicity and invitations (we heard expressions of consternation such as, "why wasn't I invited to speak?"), and that those who did participate expressed strong support and appreciation for the events. There were some naysayers who felt the events did not reflect all reservation clans and communities but the Buffalo Project has demonstrated that there is a strong core group of buffalo supporters, and many more people who want to learn and be involved.

## Conclusion

We are impressed and grateful that, finally, for the first time in this century, there was a coming together for an important common cause, of FPCC faculty and staff, grassroots Indian people, tribal politicians, tribal agency personnel, as well as Montana State University and WWF. We were united and determined to work for the benefit of all reservation people and our relatives, the Tatanga/Tatanka Oyate. We believe that real change and real progress will come to Fort Peck, and indeed to all of Indian Country, only when the people themselves, not just the governments, band together for the common good. The Fort Peck Pté Group did become the catalyst for such common good and change because when united together, the group members and associates put aside their personal and historical issues (Assiniboine v. Sioux, East end v. West end, etc.) to work toward their goal of community education with regard to the meaning and importance of the return of our relations, the Tatanga/Tatanka Oyate. We believe that the Pté Group, with dedicated and educated leadership, could grow into giving the *Ikce Wicasa* (common man) a vehicle to directly address the serious social and cultural issues on Fort Peck Reservation. It is evident that, through this community-based, participatory research project --- its goals, questions, methods, and data gathered --- focused on the return of the buffalo to Fort Peck, important relationships have been forged that will continue to sustain the

Buffalo Project and its broader goal of connecting and re-connecting the people with their relations.

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# Connecting Educational Communities to Engage in Collective Inquiry: Creating Professional Learning Communities as Sites of Action Research

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## Abstract

Over the past several years, educational reform strategies have postulated that not only do children need to be ready and able to learn in school, but equally important, schools must be ready for children (Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2005; Washington State Department of Early Learning, 2009). In this article, Nahrin Aziz-Parsons investigates the ways in which an early childhood initiative at Northwest Indian College, building on five foundational beliefs about the readiness of schools for children, used professional learning communities (PLCs) as both a professional development forum and a methodological process to engage educators serving Lummi children and families in collective inquiry. Using the PLCs as sites of action research, the collective inquiry in which teachers engaged helped to connect educational systems across districts and communities, ensuring that schools are ready for children, redefining "Safety Zones" (Lansing, 2014) within this context, and fostering place-based education. The result was a smoother transition for children who moved from early learning to the K-3 educational system, positively impacting the growth, development, and educational trajectories of young Native children.

## Introduction

In 2011, Northwest Indian College (NWIC) was one of four tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) that received the American Indian College Fund's "*Wakanyeja* 'Sacred Little Ones' Tribal College Readiness and Success by Third Grade" Early Childhood Education Initiative grant. The five-year initiative concentrates on strengthening systems of care and learning for Native children. The purpose of the initiative is "to bring together tribal colleges, communities, educators, and families to address early learning disparities in Native communities" (American Indian College Fund: *Wakanyeja* "Sacred Little Ones" Early Childhood Education Initiative, 2015, p. 1). The initiative addresses the following five domains:

1. Improve cognitive and non-cognitive skill acquisition among American Indian children
2. Improve early childhood teacher education quality in Native communities by partnering with post-secondary teacher education programs at tribal colleges
3. Bridge early childhood education Pre-K transition to K-3 schooling
4. Integrate Native language(s) and culture(s) into curriculum development and instruction for teacher preparation programming, early childhood education centers, and K-3 settings
5. Empower families and communities to act as agents of change in education for their children

These five domains focus on "transforming Native early childhood education from within Native communities" (T. Yazzie-Mintz, personal communication, November 18, 2015). While the five domains are interconnected and interdependent, NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors placed emphasis on Domain 3: Bridging early learning with K-3 education. We invited educators serving Lummi children and families to participate in professional learning communities and think critically about developmentally appropriate practices and culturally responsive teaching.

## Research Question

Our research was guided by the following question:

*How can we, as a learning community, design a system of care and learning that prepares children for schools, and schools for children?*

Quintessentially, NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors wanted to unearth the effect that connections among educators (i.e., everyone who comes into contact with young Lummi children in early learning programs, including teachers, administrators, teacher assistants, bus drivers, cooks, etc.) would have on bridging early learning with kindergarten through grade three (i.e., creating smooth transitions allowing Lummi children to thrive in their current classrooms *and* when they move

from one program/level to the next). This article explores the ways in which early childhood education faculty members at Northwest Indian College connected educational communities to engage in collective inquiry about fostering place-based education and redefining "Safety Zones" (Lansing, 2014), in an effort to positively impact Native children's early educational experiences.

## Context

Northwest Indian College is headquartered on the Lummi Reservation, along the Salish Sea shoreline, near Bellingham, Washington. In addition to our main campus on the Lummi Reservation, NWIC has six full service extended campus sites located at Muckleshoot, Nez Perce, Nisqually, Port Gamble S'Klallam, Swinomish, and Tulalip. NWIC is the only accredited Tribal College serving the states of Washington, Idaho, and Oregon, offering four bachelor's degrees and numerous associate's degrees, including the Associate of Applied-Science Transfer degree in Early Childhood Education. During the 2014-2015 academic year, NWIC served 968 undergraduate students (Cueva, 2015) throughout the Pacific Northwest, Canada, and beyond. The educational philosophy of Northwest Indian College is based upon the belief that the opportunity for post-secondary education must be provided within Native American communities. We are also committed to the belief that "Through education, Northwest Indian College promotes Indigenous self-determination and knowledge" (Northwest Indian College, 2015). It is this mission that helps to guide the work in which we engage, in the Sacred Little Ones Early Childhood Education Initiative.

## Foundational Beliefs and Review of Literature

When we began delving into our inquiry, we had a vision that schools should be ready for children, taking both developmentally appropriate practices and culturally

responsive teaching into consideration. Since our focus in the Lummi community is to serve Native children, we also held true the following five beliefs, based on Indigenous knowledge and Native family values, and corroborated by research.

### *Native Children are Extraordinarily Intelligent and Capable of Higher-Level Learning*

Bang (2014) posits that Native children have specific, unique, and valuable intelligences, such as a deep understanding that nature and culture are intertwined; awareness that human beings ought to respect nature and that there is an expectation of reciprocity in the human/nature relationship; the ability to reason in terms of life cycles and thus have multiple perspectives when thinking critically about issues; the ability to think ecologically in terms of relationships and systems, as opposed to taxonomically (i.e., compartmentalizing issues); and a broader view of what is alive as well as the ability to take this into consideration when studying nature, the environment, and the greater world around them.

### *Teachers Must Foster Classroom Environments in which Native Families' Values and Practices are Acknowledged, Respected, and Represented*

Lomawaima & McCarty (as cited in Lansing, 2014) use the "Safety Zone Theory" as a way of describing why certain aspects of Native American culture are perceived as being either accepted or forbidden, dependent upon the nation's current economic and political state. Lansing (2014) posits that educators, especially Native educators, must therefore revisit and redefine "Safety Zones" in classrooms in order to position "Native… language and culture at the forefront of education" (p. 38). NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors agreed with this tenet, and wanted to stress the importance of having Native families, values, and communities, from which the children come, be acknowledged, respected, and represented in the classroom and the curriculum in schools both on and off the Lummi Reservation.

### *There Must be a Focus on Developmentally Appropriate Practices and Culturally Responsive Teaching*

Developmentally appropriate practices (DAPs) and culturally responsive teaching are critical not only in the early childhood years but also in primary education levels as well. According to Copple & Bredekamp (2009), children deserve developmentally appropriate programming at every age and at every level. NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors therefore wanted to ensure that DAPs and culturally responsive teaching moved forward and upward, into the Head Start and K-3 levels, in order to foster and nurture Native children's lifelong learning, competence, and confidence.

### *Place-Based Education Must be Infused Throughout Classrooms and Curricula in Early Learning Programs that Serve Native Children and Families*

As London (2013) describes, "An Indigenous understanding of place recognizes and values places to be made up of relationships, experiences, histories, stories, languages, skills, and ceremonies" (p. 2). Woodhouse & Knapp (2000) describe place-based education using the following five essential characteristics:

1. It emerges from the particular attributes of a place
2. It is inherently multidisciplinary
3. It is inherently experiential
4. It is reflective of an educational philosophy that is broader than "learn to earn"
5. It connects place with self and community

These scholars further elaborate that educators who use place-based education as the foundation of their pedagogy believe "that education should prepare people to live and work to sustain the cultural and ecological integrity of the places they inhabit" (Woodhouse & Knapp, 2000, p. 2). Because Native children have a heightened awareness of the relationship between culture and nature (Bang, 2014), NWIC Sacred

Little Ones Project Co-Directors wanted to further explore the notion of implementing place-based education in early learning classrooms with teachers who served Lummi children and families.

Native scholars and authors also underscore the importance of place, specifically as it relates to Indigenous knowledge. Wildcat (2014) posits that Indigenous knowledges stem from a people's long-standing history with a place. It is therefore imperative that place-based education be restored as the foundation of learning activities for Native children, in an effort to fully support not only their growth and development, but also to validate their cultural identity and history.

### *Engaging in Collective Community Based Work is Essential in Order to Effect Systemic Change*

Lesaux, Jones, Harris, & Kane (2014) posit that in order for professional development to result in meaningful changes in practice, there needs to be a specific approach to knowledge-building:

1. Professional development sessions must be interactive, using discussion and dialogue
2. Early childhood educators must have the opportunity to collaborate, in order to identify areas of strength and opportunities for growth
3. Professional development needs to be onsite and ongoing with frequent sessions and opportunities for discourse

This emphasis on dialogue, collaboration, and discourse is important in any educational setting, and particularly resonates with Native educators. As Strickland, member of the Lumbee tribe of North Carolina, says, "… The circle is a gathering and a gathering welcomes all… In this way, we honor the American Indian spirit of inclusion… Those of the circle, we all have an equal value, and our experience is to be a dialogue. This is in tradition of our First Americans, where all voices are to be heard and respected. Knowledge is to be shared with all" (Office of Head Start, 2013,

17:48). Ultimately, community based work, such as professional learning communities, engage participants in collective learning that connects us to one another, effectively transcending borders (created by school districts and grade levels) through education.

The aim of this inquiry is to further understand how (1) fostering place-based education enhances Native children's learning by underscoring the importance of family, culture, and community; (2) engaging educators and stakeholders in collective community based work supports Native children's transition from pre-kindergarten to K-3 education; and (3) bridging amongst a number of levels (such as content, curriculum, pedagogy, school cultures, and cultural differences) leads to the creation of increased learning opportunities for young children. The findings in this study will assist in determining a sustainable practice (that is, engaging in collective inquiry by participating in professional learning communities to explore developmentally appropriate practices and culturally responsive teaching) that positively impacts the lives and educational experiences of young Native learners.

## Methodology

We selected professional learning communities (PLCs) as a way to engage stakeholders in collective inquiry to examine, question, and reshape early learning, in an effort to strengthen systems of care and learning for Lummi children. We thus used professional learning communities not only as a way to improve instruction and learning as a collective, but our PLCs also emerged as a methodological process to document what had been accomplished as a result of this initiative; it became a form of action research, using an existing structure of dialogue to drive our analysis of professional learning communities (T. Yazzie-Mintz, personal communication, December 2, 2015). Action research is, as defined by Mills (2007), "systematic inquiry… [in which]… information is gathered with the goals of gaining insight,

developing reflective practice, effecting positive changes in the school environment (and on educational practices in general), and improving student outcomes and the lives of those involved" (p. 5).

Because one of the project's purposes and end goals was to support Lummi children's transition from early learning to K-3, NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors and a contracted data consultant postulated that in addition to bridging content and curriculum, the project also had to focus on bridging pedagogy, people, school cultures, and cultural differences (Yazzie-Mintz, 2015). Table 1 indicates how the NWIC project's areas of focus align with the Sacred Little Ones initiative's goals / domains.

**Table 1:** ***Alignment between project's focus areas and initiative's goals / domains.***

| Focus Area: | NWIC Sacred Little Ones Goal / Domain: |
|---|---|
| Bridge of Content and Curriculum | Domain 1: Improve cognitive and non-cognitive skill acquisition among American Indian children |
| Bridge of Pedagogy | Domain 2: Improve early childhood teacher education quality in Native communities by partnering with post-secondary teacher education programs at tribal colleges |
| Bridge of People | Domain 5: Empower families and communities to act as agents of change in education for their children |
| Bridge of School Cultures | Domain 3: Bridge early childhood education Pre-K transition to K-3 schooling |
| Bridge of Cultural Differences | Domain 4: Integrate Native language(s) and culture(s) into curriculum development and instruction for teacher preparation programming, early childhood education centers, and K-3 settings |

*Bridge of Content & Curriculum*

According to research in P-3 literacy alignment (Hugo & Parsons, 2012), "alignment of strong instruction and research-based standards… [must be] set within

a child development context, across a P-3 continuum" (p. 5). Content and curriculum must be aligned between the early learning and K-3 learning environments, both vertically (through the grade levels) and horizontally (across educational systems), enabling children to experience a transition in which what they learn in their new classroom builds on what they learned in their previous classroom, and what they learned in their previous classroom has prepared them for what they are learning in their new classroom. The following questions drove NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors' inquiry: *Are content and curriculum aligned between the early learning and the K-3 learning environments? Do children experience a transition in which what they learn in their new classroom builds on what they learned in their previous classroom, and what they learned in their previous classroom has prepared them for what they are learning in their new classroom?* (Yazzie-Mintz, 2015, p. 1).

*Bridge of Pedagogy*

It is important for teaching methods and styles in the children's previous classroom and in their new classroom to mesh in a way that makes it easy for the children to make the transition. The following questions drove NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors' inquiry: *Do the teaching methods and styles in the children's previous classroom and in their new classroom mesh in a way that makes it easy for the children to make the transition, or is there a big difference to which children need to adjust? If there is a contrast, how can the children be supported by the teachers in making this adjustment from one teacher's classroom to another?* (Yazzie-Mintz, 2015, p. 1).

*Bridge of People*

We utilize Professional Learning Communities and other forums to help children make the transition from one team of people (teachers, aides, directors, staff, etc.) to a new team of people in the new learning environment. The following

questions drove NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors' inquiry: *In what ways can the PLCs be utilized to help children make the transition from one team of people (teachers, aides, directors, staff, etc.) to a new team of people in the new learning environment?* (Yazzie-Mintz, 2015, p. 2).

*Bridge of School Cultures*

It is imperative that norms, rules, customs, and traditions in the children's new learning environment adapt to the children. The following questions drove NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors' inquiry: *Are there different norms/rules/customs/traditions in the children's new learning environment? Are there different expectations of students in the previous and the new learning environments? Are there different ways in which people interact/communicate/collaborate with each other in the new learning environment that will be a challenge for children to adapt to?* (Yazzie-Mintz, 2015, p. 2).

*Bridge of Cultures*

Lummi families who reside on the reservation have an option of sending their children to either schools on the reservation, Lummi Nation School, or schools in the neighboring Ferndale School District. According to the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, approximately 427 children identify as American Indian / Alaska Native in the Ferndale School District (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2014). It is imperative, therefore, to examine cultural differences (between home and school) and how those differences may impact children's educational experiences. The following questions drove NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors' inquiry: *How do children make the transition from a tribal school to a non-tribal school? What changes for children as they make that transition? How can adults from both the tribal school and the non-tribal school help children make that transition?* (Yazzie-Mintz, 2015, p. 2).

## Professional Learning Communities

In order to create all of these bridges, NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors drew upon places of strength and knowing and used a structure with which we were familiar to help build these bridges. NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors were familiar with professional learning communities for the following two reasons: (1) former NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Director and PLC Co-Facilitator, Smock, was involved in a county-wide professional learning community of early childhood educators representing licensed child care facilities in order to address and implement P-3 literacy alignment development and (2) current NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Director and PLC Co-Facilitator, [Aziz-Parsons], was the co-developer and facilitator who led the aforementioned professional learning communities, in which Smock participated, as a part of Northwest Educational Service District's and Opportunity Council's joint P-3 Literacy Alignment Initiative that spanned across a three-county region in the northwest corner of the State.

Throughout our PLC sessions and interactions with participants, we were guided by Hord's (2008) "five components of research-based learning communities" (p. 12):

*A Common Vision*: NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors wanted to create better systems of care and learning for Lummi children and families, guided by the question, "What does a healthy Lummi child look like, based on Lummi family values and practices?"

*Distributed Leadership*: We wanted our professional learning communities to give rise to shared leadership and shared responsibility, and thus members of the Sacred Little Ones Coordinating Team helped to plan and facilitate the sessions, and each subsequent session was guided by feedback from participants (in the form of evaluations).

*Supportive Conditions*: We wanted to establish relational and structural conditions that were supportive of participant learning and engagement:

1. Relational Conditions: listening, connecting, building trust, etc.
2. Structural Conditions: addressing PLC participants' needs, based on logistical details, such as meeting location, date, and time.

*Collective Learning and Application:* We wanted participants to collaboratively learn about fostering place-based education and redefining "Safety Zones" (Lansing, 2014) in classrooms so that Native children feel seen, heard, and valued. Moreover, we wanted Native children to have a sense of belonging to the classroom community and ownership of their educational experiences.

*Shared Personal Practice*: Once NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors helped to establish and sustain trust among the group of PLC participants, teachers felt comfortable lowering their classroom walls, and inviting their peers (across systems, districts, and grade levels) to give feedback about their teaching and learning practices based on observations of teaching and classroom tours focusing on environments. We thus see a shift in the paradigm, in which teachers begin to "de-privatize" their practice by observing each other's classrooms, providing feedback as peer mentors, and supporting one another's acquisition and application of new learning.

In order to truly support Lummi children and families, however, we realized that while Hord's (2008) five components were excellent principles on which to build our professional learning communities, we also needed to adapt our PLCs, taking into consideration the strengths and needs of the Lummi community. Contrary to educational research stemming from the Western Academy, which postulates that professional learning communities ought to remain small (Guskey & Peterson, as cited in Hord, 1997), we knew in our final year of the project that in order to effect systemic change, we had to reach out further into the Lummi community.

Therefore, we began inviting teachers and administrators from all Lummi early learning programs (including Lummi Early Head Start, Lummi Nation Child Care Center, and Teen Parent Child Development Center) to participate in our PLCs. This innovative practice, which directly ties to creating supportive *relational* conditions (Hord, 2008), helped to ensure that all Lummi families with young children enrolled in a tribal early learning program were being represented, that all early childhood educators serving Lummi children were included, and that they had common understandings and language to use with colleagues and with parents / families.

## Partnerships

Our inquiry and bridge-building efforts were not pursued in isolation, but rather, in collaboration, with the following partners: Northwest Indian College Associate of Applied-Science Transfer in Early Childhood Education degree program, Northwest Indian College Early Learning Center, Lummi Nation Head Start, Lummi Nation School, and Eagleridge Elementary in the Ferndale School District.

Our partner sites consisted of both Native and non-Native educators and administrators. Table 2 provides a breakdown of Native and non-Native lead teachers, from among our formal partner sites, who consistently participated in our professional learning communities:

**Table 2:** ***Breakdown of Native and Non-Native Teachers at Partner Programs.***

| Name of Partner Program | Number of Native Teachers | Number of Non-Native Teachers |
|---|---|---|
| NWIC Early Learning Center | 4 Lummi Teachers<br>1 First Nations Teacher<br>1 Native Descendent Teacher | 0 Non-Native Teachers |
| Lummi Nation Head Start | 1 Lummi Teacher<br>6 Lummi Teacher Assistants | 5 Non-Native Teachers |
| Lummi Nation School | 1 Lummi Teacher | 3 Non-Native Teachers |
| Eagleridge Elementary | 0 Native Teachers | 5 Non-Native Teachers |
| Total | 14 Native Teachers | 13 Non-Native Teachers |

## Data / Evidence

We triangulated our data, and collected evidence stemming from three different sources: (1) attendance logs; (2) teacher interviews/focus groups; and (3) participant evaluations.

*Attendance Logs*

We met with representatives from partner early childhood education programs that served Lummi children and families 20 times over the course of three years (April 2012 to May 2015). Twenty (20) attendance logs were collected and documented the following numbers of participants over the span of the three years:

59 of 85 PLC participants attended 05% - 25% of PLC sessions (1-5 sessions)

17 of 85 PLC participants attended 26% - 50% of PLC sessions (6-10 sessions)

Eight of 85 PLC participants attended 51% - 75% of PLC sessions (11-15 sessions)

One of 85 PLC participants attended 76% - 100% of PLC sessions (16-20 sessions)

It is important to note that there is a high turnover rate in non-Native teachers in tribal early childhood education programs (Pavel, Strong, Dolata, & Baker, 2014).

Taking into consideration this and the fact that, in general, "teacher turnover is an issue of continued concern in early education" (Carolan, 2013, p. 1), the above figures are demonstrative of PLC participants' commitment to Lummi children and families who want to strengthen systems of care and learning for Native children, and to one another as collegial peers who engage in collective inquiry.

*Teacher Interviews*

In spring 2015, NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors conducted interviews (with nine PLC participants) and focus groups (with 15 PLC participants), to better understand participants' experiences with and satisfaction of PLCs. During the interviews, PLC participants were asked to describe how their teaching experiences would be different, had the Sacred Little Ones project and professional learning communities not existed. Brooks (2015), a veteran teacher at Lummi Nation Head Start, responded:

> [Without Sacred Little Ones] I wouldn't have met the kindergarten teachers from Eagleridge or Lummi Nation. It's nice to talk to them about what they're doing… [Y]ou don't get that usually, you know, in a school district… and so I like that" (p. 10).

Grah (2015), a newly hired teacher at Lummi Nation Head Start, responded:

> With me being brand new, [the PLCs are] pretty much the only time I talk to the other teachers [in my own building]… because we're all always… so busy. And even when the kids aren't here, you're still busy preparing and cleaning and organizing and [doing] paperwork. So it's kind of time to connect (p. 8).

The aforementioned quotations from our professional learning community participants exemplify how valuable and meaningful PLCs were to participants in terms of bridging educational systems, both vertically (through the grades) and horizontally (across systems), and bridging people. Furthermore, The Washington

Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills, a process developed to enhance children's success in schools, includes collaboration between kindergarten teachers and early childhood educators, to discuss student learning, as one of its three main tenets (Washington State Department of Early Learning, 2015). Thus, bridging educators from the early learning and K-3 educational systems is aligned with promising practices and state efforts that result in children's school readiness and school success.

NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors and PLC Co-Facilitators deliberately continued to revisit the concept of "Safety Zones" (Lansing, 2014) with professional learning community participants throughout the 2014-2015 academic year. First, in an effort to define and exemplify the concepts of place-based education and "Safety Zones," PLC Co-Facilitators guided and supported teachers to answer the question, "What do place-based education and 'Safety Zones' mean and what do they look like in early learning classrooms/environments?" PLC Co-Facilitators used visual and verbal descriptions, as well as catalogs featuring educational materials and supplies, through which teachers looked and about which they discussed, to think critically about these two concepts that help Native children's transition from the early learning to K-3 educational systems, and from tribal to non-tribal schools.

Next, NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors and PLC Co-Facilitators began to construct and collectively make sense of these terms, place-based and "Safety Zones" with PLC participants. PLC Co-Facilitators who had spent considerable amounts of time studying these concepts shared ideas, gave participants opportunities to meet Lummi artists, helped teachers to search educational websites, and encouraged them to create their own educational materials that were supportive of and aligned with place-based education and "Safety Zones."

Then, NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors and PLC Co-Facilitators provided topics and resources to implement place-based education and "Safety

Zones" in each respective classroom. PLC Co-Facilitators provided research articles about developmentally appropriate practices and a video during which an early childhood educator played tribal music for a Lummi infant and the ways in which the Lummi infant responded to her tribal music, demonstrative of the importance of culturally responsive teaching.

Last, PLC Co-Facilitators made a commitment to help PLC participants spend mini-grants (ranging from $500 to $750) on classroom enhancements, designed to help foster place-based education in early learning programs, via coaching, reviewing requests, and providing feedback to teachers about their draft requests in an effort to strengthen their proposals and prepare them for approval.

During the spring 2015 interviews and focus groups that were conducted with 24 PLC participants, NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors wanted to better understand the evolution of PLC participants' understanding of place-based education and "Safety Zones." PLC participants were asked to explain how incorporating language and literacy that reflected Native values and practices into the classroom impacted their classroom communities by fostering place-based education and redefining "Safety Zones" in the classroom. Ballew (2015), a Lummi teacher at Lummi Nation School responded:

> As a Lummi teacher, I've always tried to incorporate Lummi culture, even before Sacred Little Ones. But this is just… what's the word... inspiring me, or validating. And making what I feel in my heart initially and why I went to school to become a teacher, and this is just enhancing what I already feel (p. 3).

Howell (2015), a teacher in the Ferndale School District working with Lummi children and families, responded:

> I just appreciate being able to be a part of [the professional learning communities and Sacred Little Ones project]. It's opened my eyes in many ways and it's made me think of a lot of things differently… and take [smaller] steps sometimes with some of these kids who are just not ready to be where

> somebody else is telling me they should be. So it's thinking for yourself and trusting yourself and knowing what's best [for children] without somebody having to tell you that or tell you different (p. 30).

Howell further explained:

> [Using Personal Narrative (Matteson & Freeman, 2005)], I'm telling all these stories about when I'm growing up… I noticed one day I told when we lived on Lummi Island and I was talking about being on the beach and waiting for the ferry boat, and the Lummi kids are starting to say, "We know that beach! We know where that is!" And they got so excited that my next story I told was [that] my father was a fisherman, and he fished on reef netters and gill netters. I wouldn't have even said those words except for they got so excited before. So one boy goes, "My dad does that too! Do you know the difference between a reef netter and gill netter?" And I told him what my experiences were, and he goes, "You're right! And what kind of fish did you catch? Because when I go out on a gill netter, I catch…" And it was something that I probably wouldn't have gone into had I not had those ideas [about place-based education] presented to me [at our professional learning communities] (p. 1).

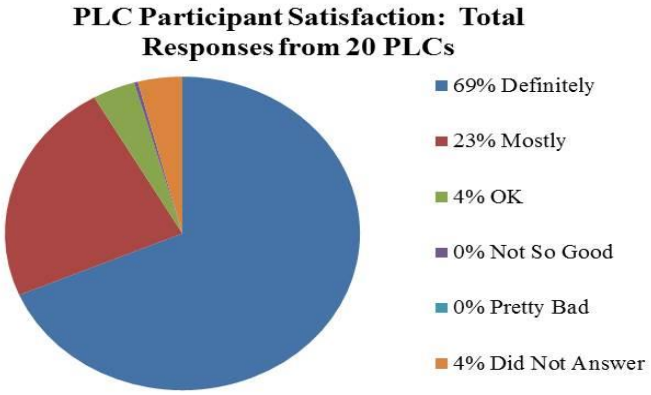
The aforementioned quotations from our professional learning community participants convey positive changes in teacher attitudes and behaviors, as a result of the concentrated effort on easing children's transition from early learning to kindergarten by bridging people, pedagogy, content and curriculum, and developmentally appropriate practices, and engaging in collective inquiry focused on place-based education and "Safety Zones" during our professional learning community sessions.

*Participant Evaluations*

Participant evaluations were distributed at every single professional learning community session, in order to gauge effectiveness and participant satisfaction. 296 participant evaluations were collected over the course of 3 years, at the 20 professional learning community sessions. An overwhelming number of participants (92%) reported that they "definitely" or "mostly" found the professional learning

community sessions to be "useful, interesting, and / or a good experience" as professional development opportunities (Figure 1 below).

**Figure 1:** ***Measuring Levels of Satisfaction: Percentage of PLC Participants who Found the PLC to be "Useful, Interesting, and/or a Good Experience."***




## Analysis and Findings

Our professional learning community sessions were focused on engaging educators in collective inquiry, in order to redefine "Safety Zones" and foster place-based education in an effort to work together to create strong early learning experiences for Native children. During the 2014-2015 academic year we intentionally explored these notions by: (1) introducing the concept of place-based education as a way to honor Lummi children's identity and support their learning by making classrooms more reflective of their family and community; (2) distributing literacy kits (Figure 2 below) that fostered place-based education and helped to redefine "Safety Zones" in classrooms; and (3) awarding mini-grants to educators to help transform their early learning classroom environments into ones that reflect Native values and practices.

**Figure 2:** ***Place-Based Education Literacy Kits (photo courtesy of author).***


The following evidence suggests that early childhood educators who participated in our professional learning communities used literacy kits and mini-grants as intended for fostering place-based education and redefining "Safety Zones" for Native children:

1. Teaching staff attendance at one or more of the three PLCs focused on professional development addressing the use of literacy kits and mini-grants to create place-based education and redefine "Safety Zones" in early learning classrooms:
    a. 94% (17 of 18) of PLC partner classrooms (partner classrooms consisted of three NWIC ELC classrooms, six Lummi Head Start classrooms, four Lummi Nation School, and five Eagleridge Elementary classrooms)
    b. 60% (6 of 10) of additional Lummi early childhood education (ECE) program settings (additional Lummi ECE programs consisted of two Lummi Teen Parent Child Development Center classrooms, three Lummi Nation Child Care Early Head Start classrooms, and five Lummi Early Head Start Home Base programs)

   c. 100% of respondents to PLC evaluations indicate interest, enthusiasm, and intention for increasing place-based, safety zones in their classrooms for tribal children at all levels, infancy through grade one.

2. Receipt of literacy kits that help to position "Native… language and culture at the forefront of education" (Lansing, 2014, p. 38), thus helping to redefine "Safety Zones" in early learning classrooms:
   a. 100% (18 of 18) of PLC partner classrooms
   b. 100% (10 of 10) of additional Lummi ECE program settings
3. Requests for classroom enhancements / mini-grants:
   a. 94% (17 of 18) of PLC partner classrooms
   b. 60% (6 of 10) of additional Lummi ECE program settings
4. Mini-Grant requests that met NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors' standards to redefine "Safety Zones" and foster place-based classrooms:
   a. 100% of PLC partner classrooms
   b. 100% of additional Lummi ECE program settings
5. Mentoring and Coaching
   a. Several teachers required re-thinking and changes to their requests, and to support their learning, NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors gave them feedback
   b. This resulted in stronger proposals and more clearly place-based materials (e.g., changing an order with pan-Indian imagery on small picture frames to Coast Salish imagery).
6. Classrooms / Settings
   a. 100% (15 of 15) of PLC classrooms observed (3 ELC, 6 Head Start, 2 LNS, 4 Eagleridge) demonstrate use of place-based elements.

The aforementioned data suggest that participating PLC teachers and classroom staff gained a clearer understanding of the importance of redefining "Safety

Zone" via literacy kits and mini-grants and used them well for enhancement of classrooms and curriculum. This redefinition of "Safety Zones" (Lansing, 2014) helped to put "Native… language and culture at the forefront of education" (p. 38) and resulted in fostering place-based education for Lummi children. Over the past several years, research highlights the importance of place-based pedagogy and its impact on student achievement. According to Promise of Place (2015), "Students participating in place based education often show more enthusiasm for learning because it is more relevant to their daily life, their home, and community." Moreover, Emekauwa (2004) underscores the importance of place-based pedagogy in *rural indigenous communities* especially and the positive impact it has on *Native* student achievement, which resonates with teaching and learning on the Lummi Reservation.

One of Northwest Indian College's seven Sacred Little Ones project goals is to "improve cognitive skills acquisition, specifically language development and literacy, in both Lummi and English." NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors continued to focus on language and literacy development throughout our initiative, and in an effort to learn about the ways in which the initiative has affected children's cognitive skill acquisition, we conducted interviews and focus groups with 24 PLC participants, in spring 2015, to determine the effect that making Lummi values present in young Native children's classrooms have on their language and literacy development.

After analyzing the data gathered from these interviews, themes emerged, and the following findings, in terms of language and literacy development, were discovered.

### *Learning Lummi Language*

When asked if and how the Sacred Little Ones project helped to support Lummi language in teachers' classrooms, Somerville (2015), a Lummi PLC participant

and early childhood educator shared, "We can't teach something we don't know" (p. 4). Addressing this challenge, Sacred Little Ones provided PLC participants the opportunity to learn more about Lummi language by hiring a certified Lummi Language Teacher who worked with early childhood educators during our PLC sessions. Furthermore, Sacred Little Ones gave Lummi teachers, specifically, at Northwest Indian College's Early Learning Center the opportunity (via financial support for tuition and release time from work) to take Lummi language courses in order to learn their Native language, reflect on their learning during professional learning community sessions, and use Lummi language with Lummi children for whom they care. This Lummi teacher observed the effect that her speaking Lummi language had on one specific Lummi child, sharing:

> He is behind where he should be verbally. He has a very, very limited vocabulary compared to his peers. And there are other things too that suggest there might be some delays. Very few English words and maybe I would say at least…at least two Lummi words. We're talking about a child who has around five words in total and two of them are Lummi words! (Somerville, 2015, p. 7).

Sacred Little Ones has helped this teacher to develop critical perspectives in teaching and learning, and take a strength-based, asset-oriented approach to teaching and learning, an incredibly important shift in the paradigm.

*Fostering Place-Based Education and Creating "Safety Zones" for Native Children*

Parris (2015), a Lummi PLC participant and early childhood educator, shared, "When we… order books we… try to find books that would be really relatable to our community or to the age group and back to how I was saying about [children] being able to relate to things, it helps them learn better and makes them want to learn more" (p. 13). During our professional learning communities, teachers examined the importance of place-based education, and as a result, realized that literature must be connected to children's culture and community as well. Sacred Little Ones had an

impact on teachers' approach to selecting literacy materials that foster place-based education for Lummi children, which supports Native student achievement.

*Implementing Developmentally Appropriate and Culturally Responsive Practices*

When asked during an interview what teachers noticed when children can relate to the stories being read and told in class, Parris (2015), a Lummi PLC participant and early childhood educator, shared:

> The [children] really enjoy [a book from the place-based literacy kit]… It becomes one of their favorite books and they'll want to read it more often, and then they'll talk about it when they're playing; they'll talk about it when they're at home; parents will come in and tell us that they're talking about it because it's sticking with them… When they find like a book that they can relate to, it gets them really encouraged to want to learn and read…other books (p. 5).

As discussed in our professional learning community sessions, literacy is more than just letters and words. Taking developmentally appropriate practices into consideration, literature is especially important when children can relate to and talk about it. In a joint position statement of the International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children, researchers posit, "It is the talk that surrounds the storybook reading that gives it power, helping children to bridge what is in the story and their own lives" (International Reading Association and National Association for the Education of Young Children, p. 32). Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors' focus on important indicators of learning, developmentally appropriate practices, and culturally responsive teaching, has helped teachers to deepen their understanding of language and literacy development. Furthermore, PLC participants realize that not every book accomplishes this goal. Rather, in order to foster a love for reading and learning in young Native children, teachers must incorporate relevant and engaging stories to which Native children can relate.

*Impacting Student Achievement*

Analyzing which classrooms successfully submitted and received their enhancement requests to foster place-based education, resulted in the finding that attendance at PLCs was supportive of: (1) helping teachers to deepen their understanding of place-based education, and (2) encouraging them to craft and submit their request for educational materials and supplies that foster place-based education. Nearly 95% of participants who consistently attended PLCs submitted and received their classroom enhancement request, as compared to only 60% of participants who did not have the opportunity to consistently attend our PLCs. These figures exemplify that the teachers who continuously attended professional learning communities and engaged in collective inquiry around place-based education were more apt to foster place-based education in their early learning classrooms, which impacts school readiness and school success, as "students participating in place-based education… often exhibit higher scores on standardized measures of academic achievement, improved behavior in class, greater pride and ownership in their accomplishments, increases in self-esteem, conflict resolution, problem solving, and higher-level thinking skills" (Promise of Place, 2015).

## Educational Significance and Contributions

As evidenced in this article, professional learning communities supported early childhood educators of Lummi children by bridging early learning with the K-3 educational system, focusing specifically on alignment of content and curriculum, pedagogy, people, school cultures, and cultural differences, in an effort to support Lummi children's transition from early learning to K-3 (and in some cases, from tribal to non-tribal educational institutions). PLCs also resulted in positive changes in teacher attitudes and behaviors towards developmentally appropriate and culturally

responsive practices, and helped educators to deepen their understanding of place-based education (which positively impacts Native student achievement), thus helping to redefine "Safety Zones" (Lansing, 2014) in early learning classrooms.

While professional learning communities within the Lummi tribal early childhood education context are sustainable, doable, practical, and feasible, NWIC Sacred Little Ones Project Co-Directors learned that PLCs do require time and personnel to: (1) address PLC participants' critical thinking; (2) juxtapose participants' feedback with initiative goals; and (3) collect and analyze data to ensure that PLCs remain relevant, vibrant, and true to honoring Native children. There also needs to be an emphasis on collective community based work because *honoring all voices* is a tribal value and practice. The work, therefore, must be inclusive of everyone who touches the life of a young Native child, including early childhood educators, elementary school teachers, teacher assistants, paraprofessionals, administrators, support staff, community members, elders, and leaders from across grade levels, districts, systems, cultures, and communities. Such emphasis on collective community based work will help to reach the goal of engaging early childhood educators in collective inquiry in order to positively impact the lives and educational experiences of young Native children.

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# Pathways to Authentic Community Engagement: Phases of Teacher Development on a Continuum of Practice Toward Nation-Building

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## Abstract

American Indian and Alaskan Native (AI/AN) communities across the United States have struggled with the complexities of developing systems that support the livelihood and perpetuation of their communities. The sustainability of these communities is highly dependent upon reawakening, revisiting, and relearning the language, values, and beliefs of the people. Native scholars advocate a nation-building stance that marries the contemporary needs of the community with traditional values, as a replacement for more common and less effective mainstream models, in meeting the unique needs of tribal communities. In the educational realm, teachers are now looked toward as allies in supporting and cultivating tribal language and culture perpetuation. Tribal communities clearly understand this need, but are Native pre-service teachers prepared for this challenge? In this article, Danielle Lansing looks at Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute's early childhood education and teacher preparation initiative, which is built on the *Teachers as Nation Builders* framework (Kawai'ae'a, 2008), to investigate and understand the ways in which the students describe the impact of this framework on their learning and their future aspirations as teachers in Native communities. The framework is comprised of six components --- Revitalize, Renew, Relevance, Responsible, Relationship, and Responsive --- all key to developing the mindset and practices in future teachers committed to working as both teachers and nation builders.

## Introduction

American Indian and Alaskan Native (AI/AN) communities across the United States have struggled with the complexities of developing systems that truly support the livelihood and perpetuation of their communities. The perpetuation of these communities is highly dependent upon reawakening, revisiting, and relearning the language, values, and beliefs of our people. Native scholars advocate a nation-building stance that marries the contemporary needs of the community with traditional values. No more can tribes rely upon implementing mainstream models

thought to meet the unique needs of tribal communities. This is true within the realms of economic development, sustainability, government, and, most importantly, within the educational realm. Since educational systems provide the foundation for future leaders of tomorrow, the motivation and goal of education for AI/AN citizens should consider inclusion of tribal and community values as an integral aspect of learning. Increasingly, AI/AN educators are seen as allies in sustaining tribal values, language and culture. Communities clearly understand this need as it directly impacts their ability to construct viable communities for the future.

Are AI/AN pre-service teachers prepared for this challenge? In the past, Native teachers have been trained within mainstream schools of thought only to implement curriculums that greatly differ from the values and teachings of their communities. To what end is an education if it doesn't match community values or perpetuate the livelihood of the community? For tribal communities seeking to rebuild educational systems that align with the needs of tribal community members, this is an ongoing dilemma. What is greatly needed is an understanding of how pre-service teachers can develop the motivation and positionality to place community values at the forefront; in essence, the processes by which teacher education programs can prepare teachers to develop the motivation to act as Native Nation builders.

The purpose of this study is to understand and describe the impact of utilizing the "Teachers as Nation Builders" conceptual framework to develop pre-service teachers within the Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute's (SIPI) Early Childhood Education (ECE) teacher education program. This phenomenological study examines tribal college ECE students and their experiences within a Special Topics course designed to provide experiences aimed at motivating students to become nation builders. This inquiry is focused on answering the following research questions:

- *In what ways do pre-service teachers describe the impact of educational experiences aimed at positioning pre-service teachers to contribute to Native Nation building?*

- *How do Native ECE students see themselves in their roles as teachers who serve as nation builders?*

## Literature

AI/AN tribes have worked hard to rebuild their nations after generations have endured assimilationist Federal policies that worked to decimate tribal ways of knowing within their communities. Many have done so by developing or reinvigorating unique economic, social, and political systems within their communities that support the economic and cultural vitality of their citizens (Cornell & Kalt, 2007). Successful AI/AN communities have found ways to reinforce the essence of community values within their development efforts. An approach that is congruent with honoring community needs includes a nation-building approach that is characterized by Native nations asserting decision-making power and developing effective institutions that are culturally aligned, and consists of decision makers who serve as leaders and nation builders (Cornell & Kalt, 2007). As nation builders, leaders within the nation-building approach are quite often citizens who take a great deal of responsibility in improving systems through promoting and implementing Indigenous responses to community needs. Leaders also take great care in mobilizing and educating others in rebuilding the nation. Research has supported the nation-building approach through evidence that illustrates the positive impact of community-level decision-making (Cornell & Kalt, 2007). This approach is especially unique as it acknowledges the need to rebuild systems within tribal communities. With regard to teachers, their role in rebuilding educational systems within tribal communities is vital when considering how schools were historically used as instruments of assimilation. There is a need to rethink and rebuild educational systems so that they can be positive supports to developing the citizenry of tribal communities.

An Indigenous response to the current educational needs of tribal communities has been offered by Keiki Kawai'ae'a. Kawai'ae'a (2008) asserts that teachers play a critical role in shaping an individual's ability to comprehend personal connections to land, one another, and to their Native community. In essence, teachers are ultimately cultural leaders within tribal communities who help develop the roles and responsibilities Native community members fulfill. In order to prepare future teachers to take on this significant role, teacher education must evolve to include a love for community, culture, language, and people (Kawai'ae'a, 2008). With Native language and culture as the foundation, educators can be instrumental in restoring healthy Native communities. In order to prepare teachers to serve as nation builders, Kawai'ae'a (2008) has developed a conceptual framework that includes language, culture, community, pedagogy, dispositions, and content as essential components of Native-based teacher education.

With future teachers positioned to value Native culture, language, and beliefs as foundational to learning, AI/AN pre-service teachers will develop the cultural integrity to give back and contribute to the livelihood of their communities. For teachers to become allies in rebuilding AI/AN communities, preservice teachers need opportunities to consider the context of the communities they serve as well as their role in developing educational experiences that contribute to the development of future tribal citizens. For many preservice teachers, this requires a parallel learning process that includes becoming immersed in the context of tribal communities in order to better understand its needs as well as preparing to implement educational programs and curriculum. Keiki Kawai'ae'a's (2008) conceptual framework is especially instructive as it provides key components that assist teachers in understanding the immense impact they have as teachers as well as their contribution to the livelihood of tribal communities. This framework can enhance current mainstream teacher education program requirements needed to be fulfilled by all

teachers. It is a unique departure from a solely academic focus and speaks to the communal values many AI/AN teachers already possess.

There have been attempts at providing teacher education programs that focus solely on developing AI/AN teachers. However, finding ways to make them relevant to tribal communities has been a challenge. Castagno (2012) argues that Indigenous teacher preparation programs at mainstream universities, while attempting to increase the numbers of culturally responsive Indigenous teachers, often are unable to overcome institutionalized colonialism. This is in part due to the dominant paradigm inherent in most teacher education programs that espouse a one-size-fits-all approach to focusing on diversity. In doing so, programs often become engulfed within mainstream teacher education paradigms rather than truly supporting teachers in developing the means to implement culturally responsive curriculum. Castagno (2012) recommends that Indigenous teacher education programs localize curriculum by integrating the knowledge of the communities they serve. This requires that Indigenous teacher education programs have an explicit focus on sovereignty and self-determination for tribal communities. Programs should engage with local communities in order to better reflect their knowledge systems.

For many AI/AN preservice teachers, their desire to become educators includes a greater calling that includes that of nation builder. For many teachers, their roles include building the capacity of their community schools to include culturally sustaining practices and programs. Therefore, it is imperative that teacher education begins to consider culturally specific paradigms, concepts, and frameworks that speak to these roles.

## Context

SIPI is a national tribal community college located within the metropolitan city of Albuquerque, New Mexico. It opened its doors in 1971 in response to the request

of local New Mexico tribes who sought access to higher education for their community members. Today, SIPI is fully accredited by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) to provide Associate and certificate degree programs in various areas of study. In 2003, SIPI was approved by the HLC to provide an Associate of Arts and certificate in Early Childhood Education (ECE). This was in direct response to the professional development needs of local tribal Head Starts (Martin, Lujan, Montoya, Goldstein, & Abeita, 2003). Since then, SIPI has developed ongoing relationships with tribal Head Start programs to support development of AI/AN early childhood teachers. SIPI's program is fully articulated for transfer to New Mexico colleges and universities and maintains transfer agreements through the New Mexico Early Childhood Higher Education Task Force. Today, SIPI's ECE program is also very popular with pre-service teachers who seek entry into the profession. Students who represent various tribes from the southwest relocate to Albuquerque, New Mexico, to attend SIPI.

SIPI is fortunate to have a lab school located on campus that serves as a practicum site for ECE students. The SIPI Early Childhood Learning Center serves SIPI students and families as well as the greater Albuquerque community. Students enjoy two practicum experiences that include 120 hours within infant, toddler, and preschool classrooms. The center is nationally accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children and is an excellent site for SIPI's ECE students to learn early childhood best practices.

In 2011, SIPI was one of four Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCU) awarded a grant under the American Indian College Fund's *Wakanyeja* "Sacred Little Ones" Tribal College Readiness and Success by Third Grade Initiative (W.K. Kellogg Foundation Grant, P3015070). As part of the *Wakanyeja* ECE Initiative, SIPI's Early Childhood Education (ECE) Associate degree program began to rethink the manner in which the program trained pre-service teachers. As a goal of the grant, SIPI

worked with its lab school to develop opportunities to integrate Native language and culture into early childhood curriculum. Consequently, SIPI began to develop coursework and co-curricular learning experiences to better prepare pre-service teachers to integrate Native language and culture.

As part of this endeavor, SIPI developed a Special Topics course, titled "Foundations for the Integration of Native Language and Culture in Education," to prepare pre-service teachers to support implementation of culturally sustaining early childhood programs in Native communities. This three-credit course was made available to SIPI ECE students enrolled in the Associates degree program. As part of the course curriculum, students were introduced to the notion of teachers as nation builders (Kawai'ae'a, 2008). Since its introduction, this conceptual framework has served as the foundation for the course and co-curricular experiences. The following is a reflection provided by the course instructor that further illustrates why Kawai'ae'a's *Teachers as Nation Builders* framework was used as an integral part of the course:

> I wanted something different for my students. Mainstream teacher educational theories and even many of the popular multicultural theories didn't get to the essence of what our communities are asking of us as teachers. Kawai'ae'a's ideas were different. First of all, her voice is that of an Indigenous woman, one who has helped transform the educational systems of her people through revitalization of language and culture. That in itself is so powerful for my students. Many of the educational texts are built around mainstream theorists that students cannot relate to. She speaks to the connection of our shared history as Native people and the strength that exists in their teachings. Secondly, she speaks to the values that many of our preservice teachers possess. There's prior knowledge that can be tapped into and reinforced. Many of our students want to have a role in developing a more relevant education for their communities (Lansing, personal reflection, 2017).

## Theory and Methods

This qualitative research inquiry is a phenomenological study based upon the lived experiences of nine tribal college students enrolled in the ECED 190 course titled, "Foundations for the Integration of Native Language and Culture in Education." All nine of the students enrolled in this Special Topics course during the Fall 2014 trimester participated in this inquiry. Participants were all classified as majors in SIPI's ECE Associate degree program. At the time of the study, the ECED 190 course was not a program requirement. Participants enrolled in the course out of pure interest. Student narratives, course assignments, and observations are the units of analysis for this study.

It is important to note that the researcher is the Principal Investigator and Project Director of the *Wakanyeja* Early Childhood Education initiative, as well as the instructor for the ECED 190 course. The researcher's role is participant observer of both the course and the overall initiative. Much of the analysis is also a result of data collected throughout the entire duration of the course as well as the four-year funded initiative.

Keiki Kawai'ae'a's (2008) *Teachers as Nation Builders* conceptual framework includes six major components that constitute a rigorous program for teacher preparation. It is a call to rethink our current educational practices. The six components are as follows:

1. **Revitalize:** *Use the Native language and teach through the Native language.* This component acknowledges teachers who have the gift of Native language. Speaking in the Native language is encouraged as it serves as a model for learners and supports the cultural identity of students.

2. **Renew:** *Instill knowledge of Native pedagogy and natural learning processes that build meaningful connections through the culture.* This component acknowledges various modes of Native pedagogy such as the arts, storytelling, and cultural

practices. It emphasizes the value of natural development in relation to place and culture with special regard to the needs of learners.

3. **Relevance:** *Foster inquiry and passion for learning.* This component encourages teachers to mindfully engage students by making meaningful connections to their lives. This includes use of language and culture to see the world through multiple perspectives.

4. **Responsible:** *Deliver curriculum that cultivates identity and belonging and develops critical thinking, academic proficiency, responsible behavior, and generosity of heart.* This component encourages teachers to have a core sense of purpose so that they can empower students to become responsible citizens of their communities.

5. **Relationship:** *Cultivate relationships and develop partnerships among the school, family, and community.* This component supports an understanding of the relationship between individuals and their environment. Relationships are of great value and therefore schooling is a family and community endeavor.

6. **Responsive:** *Participate as culturally responsive educators.* This component espouses that teachers know the learners, families, and community. Teachers are responsive educators who work collaboratively with the community to ensure the success of the learners and community as a whole.

Throughout SIPI's *Wakanyeja* "Sacred Little Ones" initiative, the ECE program has become increasingly aligned to Kawai'ae'a's conceptual framework through the development of mindful relationships and partnerships within the campus community, lab school, and greater AI/AN community. The initiative has supported SIPI's ECE program curriculum in becoming more relevant to the context of tribal communities, and the framework has informed numerous revisions and enhancements to the program.

The Special Topics course instructor designed the ECED 190 curriculum and experiences to include Kawai'ae'a's conceptual framework as a means to develop students' ideas regarding their role as future nation builders; the course thus included in-class discussions, course readings, and community-based experiences aligned with

each of Kawai'ae'a's six components. As such, Kawai'ae'a's conceptual framework is utilized here as a theoretical framework for analysis of student responses to course assignments and experiences. Understanding student perspectives through these six components provides an important lens in analyzing the students' connection to the nation-building goals of the course and program.

## Findings and Results

*Component 1: Revitalize*

Teachers who are nation builders understand the value of utilizing Native language as a part of the learning process. As part of the ECED 190 course curriculum, students were exposed to course readings and guest lectures that emphasized the value of integrating Native language instruction within teaching. A guest lecture by a local Native scholar was especially powerful for students. The lecture focused on the current status of language loss within local AI/AN communities. For many students it was an eye-opening experience. Nadia, a student in the Special Topics course, shares her reaction to the lecture:

> She had mentioned that a lot of people are in the stage of language denial, and I know for a fact now that I, myself, am in language denial. I never thought that I would be sitting here having to worry about losing our language. It may be a little late, but we still have hope for reviving the language. If it breaks my back, I am willing to work with anybody, to open up a full language immersion school. The community may be in denial, but this project would be for the better of our community and the language. (Nadia, course assessment, 2014)

Nadia was especially alarmed by the current status of tribal languages in local communities including her own community. She began to see it as her responsibility to bring a project to her community that focused on language maintenance. An important aspect of the course was exposure to current examples of early childhood

centers and school programs that implement tribal language as a central aspect of learning. This included language nests, language learning materials, and immersion programs. Nadia became especially motivated by a local Montessori program she learned about:

> I never thought I would be that scared to hear that language in different communities is fading away, and fast! After hearing her speak about the Montessori center, it made me want that for my community. Hearing her lecture made me want for my community to open up a full language immersion school. I can't say enough that her lecture scared me because it was the cold hard truth. On my drive home, all I thought about was how I can take knowledge from her lecture and turn it into action. (Nadia, course assessment, 2014)

For Nadia, as well as other students in the course, the information was pivotal in their decisions to integrate tribal language instruction as part of their career goals. Nadia became empowered with specific ideas about how to improve community education. This moved her to think immediately about next steps.

*Component 2: Renew*

Teachers who are nation builders need to understand how to support Native pedagogy. Explicit examples of community-based partnerships that reinforce and utilize Native pedagogy are essential for students. Another aspect of the course included focused learning with regard to each of the partner *Wakanyeja* "Sacred Little Ones" sites through research projects. Students were able to garner insight from funded projects at other TCUs. This included learning about how TCUs partnered with tribal communities to advance community goals, scope of language and culture programming, and specific strategies employed. Leslie, a student in the Special Topics course, reflects on what she has learned as a result of investigating various funded initiatives:

> I learned that you can work with families to establish partnerships, use community members such as elders and high school students to be role models for the children. I also learned different teaching methods that were being implemented to revitalize Native language and culture. (Leslie, course reflection, 2014)

For Leslie, and other students, the course was often the first time they had heard about early childhood programs and tribal communities implementing initiatives focused on infusion of Native language and culture into curriculum. Students learned that community partnerships often served as the foundation for these programs. This provided tangible real-life examples they could gain insight from. Students could see commonalities with their own communities and therefore began to see future possibilities for themselves and their communities.

Throughout the course, students became directly involved in SIPI's funded initiative. This included co-curricular experiences that placed students in leadership roles within SIPI's community. Students helped facilitate community-based projects and learning experiences at SIPI. They were able to gain firsthand knowledge of the positive impact on the community. As SIPI's funded project exemplified reconnecting the urban AI/AN community with tribal ways of knowing, students also began to see the value of looking towards Native teachings and history. Caroline, a student in the course, reflects on the importance of Native teachings and notions of nation-building:

> For myself, and becoming a teacher, I will teach our 7th generation about the importance of our history. I think it starts there first. Then I will help people understand leadership in a traditional sense and still continue to be knowledgeable of our outside world (our education). Native nation building is an ideal concept that unites students, communities, policy makers, and our history. That's why I want to make sure our younger generation understands

> their identity. It is of high importance for all our Native people. (Caroline, course reflection, 2014)

It is evident that Caroline interprets nation-building as advocacy as well as ensuring the youth are confident about their Native identity. She uses the concept of nation-building as a way to unite tribal communities.

As students worked directly with SIPI's initiative, they were able to experience the value of community partnerships, including countless opportunities to work with community based projects. As a result, students developed meaningful relationships that made a positive impact on the SIPI community. Leslie, a student in the course, saw developing and valuing community partnerships as a core value of nation builders as illustrated in her reflection:

> Part of nation-building is being able to build partnerships and establish core values within you. You also have to make yourself be disposable. By making ourselves disposable we have to think ahead. This would be asking the questions of 'who will take on the role of teaching the next generation?' Whether I become a teacher or not, I will still give my time unconditionally to the community by volunteering and expressing the need to learn our Native culture and language. (Leslie, course reflection, 2014)

For Leslie, building community partnerships meant thinking about long-term commitments to build the capacity of her community. This included being a role model and also training other community members to advance community goals in the future. Opportunities to work within SIPI's community partnerships and observing their positive impact have motivated student to make long term commitments to be of service to their community.

*Component 3: Relevance*

Students need tangible examples of how partnerships can foster connections between school and community in order to create culturally relevant educational experiences for AI/AN children. A unique aspect of the Special Topics course included experiencing community partnerships that included interaction with cultural leaders, engaged parents, advocates, and teachers as tangible role models for students. As a result, students were able to witness the value of community-based projects and develop strategies for future practice. Leslie discussed the impact of her experiences:

> I have been involved in Sacred Little Ones events. These events include the community garden, setting up for the Jim Thorpe run, making craft projects for the Native harvest feast dinner, and creating a fashion show to promote cultural identity. These experiences will help me in the future to establish different projects to promote family engagement and cultural awareness. By establishing such projects, you can establish partnerships within the community. This also establishes a sense of security for the children and helps promote cultural identity for the children. This implementation is part of social development, cognitive development and gross/fine motor skills. These are part of early childhood growth and development with the use of Native culture and language in the classroom. (Leslie, course reflection, 2014)

Many students were able to make an important connection to child development as illustrated by Leslie's statement. This is especially significant as students see the positive impact of integrating Native language and culture on the cognitive and social development of children. This illustrated the need for culturally relevant curriculum for AI/AN students. As a result students began to aspire to developing culturally relevant pedagogy as part of their professional goals.

*Component 4: Responsible*

Being responsible as a teacher includes operating from a core sense of purpose. The Special Topics course provides opportunities for students to think critically about

the needs of their communities while examining current resources. Many students began to see themselves as change agents for their communities. This is illustrated by Tiffany, who describes the plans she has for her community:

> When I imagine myself as a nation builder, I imagine that I will advocate for my communities back at home and in the community I will teach in. As an educator, it is important to be the voice for my students, their families, and their community. I believe that I can and will make a difference for children. My main goal as a nation builder and as an educator is to open up a community recreation center back home that will help my community. As a teacher, I will go to the local chapter meetings and provide my community with information, statistic rates, and budget plans to help make this goal be achieved. The community center that I have built will not only benefit children but the community as a whole. This community recreation center will help promote Native language and culture. The center would offer jobs, volunteer hours for local teenagers, senior citizen recreational time, and also a wide variety of time to engage children with their surroundings. Therefore, children will be surrounded by their Native language and have the ability to converse and learn from others around them. As a nation builder, I believe that this community center for my community will come true. As a (tribal affiliation) woman, educator, nation builder, I can make a difference for children. (Tiffany, course assignment, 2014)

It is evident that Tiffany truly believes that she as a nation builder can contribute to community changes. She has thought through various aspects of her plan to make an impact. Each student in the class set goals for making community change in the future. After course experiences made real life examples tangible, students truly see themselves as nation builders as illustrated by Tiffany's additional reflection:

> Our communities are on the brink of loss of culture and language. This problem is occurring present day and by being able to address it, Native educators can help make a difference to fix this problem. By being responsible and acknowledging this problem, we can further educate our students, families, and communities in the importance of sustaining our language. (Tiffany, course assignment, 2014)

Students view educators as change agents that can make a difference within tribal communities. Like Tiffany, many students in the class believe that teachers have a role in sustaining Native language and culture through education. Students developed a core sense of purpose that was greater than the role as classroom teacher.

*Component 5: Relationship*

AI/AN teachers must understand the importance of relationships with individuals and within the community. Therefore, an integral part of the course is the introduction of self and making connections through tribal affiliation. Students began the course by developing relationships through their shared experiences as AI/AN community members. This is especially powerful as students develop collegial relationships. This is evident in Nadia's reflection:

> One component about building teachers as nation builders that I have experienced in this class is relationship. This component is to cultivate relationships and develop partnerships among the school, family, and community. I chose this component because this class has given us the opportunity to work with families at the center, work with the SIPI community, and the class alone is a family and community of its own. Relationships were built through group work. (Nadia, course assessment, 2014)

Students then moved from collegial relationships to the greater community with whom they also build relationships. Students developed meaningful relationships with children, families, and community members as part of SIPI's initiative. Many students developed skills for future practice as illustrated by Nadia's statement:

> Some of the events I was involved in with Sacred Little Ones were the Native Harvest Feast, Fashion Show, the gardening event, and helping out with the garden and turning it into a pumpkin patch. These events were successful

> because they brought the SIPI community together. Each event was held where it involved the children at the center. The events also gave the early childhood education students the opportunity to interact with families and give us a sense of what it is like to have that community component. These experiences will help me in the future by better understanding how to interact with parents and the community. It gave me ideas of how I can involve the community in the children's learning, and gave me ideas of what else I can do for the children. (Nadia, course assessment, 2014)

As a result, students completed the course equipped with beginning skills in developing and implementing relationships within tribal communities. Students understood that their co-curricular learning experiences made an actual impact within the community.

For many students, community partnerships are congruent with tribal ways of relating to one another.

> SIPI's project is important to not only the students but to other Native families that live in such an urban area. It lets them know that we can learn from one another despite cultural differences. It also establishes partnerships with other families that may not have family in the area. Family is not just blood relation but can be in forms of cultural identity and awareness. (Leslie, course reflection, 2014)

This reinforced the value of tribal ways of relating to each other and the community. For many students, these are aspects of tribal ways of knowing that they already possess. It is empowering for preservice teachers to know that their prior knowledge can contribute greatly to their role as a teacher who can build supportive relationships with families and children.

*Component 6: Responsive*

Teachers need to be responsive to the children, families, and communities they serve. They should know who they are working and partnering with, and

collaboratively develop programs that ensure the success of the community. Throughout the course, students were able to observe SIPI's efforts to develop and implement a locally-developed cultural curriculum. An important aspect of the course is learning from SIPI's example. Students witnessed SIPI's use of community resources to develop culturally-based learning experiences within its partner Head Start. Leslie shared her ideas about utilizing local resources:

> One idea I have about including culture and language into classroom is using outside resources and the children's family. These are resources in the grasp of our hands and by establishing those partnerships from the time you meet the children and families, you can communicate the importance of Native culture and language. This use of resources is having them learn social dances, songs with the use of Native language and doing traditional crafts being taught by family and community. (Leslie, course reflection, 2014)

Through SIPI's example, students understood the impact of collaborating with the tribal community and knowing their needs in order to develop culturally responsive curriculum. Course readings and projects provided the foundation for their learning but firsthand experience with SIPI's curriculum provided a lasting example for students.

## Discussion

Prior to SIPI's *Wakanyeja* "Sacred Little Ones" initiative, students within the ECE program experienced the articulated transfer curriculum developed for New Mexico colleges and universities. This provided a foundation for students that was mostly built around a mainstream ECE curriculum. As a result of utilizing Keiki Kawai'ae'a's (2008) *Teachers as Nation Builders* framework to develop a Special Topics course, SIPI's ECE program has developed a course curriculum specifically aimed at

providing students with the knowledge and experiences to develop their motivation to contribute to rebuilding Native nations through their roles as educators.

For many students, the Special Topics course prompted self-discovery and self-examination in relation to tribal language and culture. By exposing students to the realities of language and cultural loss, students often began to think about their personal responsibility to their community and tribe. Many students rediscovered their tribal languages or developed the motivation to learn their tribal language for the first time. Students internalized their role as teacher to include advocacy and change agent with regard to tribal language and culture. Students developed an understanding of the value of teaching tribal languages and also felt an urgency to make language revitalization a reality.

Students also garnered insight from tangible examples of infusion of tribal language and culture within early childhood education. This provided students with strategies for meeting the needs of their own communities with regard to implementation of culturally responsive curriculum. As a result, students placed a great importance on learning innovative ways to incorporate Native language and culture in education programming. Many students saw a need to mobilize within their communities to bring awareness to the importance of Native teachings.

SIPI's community partnerships within the local tribal community provided an excellent example for students. Students incorporated the role of community organizer as a part of their role as a teacher. Students began to see the roles of nation builder and teacher as one and the same. This moved students beyond typical notions of a teacher's roles and responsibilities. Students then began to see teachers as influential not only within the classroom but also as an integral part of the greater community. Consequently, SIPI ECE students began to think critically about community needs and issues.

The context for co-curricular relationships was dependent upon relationships with each other as well as the greater community. This developed within students feelings of love and reciprocity for the community. The course and students evolved into a community of practice. As a result, community responsiveness evolved as a professional goal.

## Conclusions

In order for AI/AN teachers to contribute to nation building, teacher education must evolve to include foundational concepts and experiences that provide nation building as a guiding principle. To do so, preservice teachers must see the value of supporting perpetuation of community values. For many tribal communities, this means contributing to the perpetuation of Native language and culture. However, mainstream models of teacher education focus solely on classroom curriculum and alignment with national curriculum goals. AI/AN communities need teachers who are ready to assume the role of nation builder. This requires Native teacher education to examine the manner in which they train teachers. Paradigms must evolve to meet the needs of AI/AN communities and include a continuum of development that includes the knowledge and experiences needed to mobilize teachers to assume greater roles than that of classroom teacher. Training must include a specific focus on developing community partnerships to develop educational experiences that truly rebuild the systems that tribal communities value. Like many TCUs, SIPI continues to refine their ECE teacher education program to specifically support tribal nation-building within educational contexts. This includes thinking deeper about the continuum of experiences needed to support teachers to become nation builders. This will indeed ensure a bright future for many AI/AN communities.

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# Validating Lummi Children and Families: Connection as Foundational to Improving Family Engagement in Early Childhood Education

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## Abstract

Interconnectedness is a familial, cultural, and practical way of life for people of the Lummi Nation. While schools and early childhood programs often look at low attendance of parents at school-created events to conclude that parents "just don't care," Shelley Macy, in this article, investigates an early childhood initiative (which she was involved in conceiving and creating) at Northwest Indian College, built on the Lummi values of connection and interconnectedness. Looking at family engagement through this lens, Macy explores the ways in which working with families throughout the process --- defining family engagement, sharing responsibility for family engagement activities, and soliciting parent and family perspectives all along the way --- leads to stronger connections among families, communities, and teachers. Using data collected over several years and through a variety of qualitative and evaluative means, Macy finds that the shared approach to family engagement --- rather than the unidirectional approach of many schools and early childhood programs --- highlights and strengthens the love and care that Lummi parents have for their children, as well as fosters connections between and within families, and between families and their children's teachers and caregivers.

## Introduction

Connection is vital to young children's flourishing and to the improvement of early childhood education for tribal children. By whatever name it is called --- parent participation, parent involvement, family-school partnership --- early childhood educators realize that caring for and educating children from birth through the early years must somehow include each child's family. Often the efforts of early childhood programs to include families have left program managers and staff feeling that parents "just don't care" based on low attendance at parent conferences, field trips, parent meetings, or whatever the program has prepared or the funder of the program has

designated as important. However, despite sometimes less-than-successful efforts, engaging families is critical in early learning and development.

Connecting with children is an essential basis for supporting children's cognitive development (Walters, 2013). The Hand in Hand (HiH) approach as laid out by Patricia Wipfler (2006) teaches adults tools for building connection with children through (1) designated times when the adult follows the child's lead in play called "Special Time," (2) enjoying laughter with children called "Playlistening," (3) handling and listening fully to children's feelings called "Staylistening," and (4) setting limits on off-track behavior with caring, connection, and firm kindness that gives children room to release the feelings that drove their behavior off track without giving in to their irrational behavior or demands.

Northwest Indian College (NWIC) has embarked upon a collection of efforts to improve early education for all tribal children. Fostering connections --- among teachers, among parents and other family members, and between adults and children --- has characterized these efforts. In early childhood development and education, children feeling connected, seen, and cared for is vital to their survival, thriving, and brain development (Walters, 2013, pp. 9-10). In the Lummi community, children are connected to one another, older children, adults, and elders in innumerable ways. They are cherished and loved and part of a large community. Disconnection via generations of trauma can interfere with children's basic sense of connection, sense of and actual safety (Walters, 2013), but the potential exists for tremendous connection for each and every child in early learning programs serving Lummi children and families.

This paper specifically investigates how taking a fresh look at family engagement --- where Lummi parents helped to define family engagement, shared responsibility for implementing family engagement strategies, and provided feedback throughout the process --- is resulting in awareness of what parents value. This should

prove to be a valuable guide to early learning programs in designing their family engagement strategies.

## Context: Northwest Indian College

NWIC is an accredited tribally-controlled college governed by its own Board of Trustees and chartered by the Lummi Nation. The college grew out of the Lummi Indian School of Aquaculture, beginning to offer associate's degrees in 1983 as Lummi Community College. In 1989 the name of the college was changed to Northwest Indian College to reflect its mission to provide higher education throughout the region, being the only tribal college to serve tribes in Washington, Idaho, and Oregon. In 2010, NWIC became accredited at the baccalaureate level and now offers four bachelor's degrees. The main campus is on the Lummi Nation reservation, and extended instructional sites are located on the Nez Perce reservation in Idaho, and the Swinomish, Tulalip, Pt. Gamble S'Klallam, Nisqually, and Muckleshoot reservations in Washington.

The early childhood teacher education program began in 1987 and is currently one of nine associate's degrees offered at NWIC. The program had its beginnings primarily helping tribal Head Start teachers achieve their Child Development Associate (CDA) credentials while also offering an Associate of Technical Arts degree in Early Childhood Education. With assistance from a federal Head Start/Tribal College Partnership Grant between 2005 and 2010, the college developed additional early childhood education (ECED) coursework, and was granted permission to offer the Associate of Applied Science-Transfer degree in Early Childhood Education (AAS-T ECE) by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities. A more rigorous program of study with forty-five transferable general education courses and fifty ECED credits, the AAS-T ECE program is geared to meet the needs of Native

early childhood teachers working in tribal programs to enhance the lives and education of Native children, birth through five years.

## Context: *Wakanyeja* "Sacred Little Ones" Early Childhood Education Initiative

Within the NWIC early childhood education and parenting education programs, we believe strongly that Lummi parents love their children and care very much. We wanted to take a fresh look at how family engagement could be designed so that all families, and in particular tribal families, would be interested in and eager to participate and engage.

In 2011, we received notice of the *Wakanyeja* "Sacred Little Ones" funding opportunity from the American Indian College Fund ("the College Fund"). With its five domains of focus and generous funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, we would be able to put efforts into improving early education for young children beyond just our degree program. We would be able, yes, to make improvements to teacher education, but also to work with early learning centers and K-3 schools and parents, and cooperate with the Lummi tribe to embed early education in the Lummi way of life. We developed a proposal to address the College Fund's five domains of the project: (1) improving children's cognitive and non-cognitive development, (2) improving teacher quality, (3) bridging early learning within K-3, (4) embedding what we do in Lummi language and culture, and (5) empowering parents as advocates for positive educational change for their children. Our proposal was funded, and in July 2011, our four-year project began where NWIC, alongside three sister tribal colleges (Ilisaġvik College, Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute, and College of Menominee Nation), would coordinate and implement our ambitious project at Lummi for the improvement of outcomes for tribal children in early education.

*Focus on Connection and Interconnectedness*

When engaging the Lummi community in a visioning process in February 2012 to help guide the goals and activities of the Sacred Little Ones project overall, interconnectedness was mentioned in many ways as a strength of Lummi families prior to European contact and integral to a vision for the future. Participants were clear that the removal of children via residential schools from their connections to family, language, and culture was a particularly heinous and abusive tool of attempted genocide of their people. The message was clear that we would need connection to family, community, culture and language to be the basis upon which our work is built to improve early childhood education.

It is no wonder, therefore, that our project, based upon connections—children with their parents and teachers; early learning professionals with one another across programs, age-levels, and school systems; parents with one another; and children with their family heritage and indigenous language—resonated with the boards, commissions, and tribal council of the Lummi Nation. If we wanted to improve early childhood education for Lummi children, whether concerned with children's cognitive development, their social/emotional health, the quality of their teachers, how well they were able to move from one age-level and educational setting to the next, their grounding in their own language and culture, or their parents' engagement in advocating for positive educational change, the work needed to be based in connection.

While we had specific actions, goals, and outcomes in mind for each of the five domains of the project, each and every one was predicated on the importance of interconnectedness. We believed connection to be essential to the success of the project, starting from the very basic understanding that connection to caring adults and to who each is as a Native person is vital to each child's flourishing.

Within our AAS-T in ECE early childhood teacher education program, interconnectedness and indigenous families' values had long been emphasized in our courses whether it is an introductory class, a class on guidance, a language and literacy development class, the practicum series, or a class on family and community engagement and so on. We were excited for the opportunity to expand the vital importance of connection into work with community partners. Connecting early childhood teachers who work with and teach children birth through grade three with one another through Professional Learning Communities (Hord, 2008), has highlighted the importance of teachers connecting with one another to improve children's transitions and their sense of self as Lummi people.

Along with improving the education and professional development of staff working with children birth through age eight, we included peer support in our vision of improving early childhood teacher education. The Professional Learning Communities provided one avenue for peer support, and the other major effort was providing one or more courses in the Hand in Hand approach (Wipfler, 2006) to as many of the staff of our early learning and elementary school partners as we could schedule. We taught both the listening tools for connecting with children and shared the adult-to-adult tools of peer listening for the mutual support of educators. Exciting things happened when the entire Native staff of our tribal college on-campus Early Learning Center (ELC) learned and applied the Hand in Hand approach to their work with young children and as a tool of peer support (Macy, 2015).

Our commitment to our work with parents to share this approach with them was key to our original Sacred Little Ones project. NWIC committed to waiving tuition for those parents not receiving financial aid, and recommended that all parents with children in the ELC take the course. Many parents did enroll in the course, though not at the numbers we had hoped. Still those who did were overwhelmingly positive in their response to it.

In the fourth and final year of the Sacred Little Ones Initiative, the Kellogg Foundation made available to the College Fund additional funding to NWIC and three other TCUs for family engagement. We were eager to increase our family engagement efforts and used that money to fund those efforts. This initiative was an extension of the original Sacred Little Ones initiative's efforts to empower families and communities to act as agents of change in education for their children and has helped us to expand what we are able to do in the area of family engagement and family advocacy. We established three main efforts with the *Kᵉ'* Initiative to engage families: (1) Ey' Snat ("good night" in Lummi language) for Family Fun; (2) Hand in Hand support for all parents and conducting a Mastery Class to help a core group of parents gain certification as HiH instructors; and (3) Family Play Evenings. In addition we held a "finale" family engagement activity for those families who had participated most consistently in the other three efforts.

This paper will look at the promising practices we engaged in, building on our original efforts to support parent-child connectedness and peer support for parents, and including Lummi parents' vision, requests, and guidance for making family engagement truly reflective of this community.

## Research Questions

In investigating our efforts to engage families in our early childhood initiatives, particularly through the conceptual lenses of connection and interconnectedness, I focus my inquiry on these three research questions:

- *In what ways can family engagement activities be employed to connect children, families, and communities?*
- *What family engagement activities would be attractive to Lummi families?*
- *What elements of those activities would be highly valued by Lummi parents?*

## Methods

*Background of Study*

From my 26-plus years of working at Northwest Indian College at Lummi, I have come to deeply appreciate the interconnectedness and interrelatedness of this community located in the northwest corner of what is now Washington State. "You and I are related to each other," is an oft-heard phrase when people meet for the first time. One or the other will ask enough questions to determine which of their parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, grand-aunts, grand-uncles and so on they have in common, usually accompanied by smiles, nods, and sometimes laughter. It has been a joy to get to know individuals and to get to know their families and their connections. Connectedness is a quintessential quality of the Lummi community, and parent/child connectedness has been a large part of our efforts in the early childhood and parenting education programs at NWIC. I have taught classes and support groups based on Hand in Hand for parents and for early childhood teachers since the early 1990s here at NWIC. On Lummi campus I sometimes had the opportunity to model the approach with young children at our on-campus Early Learning Center, which teachers found to be very supportive. By and large, those opportunities were few and far between, however, and parents expressed longing for a chance to gather with their children and me to support the use of the listening tools they were learning.

Connecting all those adults who care for Lummi children, including teachers, assistant teachers, bus drivers, staff, and community members, was an important effort that we believed would help children as they transitioned from one setting to the next. We created a variation on Professional Learning Communities (Macy, Parsons, & Bob, 2015) across all our partner sites, including NWIC's Early Learning Center, Lummi Head Start, and grades K-1 at Lummi Nation School and Eagleridge Elementary, where teachers and other staff came together four to seven times per year to engage in conversations and professional development particularly around place-

based education and expanding identity "safety zones" (Lansing, 2014) for Native children to know who they are and that they belong wherever they are in educational settings.

Through the *Ké'* Initiative, we focused more intensively on creating activities and programs to connect families and children, families and their community, and families and their children's learning and development. This study focuses on these efforts to engage families through the *Ké'* Initiative.

*Data Collection*

There were four primary family engagement activities on which we collected data: 1) Ey' Snat for Family Fun; (2) Hand in Hand activities including efforts for all parents plus a Mastery Class for instructor certification; (3) Family Play Evenings; and (4) the Great Wolf Lodge Family Play Retreat for those families who had participated most consistently in the other three efforts. As we planned for additional resources in 2014-15 via the *Ké'* funding, we also kept notes on the two planning meetings we held with parents in order to be guided by their desires, with the goal of co-creating the project design with them.

We collected both quantitative and qualitative data on these activities, using four primary data collection and reporting activities: tracking attendance, observing and documenting the activities, feedback in the form of post-activity evaluations, and both informal and formal discussions with parents and families. As the project unfolded, we tracked attendance numbers at Ey' Snats, Family Play Evenings, the Family Play Retreat, and Hand in Hand Mastery Classes. We listened to parents' comments and asked for parents' feedback and guidance of our efforts in the form of written evaluations of some Ey' Snats, most Family Play Evenings, and the Family Play Retreat.

There were six Ey' Snat gatherings, and we solicited evaluations for two: February and March. We had sign-in sheets to track attendance for five of the six Ey' Snat gatherings. Parents completed a simple evaluation at the first four Play Evenings. No evaluations were collected for the fifth and final Play Evening. We had accurate sign-in sheets for the first four play evenings. The sign-in sheet for the fifth evening was misplaced. All families completed evaluations on the Great Wolf Lodge Family Play Retreat and attendance was tracked for all families, including parents, children, and any extended family members or guests.

The first question on the evaluation form for each event asked the participant to rate the event overall. In addition, other questions on the evaluation form asked participants to share: (1) what was good about or worked well or was enjoyable about the event, and (2) what could have been improved or did not work well. For Ey' Snat and Family Play Evenings, we asked a third question: *What would you like us to know for next time?* Since we did not anticipate having a "next time" for the Great Wolf Lodge without ongoing funding, we asked two other questions of retreat participants instead: (1) *What effects did you notice on your child(ren) from the weekend?*, and (2) *How has your sense of connection with your child been affected by this weekend?*

## Findings

*Engaging Parents in Planning*

One of the pillars of Head Start is to support and engage families; federal funders mandate grantees to host events on specific topics (health and safety, mental health, transition to kindergarten, and so on). However, in recent years, participation in the Lummi Nation Head Start family engagement events (called Ey' Snat for Family Fun nights) had dwindled to near zero. If the parents were not involved, then how were we to assist in empowering them to advocate for positive educational change?

When planning our *Ké'* Initiative, we asked parents what they hoped for. One request that resonated around the table of the parents gathered was to learn about Lummi lifeways, skills, and crafts alongside their children in ways that would be fun for them and their young ones. Of especial importance was that they would get to learn these things from their own Lummi people.

Other requests were that they wanted to have fun with their children and they wanted Hand in Hand Listening Partnerships and Support Groups for themselves and for many more tribal parents to be available at our activities.

### *Ey' Snat*

With *Ké'* funding, the NWIC Sacred Little Ones project was able to strengthen the Lummi Head Start partner programs' family engagement efforts. Head Start already had the structure to have a monthly or bimonthly family night, and *Ké'* had the funds to support the parents' vision for culturally-related activities where they could learn Lummi family ways from their own people. We therefore combined efforts with the Lummi Head Start program, reinvigorating Ey' Snat for Family Fun events where a topic mandated by Head Start was addressed and that also focused on contributions from members of the Lummi community, such as parents/families, elders, and artists who led activities which gave families the opportunity to learn about Lummi values and practices alongside their children (Macy, Parsons, & Somerville, 2015).

On a balmy fall evening in September 2014, we gathered at the beach at the Lummi Stommish Grounds for a dinner of salmon cooked in the traditional way skewered on ironwood fish sticks to bake by the fire. Elders blessed the meal and adults visited and watched as children played together on the beach as they have here at Lummi since time immemorial. Thirty-eight adults attended with their children. Most, but not all, were Head Start families. Whereas previously only Head Start parents came, Ey' Snat was now attractive to and drew people from the community as

well. This proved to be true throughout the year. We had no evaluation form for them to give us feedback on the event that evening, but the sheer numbers and the happy smiles showed us that gathering for food cooked in the traditional way by a Lummi dad and fisherman was a wonderfully engaging place to be for parents and families. Head Start teachers were thrilled to have been there, working to make it all go well, serving up potato salad, rolls, and fruit to go with the fish. Tired and happy, the staff spoke repeatedly of the hearty turnout for such a wonderful Ey' Snat. We were off to a good start for our *Ké'* family engagement project that had been and would continue to be defined by parents.

October's Ey' Snat was attended by ten families who came to learn about Coast Salish art forms and engage in painting those forms with their children. Following dinner provided by our project, a Lummi artist and father of three former Head Start children provided the experience with either blank paper or photocopied art forms to fill in with watercolor paints. The community meeting room in the Head Start building was abuzz with families engaged with one another and the painting activity. Again, most families had children in Head Start, but NWIC ELC families, child care families, and their extended family members attended as well. At twelve parents, five non-parent staff, and one community member, this group was smaller than the one at the beach in September, but it was the perfect size for the Head Start meeting room, and still larger by three to four times what the previous year's attendance had been at Ey' Snat.

The best-laid plans…Our December Ey' Snat contained a few surprises for us as organizers as well as for families. We had planned a set of "make-and-take" activities where parents could enjoy creating crafts based on Coast Salish practices, themes, and materials with their children. Last minute supply challenges and the sudden unavailability of a couple of our cultural resource people resulted in impromptu activities provided by Head Start parents, staff, and relatives of Head Start

children that were based more on a Christmas theme than on traditional Lummi activities. In addition, this was the one Ey' Snat to which we intentionally planned to invite only Head Start and ELC families. We wanted to treat the families to a full buffet dinner at Lummi Nation's Silver Reef Casino, and the room we were able to book would hold 60 comfortably. Unbeknownst to our planners, the invitation went out to the entire tribal staff email list. This meant that we had invited nearly the entire community!

People came in droves. The casino staff stepped up to the challenge, opening the meeting room next door to dine in and setting up tables in an open space between the two rooms. The kitchen staff produced much more food than they had anticipated, and the hostess for our event called on the kitchen chefs in other restaurant venues within the casino to add more dishes to our buffet.

Our make-and-take resource people got held up by a series of challenges, so only one craft was ready to go when children were done eating. That craft (making Ninja Turtle glass bulb ornaments) got underway, led by one of the Lummi staffers at Head Start. The other craft leaders arrived with their supplies, ate their dinner, and set up their wares. They gave children the chance to decorate cookies, create a snowman hot-chocolate-and-candy craft, and older youngsters and adults could appliqué the Seattle Seahawks professional football team's logo on long neck-scarves. The rooms filled with children and adults creating, supporting each other in creating, sharing what they were doing, encouraging one another, beaming at the children, and relaxing in each other's company.

As we debriefed the Ey' Snat at our next Coordinating Team meeting, we realized just how "traditional" this Ey' Snat had actually been. First it was inclusive and everyone was welcomed. Our sign-in sheets indicated 70 adults and 15 children. However, clearly not everyone signed in because at the height of the evening, I personally counted at least 120 people (a far cry from our planned event of 60 diners).

And while our activities were not traditional per se, the gathering of extended families, the inclusion of everyone, the sharing of a meal, the unflappable calm with the adjustments we needed to make because of the large crowd, the thorough delight in each child's make-and-take efforts, the visiting, and the lack of complaint or criticism were all part of the joy of being at a Lummi gathering. The interconnections of families and the appreciation of what was offered characterized this gathering. And oh yes, they loved the Seahawks scarves (whose logo is a quasi-Coast Salish style, after all). Families did indeed have fun together and strengthen traditions.

For our next Ey' Snat in February 2015 we invited families from all the early learning programs at Lummi: Head Start, Lummi Nation Child Care, Teen Parent Child Development Center, and NWIC ELC. We again asked Lummi adults if they would provide make-and-take expertise with materials that the grant could purchase so that families could enjoy learning together about activities that draw from Lummi families' lifeways. This time, we offered a drum-making demonstration with one small drum per household to be sent home, sewing drum bags with sewing machines from NWIC's quilting class, beading with a lovely assortment of preschooler-appropriate beads, storytelling by an elder about her childhood growing up on Portage Island on the reservation, and dancing with one of Lummi Nation School's Lummi language teachers who sang and drummed for the children. Sharing a blessing, eating dinner together, and addressing one of the required federal Head Start topics (this time "mental health"), were followed by these Lummi family-provided activities that again made room for families to have fun together and strengthen their traditions.

March Ey' Snat focused on children's and families' transition from preschool to kindergarten. The attendance at this event was primarily but not only families of children who would be entering kindergarten the following September. As always, we began with a prayer sung and drummed by a Lummi tribal member, followed by dinner prepared by loving hands—traditional halibut soup coupled with fry bread and

salad made for a delicious meal and demonstrated yet again that the Lummi practice of sharing a meal together before engaging in any "business" helped to build and rekindle connections, making the work ahead go well. It helped to break down any barriers, put people at ease, and created opportunities for authentic conversations. In this case, after the meal, parents could talk with a Ferndale School District representative, one of the Lummi Nation School Kindergarten teachers (who also led the children on a "Bear Hunt"), and their children's current Head Start teachers. Our *Ké'* staff prepared a craft activity for families to do together using driftwood pieces from the beach at Lummi to create mobile collages of feathers, beads, and yarn. Head Start staff had prepared "spring buckets" of transition activities parents could do over the summer at home with their children, and the *Ké'* project supplied each family with two hard cover books: *The Kissing Hand* (Penn, 1993), and *Brown Bear, Brown Bear* (Martin, 2010). Both address transitions but in different ways. *The Kissing Hand* is about a mother raccoon putting a kiss in the hand of her child as he goes off to school so that he will always have her love near. *Brown Bear* is a book that every Head Start teacher and all kindergarten teachers at Lummi Nation School and Ferndale have in their classroom and most if not all teachers will be reading the first week of school in the fall. Hearing and seeing it will be like meeting an old friend in their new school. The event was well-attended and the feedback positive about what was both fun and useful.

April's was the last Ey' Snat gathering for the 2014-15 year, and supported parents' desire for the Head Start graduation attire to switch from caps and gowns to shawls and vests (or other traditional garb, if so desired by a particular parent). With sewing machines again loaned by the College, parents gathered to sew, and created beautiful clothing for the graduates. Children played together with Head Start teachers in attendance who also backed the parents' desires in another way by creating

graduation caps over the next few weeks made by using strips of brown paper bags to resemble woven cedar.

*Family Play Evenings*

Family Play Evenings arose out of the Hand in Hand (Wipfler, 2006) classes in our original Sacred Little Ones project. With the *Ké'* funding, parents said they wanted to have fun. Those who had taken HiH classes had been asking if they could bring their children together to engage so we could all do "Special Time" together, getting support for any "Staylistening" that might be needed, and getting to know one another and each other's children better. Research supports this desire of the parents, noting that "positive effects of preschool education can be augmented when a parenting education component is added, but only when this component focuses on providing parents the opportunity to see modeling of positive interactions or to practice such interactions" (Yoshikawa et al, 2013, p. 15). With Family Play Evenings they would get both modeling and practice. Now that we had grant funds, they suggested again that we do this. We worked together to set up Family Play Evenings for November 2014 and January, February, March, and April 2015.

For each Family Play Evening, we set up an open space in the beautiful Cultural Arts Center Log Building at NWIC with gym mats on the floor, soft toys and balls to play with, playdough and other manipulatives on tables and around the room, blankets for making hide-a-ways under tables, and other toys that would be attractive to young children with some that would also be interesting to their older siblings. All supplies and materials were selected because of their attractiveness for open-ended play where the children could direct the play and parents would not be required to explain or to keep track of materials. Instead they could focus fully on their young one using the "Special Time" listening process of Hand in Hand.

We would begin at 5:30, right as parents got off work, with a meal. We would then be ready to play as soon as the children were done eating. With the prospect of all that play with family, other adults who came expressly for the purpose of playing with them, and the other children, the young ones characteristically finished eating quickly. Once all had eaten and played a bit, we gathered at about 6:00 on the mats to greet each other, tell everyone our names and who we came with, and hear the schedule for the evening. The routine was the same each time—half the parents and the Play Team stayed out to play for about 30 minutes with the children while the other half of the parents went with me to the room next door for an HiH-style Parents' Support Group. Upon their return, the other half of the parents told their little ones that they are leaving for half an hour, and they too had their parents' support group next door. Once the second group of parents returned there was usually about 10 minutes left for us all to play. We then cleaned up and gathered once again as a whole group to share one thing each person had fun doing at our Play Evening. The families departed right around 7:45, and then I, as the overall leader of the Play Evening, led the Play Team members in their half-hour support group together.

The parents' support groups accomplished a lot in a very short time. At the Play Evenings when the parent group contained fewer than eight participants, as the Hand in Hand certified facilitator I led the group. At two of the Play Evenings, however, so many parents attended that one of our Hand in Hand Mastery Class students led half the parents at a time while I led the other. This gave the Mastery Class students practical experience for the work they were studying to do. After welcoming the parents and expressing our appreciation of their children and their hard work as parents, each circle of four to eight parents gave one another equal time to be listened to about anything of their choosing whether about parenting or not.

Parents bonded in these brief but heartfelt moments of sharing, with a commitment to confidentiality and not giving advice.

Meanwhile back in the Log Building, the other half of the parents and the Play Team followed the children's lead. The Play Team was comprised of selected adults who came without children to provide additional resource so parents could have their support groups as well as have the support of caring adults who could play with the children. When adults followed children's lead in play, the power dynamic shifted. Children eagerly took the opportunity to show what they wanted to do, to take leadership, to take risks, and to express themselves fully whether in laughter, full-body play, quiet enjoyment of an activity with an attentive adult, or even to dissolve into tears when they felt safe enough to release what might have been weighing on them. When children led in play, parents, often exhausted from the heavy responsibilities and endless work of parenting, began to smile and relax with enough adult resource for children to play full out and not cause hurt or damage, and to see their beautiful children show themselves so fully to others.

*Hand in Hand Instructor Certification*

Our third main effort was to begin training parents to become certified instructors of Hand in Hand's classes. When parents told us they wanted Listening Partnerships and Support Groups to be available to lots of parents via the *Ké'* project, we began to look at the need to train more parents to teach and lead this approach.

Backing one another as parents is a key part of Hand in Hand while learning effective tools for connecting with and listening well to children. Backing parents is essential since parents are often heavily criticized in their role as parents in today's societies and blamed when their children have struggles. It is as if society's view is that the presence of systemic pressures like classism (including the challenges of poverty), racism, sexism, the ongoing effects of attempted genocide, and other oppressive

conditions don't create often-impossible conditions where parents have insufficient resources and/or provide insufficient attention for their children. Add to this the fact that Native ways of parenting when viewed by the dominant society have been all too often seen as lacking, wrong, and cause for removal of children from their family and their tribe.

When parents receive support and understanding, it is easier to then connect with their own children. Yet how could we get this peer support out to increasing numbers of families? Many Native parents veer away from parenting classes, fearful that others will think they are somehow "admitting" they are not good parents. Yet when parents do engage in the HiH classes, they respond with comments like, "[now I see] everyone has troubles too," "I *am* a good parent," and "I have really useful skills now—you really taught me something useful in this class!" So they could empathize with each other, validate their own parenting, and learn useful skills while strengthening connections with one another and their children. The HiH approach is about listening, relationship-building, support for the huge work of parenting, getting to enjoy child-rearing more, and getting to be the parent you always wanted to be. Several parents expressed interest in teaching others what they were learning.

In October 2014, with a group of eight parents who had experienced the Hand in Hand Starter Class (previously called "Building Emotional Understanding" or BEU), our Mastering Hand in Hand instructor certification course began. For various reasons the group jelled at three individuals who found themselves learning the usefulness of Listening Partnerships more thoroughly, learning more about the skills of listening to children, and learning how to think about other parents' questions and concerns. Along with me, their instructor, they attended the July 2015 Hand in Hand instructors' retreat in Ben Lomond, California, and persisted in the course through the fall of 2015. Once they have written up at least two anecdotes each of how they have used the four adult-to-child listening tools and the two adult-to-adult listening tools,

they will be ready for their assessment and certification process. They are motivated by their own positive experiences as well as their commitment to better lives for all Lummi children. As one of the participants stated, "this is helping us to end the destructive cycles brought on by the boarding schools" (Anna Somerville, personal conversation, 2015).

*Family Play Retreat at Great Wolf Lodge*

Our final family engagement activity for the year was to provide a weekend retreat at the Great Wolf Lodge in southwest Washington State for the 15 families who had participated most consistently in *Ké'* Family Engagement activities since September 2014. We combined elements of Ey' Snat and Family Play Evenings for this retreat that had been enthusiastically requested by parents during the planning phase when asked, "What family engagement opportunity would you like to participate in *if money were no object*?" For young families, particularly those whose income qualifies them for Head Start or who are college students, money is almost always a limiting factor. This gave us a chance to see what we could do without that limit. Our retreat was over Mothers' Day weekend 2015, with early morning support groups available for parents Saturday and Sunday, lots of play time in the amazing indoor water park and throughout the resort, and a child-friendly dinner gathering Saturday evening that included cultural art activities—cedar weaving and beading—available for families and taught by family members.

## Results and Discussion

Each family engagement effort was based upon what parents had said they wanted. This included having ways for Lummi families of young children to gather to have fun in one another's company, engaging in activities where Lummi children and families could strengthen their abilities, skills, and sense of self as a Lummi person,

and partaking of opportunities for building mutual support for parents and families via Hand in Hand work. Efforts were to include opportunities to strengthen their parent-to-child connection. Native parents helped to define the events, they shared responsibility for the outcomes, and within the events they enjoyed activities with and parenting of their children.

Connection has been a key foundation of all aspects of NWIC's Sacred Little Ones Initiative, upon which the project and its successes have been built. Essential to Lummi practices at all levels of community, connection is also recognized in western research, concluding that "parent-child connectedness…has emerged as a compelling 'super-protector'—a feature of family life that may buffer young people from the many challenges and risks facing them in today's world." (Lezin, Rolleri, Bean, & Taylor, 2004, p. 1). Connection was essential to our family engagement project, and we believe it is essential to the work of improving early childhood education.

*Attendance*

Ey' Snat attendance went from two to three families the prior year to consistently well-attended events during the project year. From the first event in September with at least 15 early learning families and many more community members, each event was well-attended. There were 12 families in October; 120 attendees of which at least 50 were early childhood program families in December; at least 27 parents came with their children in February plus at least 40 community members and early learning staff; 28 parents attended March's kindergarten transition event; and, at ten parents, April had the lowest attendance which was still quite respectable. This was partially because it was a work evening and was somewhat limited by the number of sewing machines available for making the graduation shawls and vests.

Family Play Evenings were attended by between 13 and 27 adults with two attended by 19 adults each. Of the adults, the parents (including grandparents and an uncle) numbered 13, 7, 15, and 3. Attendance increased again in April to over eight parents and at least as many other adults; however, the exact number has been lost.

*Overall Satisfaction with Events*

The first question on the evaluation form for each event asked the participant to rate the event overall. Ey' Snat and Family Play Evenings offered the five choices of "terrific, good, okay, not so good, or pretty bad." Great Wolf Lodge asked them to rate the activity from "5-Excellent for my family" to "3-OK for my family" to "1-Not so good for my family." For the seven total events for which we collected participant evaluations, 73% of respondents gave the event the highest rating (5 or "terrific"), followed by 21% for "good," 3% for "okay," and 0% each for "not so good" and "pretty bad." The percentage of those who neglected to do the rating was 3%, and for that group, examining the answers to the questions on the form were all validating of the worth or goodness of the event. Thus fully 94% of respondents rated the events as good or excellent.

*Qualitative Themes: Family Lifeways Activities are Important*

Traditional activities and learning were explicitly part of the February and March Ey' Snats and the Great Wolf Lodge Family Play Retreat (GWL-FPR). February, with its storytelling by a Lummi elder, Lummi singing and drumming with a song about tadpoles becoming frogs, beading, drum-making and sewing bags for the drums was especially beloved by parents and family members. One or more of these activities based in Lummi family practices was mentioned in every single evaluation form collected that evening. A few people made comments about "the [traditional] cedar weaving" at the GWL-FPR and one person noted that someone "wearing

Native clothes got the attention of children" at the March Family Play Evening. Where traditional or family ways of being and doing were present, parents noticed and placed these things high on their approval list.

*Qualitative Themes: Play Matters to Lummi Families*

Play is perhaps the chief avenue young children have for learning, connection, and fun. And remarkably, parents' comments indicated a high regard for play, which was mentioned as a positive aspect of all seven events for which we have written evaluations. For example, when asked to identify one or two things that they especially liked about the event, parents said things like, "they love to play," "[I enjoyed] observing the children play with the adults and…adults playing with children and enjoy[ing] each other," and "[I enjoyed] playing at my child's level." Over and over, as one of the top two or three things they liked at the event they mentioned the pleasure they took from the children's play, including that they were themselves included in that play.

*Qualitative Themes: Families --- Parents, Children, Grandparents --- All Like to Have Fun*

Perhaps not surprising when we think of why we like to do things, parents mentioned fun as being a very positive aspect of the events. Comments included: liking "building with the kids and seeing them have fun," "seeing all the kids playing and having fun," "seeing families have fun," "spending time with two toddlers and seeing the other children have so much fun," "kids had fun with other families," and "kids had lots of fun…" Fun was mentioned in the comments on every one of the seven events.

*Qualitative Themes: Family is Important*

Adults mentioned families and/or their own family as important in the evaluations of every one of the seven events as well. "It's good to get families together," "the family atmosphere," "my family connected in so many ways," "noticing other families' involvement," "family connection," "family time making the craft," and "it was great to get out as a family" typified the comments. Parents over and over mentioned their children and their family connections and the fact that they enjoyed "family togetherness."

*Qualitative Themes: Importance of Social Aspects, Food, and Appreciation for Children*

Three other areas received attention in at least six of the seven events' evaluations. Parents were very interested in the social aspects they observed, such as "generosity," "the feeling of community," "learned more about how social my child is," "my son made new friends," and how they "felt welcomed."

Food was part of every one of our *Ké'* activities, which we believed would be important to their family-friendliness. Evaluations mentioned appreciation of the food in six of the seven events with some even offering suggestions for the next time.

What was clear was that parents expressed delight in their children: "I really like the happy sounds of our children," "[my] daughter loves to help," "I loved the look on my boys' faces. The sheer delight and joy in leading play and being paid attention to," "my 2 y[ea]r old knows what sound a duck makes," "I got to see my son enjoy himself," and "[my] kids are so much fun!" Lummi parents not only care very much about their children, but expressed seeing them in a positive light over and over again.

Other themes emerging were that the support groups and listening times at the Family Play Evenings were always mentioned in those evaluations and that the activities at all events were appreciated for their appropriateness and fun. A few

suggestions were made for additional activities for infants and toddlers amidst the appreciations for what was present.

*Qualitative Themes: Additional Themes*

The above major themes emerged as well as those mentioned in evaluations for five or fewer of the seven events (71 percent or less). These included learning, relaxed time, organization, feelings of safety, physical play, listening to emotions, engaging in discussions, a sense of community, and appreciation of leadership.

## Conclusions

The markedly increased attendance at Ey' Snat each time is an indication that parents and families were enthusiastic about the path on which they had guided the project. Family Play Evenings by design had a limited capacity in order to have enough Play Team members to ensure at least as many of them attended as the number of children. Nonetheless, the ability of the brand new Family Play Evenings to draw a good-sized group of parents and Play Team members each time indicates its importance to those who attended. Families who attended wanted to attend again and again, and did so as many times as they could. And the Great Wolf Lodge trip filled up quickly with families who had attended Ey' Snat and Family Play Evenings most consistently.

The overall 94% approval rating on all the family events indicates that these events resonated with what parents said they needed and wanted. By connecting with and listening to parents we co-created our events and family engagement was enhanced.

We noticed that the themes that emerged in the evaluations all share a common thread. That commonality is a reliance on the interconnectedness of people: adults with children, children with children, adults with adults, and everyone with the

community and with Lummi family practices and traditions. Connection simply was the foundation that positive family engagement was built upon and enjoyed by this community.

We found that when we listened to what parents said about what they wanted to do, we could co-create the activities that would bring families together to connect within themselves, with other families, and with some of Lummi families' lifeways that they wanted to experience and learn about. They were immediately ready for shared responsibility, and we all conceived family engagement in a deeply connected way, resulting in increased parental participation and leadership**.** Basing family engagement efforts on what parents say they want increases connection with parents, increases attendance, and results in participant satisfaction with the events.

We believe that the Lummi community's strength of connection served as an essential basis and foundation for family engagement and must be the basis upon which to improve early education. As we progressed, the efforts that were synchronous with the community's high value for connection flourished, and they validated Lummi indigenous identity and adults' and children's eagerness to learn and grow.

Play is tremendously attractive to children and given enough resource, adults love to be with children who are in charge of the play and playing fully. Children's understanding of play, relationships in play, and their joyfulness in connected play is an untapped resource and should be investigated further in order to help us all—parents and professionals—understand just what engages children fully in education or anything else we value.

Lummi parents love their children deeply and want to do absolutely the best for them. Engaging with other families in ways that validate all of their children in playful, culturally engaging ways supports that love, helps parents relax, and can provide excellent opportunities to support their desire to do their best. As our *Ké'* year

got underway, I never again heard people say that parents just don't care. Lummi parents do indeed care deeply about their children, work hard for their flourishing, and desire support and connection and relaxed time to spend with them.

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# Breaking Trail for Community Impact: The Development of an Early Learning Program on the North Slope of Alaska

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## Abstract

Community collaborative projects require a shared sense of purpose, a vision, and numerous individual and organizational partners to be successful. In this article, Birgit Meany documents and analyzes one such process: the development of an early learning initiative in Barrow, Alaska, an Iñupiaq community on the North Slope of Alaska. Using the metaphor of "breaking trail," which the local whale hunters do every spring in preparation for whaling season as they create a trail through the ice to the prime hunting and camping sites near the water, Meany investigates the process of developing and implementing a vision and strategy for culturally-driven early learning as a similar process of breaking trail. The success of the initiative and the ability of the community to address challenges along the way depends, like the whaling crews, on a shared vision, a commitment to the ultimate goal, cooperation even among competing interests, and adherence to the twelve Iñupiaq values.

## Introduction: Creating a Path on the Ice

With the winter months coming to a close in the remote, arctic Iñupiaq community of Utqiaġvik (Barrow), Alaska, daylight returns at a leisurely pace of nine-minute increments each day, and excitement builds as the community readies itself for the spring whaling season, an important time to follow ancestral ways and replenish needed food supplies. Utqiaġvik is home to approximately forty whaling captains, seasoned hunters and respected members of the community, who lead their crews in this enormous endeavor, the success of which depends upon the careful coordination of resources and people. Although knowledgeable and experienced, the whaling captain provides not only leadership and counsel, but also the necessary equipment and gear, including the *umiaq* (skin boat), aluminum boat, rifles, harpoon, and a system of pulleys and ropes, as well as the items needed to establish the camp on the ice

where the crew will stay during the hunt: walled tents, stoves, skins, and other supplies.

The captain's crew consists of members of the captain's extended family, but a boat can also be a collaborative effort involving multiple families. Crews vary in size and can range from twenty to fifty members that include men as well as women, although men tend to predominate. The interaction among the crew is guided by the twelve Iñupiaq values:

- Avoidance of Conflict
- Compassion
- Cooperation
- Family and Kinship
- Love and Respect for Our Elders and One Another
- Humility, Humor, Hunting Traditions
- Knowledge of our Language
- Respect for Nature
- Sharing

Grounded in these values, everyone works together for the common goal: to harvest a bowhead whale that will sustain the crew and the larger community.

Typically, preparations begin in late February to early March, with an inspection of the equipment and gear, to make sure that all is in good condition. The umiaq frame may need a new seal skin cover; wooden sleds may require repairs or else new ones need to be built; snow machines may need their engines tuned; tents may need cleaning or mending after their summer camping use; and numerous other items must be readied in order to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the crew and help foster a successful outcome.

The ocean is still frozen at that time. As such, crew members embark on the arduous task of breaking a trail through the sharp, often snow-covered ridges of sea ice, in their important quest to secure a spot near an open lead of water, suitable to set up camp for the season. The whaling captain determines the location where the crew will establish the base camp, usually in an area that is smooth and free of any ridges;

ridges indicate that thinner ice has been pushed together by the current and buckled under the pressure, creating an unsafe spot for the camp. Armed with shovels and pick axes, crew members cut their way through the ice ridges, painstakingly carving out a winding trail to the desirable location, which can be several miles from the shore.

Striving for communal rather than individual success, competition --- for campsites and whales --- gives way to cooperation. It is not unusual for different crews to join forces as they forge ahead to their destination, the large open area marked by smooth ice, void of the ominous ridges; an indicator that it has sufficient thickness to hold the weight of the whale when it is pulled up. Thus, a single trail can provide access to several individual camps, temporary home and work places for crewmembers during the April hunt. Unfortunately, with the ice constantly shifting, a trail is not necessarily permanent; rather it may have to be periodically maintained or rerouted depending on ice conditions.

When the crew has landed a strike (a whale), it is time to again to muster one's energy and work together as the massive animal (bowhead whales can reach weights up to 100 tons) is hoisted onto the ice with the help of a complex system of pulleys and villagers using their snow machines for added power. Amidst the celebratory atmosphere, the hunt may be over, but the "real" work has just begun as the whale is butchered on the ice and then taken back to the village on snow machines pulling the precious cargo. As the crews are successful in their hunts, they proudly display their *umiat* (skin boats) on the shore, each bearing the family's crest on a flagpole for all to see. The community shares in the success with their appreciation for the hard work of the hunters, their coming together to receive "shares" from the crew and reconnect with friends and family; and with celebration of this Iñupiaq cultural tradition (Jonas Ahsoak, Whaling Captain, Interview).

# Starting the New Trail: The Context for a Community-Based Early Learning Initiative

In the late winter of 2011, bundled-up whaling crew members braved the arctic temperatures outside to break their trail, while inside, in the warm, well-worn, familiar spaces of the old Central Office building of the North Slope Borough School District (NSBSD), a different crew was preparing to blaze a trail of its own after having learned of a grant opportunity through the American Indian College Fund ("the College Fund"). Filled with enthusiasm about the possibility of realizing what had only been a distant hope up to that point, a group of educators, elders, and community members representing various organizations came together to articulate a vision that addressed the need for a culturally responsive, language-centered early learning environment, which would also serve as the training ground for a teacher preparation program for a region in which less than 1% of teachers are Iñupiaq but 80% of the students are. Focused on this grant opportunity from the College Fund, the atmosphere was filled with enthusiasm and an abundance of ideas that began to take shape on the pages of the grant application. The outcome of this and several subsequent planning sessions was the submission of a proposal, which was selected for funding later that summer. Thus, Ilisaġvik College's Early Childhood Education Initiative (*Uqautchim Uglua*, Iñupiaq for "Language Nest") became a reality and planning gave way to implementation, with the "real" work having just begun.

The organizations and community members in the early conversations had now become active, committed partners working together to transform the plan into reality. One of them was *Ilisaġvik College*, a two-year Tribal College established in 1996 to serve primarily the Iñupiaq people of the North Slope of Alaska, the northernmost, arctic region of the state, encompassing an area of 89,000 square miles and home to 8,000 people (Erben, 2010; North Slope Borough, 2016). The College serves

approximately 1600 students annually in academic and workforce development programs.

Another partner, the *North Slope Borough School District* (NSBSD), with approximately 1900 students in 11 schools, was (and still is) a vital partner, whose cultural experts helped to shape the vision and contributed to the shared pool of knowledge with their expertise in curriculum development as it pertained to Iñupiaq language and culture. The NSBSD developed the Iñupiaq Learning Framework (ILF) to ensure culturally responsive instruction in primary and secondary grades. NSBSD Director of Iñupiaq Education, Jana Harcharek, describes the ILF as encapsulating "… our community's expectations of what Iñupiaq youth should experience in their schooling" (Harcharek & Rexford, p. 25). This framework served as a model for the subsequent development of the early learning curriculum.

Yet another partner was the *Iñupiat Community of the Arctic Slope* (ICAS), the federally recognized Regional Tribal Government organized under the Indian Reorganization of 1934, and the tribal entity under which Iḷisaġvik College received its charter. ICAS is responsible for protecting the interests and self-governance rights of the Iñupiat residents within the Arctic Slope region of Alaska. As the project unfolded, this initial crew of three was joined by other organizations that helped clear the way: The *Arctic Slope Native Association* (ASNA), which facilitates education and childcare in the outlying villages and the *North Slope Borough* (NSB), the municipal government that provided funding to bridge unexpected gaps and with which the College collaborated on related, supplemental projects. Community members included interested parents and grandparents, elders as well as young people who embraced the project and vision it represented: an Iñupiaq culture-based learning environment for the youngest members of the community.

## Documenting the Trail: Central Question and Methods

This narrative inquiry focuses on these central questions:

- *How does a Native community on the North Slope of Alaska move from vision to planning to implementation of an early childhood initiative serving children, families, and the community?*
- *What challenges present themselves in this process?*
- *What lessons are learned for future efforts in this community and similar communities?*

In order to give an accurate, well-rounded account of this narrative, the author relied on both primary and secondary sources, including grant reports, materials presented at national conferences, minutes documenting participation in local events, press releases in the regional paper, the project website, and trip reports. Furthermore, photo and video documentation provide snapshots of children's learning, as do curriculum materials, classroom assessments, and parent feedback.

## Building the Trail: Creating and Implementing the Vision

As a community collaborative initiative, it was critical for implementation to involve both events for community members to come together and activities that were important to serving the community. One of the first steps included gathering letters of commitment and Memoranda of Agreement, outlining common goals, time lines, and duties and responsibilities agreed to by each partner.

### *Community Gathering*

The project was officially launched with a community-wide meeting, designed to gather ideas and ensure buy-in. The goal was to demonstrate that this initiative was not merely another grant project, but a grassroots effort with focus on early childhood education at the core. If successful, it could be the catalyst to change at the community level by fostering family wellness, developing cultural identity, advancing

language revitalization, preparing young children for future academic success, creating an environment that linked the academia of the college classroom to the practical early learning setting, and providing teachers with opportunities for professional development. The gathering brought together approximately 30 people to include outlying village as well as Utqiaġvik residents; young and old elders, parents and grandparents, the traditional and the professional. With excitement in the air, all were ready to get started. Participants separated into five working groups with the goal of: articulating a vision of what an Iñupiaq Early Learning degree might look like; outlining parent roles for the early learning center; plotting a strategy for launching home language nests for young children in the villages; gathering ideas for creating an Iñupiaq immersion learning environment for young children.

Fueled by enthusiasm, a spirit of commitment, compromise and sacrifice, the project seemed ambitious but within easy reach. Little did anyone anticipate the less-than-smooth trail ride that would ensue from the twists and turns shaping the path. All shared a common vision of the end goal, but perspectives pertaining to details and implementation did not always align. This included meeting frequencies and format, dissemination of information, degree of stakeholder inclusion at different levels of decision making, curriculum development process, structure and content of the teacher preparation program, follow-through on commitments and adherence to projected timeline, and personnel decisions. At times, the logistics of this project, with multiple layers of organizational and community involvement, proved to be challenging though not impossible to overcome. This initial gathering was followed by four *Community Cafe* meetings, sponsored through organizational collaborations and held in some of the outlying villages. Together they provided the impetus for continuing community and regional involvement in the program culminating in the North Slope Borough Mayor working towards creating much needed Early Learning Centers in the region. After the community gathering and the Community Café

meetings, the five working groups formed earlier continued their work at varying levels.

*Language Nest*

One aspect of the initiative was the creation of an Early Learning Center, the Language Nest. Decisions needed to be made concerning the curriculum, the teachers, the facility, the furnishings, and, not to be overlooked, compliance with state guidelines. Initially anticipated to be straightforward, the decision-making process now resulted in lengthy conversations that required all to observe the Iñupiaq values of sharing and cooperation when debating the issues at hand. Questions that came up were: What would the age range for children be? Should all 'western' toys be banned in an Iñupiaq learning environment? With an emphasis on Iñupiaq culture and language, what would preparation for the later transition to the public school look like? How would student learning and progress be assessed? What would the application and selection process for interested families and children look like? The College had hired a project director and lead teacher who had two main tasks: to prepare the classroom environment (order furnishings, create curriculum materials, etc.) and to establish the organizational framework (draft policies and handbooks, prepare state application for licensure, etc.)

The Language Nest opened in fall 2012 with only four children, the state mandated limit, under which the Center was able to operate without a license, since not all of the requirements had been met at that time. However, in the following year, the Language Nest could enroll up to twelve children under a provisional license, and in spring 2014, the Center obtained state licensure. Since then, the Language Nest has been fully operational and is about to graduate its fifth cohort of children. It is not uncommon for families to enroll younger siblings, a testament to the quality of care provided. Because of the partnership with NSBSD, the Language Nest was able to

utilize an existing School District facility. The grant funds helped to transform the empty rooms into a welcoming, nurturing, and stimulating Early Learning space with the addition of furnishings, equipment, curriculum materials, and toys, to name a few.

## Obstacles on the Trail: The Challenges of Personnel and Curriculum

Initially, the Center was operated by a combined effort of a seasoned, veteran teacher and childcare workers; however, while those dedicated individuals were inspired and enthusiastic about guiding the Center in the early years, they had achieved fulfilling careers, and did not envision themselves in the early learning classroom for the long term. Beginning in 2014, several of the experienced, core staff members had either retired or relocated, and left the Language Nest with a young, dedicated, but very inexperienced staff to carry on the work. That fall was a time filled with stress and uncertainty.

In an effort to bridge the transition, the College entered into a 12-month contract with ThreadAlaska to mentor both the center administrator and the teachers. Following a site visit by the program officer and a TCU partner, the decision was made to close the Language Nest for a period of approximately seven weeks starting in late November. During that time, the staff traveled to several other centers to observe best practices, consulted with center administrators, participated in a training session with the state licensing official, and worked closely with the ThreadAlaska mentor. The plan was discussed with the families, who were very supportive and continued their participation upon the re-opening of the Language Nest in mid-January, The staff, now re-energized, continued to develop curriculum and utilized the strategies and practices learned during the Center closure. Parents noted the improvement and the spring semester was marked by success, culminating in a well-attended graduation ceremony in May. The outcome was improved quality of

instruction, motivated teachers, and positive parent feedback. Lesson learned: Ongoing staff development in the form of training workshops, classroom visits, and staff meetings is essential to morale and to maintaining a quality early learning environment.

With the "changing of the guard" to a younger team, the Language Nest concept shifted from an Immersion concept to an Iñupiaq medium concept (teaching through Iñupiaq culture and language), as these young Iñupiaq staff members had the necessary cultural competencies, but lacked language fluency. This shift was initially not met with great enthusiasm, and a plethora of ideas was offered by partners and community members as to how to maintain the immersion learning environment. While greatly appreciated, the suggestions were largely driven by idealism but not feasible in the day-to-day operations of the Center. In spite of their enthusiasm and drive, it was heartbreaking to see the young trail breakers struggle with lack of confidence and self-doubt over their lack of fluency. However, with much encouragement and exchange with their peers from other TCUs, they came to realize that language is a very important element of culture, but it is not the only element. Thus, they eagerly continued to learn Iñupiaq and incorporate language every day, but also realized that they can be effective teachers of their culture while learners themselves.

Curriculum development posed another challenge and centered on differing stakeholder views of what exactly the curriculum should look like as well as the lack of existing curriculum. The initial veteran teaching staff prepared some of the curriculum based on their experience, while the NSBSD Department of Iñupiaq Education staff also provided support and developed curriculum units. The curriculum had to meet two objectives: provide a solid cultural foundation for the children and prepare them academically and socially for a successful transition to the public school system. To achieve that balance, the College also enlisted the help of a curriculum expert

recommended by the NSBSD staff, who provided workshops on how to develop materials in addition to developing some curriculum herself. Gradually, as the younger teaching staff has gained confidence and experience, their participation in and ownership of that process increased significantly.

## The End of the Trail: Outcomes

The Language Nest has weathered the initial trail-breaking years and is now fully in operational mode. The staff, both teaching and administrative, is a stable group of young Iñupiaq individuals who have demonstrated tremendous growth in their journey to becoming early learning professionals and have established themselves as competent in their positions. Partners continue to provide support and feedback and are a much-appreciated resource. As a result, the frequent "crises" of the early years seem to have diminished; instead, a sense of routine, experience, and confidence guide the manner in which any challenges are resolved.

Curriculum development has expanded beyond the immediate classroom and now includes supplemental materials created by the College's Iñupiaq Studies Coordinator. She has created and continues to create small children's books about Iñupiaq culture and language, which are not only used in the classroom, but will be published commercially and made available to the parents and community. All materials are shared with the NSBSD.

Professional development has been and continues to be an ongoing process. Opportunities have included annual convenings with partner TCUs under this initiative, resulting in a strong support network as well as learning about various tools, such as data collection process, documentation, photo voice, and curriculum development. Regular attendance and participation in workshops and forums provided at professional conferences, such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), have given the staff a platform for exchange

with other professionals in the field and resulted in implementation of new strategies and teaching methods. Aside from the immediate benefits of these development opportunities for the staff, they have also helped to strengthen partnerships and promote the project in the community, as select partners, elders and parents, attended some of these events as well. Currently, all Language Nest staff members are pursuing college degrees.

The Language Nest has become an integral part of the College's operations and as a lab school provides classroom experiences for college students as well as high school interns interested in early childhood education as a potential career field. It is a part of the College's strategic plan and promises to be sustainable in the years to come.

## The Impact of the Trail: Findings and Analysis

### *Native Language and Culture Curriculum Integration*

In the Iñupiaq medium learning environment, language and culture were integrated as a result of having Iñupiaq staff dedicated to creating a culturally responsive early learning classroom. This was the outcome of communal collaboration: input from Iñupiat professionals at NSBSD; feedback from the Ilisaġvik Board of Trustees; presence of elders in the Center; support from the Iñupiaq Studies Department at the College; and continued community interest and participation. Activities such as storytelling, Iñupiaq dancing, traditional games, sewing, beading, tool making, drumming and singing are some of the ways in which the children are taught about the traditional way of life while creating educational environments rooted in Iñupiaq ways of knowing.

### *Parent, Family, and Community Engagement*

The Language Nest engages various community partners. For example, cultural events co-sponsored by the Iñupiaq Heritage Center are open to the public and Language Nest families. Uqapiaqta events [i.e., Niġliaq camp (geese hunting), hide tanning] are attended by community members as well as Uqautchim parents. The Language Nest has a close working relationship with the Barrow Early Learning Center, recently opened, and both Centers collaborate on professional development opportunities for their staff. The Language Nest hosts various parent nights (i.e. potlucks, presentations on different topics); parents have the opportunity to participate in field trips; and parents bring in traditional foods and or animals to share. Regular field trips to the community's Senior Center fosters a positive Elder/youth connection.

### *TCU Early Childhood Teacher Education Program*

As part of the overall Early Childhood initiative, the College started a two-year degree program in Indigenous Early Learning, improving both the teacher education offerings and the training of new teachers. The program utilizes the Language Nest to provide college students with early learning experience concurrently with their academic classroom experience. The program works in close collaboration with the NSBSD to help develop future teachers. As such, it is currently in the process of developing various areas of concentration: early learning, elementary education, and paraprofessional to name a few, to better meet the needs of the District and the community.

### *Impact on and Contributions to TCU*

This project has impacted Iḷisaġvik College in several ways. The cornerstone of this initiative was the creation of an Iñupiaq Early Learning degree program,

supported by student experiential learning in the classroom setting of the Language Nest, an Iñupiaq Early Learning Center. Although growth has been slow, several student interns, both college and high school, have taken advantage of the opportunity. The fledgling degree program is under the leadership of a full-time faculty member, a new position, now in its second year. New to the college as an instructor, she was a long-time teacher for the NSBSD and is grounded in the community as well as both organizations (having been a former Board of Trustee member for Iḷisaġvik). Her experience residing in one of the villages and her positive relationship with the NSBSD help with the recruitment of students and the coordination of observation visits in school classrooms. Thus, education has become a new academic discipline for Iḷisaġvik College.

As a tribal college, Iḷisaġvik is more than a post-secondary institution, but takes a leading role in community affairs as well. This project has raised the institution's awareness of this role and the level of participation and leadership in those affairs. For example, the college is one of the leaders advising the North Slope Borough's early childhood initiative. College staff is included in official village visits to support efforts to establish childcare facilities. The College regularly reports to the Iñupiaq Heritage and Language Commission (IHLC), the region's influential body on all things cultural and language related and is a sought-after partner to coordinate community events, such as language summits and cultural events.

The partnerships that were forged as a result of this project have positively impacted Iḷisaġvik. Those partnerships with the NSBSD, Arctic Slope Native Association (ASNA), ICAS, NSB, and IHLC have shaped the institution's approach to community involvement as well as how partners view of the role Iḷisaġvik plays in the community.

## New Trails Ahead: Conclusions

With support and involvement of the community, Iḷisaġvik College was able to break a trail in culturally-responsive early learning. This initiative had a great impact on the community in Barrow, the college, and the collaborating partners. Now that this trail has been established and traveled on for a few years, possibilities for new trails emerge. The notion that a community could take an idea about early learning to reality within a span of just a few years generated many new possibilities for the community and the institutions within the community.

One such possibility is the production of cultural curriculum materials for the community: parents or family members could buy an Iñupiaq children's book, Iñupiaq coloring book, or an Iñupiaq game for the young child in their family. Such materials extend the learning of language and culture from the classroom to the family and may help strengthen family ties through joint activities as well as inter-generational relationships.

Breaking trail is hard work, whether the work is done indoors or outside. The Iñupiaq whaling crews rely on traditional knowledge passed down from their elders, endurance to brave the cold, harsh conditions, and determination to continue their way of life when they will begin their task anew during next year's season. A great reward awaits them: the celebration of community, culture, and the pride of being Iñupiaq. Similarly, the Uqautchim Uglua crew too relies on traditional knowledge to enrich the learning environment and endurance to strengthen language fluency, meet the educational and social needs of their young charges, and handle the unexpected challenges with grace. They too begin their task anew each fall when a new group of young children and their families await them. They too celebrate their culture and take pride in being Iñupiaq.

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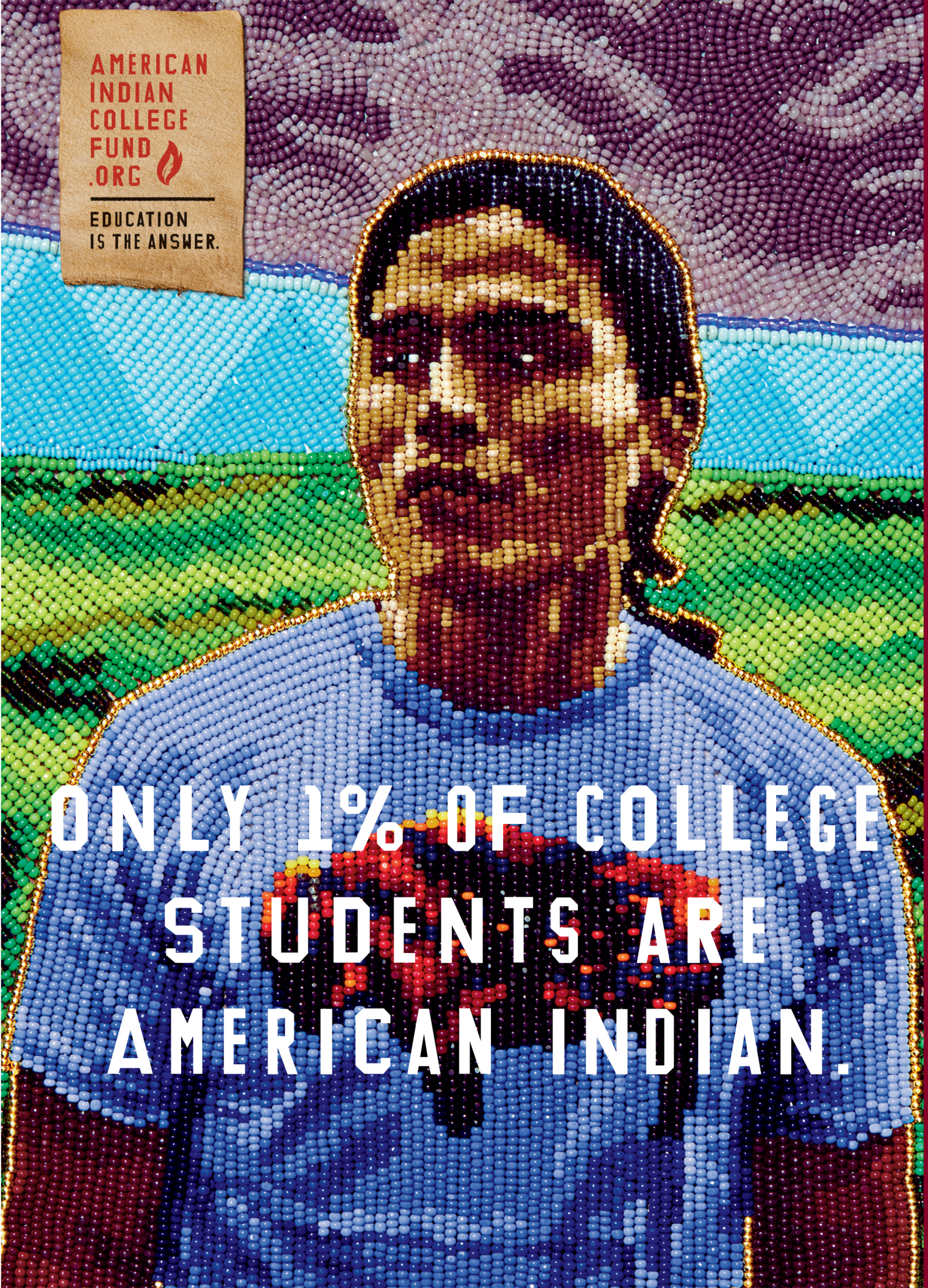


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