INDIGENOUS EARLY LEARNING COLLABORATIVE

Advancing Community-Based Inquiry and Equitable Early Learning Opportunities for Native Children & Families

2021–2022

PRESENTED BY: Brazelton Touchpoints Project & First Light Education Project
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS


About the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative:
Together, First Light Education Project and the Brazelton Touchpoints Center (BTC) lead the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative (IELC), a national initiative envisioned and designed in consultation with more than 50 different Tribal individuals, educators, and representatives from early childhood learning and care organizations and Tribal departments of early childhood education. Launched in 2021, Native educators, early learning professionals, and leaders from four Tribal/Native partner communities learn how to generate local solutions to historical and current dilemmas of practice. Community-Based Inquiry (CBI) — a process by which Indigenous communities engage in asking and investigating their own questions about their early childhood practices — is the driver and focal point of this project. The IELC is made possible by funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (Grant number: P0133104).

The Brazelton Touchpoints Center (BTC) was founded in 1996 by world-renowned pediatrician T. Berry Brazelton, MD, and colleagues and is based in the Division of Developmental Medicine at Boston Children's Hospital. Together with families, providers, and communities, BTC develops and applies knowledge of early childhood development to practice and policy through professional and leadership development, organizational learning and change, research and evaluation, advocacy and awareness, and serving as a resource for proven practices. BTC is home to the Touchpoints Approach, the Brazelton Institute (Newborn Behavioral Observations and Neonatal Behavioral Assessment Scale), Family Connections, and the BTC Research and Evaluation team. For more information, visit www.brazeltontouchpoints.org.

Guided by the principle, “Starting with What Works,” First Light Education Project, LLC is a consulting and collaborative initiative, providing leadership on projects of practice and inquiry in community and educational contexts. The company’s two founders and principals, Dr. Tarajean Yazzie-Mintz (Diné) and Dr. Ethan Yazzie-Mintz, bring extensive expertise and experience working with and within communities, Tribal nations and Indigenous communities, K-12 schools, nonprofit organizations and foundations, and higher education institutions across a variety of social, political, and educational domains. Conceptually grounded in the idea that education is a fountain of enormous possibility and immense potential from prenatal development and continuing through adulthood, First Light Education Project uses a strengths-based and question-driven approach to create relationships, processes, and knowledge that lead to collective, transformative outcomes. For more information, visit www.firstlighteducationproject.org.

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Or visit the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative website: www.brazeltontouchpoints.org/programs-services/indigenous-early-learning
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Introduction

"...in order for us to be effective at what we do, from the mindset that we want to approach it, it will come with the grounding of our Indigenous selves first."

– INPEACE / Keiki Steps Team Member, Reflective Inquiry Session, June 2021

We’re calling to our community, calling them into us, we’re not calling them out, we are calling in. And we are calling to our young people our community and letting them know we are here.”

– Daybreak Star Team Member, Reflective Inquiry Session, November 2021


The four communities engaged in Year One of the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative (IELC) provide strong foundations of leadership and growth — for themselves and the individuals in their communities. For everyone from early learners to elders, these sites are places of Indigenous identity and connection. The individuals participating in the IELC from these four sites are “doers” — teachers, parents, home visitors, leaders, elders — people involved in the education and care of children and families in their Indigenous communities. These are also individuals who are interested in continually addressing and solving problems and challenges in their communities. For many early childhood care and educational communities, research is one place to look for and adapt solutions to address local challenges. For Indigenous communities, little research exists that provides timely and relevant solutions, let alone addresses locally developed questions. The IELC provides a space for these communities to create their own critical questions; strengthen their inquiry abilities; and develop local, relevant, and sustainable solutions and answers to their questions.

The Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative was envisioned and designed in partnership and consultation with more than 50 different Tribal individuals, educators, and representatives who come from different levels of early childhood learning and care organizations, Tribal departments of early childhood education, and center-based leadership. The concept of having an intellectual home for facilitation of Community-Based Inquiry was of great interest. Native educators, early learning professionals, and leaders could engage in learning about how to generate local solutions to historical and current dilemmas of practice. Together, First Light Education Project (Denver, CO) and the Brazelton Touchpoints Foundation (Boston, MA) lead this national initiative, working in equitable partnerships with four Tribal/Native partner sites located across four states, from east to west: Michigan, Minnesota, Washington, and Hawaii.
INDIGENOUS EARLY LEARNING COLLABORATIVE: MISSION, VISION, GOALS

**MISSION**

The center seeks to address systemic barriers that impede Native/Indigenous communities from designing high-quality, culture- and language-rich, early childhood development programming for Native children, families, and communities. The center relies on Indigenous research and knowledge generation as a foundational component toward achieving racial equity in early learning and core systems.

**VISION**

To develop phases of development and a systems approach on a continuum starting with pre-natal through adolescence. To steward significant support (financial and data knowledge resources) to address gaps and silos in the world of Native/indigenous early childhood development at a national level.

**GOALS**

Build systems so that the work of Native early childhood professionals/communities, will contribute to national policy — using local, regional, and national data knowledge to tell their powerful stories toward stronger advocacy with children, parents, and communities.
Partnership in co-facilitation: First Light Education Project and Brazelton Touchpoints Project

First Light Education Project and the Brazelton Touchpoints Project have created a unique partnership to co-facilitate this work side by side with our early childhood partners. First Light Education Project is a Native-run organization built on Indigenous principles and implementing Indigenous practices with expertise and experience in early childhood education and building systems of care and learning. Brazelton Touchpoints Project is a long-time leader in early childhood learning and development with a long history of working in and strengthening communities in the U.S. and around the world. We have created an intentionally equitable partnership to conceptualize and operationalize the IELC, bringing together expertise, experience, and community connections to jointly implement the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative. This process has been distinct from other, less content-focused, partnership creations: for example, one organization looking for a partner that can be a fiscal sponsor or, in the current funding context in which foundations seek to fund organizations run by a person of color as a proxy for funding social justice initiatives, one organization seeking to partner with an organization led by a person of color. We have joined intellectual forces to create, conceptualize, implement, and support working with Native communities in the areas of early childhood education and research — and, in so doing, we have created a partnership that allows us to put into action our shared vision and philosophy for Native children, families, and communities. In this report, we highlight the accomplishments in Year One, our projections for Year Two, and the ways in which this work builds a sustainable vision for strengthening Native communities.

Community-Based Inquiry: The Foundation of the Work

Community-Based Inquiry (CBI) — a process by which Indigenous communities engage in asking and investigating their own questions about their early childhood practices — is the main driver and focal point of this project. The unique approach that CBI takes to research and strengthening practices in communities — which originates with, is implemented by, and is sustained by the communities themselves — means that communities are not dependent on either First Light Education Project or Brazelton Touchpoints Center to analyze their practices or take action. As external organizations, we have developed a relationship with the community partners, and with them, we co-design approaches and identify methods to answer their questions as, simultaneously, they implement their ideas in practice. This leads to cycles of inquiry and action in which communities ask their own questions, solve their own issues, and implement their own solutions.

The process starts with discussion of questions such as “What are some of the issues this community of practice wants to solve?” This is distinct from external researchers coming in to solve an issue and get people to “buy in” or external organizations coming in with funding to study a particular issue or implement a particular program and then getting community members to support this external research agenda. If we can understand what communities believe are the most immediate questions about practice and support them in researching and answering those questions, then the result will be increasingly high-quality opportunities for teaching, learning, and care in their early childhood settings; more knowledge in the communities about research for future inquiries; and stronger children, families, and communities.

Traditional models of research locate inquiry expertise within the researcher, who pursues answers to a set of research questions through a variety of research methods with “subjects,” those who have knowledge or experiences (e.g., practitioners) who can inform and help answer the researcher’s questions. More recently, models of research have reclassified “subjects” as “participants” and have made efforts to include participants as decision makers in both the design of the inquiry and analysis of the data. Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) and Research Practice Partnerships (RPPs) are examples of this way of working, theoretically designed to have practitioners help to strengthen the research by being the experts on problems of practice and strategies in action and to have researchers help to strengthen practice by sharing their analyses and recommendations with practitioners. However, despite the driving theories

“Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative will rely on Indigenous research and knowledge generation as a foundational component toward achieving racial equity in early learning and care systems.”
behind these ways of working, the implementation of these methods is often focused on the researcher — in funding, in perceived legitimacy, in knowledge and expertise — because, ultimately, these models are focused on research.

In Community-Based Inquiry, community members are the researchers: they are the people who have the questions that need to be studied, an understanding of the context, access to relevant data, and critical ideas on how to implement solutions in practice.

Community-Based Inquiry is the engine that drives this project and the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative. Every site goes through cycles of inquiry. We walk side by side with them through this process, offering them insights and guidance through the inquiry process, helping them to design a survey, take an initial look at preliminary data, understand the connections between survey data and the other data they are collecting, look at data to deepen their knowledge about their questions, etc. Through all of the work and all of the connections they identify across various parts of the research process, they see the value and power of inquiry into their own work as a way of strengthening their practice and their communities.

Community-Based Inquiry as an Equitable Practice with Indigenous Early Educational Communities

The implementation of equitable practices is critical in working with communities, particularly Native communities. For too long, Indigenous communities have been over-researched and underserved, leading to the proliferation of researchers building and advancing their careers on work in Native communities while so many research products developed by these same researchers either never make it back to the communities or are of little value to making timely changes and shifts in practice within these communities.

We view Community-Based Inquiry as a critical and equitable practice within Indigenous early educational communities. First, the IELC enters and cultivates authentic partnerships with communities, in which there is a balanced approach to who guides, who leads, who learns, and how inquiry happens. Second, we move forward in this work together driven by a collective commitment to answering the community’s questions (not our own). Third, the knowledge of the community partners — of content, context, history, community relationships, practice, etc. — serves as a foundational component of doing this work now and into the future. Fourth, by design, the community teams comprise members from diverse experiences holding a range of roles in their community; this allows for both representation of various groups in the communities and an opportunity to solve a range of dilemmas of practice and surface deeper questions that may lead to sustainable opportunities for young children and their families and communities. Finally, the agenda guiding the work is focused on learning and process, not conclusion. So the knowledge that emerges through the process serves the community.
members immediately in their practice. The goal is strengthening practice, not publishing in journals — and the community does not need to wait for a peer-reviewed article to be published or for an external researcher to decide to share knowledge with them in order for changes to be implemented in practice. Through modeling and practicing authentic, equitable partnerships and centering the work within the community, the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative is implementing Community-Based Inquiry as an equitable and sustainable practice in Indigenous early educational communities.

Summary Overview of Year One: Finding the Footholds and Developing Systems and Inquiry Processes

This report focuses on Year One of the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative, in which work was focused on building foundational footholds for inquiry at each site within the broader initiative. The purpose of Year One was to create the foundations, systems, structures, and processes to co-vision and co-learn with each site as they build an informative, community-based inquiry. The intense investment in building teams, incubating ideas, engaging community partners, building knowledge around inquiry, and developing important inquiry questions at each site was critical for success in Year One and for creating impact in Year Two.

In this report, we focus on Community-Based Inquiry (CBI), a process through which communities identify their own needs and problems, develop relevant questions to drive an inquiry process, investigate those questions through employing diverse inquiry methodologies, and implement solutions to the identified problems of practice. CBI is an equitable practice, particularly for Indigenous communities, and this report describes the work in Year One of building relationships and starting up Community-Based Inquiry in these four Native communities. We share highlights of the program components that guided and drove the work, the development of an intellectual home for this work at these sites, the implementation of the Brazelton Touchpoints training, and the ongoing work at each of the four sites.

From all this work, we share emergent lessons that provide a springboard into the work in Year Two. Whereas, at this point, we can infer and anticipate both direct and indirect impact on Native children and families, we will be able to see and describe the impact of this work at the end of Year Two more clearly. This report describes our work in Year One to develop strong foundations — creating relationships, building knowledge, developing inquiry processes and focal areas — for these Native communities to ask and answer their own questions about early childhood teaching, learning, care, and development and implementing their findings in practice.

"The Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative is envisioned as a national center that will become an intellectual home for Indigenous communities, partners, and sites to access material and intellectual resources to inform their Community-Based Inquiry, program design, evaluation and strategy for sustaining high-quality early learning opportunities for Native children and families.”
Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative: Goals

The Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative is focused on working with and impacting three different target groups: Native children, Native families, and Native communities. We are connecting Community-Based Inquiry processes to solve problems on all three levels. When teams are developing inquiries, they are meant to strengthen learning and care systems for children. Their inquiries will then inform their work with Native families, engaging them in strengthening skills, knowledge, and connection with their children. We are focused as well on reaching the broader communities, supporting their efforts to learn and implement inquiry processes to develop knowledge and strengthen early learning and care systems. Sharing knowledge across communities and then disseminating knowledge nationally and internationally will help us have an impact on these four sites as well as communities beyond the initiative. The work in Year One builds the foundation to address goals for Native children, Native families, and Native communities. The rest of the report shares examples of the ways in which we are making progress toward our goals.

The goals of the Collaborative are focused on three levels of work and practice: children, families, and communities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal for Native Children</th>
<th>• Community-Based inquiries developed locally will advance high-quality early learning opportunities for infants and young children, addressing development from prenatal to age 8</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| Goals for Native Families| • Through trainings and Community-Based Inquiry cycles, families will expand their own knowledge of prenatal, infant, and young children’s development, learning, health, and well-being  
• Families will activate their skills in advocacy, the workforce, and social and education systems  
• Families will strengthen connections and relationships with their children and community |
| Goals for Native Communities | • Communities will learn diverse research methodologies to provide a foundation for Community-Based Inquiry  
• Tribal communities, in urban and rural settings, will develop systems knowledge, create partnerships, and design locally informed inquiries to strengthen services, education, and health opportunities for Native children and families  
• Across sites, communities engaged in the collaborative will contribute to the larger national efforts to improve early childhood development, learning, health, and well-being outcomes  
• Across the entire initiative, research produced by communities will be disseminated locally and nationally to inform Native early childhood development research and practice in communities beyond the initiative |
Components of Programming, Year One

There are seven components of programming in Year One of the IELC (see Figure 1 below): Community Planning, Co-Design, Training, Evaluation, Usable Knowledge and Implementation, Sustainable National/International Partnerships, National and International Engagement.

Community Planning
Tailored, on-site co-design, implementation, evaluation, cross-sector engagement, sustainable partnerships

Co-Design
Locally designed Indigenous and community-based inquiry

Usable Knowledge and Implementation

Sustainable National/International Partnerships
Build international Indigenous ECD network

National and International Engagement

Training
Proven BTC training – to increase local community capacity

Evaluation

Our first accomplishment in Year One was completing one cycle of programming, consisting of all of these components, at each site.

Figure 1: IELC Program Components
COMMUNITY PLANNING
This visioning phase is the beginning of a cycle of inquiry. In this phase, the community is facilitated through a process of identifying what their priorities and needs are, and from that, they generate questions that can be systematically investigated through the rest of the cycle of inquiry. In this first phase, teams also envision the future, thinking through what their communities, children, and families need to thrive both right now and 10 or 20 years down the road.

CO-DESIGN
Once key questions are developed by the community partners, this second phase of the cycle of inquiry entails developing a tailored inquiry approach that is guided by the needs, priorities, and questions developed at the site. Through this phase, site teams develop plans for technical assistance they will need in designing and implementing their inquiry and develop skills and knowledge to sustain the collective work at the site. The key product of the co-planning process is the development of the Memorandum of Understanding and the site’s implementation plan.

TRAINING
Brazelton Touchpoints training is important because it provides an opportunity for these Tribal community teams to engage in learning together about child development as they develop skills and knowledge — the goal of the training is to “strengthen relationship-based and developmentally informed practice for providers who work with young children and their families.” In the IELC, that training is an essential component of building relationships internally at the site as the trainings bring together a diverse spectrum of providers to learn together and share perspectives.

EVALUATION
In this project, we have two evaluation inquiries being conducted simultaneously. One evaluation inquiry is focused on the BTC training, sharing insights from Year One trainings, and incorporating trend data from BTC’s historical work. The second evaluation inquiry takes a broader look at the IELC and the work across sites; in Year One, the evaluation involves participation of the BTC project leads and the sites. As we were launching the project, our site partners insightfully suggested that we use the term “co-learning” instead of evaluation to intentionally honor how we are all engaged in this work; we are not putting sites under a microscope for study, but rather we are involved in co-learning from the work.

USABLE KNOWLEDGE AND IMPLEMENTATION
We create usable knowledge for implementation through our monthly reflective inquiry sessions, in which we engage and build upon what these site teams know and have learned, activating local knowledge and resources for their inquiries. These reflective inquiry sessions also present scholarly knowledge from other communities and from the field to inform specific knowledge for these sites. For example, Keiki Steps wants to create an Indigenous learning framework — so we set up their knowledge library with materials they could use in their inquiry. Wilkwedong is designing an Ojibwe learning series. As they are building it, they are implementing it, studying it, and refining it. This work is not just about doing research and waiting for answers — it is about implementing knowledge as soon as the sites can. As the knowledge deepens, they try it out; we are implementing while we are doing. Our site partners say, “We don’t have time to wait to put our ideas to work.” This is a critical measurement of success: How can we put this knowledge to use right away?

SUSTAINABLE NATIONAL/INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS
Creating partnerships is critical for the success and expansion of the IELC. One component of the program is connecting sites with each other; it is also important to connect them with national and international organizations doing work across a range of areas. These partnerships offer increased opportunities for the sites to gain resources and knowledge in answering their questions and for IELC in looking to expand and grow.

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT
This component is primarily focused on the IELC in efforts toward greater visibility through national and international networks to share and disseminate knowledge, being present and active in developing early childhood inquiry and work in Native communities, and creating a virtual national and international intellectual home for this critical work in early childhood education.
Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative Site Partners

In Year One, we partnered with four sites in launching a Community-Based Inquiry project: Wiikwedong Early Childhood Development Collaborative (Keweenaw Bay Indian Community, Michigan), Wicoie Nandagikendan (Dakota/Ojibwe, Minnesota), Daybreak Star Preschool (Tribes of Northwest and California, Washington), and Institute for Native Pacific Education and Culture (INPEACE) Keiki Steps (Native Hawaiian, Hawaii). In identifying partner sites, we were looking for educational communities that met indicators for readiness to engage in this kind of inquiry, sites across various geographic locations, historically underfunded communities, limited state/government funding, and sites that had existing community and family partnerships and had interest to launch into a collective inquiry. We were also looking for both rural and urban sites. In particular, we were interested to include Native communities in urban spaces as they tend not to be included in other research projects and partnerships; the prevailing perception is that Native people only live on rural reservations, whereas demographic data indicate that a high percentage of American Indians and Alaska Natives reside in urban centers. We wanted to recognize and work with urban Native communities ready to engage in Community-Based Inquiry.

The four project sites were prepared to do this work because they have something they are fighting to achieve for their communities, and their teams comprise lifelong, sustained, engaged leaders and advocates. Fueled by their passion, they can do much more once they have tools in their hands to do this work. These four communities are shining models of hope and resilience. The IELC is a great opportunity for these communities to invest in themselves and as partners in a larger movement.

In terms of their projects, these sites sit on a continuum from theory-based inquiries to visionary, action-centered strategic plan implementation. The four projects are Professional/Workforce Development: Ojibwe learning series, professional networks; Space: Physical wellness within an immersion setting; Land-based curriculum for early learning in urban and Indigenous contexts; and Indigenous early learning framework.

CONTEXT & INQUIRY

**Partner Sites**
- Four, across four states: Michigan, Minnesota, Washington, Hawaii
- Tribal Groups: Keweenaw Bay Indian Community; Dakota/Ojibwe; Tribes of NW, CA, and inter-Tribal, Native Hawaiian
- Serving 0–5 and ages 5+ for intergenerational events/learning

**Community-Based Inquiries**
- Professional/Workforce development: Ojibwe Learning Series, professional networks
- Space: Physical Wellness within immersion setting
- Land-based curriculum for early learning in urban and Indigenous contexts
- Indigenous early learning framework
At each IELC partner site, there are levels of local engagement (Figure 3). There is a Coordinating Leadership Team comprising 2–5 members who participate in the IELC’s monthly Reflective Inquiry Sessions and who locally lead and implement their respective projects. Within each partner site, there are also internal teams comprising staff, parents, community members, and leaders working directly with children and families (i.e., parents, elders, teachers, home visitors, Tribal health or social service providers). And each partner site has identified and developed partnerships with local Tribal and non-Tribal organizations, institutions, and programs to engage in different threads of their inquiry project (i.e., regional associations, citywide parks and recreation departments, universities, advocacy groups, public service programs).

**Figure 3: IELC Partner Site Levels of Local Engagement**

The Coordinating Leadership Team serves as the anchor for the partner sites’ Community-Based Inquiry. They invite and engage their internal teams and partners as they implement different aspects of their project or as they seek local expertise to inform strengthening their programming and inquiry. The approach of building intentional contributors across sectors supports each site in developing sustainable partnerships and systems to continue their collective work. The national team at Brazelton Touchpoints Project and First Light Education Project bring another layer to these sites: expertise in research inquiry, early childhood development, and extensive national and international professional networks. The structure of the project from local to national engagement results in a strong tapestry of work that is supported on a diversity of levels and by a wide range of expertise.

A brief overview of each partner site and their projects is shared in the next section; the projects are presented in the order of the sun’s movement from East to West, beginning with Wiikwedong in the east, then Wicoie Nandagikendan, then to Daybreak Star, and finally, INPEACE’s Keiki Steps, located in the west.
“Niwiidosedimin, We walk with each other, was a decision we had to make before we committed to this partnership with the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative. We are four Tribal early childhood programs who have worked in silos for many years. We are walking with each other in this partnership and using research as the tool to find out what are the ways in which we can align cultural knowledge and services that touch children and families to help us to heal, thrive, and grow.” (Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative, Collective Reflective Inquiry Presentation, November 2021)

The Wiikwedong Early Childhood Development Collaborative is a group of early childhood professionals working within the Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa Indian Community (L’Anse, Michigan). Three members are of the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community; two have worked within Keweenaw Bay Indian Community for a large part of their careers. There is extensive knowledge and historical contributions each of the Wiikwedong members bring to their collaborative. These five professionals came together in December 2020 for the first time to engage in this collaborative effort to strengthen professional development across early childhood development departments, services, and early learning centers. A powerful and dedicated group of leaders described their collective knowledge:

“The Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative Team brings strengths in early childhood education, health and wellness, and Ojibwe culture. As a collective, our team has over 100 years of collective experience in early childhood development to include a diverse background in family support, health and wellness, curriculum development, assessment, leadership, and management and collaboration.” (Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative, Implementation Plan, 2021, p. 2)

An important step in the inquiry process is to start from what is working and to articulate a team’s strengths, focusing on the local context and the strengths, knowledge, cultural connections, professional experience, and commitment to thriving as a profession and a collaboration.

Below is a chart summarizing the members, their respective organization or Tribal department, and their roles.

### Wiikwedong Leadership Team

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization/Department</th>
<th>Title/Role</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>KBIC1 Tribal Head Start-Tribal Council of Michigan</td>
<td>Early Childhood Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KBIC Pre-Primary Program</td>
<td>Early Childhood Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KBOCC2 Migiizinsag</td>
<td>Early Childhood Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KBIC Health Systems</td>
<td>Health Promotions Coordinator/MCH Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional within the Local Community</td>
<td>Former Tribal College Faculty Member and Community Member</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. KBIC stands for Keweenaw Bay Indian Community
2. KBOCC stands for Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa Community College

The Community-Based Inquiry project implemented by the Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative is called, Niwiidosedimin (We walk together), and their inquiry questions seek to learn about early childhood development issues such that, if they address them, their community can heal, thrive, and grow. The driving inquiry question the team is investigating is:

**What are the ways in which we can align cultural knowledge and services that touch children and families to help us to heal, thrive, and grow?**

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**WHO DOES WIIKWEDONG SERVE?**

Together, the Wiikwedong programs working across the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community serve 211 children under the age of 8 and 175 families. Of the currently-enrolled 211 children:

- 90.5% (191) are American Indian/Alaska Native or multiracial with one of the races being American Indian/Alaska Native
- 26.1% (55) are experiencing other environmental or familial risk factors, including substance abuse, trauma, an incarcerated parent, etc.
This question highlights the deep desire for this team to influence practice from an Indigenous perspective, aligning knowledge and early learning services with cultural knowledge. Cultural knowledge is a starting place for this team; they already know their tribal history, language, traditions, and ceremonies will inform their process to support children and families in ways that will help them heal, thrive, and grow. Critical to Wiikwedong are areas of work: knowledge of early childhood development; increasing the generation of strong, culturally-rooted materials and learning resources; and improving opportunities for early childhood professionals. An excerpt from their implementation plan describes their visionary goals and questions:

Committed to addressing their silos and strengthening their practice across four Keweenaw Bay Indian Community early learning centers, Tribal home-visiting and drawing upon earlier work developed by faculty at the Tribal college, this group focused on an inquiry to address the following questions:

Our overarching question that encompasses early childhood development/learning/care issues is what are the ways in which we can align cultural knowledge and services that touch children and families to help us heal, thrive, and grow? The key is [to] heal, thrive, and grow. It is important for us to reclaim and revitalize the Ojibwe culture.

**Early childhood development:** Lack of or unknown Ojibwe teaching resources available to the ECD Program’s teachers. Break down the silos between local Tribal ECD Programs. Sharing, developing, and aggregating local Native American resources within the early childhood development community.

**Learning:** Improve the quality of teachers to include Ojibwe teaching and content in teaching practices. Identify Ojibwe teaching imperative to heal, thrive, and grow.

**Care issues:** Increase the number of qualified teachers in relation to need for early childhood programs and childcare in the community. Drug and alcohol dependence from birth to adulthood. In turn, it would bring young Native American individuals into the culture to pass it on for generations to come. Once again, [it] is important for us to reclaim and revitalize Ojibwe culture. (Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative Implementation Plan, 2021, p. 5)

The team identified addressing silos in their practice by coming together to lead, together. They target their collective work with children and families, noting early on that they all share the same families in their work, and they all are committed to strengthening Indian families across their region in the upper peninsula of Michigan. They strategically plan to simultaneously build while providing professional development opportunities to their teachers, early care providers, and parents. They see a solution, and the solution resides within reclaiming and revitalizing Ojibwe culture.

12.3% (26) are classified as having special needs
2.4% (5) are currently homeless
60.2% (127) are in families experiencing extreme poverty

There are approximately 36 teachers and professionals (28 are pre-K teachers/caregivers with full credentials, eight have some credentials) who either provide services or teach within these local programs, centers, and home visiting services.
Addressing silos across Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative’s respective programs reveals strength in their Coordinating Leadership Team’s collective knowledge and commitment. One member shared, with respect to their shared vision and responsibility to lead,

“I plan to keep moving forward in this direction. I am proud when I talk about this team because I know that all of us working together on this team are going to be strong, and we are stronger together.”

– (Wiikwedong Team Member, Team Work Session, 2021)

WIIKWEDONG YEAR ONE ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Developed and strengthened partnerships with families
- Revitalization and engagement in ceremony – Mother moon ceremony, water walks
- Development of Ojibwe lending library
- Creation of the initial learning modules of Ojibwe learning series

Developed stronger systems by engaging in Community-Based Inquiry
- Developed knowledge on survey design and development
- Learned to collect relevant data to inform lending library and Ojibwe learning series
- Engaged in initial work sessions to analyze data and improve strategy for documenting emergent knowledge about their programs, teachers, early learning care providers.

Engaged in strengthening early childhood development knowledge
- Completed series of Brazelton Touchpoints Training, including local professionals and partners

Reflecting on Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative’s goals, approach, inquiry, and early findings and accomplishments, we see the ways in which this work truly is a tapestry of threads that are being artfully woven together. A coordinated effort to build from their inquiry questions culturally rooted connections with families, teachers, early childhood providers – together, this community of practitioners and leaders is creating increased opportunities for children and their families to heal, thrive, and grow.
Wicoie Nandagikendan
(Inter-Tribal community of Minneapolis, Minnesota)

Wicoie Nandagikendan, an Ojibwe and Dakota language immersion program, serves the Inter-Tribal Native community of Minneapolis. Wicoie Nandagikendan joined the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative seeking to engage their community in a Community-Based Inquiry that would result in identifying a home, a physical space of their own. Historically, the program has moved from place to place existing only in borrowed space. The program serves a diverse community of families and children from a number of tribes. The Managing Director shared,

“We serve our Dakota and Ojibwe community, and sometimes other Tribal folks will enroll their child in our program that are linguistically related: Ho-Chunk, Lakota, Potawatomi, Hidatsa/Mandan/Arikara, for example. But Dakota and Ojibwe are our main focus, and there are 11 reservations in Minnesota with 4 being Dakota and 7 being Ojibwe – there are approximately 58,000 Native Americans in Minnesota, 4,000 Dakota (2016) with 9,000 being Ojibwe.” (Personal communication with Wicoie Nandagikendan Managing Director, January 2022)

The name of their project is Finding our place in our own space - Wicoie Nandagikendan's Dedicated Early Childhood Language Immersion space to call home. Together, the Wicoie Nandagikendan community framed their Community-Based Inquiry and quickly learned that the concept of “space” is much more than physical brick and mortar. Space for the organization and those who fight for Native families is much more meaningful when they include the concept of space for healing, learning, and connection to place and traditional homelands. The project calls upon the strengths of place, connection, Native lifeways – essentially their deep love for their community:

“Connection to place, grounded in traditional lifeways, love for our community. We all bring a solution-oriented thought process to the team. We all realize that the children are at the center of our work.” (Wicoie Nandagikendan implementation plan, 2021, p. 10)

WHO DOES WICOIE NANDAGIKENDAN SERVE?

According to their current data, Wicoie Nandagikendan currently directly serves 10 children enrolled in the language immersion programs. Under normal (pre-COVID) conditions, the program routinely enrolls between 12 and 15 children per classroom. The children are taught by two apprentices and one lead teacher. Whereas currently there are 10 children directly served by the program, the children's family members are also considered program participants; the language immersion program reaches up to 72 family members. Additionally, Wicoie Nandagikendan partners with Native organizations, initiatives, and educational programs across Minneapolis and Minnesota, reaching 30 or more Indian education programs and serving the American Indian community of Minneapolis, reaching 12,000 families through their broader community engagement. The Managing Director, staff, and board members deeply desire to find a home for their growing organization – in order to reach more families and bring more Indigenous teachings to the community.
In the rich spirit of honoring the Wicoie Nandagikendan community’s connection to place, the team, throughout their entire inquiry process, kept the faces and futures of the children for whom they work at the center of their pursuit to learn, implement, and strengthen their work across Wicoie Nandagikendan’s spheres of influence.

**Wicoie Nandagikendan Leadership Team**

The project Coordinating Leadership Team comprises four active members: the Managing Director, a Program Assistant/Coordinator, Finance Associate, and organization Board Member. Together, this group brings a diversity of perspectives, rich experience, and roles informing their collective work.

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<tr>
<td>Wicoie Nandagikendan</td>
<td>Managing Director</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wicoie Nandagikendan</td>
<td>Program Assistant/Indigenous Food Coordinator</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wicoie Nandagikendan</td>
<td>Finance Associate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wicoie Nandagikendan</td>
<td>Board member</td>
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In addition to the three staff members on the Coordinating Leadership Team of the project, Wicoie Nandagikendan has three other staff members: a Digital Navigator/Coordinator and two language immersion teachers (1 Ojibwe and 1 Dakota).

Within Indigenous communities, timing and opportunity often intersect in important ways. Our budding partnership is rooted in the context of social and racial unrest in the city of Minneapolis. The team, at the time, was in the middle of intense community advocacy and political engagement related to the George Floyd murder. This social and racial unrest piled on thick with the COVID pandemic. The Wicoie Nandagikendan coordinating team defined their focal areas of need as, first, to address the challenges, stress, and exhaustion of the social, racial, and political context surrounding their physical and mental spaces of work, of care, and existence. Health and wellness were key areas of priority as the team planned for opportunity to engage in visionary work on behalf of their community. To the right is an excerpt of the team’s reflection on context, priority, challenges, and ultimate dream to find a home — a safe home for their organization, immersion program, families, and partnerships of service.

**Team Wicoie is working** to recover from COVID fatigue, the murder of George Floyd, and the subsequent Chauvin trial in Minneapolis, MN. This has been an unprecedented year from a pandemic perspective entailing isolation and huge technology learning curves as well as testing the limits of our resiliency and flexibility.

The protests that popped off here in Minneapolis resulted in a neighborhood food desert, high anxiety, and real fear as many of us had to be vigilant about patrolling our neighborhoods from looters, arsonists, and provocateurs looking to instigate racial terror. The results of this type of projected toxic energy were boarded up work and business spaces as well as ongoing police abuse and gun violence impacts in the neighborhood in which our administrative program and classrooms are housed.

We realized on April 7th, as a verdict came in on Tuesday April 6th, how much stress and weight we had all carried for over a year both from the murder of George Floyd and the COVID-19 virus. While we had continued to show up and hold space all year long, we were also realizing we were reaching our limits.

As we began to talk internally about health and wellness and the stress and weight of the year, discussion turned to what does health and wellness mean to us as a team and how are we caring for ourselves and for each other within a workspace environment and how were we as an organization going to recover and remain healthy for our community?

Wicoie realizes the importance of family engagement and how positive reinforcement on the home front enhances language immersion strategies learned in our program. We continue to reach out to our families using language immersion community engagement strategies, such as immersion camps, hand drum making classes, cooking classes, feasts, and other cultural family engagement activities.

Another area Wicoie is looking to strengthen within the scope of healthy children is our food systems. We are building strategies that will implement a food pyramid based on Minnesota’s indigenous foodshed. We now prepare snacks for our children based on our foodshed. As part of this healthy foods initiative, we have expanded our garden spaces to grow foods that will be utilized for our program and to serve the families of the children we serve.

Wicoie partners with many organizations in our neighborhood and city as well as throughout Minnesota, some of these are Bdote Learning Center (a K-8 Dakota and Ojibwe language-centered charter school), Division of Indian Work, Minneapolis American Indian Center, St. Paul Indian Education, Dream of Wild Health, The Family Partnership, Minneapolis Park Board, Owa’mni Festival, and a host of other organizations. Many times, the children in our program will open events by singing in Dakota or Ojibwe, much to the delight of our adult community members.

**What we now realize is missing is our very own home:** a space dedicated to providing a high-quality and nurturing early childhood education that is centered on language immersion strategies and culturally engaged families.

(Wicoie Nandagikendan Implementation Plan, 2021, p. 4-5)
The narrative reveals the tumultuous social and racial context in which many of our Native communities work. What stands out is the strength of vision and desire to find a home in which children can be immersed in their Native languages and teachings. Certainly, there are clear ambitious and visionary goals that will benefit from implementing a Community-Based Inquiry toward informing a strategy to reach their goal to revitalize Native languages and community.

“Wicoie Nandagikendan believes that revitalizing our Dakota and Ojibwe languages through immersion strategies to our children and families offer a solution and pathway to recovery from genocide. Current research shows that children who have a solid cultural identity (e.g., using language immersion strategies) at the early childhood level imbue resiliency factors, ameliorate intergenerational historical trauma factors, and are better prepared to enter the workforce with healthier lifestyle outcomes.” (Wicoie Nandagikendan Implementation Plan, 2021, p. 3)

The clarity of their hope shines through this quoted statement above. Their existence as an organization, as a language immersion program, leads to lasting change for the children and families they serve. The Wicoie Nandagikendan team strategically developed their inquiry plan to include board members, community, and partners, together seeking to envision a place in which wellness is at the center of their work.

“As we considered ways to engage our team, board members, and community around our knowledge building and community inquiry, we as a team thought of a setting where we could combine health within a scope of wellness, ceremony, and recovery to address the year-long onslaught of trauma and toxic energy. What does wellness look like for an Indigenous-led organization? What does wellness look like for our community?” (Wicoie Nandagikendan Implementation Plan, 2021, p. 2)

THE PROJECT IS GUIDED BY THE FOLLOWING INQUIRY QUESTIONS:

• How are we caring for ourselves and for each other within a workspace environment, and how are we as an organization going to recover and remain healthy for our community?

• What are the benefits and impacts of Wicoie Nandagikendan having our own dedicated language immersion space? What are the ways in which our current space fosters learning, family engagement, staff development, and connections across our work?

• What needs will this space serve in the community? What needs are not being met in our current space?

• What does this space look like? What expert advice will we need to move forward with this idea of our own space?
The inquiry questions focus on a complex system of interconnected areas of work and impact – the health and wellness of the staff and team, recovery from external social and racial unrest, impact of culturally rooted learning, space that fosters learning, and family engagement. What holds the inquiry together is the pursuit to identify a home, a place from which they can serve their community.

WICOIE NANDAGIKENDAN INQUIRY
YEAR ONE ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Planned and hosted a retreat focused on healing and visioning
- Board members, Wicoie Nandagikendan staff
- Developed visionary plan for space of healing and learning

Hosted a community event/feast to survey and gather input on their inquiry specific to their Indigenous community families of the children in the program, teachers, and elder advisors and first speakers.

Engaged/partnered with extensive Native organizations across Minneapolis: Bdote Learning Center, TRIO (food services) Center School, Dakota Language Society, Indigenous Food Network, St. Paul Indian Education, Minneapolis Park Board, Healing Place Collaborative, and Midwest Indigenous Immersion Network

Engaged in Reflective Inquiry Sessions
- Refined approach
- Debriefed emergent knowledge and concepts of space
- Acknowledged the importance of leadership health and wellness

Completed the Brazelton Touchpoints Trainings

In less than one year, the Wicoie Nandagikendan team has transformed their relationships, deepened their commitment, and clarified their vision for an organizational and programmatic space of learning and wellness. This group has kept moving forward, even through the dark times that social and racial tension entail. To imagine possibility is a gift. To imagine the possibility of wellness in the context of trauma is evidence of their resiliency.

Community-Based Inquiry — the process of asking questions, designing new directions, and taking those next critical steps — offers a critical process to keep moving forward toward the greater aspirations Wicoie Nandagikendan holds for their beloved community.

Emerging lessons and planning
- Being a good relative means taking care of ourselves—it’s not selfish
- Importance of connection to community
- Creating tangible visuals
- Team building–leadership training
- Organizational health
- Fundraising plan
Daybreak Star Preschool, United Indians of All Tribes
(Inter-Tribal community of Seattle, Washington)

Daybreak Star Preschool exists under the nonprofit organization United Indians of All Tribes, located in Seattle, Washington. This partner site joined the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative interested to engage their community of practitioners, partners, and leaders in the development of a land-based curriculum. The Daybreak Star offers a high-quality early learning experience, drawing upon the strengths of Indigenous knowledge systems, play-based learning, and family engagement. The program offers urban Native families a place to connect to ancestral values, knowledge, and teachings. Serving a diversity of children and families, the program approach distinguishes itself by rooting learning in land and place. The program is open to Native and non-Native families in Seattle, directly serving 1,000 Native families and reaching approximately 10,000 Native individuals through the United Indians cultural events and programming.

"Our Daybreak Star Preschool services a diverse range of children and families. Many identify as American Indian/Alaska Native though we also enroll a large number of African American children. Other ethnic groups represented include Latinx, Southeast Asian, and Middle Eastern households." (Daybreak Star Implementation Plan, 2021, p. 3)

The Daybreak Star community is strengthened by the engagement of families from non-Native communities, representing a diversity of cultural and racial backgrounds. The organization has a strong historical presence in Seattle, and through this Community-Based Inquiry, the Coordinating Leadership Team seeks to strengthen its impact on early learning opportunities.

The strength of the Daybreak Star implementation plan includes the ways in which the team seeks to address interrelated and complex issues faced by the children and families they serve.

A Community-Based Inquiry approach was a strong fit for this team’s desire to both understand complex issues and develop and implement learning programming.

"We aim to bring about broader change and more equitable society through our social and cultural programming. Our work promotes the interrelated goals of cultural connection, school readiness, economic self-sufficiency, artistic expression, improved public health, and housing stability.”

(Daybreak Star implementation Plan, 2021, p. 3)
Daybreak Star Leadership Team

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization/Department</th>
<th>Title/Role</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United Indians of All Tribes – Daybreak Star Preschool</td>
<td>Preschool Program Manager</td>
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<tr>
<td>United Indians of All Tribes – Family Services Division</td>
<td>Division Director Family Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Indians of All Tribes – Development Office</td>
<td>Grant Writer</td>
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<td>United Indians of All Tribes – Development Office</td>
<td>Development Officer</td>
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Note: The Daybreak Star Coordinating Leadership Team initially comprised four members: the Preschool Program Manager, an executive leadership member, and two development personnel. As the work evolved and staff shifted in roles, the Preschool Manager and the Family Services Division Director led the project’s Coordinating Leadership Team.

Teachers, local educational practitioners, Tribal community members, and parents are also envisioned to have a role in the work in Year 2. As the inquiry process unfolds, the team has plans to develop processes for inviting more community members to participate in the project and as members of the Coordinating Team.

The Daybreak Star team articulated reconnection and empowerment as key priorities they seek to develop (Figure 6). They believe engaging Indigenous knowledge systems is an important approach to understanding and addressing generational trauma, strengthening parental engagement in learning opportunities, and deepening knowledge of their staff and families. Their goals and priorities are shaped by the historical context of cultural and linguistic disruption for Native families. Their “intentional practice” is to partner with others to bring traditional Indigenous practices and knowledge to staff and families, to enrich learning informed by land-based activities, and to weave into the land-based learning existing landscapes surrounding their program site. This inquiry project is a “healing journey” that they believe will lead to an outdoor classroom at Daybreak Star Preschool.

Aligned with the project goals are the following inquiry questions:

- How does a land-based curriculum promote social–emotional awareness and sense of self-worth within the community structure?
- How does Indigenous and land-based curriculum promote parent involvement and increased community engagement with Wisdom Carriers deepen Indigenous communities?
- How does active engagement in land-based curriculum promote decolonization of early learning pedagogy for staff and families?

To answer their inquiry questions, the team began by planning and implementing phases of the outdoor classroom project. They developed a partnership with the Seattle Parks and Recreation Department to support constructing the outdoor space. The

Figure 6: Excerpt from Daybreak Star Implementation Plan, 2021, p. 4

Indigenous families are still carrying the generational trauma of the impacts of forced relocation and compulsory boarding schools. This shows up as reactionary parenting, reluctance to value early learning opportunities, and shame around not having a deep knowledge of traditional Indigenous practices. It is our hope that, with intentional practice and partnering, we can

1. Reconnect our staff and families to their traditional Indigenous practices through family activities with local Indigenous Wisdom Carriers;
2. Empower our staff and families to heal themselves by learning how our plant relatives can teach social–emotional practices that they can continually come back to through land-based activities as well as connecting current research in neuroscience and developmentally and culturally appropriate practices;
3. Develop a land-based curriculum with our staff and families that can utilize our Bernie Whitebear Garden and Discovery Park trails that encompasses all of the traditional Indigenous practices, including language, storytelling, plant identification and uses, and plant wisdom for social–emotional self-regulation.

By addressing these three goals, we hope to embark on a healing journey that can become a springboard for an entire land-based approach for our outdoor classroom and future Daybreak Star Early Learning programs.
Figure 7: Daybreak Star Implementation Plan, Year 1 Activities, 2021, p.5)

1. Storytelling Circle; Wisdom Carrier series of events (plant identification/uses; language)
2. Na’ah Illahee Youth Cohort DBS Preschool Discover Trail Project (Junior Wisdom Carriers!)
3. Outdoor Classroom Project (Tiny Trees; Discover Park Council; Na’ah Illahee)
4. Composting and Container Garden Project (Greenworks Technology; Na’ah Illahee)
5. Parental Involvement Survey; parent and community advisory panel
coordinating team leveraged the Reflective Inquiry Sessions to support developing phases of community engagement in the inquiry. As the inquiry unfolded, the project leadership team came to recognize the need to slow their process down and to focus on building relationships with the broader community and within their own organization. The interconnected aspects of implementing their plan (Figure 7) required increased contributions of existing programs, teachers, and community members.

The benefit of the inquiry process in Year One for the Daybreak Star Coordinating Team was that it supported them in reflecting on two community listening sessions in which they learned more about the community with which they desire to work. They also came to understand how their inquiry questions can best be addressed when those they seek to gain insights from are brought into the inquiry process. The nature of their inquiry questions is complex, and they intersect with one another as they cycle through their process of learning, documenting, and reflecting. Central to their passion for strengthening early learning and family engagement is seeking to uncover the deeper connections to Indigenous identity, history, knowledge, and restoration of systems disrupted by colonization of Native lands and people.

DAYBREAK STAR INQUIRY YEAR ONE ACCOMPLISHMENTS

-Launched partnership with Seattle Parks and Recreation
-Researched and drafted Daybreak Star Preschool’s land-based curriculum
-Designed and launched Daybreak Star Preschool’s outdoor classroom
-Identified Knowledge and Wisdom Carriers to support the inquiry and inform the land-based curriculum
-Conducted two listening sessions with local community members
-Developed initial process and structure for a parent/family advisory board

The significance of Daybreak Star Preschool’s inquiry project is rooted in the commitment to “remember” – that is, to ensure the children and families recognize and learn from their ancestral lands, increasing access to historical and traditional knowledge systems that connect Native families to the Indigenous community of Daybreak Star (Figure 9).

Daybreak Star, for all that it will offer, is envisioned as a place of healing, empowerment, and re-Indigenizing thought and practice. Through their engagement in Community-Based Inquiry, the Daybreak Star Preschool is transforming its learning environments, inspiring its teachers, and honoring parents and community. They are engaged in restorative acts of healing generations.

Figure 9: Excerpt from Daybreak Star Implementation Plan, 2021, p. 10

_What are the Indigenous knowledges and systems that you seek to restore and/or strengthen through this collective work?_

The heart of this project is remembering. That is, because we are not all able to recall the traditional Indigenous teachings that many of us were unable to have passed on, our goal is to remember, or reconnect the Indigenous community of Daybreak Star with their past wisdom so they can be present for their children, heal from past traumas, and rise up, empowered by their identity to create generational healing. This will take decolonization of thought and practice and re-Indigenizing that which we remove.
INPEACE Keiki Steps
(Inter-Island Hawaiian communities of Hawai‘i)

“INPEACE as an organization grows our own employees, we have a grow-your-own teacher, ... we have a grow-your-own model. We take parents, I was a former parent, a lot of our staff are former parents who now are employees of INPEACE. We come in – some of us – with no background in education, and we get the opportunity to get professional development [to become teachers].”

(INPEACE Keiki Steps Team Member, Reflective Inquiry Session, June 2021)

E Kolo Ana No Ke Ēwe I Ke Ēwe³ describes the process of knowledge creation and relationship that is the essence of the Community-Based Inquiry project implemented by IELC partner site, Keiki Steps. Keiki Steps exists within the Institute for Native Pacific Education and Culture (INPEACE), a nonprofit organization in Hawai‘i.

Keiki Steps
Empowering Early Learning

INPEACE’s Keiki Steps early learning programs serve approximately 647 children across the islands of Hawai‘i. The Keiki Steps team joined the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative to strengthen their pursuit to develop an Indigenous – Hawaiian – early learning framework. This framework is envisioned as an important component of their culture-based curriculum experienced by Hawaiian parents and their children (newborn to 5 years old).

“We serve communities with high concentrations of Native Hawaiians across 4 different islands. Historically, our communities carry negative narratives, which we believe is only one story, and as a team/organization, we are working to add our own narrative.” (Keiki Steps Implementation Plan, 2021, p. 2)

The purpose for developing a Hawaiian early learning framework is to support addressing broader negative narratives carried by the families they serve. The Keiki Steps approach acknowledges that the negative narratives exist while stepping into the realm of creating a strength-based narrative about Hawaiian identity. The team states their “willingness to learn and strengthen” their work as they articulate the plan to build success through their Community-Based Inquiry:

“Our team brings the willingness to learn and strengthen the work that we do in our communities statewide. Each member bringing their expertise around leadership, curriculum development, community IQ, and Hawaiian language and culture. Currently, we work closely as a team to lead, and we plan to keep that strategy to continue to build on our success.” (INPEACE Keiki Steps Implementation Plan, 2021, p. 1)

The Coordinating Leadership Team at Keiki Steps includes an organizational executive leader, program director, and three program coordinators. These leaders bring extensive experience in early childhood education, Hawaiian language and culture, and valuable insights shaped by their roles as parents to young children. In their current leadership roles, these powerful women are evidence of the success of the Keiki Steps programming; once young parents, they learned to be teachers, and were “home-grown” into organizational leaders shaping new directions for their culture-based early learning programming across Hawai‘i.

³The rootlet will creep toward the rootlets. Of the same origin, kinfolk will seek and love each other.
INPEACE Keiki Steps Leadership Team

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<tr>
<td>INPEACE Executive Office</td>
<td>Chief Program Officer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Keiki Steps Program</td>
<td>Program Director</td>
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<td>Keiki Steps Program</td>
<td>Kaua’i Island Coordinator</td>
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<td>Keiki Steps Program</td>
<td>O’ahu Island Coordinator</td>
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The team identified two areas of priority in their practice. They value the opportunity to research early learning programs within Indigenous communities to inform their own design of a Hawaiian early learning framework. They included in their inquiry opportunities to examine ways to increase highly qualified home-grown Hawaiian teachers and professionals.

Keiki Steps prioritizes culturally relevant curriculum and programming; they hold high expectations for children to reach their greatest academic potential, and they see Native Hawaiian teachers and educators as critical models for intergenerational learning. The team came to the IELC work with burning questions related to documenting defining characteristics of “what is Hawaiian cultural identity?” – they know the answers to this foundational question will lead to increased programmatic and curriculum enhancements aligned with their Indigenous knowledge systems. Below are the inquiry questions the team focused on during Year One of the project:

**What is Hawaiian cultural identity?**

**Within the current framework that we are using, what is Hawaiian about the framework? And what can we add or strengthen to ensure we focus on designing a framework that reflects our community, culture, and knowledge?**

**If we had the opportunity to operate from a Hawaiian perspective of time, cycle, season, and process, what would our framework look like?**

Keiki Steps’ inquiry questions demonstrate a strong focus on identifying the nature of Hawaiian cultural identity. From this identity are the roots of knowledge that will inform the development, design, structure, or architecture of their Indigenous learning framework. They visited and learned from Hawaiian cultural experts, teachers of their communities. They desire to ensure the cultural knowledge, the scope of learning including authentic qualities of culture, of community, of knowledge. One of their inquiry questions focuses attention on the ways in which perspective informs time, cycles, process that the framework can inform. There is a plan to achieve a framework that looks, feels, and has roots in Hawaiian identity.

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**Excerpt from Keiki Steps Implementation Plan, 2021, p. 2**

Develop culturally relevant curriculum and program designed to meet school readiness needs and effectively close the opportunity/academic gap.

Increase the number of highly qualified, highly effective, culturally grounded, home-grown teachers and professionals in the field of early childhood education.

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**INPEACE KEIKI STEPS INQUIRY YEAR ONE ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

Identified local, national, and international content experts to help inform and guide the inquiry project

Completed Brazelton Touchpoints Training

Completed review of several local, national, and international Indigenous cultural curriculum frameworks

Completed several workshops with content experts

The process of answering their inquiry questions includes “heavy research”:

“...we’ve done some heavy research, and we are engaging in our Kapuna – our content knowledge experts and help us frame what it means to be Hawaiian and what it means to be a Hawaiian educator.” (INPEACE Team Member, Reflective Inquiry Session, December 2021)
The Community-Based Inquiry implemented by the Keiki Steps team is not “research for research’s sake” – their inquiry is of critical importance to their enduring philosophy, educational approach, process, and role in ensuring language, history, ancestors, and families remain for generations to come. Through engaging this Community-Based Inquiry the team seeks to restore the following knowledge systems:

- Kumu Honua Mauli Ola (Hawaiian Cultural Identity)
- Kaulana Mahina (Hawaiian Lunar Calendar)
- Kilo (Observation to achieve a level of reading the natural environment, phenomena, and omens)
- ‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i (Hawaiian Language)

Hawaiian identity, time and seasonal cycles, environment, and story (language) are foundational areas of Indigenous knowledge that will mark their professional journey to solidifying a Hawaiian early learning framework that is grounded in their Indigenous selves.
Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative

Year One

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Intellectual Home: Holding Space for Intellectual Engagement

The action of Community-Based Inquiry takes place at the sites and in the communities. The Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative serves as an intellectual home for our work and our partners, in which ideas are generated, questions are reflected on, support is provided, and data are analyzed. One accomplishment of Year One was creating this intellectual home and having partners see and experience IELC in this way.

One partner site described how this balanced approach to shared visioning and balanced partnership contributed to their new understanding of their work, allowing for increased creativity in process, awareness, and desire to widen their net to include not just families and children, but also the broader community. They shared how, in order to engage intellectually and strategically in sustained ways, they needed a space to vision together, dream together, and direct energy to revitalization efforts, and see young families getting excited, wanting to be a part of language revitalization in this case. At the core of intellectual engagement, IELC partners stated the importance of grounding the work and approach in “our Indigenous selves first.” Without Indigenous identity and knowledge, equitable partnership and engagement is not possible.

To create deep planning, strategic decision making, and implementation, Tribal partners need space to reflect, make meaning, and be affirmed in their process. The Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative offers and holds space for intellectual engagement. Some thoughts from partners:

“It’s been very unheard of … to have a place to actually process the process.” (Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative Member, 2021)

“It’s very rare, and so that to me is what equity and partnership looks like in the world, …being able to focus on something that important to our organization and to go through the process and have access to the [training(s)], most of us could not have done that without funding.” (Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative Member, 2021)

“I so appreciate this process… it’s teaching us some things that we’re going to be utilizing as we engage with future grantors and contractors and how we are showing up…. We really appreciate this process and showing us that we have capability and permission to do things in a way that fit our community, our needs, and our children.” (Daybreak Star Team Member, Reflective Inquiry Session, November 2021)
Serving as an intellectual home and offering facilitated dialogue fosters local thinking about how to engage community. One member of the Daybreak Star team shared their reflection on process toward community engagement:

“If this is a community-based approach... maybe before we embark on this big journey, we should bring [in] the community first, talk about the foundation about how this is going to grow.” (Daybreak Star Team Member, Reflective Inquiry Session, November 2021)

The efforts of the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative, as an intellectual home, have been met with open arms, praise, and appreciation. There is a generous spirit that is cultivated by our collective efforts. The Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative is strengthening its presence and contributions as a space for Indigenous early learning professionals, care providers, and leaders to engage fully and seek deeper understanding of their service, practice, and leadership within and across Native community contexts.

**Equitable Partnership and Practices**

In addition to creating an intellectual home for this work and for our partners engaging in this work, it is critical that we accomplish our goal of creating equitable partnerships through equitable practices. Partners need to know, perceive, and believe that they are the drivers of the work in their communities; we build the broader structures for this project to happen and support our partners in their localized efforts. In order to be successful implementing Community-Based Inquiry as an equitable practice, partnerships must be equitable as well. Accomplishing this goal was critical for our success in Year One. One of the team members from Wicoie Nandagikendan describes their experience with our efforts toward creating equitable partnerships in this way:

“When I think of equity, I think of an even playing field, an equalness, ...in our community, we are very aware of the lack of equity. We can't say enough about the feelings of relief...in our first meeting with you ... what you brought to the table is so much understanding of our challenges; that's huge. The listening you do, the things you do, the feedback, ... the openness and transparency—those are characteristics that are being brought to the table. Here we are, a small nonprofit, Indigenous led, we are doing all this great work in our community, we are just on this edge, we wanna grow, and looking for some of that guidance.” (Wicoie Nandagikendan Team Member, Reflective Inquiry Session, December 2021)

This partner identifies the important ways in which we work: openness, transparency, understanding, empathy, and support. Approaching partnerships and practices in this way opens up the opportunity for partners to get important work done while having constant support through the IELC. Another team member described this way of working in this way:

“When I say “you guys get where we are at” – [there is] not only an understanding of where we come from as Indigenous people in a non-Indigenous world where our values are not aligned with a non-Indigenous world. You have seen the value in us, our work, and you have been able to help pull these pieces out in our work... for those of us in the trenches day in and day out. ... to have you really listen and value and hear the importance of our work... for us to feel so comfortable to be transparent and shed our skin, ... to just be ourselves.” (Wicoie Nandagikendan Team Member, Reflective Inquiry Session, December 2021)

In order to change the focus of research in Native communities from a model of external, university-based researchers to one that is driven from within the community, it is critical that partners know that we understand their context and their experience and we value their knowledge and their expertise. Then they can trust us to share their questions and their challenges, and we can provide the support to help make their work successful. We start “mid-sentence” with these partners and communities, meaning that they don’t have to explain themselves and their context in order to engage with us; we move immediately to the work. That is why it is so critical to have pre-knowledge before beginning the work with communities, and that helps to create equitable partnerships.
Reflective Inquiry Sessions by Partner Site

From June 2021 to December 2021, we held monthly Reflective Inquiry Sessions, tailored to the inquiry process that each site was engaged in. These sessions were not preplanned in detail; these sessions were co-created and were guided by the implementation plans the sites created. The sessions were facilitated discussions with local coordinating teams and leadership that centered on the inquiry questions partners are trying to answer at their sites. Most often, the reflective sessions focused on generating team knowledge on the inquiry process, developing strong questions for investigation, developing appropriate methodologies, and learning about tools to collect and analyze data. These reflective sessions built on each other from month to month. For example, the June 2021 sessions were informed by the implementation plans the four sites developed between February 2021 and May 2021. Below is an example from a session with the INPEACE Keiki Steps team. Together, we examined Keiki Steps goals, inquiry questions, and purposes and visualized the ways in which their Community-Based Inquiry would lead to informing new goals, new questions, development and implementation of curriculum, professional development of teachers, and, ultimately, pathways to restoration of Hawaiian knowledge systems (Figure 10).

The power of the Reflective Inquiry Sessions is to generate knowledge and reflect together as well as to celebrate and honor the knowledge of the site by continually deepening the collective approach. For example, one site is focused on working to bring more community voices into their inquiry and implementation process. The Reflective Inquiry Sessions helped them determine how to do that: first building relationships with community members and then listening to the voices in the community. Before becoming too invasive, they needed to step back, pause, and think about the most culturally appropriate way of engaging their community in an authentic way. Instead of using the community to advance their purposes (i.e., get “buy-in” for their ideas), they wanted to engage the community authentically. At another site, the inquiry was focused primarily on physical space for their work, but everything they were talking about in the Reflective Inquiry Sessions was about emotional, healing work. We then used the inquiry sessions to explore ways for them to heal themselves so they could bring healing to their community.

While we talk about engaging communities broadly and larger conceptual issues within the work, we are also helping partners develop tailored ways to engage their communities authentically to implement change. All of this is localized and contextualized through these Reflective Inquiry Sessions rather than being prescriptive and uniform across sites. That’s why we tailor these sessions — to generate ideas, knowledge, and strategies that are focused on the specific communities with which we are working.
Dissemination and Sharing: Emergent Stories, Growing, and Sustaining

In Year One, the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative shared emergent knowledge from the initiative at several different levels of dissemination: Sites shared knowledge at a local level with their communities, the collective shared at a national level, and First Light Education Project and Brazelton Touchpoints Project shared the IELC concept and accomplishments in a variety of forums hosted by national organizations and associations and research networks.

As lessons on process and initial findings from the collaborative emerged, we encouraged our IELC partner sites to share their stories, and we shared the project components and the conceptual framework of Community-Based Inquiry. Organizations and associations working with Indigenous communities were a primary audience for lessons from Year One.

IELC partner sites routinely presented their projects to their local partners. And, in the fall of 2021, the IELC was approached to be included in the CDA Council for Recognition’s newsletter. An example feature story on Keiki Steps’ Puhala Kamalamalama was published in December 2021.

“In 2014, she began taking classes in ECE at the local community college, earned her bachelor’s degree in 2018 and last year, earned her master’s degree in education curriculum and instruction. Along the way, she has advanced from a teacher’s aide to child advocate before assuming her current role as Keiki Steps site coordinator for Hawaii. In her drive to succeed, she drew strength from the Polynesian phrase “un nivel mas alto”—meaning rise to a higher level. And it’s also her motto for the families and children she serves.” (Retrieved December 15, 2021, from https://www.cdacouncil.org/en/newsletter/puhala-kamalamalama-looking-back-to-look-ahead/)

Puhala’s story is like many others in the IELC initiative; stories of passion for increased opportunities for Indigenous communities, shared commitment to rising to a higher level of knowledge, and drive to restore Indigenous knowledge systems so that children from Indigenous communities will have access to their histories, languages, and rich cultural knowledge.

Through the various modes of sharing and disseminating the work of the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative, we conservatively estimate that we reached well over 3,000 early childhood educators, care providers, and scholars through various venues. The graphic (at right) highlights some of the forums, funders, and networks with which the work was shared.

EMERGENT STORIES: GROWING & SUSTAINING

Exploration with Funders & Networks
- Foundation for Child Development
- Pritzker
- Better Way Foundation
- Native Americans in Philanthropy

Dissemination/Sharing Our Work, Informing Others’ Work
- Keweenaw Bay Indian Community
- Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa Community College
- Wicoie Nandagikendan Community and Board
- Council for Professional Recognition
- Council Link Newsletter
- National Indian Education Association NEED/NPEN
- National Workforce Registry Alliance
- Seattle Partners, United Indians of All Tribes
- Community Based Participatory Research Chat: Indigenous Scholars, hosted by Native Children’s Research Exchange
- Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative: October 28th (Collective Inter-site session)
Lessons Learned & Emergent Stories: From Local to National

There are a number of emergent stories of equity and inquiry from Year One of the project. Figure 12 provides the highlights in both equitable practices — including building authentic partnerships, developing shared responsibility, reflective inquiry, training sessions and local incubation of ideas, co-planning, and co-learning — and inquiry methodologies, including locally developed questions, building knowledge of data collection and analysis in practice, and dissemination of knowledge. These are all important highlights of lessons learned and shared from Year One.

Figure 12: Summary of Emergent Stories – Equity and Inquiry

Equitable Practices
- Partnership building: Entry, Purposeful Engagement, Exit
- Shared Responsibility: MOU process
- Implementation co-planning
- Reflective Inquiry Sessions
- BTC Touchpoints Trainings
- Evaluation: “Co-learning”

Methodologies
- Inquiry-driven processes, driven by local questions
- Foundational research—conducted by Indigenous scholars
- Data collection: learning by doing
- Analysis in practice/theory/findings
- Dissemination: emergent stories, diverse knowledge artifacts

Pathways to Racial Equity and Increased Opportunities for Native Children and Families

Community-Based Inquiry is designed to be an engaging process of inquiry that can lead to collective solutions within communities. Because these inquiries are locally developed and conducted, they are pathways to racial equity and increased opportunities for Native children and families.

Surveys are often a first thought for inquiry teams in terms of gathering information and perspectives from their communities. One site, after designing an initial draft for a survey, realized that their questions were too deeply personal (and perhaps invasive) for an initial community survey. They then decided to shift to starting with a listening session, which turned out to be a powerful way to begin to build both foundational knowledge of the vision of the project and relationships with community members – teachers, leaders, people – who might bring knowledge and resources to the work.

Learning happens on multiple levels for teams: on one level, they learn what the community wants as well as what voices are out there, and on another level, they acquire important knowledge about inquiry as a process through their work. In going through the inquiry process, one site team member prioritized connecting with community members:

“If we are really being fully transparent, we need to work with the community that is currently here...” (Daybreak Star Team Member, Reflective Inquiry Session, November 2021)

As researchers, these teams are reaching out to their communities to involve as many community members in important ways as possible even if it is to just hear their perspectives. This kind of engagement is critical for increasing opportunities to strengthen Native children, families, and communities.

Equitable Practices, Lessons, and Strategies to Strengthen Approach

The pursuit of equity is an ongoing practice that needs to be built into the concept, the structures, the processes, and the implementation to be successful. In Year One, we developed equitable structures, implemented equitable practices, and worked with community partners to strengthen our work toward equity.

Structurally, the IELC serves as an intellectual and cultural space, fostering locally defined questions, approaches to Community-Based Inquiry, and systems to document actions and knowledge assets. A key asset in this work is providing increased access to Indigenous professionals, scholars, thinkers, and doers.

In the process of developing relationships with local Tribal partners, equitable practices must be purposeful and intentional — as noted earlier in the report, partners recognize our approach in this area, and the immediate benefit is starting our collective work “mid-sentence.” Leadership development and/or support at partner sites is focused on intellectual engagement and strategies to engage local teams; they don’t need to do this work alone.

At the sites, Tribal partners have a vision for achieving high-quality early learning and care for children and family engagement – they are learning how to strategically implement inquiry to document lessons and visionary ideas. Additionally, each site has a team that requires support in healing; supporting practices that help coordinating teams imagine and reach wellness is a key contributing factor to successful transformation.

Finally, clarity in our different roles in this national and local work is critical. How we work as authentic partners, paying attention to issues of empowerment, equitable practices, and access to resources (including intellectual, material, and financial resources) are all critical elements in pursuing equity in the IELC through structures, processes, and implementation.
Applying Lessons

The Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative was conceptualized, designed, and launched with the goal of creating an intellectual home for early childhood educators in Native communities to conduct Community-Based Inquiry, a research process and methodology in which community members are researchers: asking research questions important to the community, designing inquiry methodologies to answer those questions, collecting and analyzing data to answer research questions and come up with solutions to problems of practice, and implementing those solutions immediately to learn more about their effectiveness. All of these elements are part of a cycle of inquiry, in which knowledge is built along the way. In addition to the inquiry work, IELC provides support for building knowledge and expertise in the community, including monthly Reflective Inquiry Sessions, external partnerships, and trainings in Brazelton Touchpoints.

In Year One, we launched the IELC: we selected sites, worked with partner teams at those sites, created MOUs and implementation plans, initiated and completed a cycle of programming, supported sites in the development of their questions and inquiry, built knowledge around data collection and analysis, and created a space for communities to center their work on their needs. We learned a number of lessons in Year One that will carry the IELC into Year Two and beyond.

**First,** it is critically important that Indigenous communities develop their own inquiry questions to address their own needs and solve their own problems. Indigenous early learning practitioners have powerful ideas about how they want to deepen their knowledge and about the needs of their communities. This knowledge is rarely valued by external researchers in a way that is beneficial to the community; external research is often incentivized by the end goal of publication and promotion, not strengthening of communities. To make best use of those ideas and generate useful knowledge for communities, that inquiry work is best done by the community members themselves.

**Second,** the model of external funders prescribing what Native communities must do in order to receive financial support is so ingrained in these communities that much work must be done for communities to shift their thinking and be able to free themselves to do the work that they know is needed to strengthen children, families, and early learning in their communities. In addition, Native communities are accustomed to external researchers coming into their communities and trying to take knowledge for the researchers’ own pursuits as well as being asked to participate in Research Practice Partnerships in which the balance of power in the “partnership” rests with the researcher. Communities are less familiar with tapping into their own knowledge and power to ask and answer important and relevant research questions about their own practices.
**Third,** tapping into a community’s own knowledge and power opens up an enormous range of possibilities and outcomes for Native communities: the generation of relevant knowledge, the ability to implement solutions and continue to investigate options through the cycle of inquiry, the uncovering of knowledge from unexpected sources in communities, and sustainability and self-determination in research and practice in early childhood education in these communities.

**Fourth,** the composition of Community-Based Inquiry teams is critical. Including a diversity of individuals (diversity of work, sector, thought, community status, etc.) leads to rich discussion of Indigenous perspectives, theories, and philosophies, which in turn generates creative ideas and processes to strengthen a collective vision for children and families. Out of these Community-Based Inquiry teams has emerged leadership with clarity and purpose, rooted in passionate commitment, bravery, and renewable energy, both impacting their communities currently and modeling leadership consistent with Indigenous philosophies for the next generation of community leaders.

**Fifth,** within Indigenous early care settings, the implementation of knowledge needs to happen simultaneously with the conducting of inquiry to generate knowledge. There is not time in Native communities to wait and see if a peer-reviewed journal article or an external researcher’s report will be useful in strengthening early learning. It is critical that relevant knowledge is generated in the community and then is used immediately; the future of external research or supports is never promised or secure. This process, of course, requires that communities engage in a strategic, collective, and coordinated approach with continuous cycles of learning, inquiry, and knowledge creation.

**Finally,** there are increased opportunities for the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative to contribute to broader knowledge in Community-Based Inquiry — within communities, across communities, and to audiences nationally and internationally. There is great promise in how Indigenous early learning education and care professionals, advocates, and families can transform learning and opportunities by starting with their own questions.

In Year Two, we will take these lessons and expand and deepen our work (Figure 13). Having built the foundation for the work, completed one cycle of programming, and engaged these sites in a cycle of inquiry, we will now move from the inquiry processes to implementing the knowledge generated. We will look at the implementation at the various sites of the Ojibwe learning series, spaces of wellness, the Indigenous early learning framework, and the land-based curriculum. In addition, we will create structures for sites to engage substantively across communities as well as to disseminate knowledge generated more broadly. Focusing on the transition from ideas to action, we expect to be able to document the impact of this work on Native children, families, and communities even more clearly.

**Figure 13: Looking forward to Year Two, 2022 Inquiry Cycle**

- **January–March**
  - Cultivate roots of knowledge
    - Launch Year 2
    - Deepen Inquiry Questions
    - Partnership
    - BTC National Forum

- **April–June**
  - Strengthen connections across areas of inquiry
    - Train the Trainer
    - Photo-Videography

- **July–September**
  - Visioning new phases
    - Collective Reflective Inquiry Sessions with Indigenous Scholars
    - Train the Trainer
    - Donor/Foundation Engagement

- **October–December**
  - Harvest our knowledge toward sustainable systems of inquiry
    - Document Impact
    - Develop Our Collective Story
Building Beyond Year Two

What is Needed

What is needed is expanded investment in supporting more Tribal early learning communities of practice. Many Native communities desire to engage in strengthening their communities and seek ways to increase opportunities for young children. How we plan for supporting Tribal/Indigenous communities to engage in locally based change is essential to practitioners, leaders, families, and the children they care so much about. The Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative bridges an important gap between knowledge and funding resources and local communities acquiring knowledge, tools, and supports to vision, design, implement, evaluate, and share strength-based programming from within Tribal and Indigenous communities.

Funder Education

“A lot of times, like when I am writing a proposal, I have to add education ... I spend a lot of time catching people up on issues that are important to our people.... Or having to go into detail ‘what is a first speaker,’ and so funders coming with background knowledge, like when we said, ‘we’re on [Name of street],’ you knew what that meant, you understood it was stressful, there wasn’t a whole education that was needed. ... And a lot of times, like saying this is someone we want to work with because they understand our place, our culture, you know what’s important to us, our values, this is important because it cuts down on the emotional education that you have to do. I think you should be culturally competent with the people you work with.” (Wicoie Nandagikendan Team Member, Reflective Inquiry Session, December 2021)

The IELC sites crave a space in which funders and other external partners understand the context in which they work, the implications of the projects they are undertaking, and the value of the funding within the context of the community. In academic spaces, it is often an intellectual game to find ways to fit projects to funders’ requirements. In Native communities, that way of operating is a recipe for the continued production of research and knowledge that is not aligned with the needs of the community and not geared toward strengthening the community. Another site speaks to the issue of changing what they know in order to satisfy the requirements of external funders, and the benefits (and uniqueness) of engaging the process differently as part of the IELC:

“I so appreciate this process... it’s teaching us some things that we’re going to be utilizing as we engage with future grantors and contractors and how we are showing up.... We really appreciate this process and showing us that we have capability and permission to do things in a way that fit our community, our needs, and our children. ...We were talking about how we are always shaving off the square edges of every grant opportunity to fit... we are working far too hard and still not feeling like we are there yet. To be able to do this in a functional way that speaks the same language with grantors and contractors [is a goal].” (Daybreak Star Team Member, Reflective Inquiry Session, November 2021)

Our IELC partners teach us an important lesson: Funders and grantors need to understand the priorities and needs of Indigenous communities. The testimony from each of our partner sites describes how, in order to acquire funding for their most important early learning and teaching initiatives, they must “shave off” their priorities to fit a funder. They must fight the message that they aren’t good enough, that their communities and organizations aren’t valued. Through our work together, they learn how to stay present as Indigenous educators, parents, community members, first. They are learning how not to compromise their best ideas to make them “fit.”

In Year Two of our work, we plan to continue examining ways to support our IELC partners and to grow our collective. We hope foundations will join us in the journey to build this project into the future: to increase resources and expand opportunities targeted for communities such as those that are part of our Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative.