FROM DREAMS TO PRACTICE

Strengthening Systems of Teaching and Learning for Children, Families, and Educators through Community-Based Inquiry

A CO-LEARNING (EVALUATION) REPORT

2022

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Tarajean Yazzie-Mintz and Joelfre Grant for inviting me to witness the incredible journey of the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative (IELC) and to the IELC partner sites for welcoming me into the role of co-learner. Witnessing the journey of the IELC has affected me as a person, a scholar, a research partner, and community member. I have remembered and again learned how Community-Based Inquiry creates relational contexts for healing and dreams to flourish.

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 over 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 was 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

About First Light Education Project, LLC

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

For more information about the IELC, contact:
Dr. Joshua M. Sparrow, Executive Director, Brazelton Touchpoints Center
Dr. Tarajean Yazzie-Mintz, IELC Project Director, First Light Education Project, LLC

Or visit the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative website:
www.brazeltontouchpoints.org/programs-services/indigenous-early-learning
In what ways do community-based inquiries activate change and build sustainable material and knowledge resources that strengthen Native early learning systems?

The Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative (IELC) is grounded in the belief that “Native communities have the ability to identify areas of need and challenge, and to implement community-based solutions for obstacles to success” (Project Concept Note, p. 1). At the same time, the IELC recognizes that oftentimes Native communities “do not have the resources or knowledge about inquiry to study the issues, analyze evidence, and create their own long-term, sustainable solutions” (Project Concept Note, p. 1). Within this larger context, the IELC has deliberately created conditions for Native communities to both access resources (i.e., community-based, cost-free inquiry support) and be equal partners in an inquiry process that supports the creation of partnerships and the development of knowledge with the purposes of strengthening Indigenous early childhood education.

This learning stance is embodied in the work of the IELC – “to engage in locally driven community inquiry that offers a powerful opportunity to leverage Indigenous knowledge, networks, and innovation to build stronger systems of inquiry toward locally empowered solutions so that children and their families thrive” (IELC Overview). These grounding beliefs and a commitment to equity and collaborative knowledge generation have set the tone for my participation as an evaluator.

Everyone Has a Role to Play

The idea that everyone has a unique role to play is a common understanding among many Indigenous communities (Cajete, 2000). This principle is deeply connected to diversity and equity as well as understandings of responsibility. For example, the roles that people are invited in to, inherit, create, and/or adopt come with responsibilities. While individuals embody roles, they do not stand alone in the enactment of those roles. People are connected to a collective, and when roles are activated in a good way, their enactment can support mutual flourishing.

The principles of roles, responsibilities, and by relation, creativity are fundamental to the IELC’s mission of developing equitable practices that advance high-quality Indigenous Early Childhood Education (ECE). How are roles and responsibilities central to equitable practices? Equity asks people to consider what is necessary for individuals and communities to receive in order to thrive and flourish. In this way, equity can be likened to processes of creativity and self-determination. Self-determination can be defined in multiple ways. In this context, I am using the term to signal (1) the right and responsibility to engage in decision-making processes that shape one’s path to realizing their unique gifts and roles and (2) the notion that individuals and communities have the right to create conditions for developing into their whole selves and that, essential to this is an understanding of how one’s changing roles and responsibilities are connected to webs of interdependence.

The work of the IELC is about this – sharing resources with Indigenous communities, who have historically been underserved and under-resourced, so that they can develop local, culturally based inquiries that support problem-solving and the development of high-quality Indigenous early childhood education. At the heart of this effort is a story about relationality and
the sacred work of caring for one's self and children as they mature into their whole selves.

I was first invited to join the IELC community in the role of evaluator by Dr. Tarajean Yazzie-Mintz. As an evaluator, I see my role and my practice as being guided by Dr. Robin Kimmerer's ideas about gift economies. I have been offered the incredible gift of learning alongside Native communities as they create partnerships and generate knowledge about methodologies and Indigenous early childhood development. In return, I have the responsibility of gifting back to the IELC a story about the IELC process that can be put to good use and support the sustenance of knowledge generation. This exchange of gifts requires deliberate reflection on roles, responsibilities, and knowledge sharing. It is not my right to have knowledge of IELC partner sites' processes; rather, as an invited guest, it is my privilege and responsibility to ethically walk alongside the IELC on the inquiry journey. Relatedly, my role as an evaluator was not set, but rather open to IELC community input. For example, the IELC partner sites recommended that, instead of using the role name of evaluator, we adopt the role name of co-learner. This name "co-learner" embodies an ethical position that respects the IELC sites in the generation of usable knowledge for continuous program improvement/advancement.

This co-learning (i.e., evaluation) report focuses on the story of Community-Based Inquiry from the perspective of the IELC and partner sites. It is worth noting that the IELC identifies as an inquiry-based project rather than a scientific research project. This distinction is critical because it carries with it a different sense of time-space relations. An inquiry-based approach recognizes and appreciates that the development of questions and the search process are not always carried out in a linear stepwise fashion. Instead, inquiry can begin with a question or with implementation. A question that guides an inquiry can fold into itself, and implementation can lead to new questions.

My Role as a Co-Learner within the IELC

As a co-learner, I drew on my prior work with Indigenous communities and my knowledge of Indigenous education scholarship to guide my process. Drawing on the work of Indigenous educators, I conceived of the co-learning (evaluation) process as akin to storylistening and storytelling – what Dr. Jo-Ann Archibald writes about as storywork. The conceptualization of co-learning as a process of storywork aligns with Indigenous methodologies (for example, see Gregory Cajete’s scholarship on storytelling and Indigenous education or Bryan Brayboy’s scholarship on storytelling as theory building). This conceptualization positions the evaluator in the combined role of storylistener and storyteller. Being in the role of a storylistener is much like being an observant witness – you are invited into a community to hear, feel, and reflect on community members’ stories. Being in the role of storyteller requires a kind of collaborative contemplation that allows for a story to emerge and be told. Within the evaluation process, Dr. Yazzie-Mintz and Mr. Grant were also storylisteners and storytellers. As IELC conveners and facilitators, they had the opportunity to listen to the stories of partner sites and then share those stories with me.
From my perspective as a co-learner, the Year 1 IELC story evolved across four activities: (1) partnering with ready sites, (2) articulating memorandums of understanding, (3) documenting plans for implementation, and (4) engaging in Community-Based Inquiry. These activity-based stories shed light on the questions that guided our co-learning process (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Questions Guiding the Co-Learning (Evaluation) Process**

### Long-term Collaborative
- In what ways did the project team engage in processes to identify **characteristics of readiness** among partner sites? In what ways have these characteristics of readiness supported the sustainability of the Collaborative?
- What are examples of the ways in which the IELC supported **equitable practices** in the processes, from MOU to implementation planning, to trainings?
- What are the broader aspirations of the collective partner sites for the collective work? What is the larger hope for change in their respective communities and across the sites?

### Community-Based Inquiry
- How far along did each partner site **implement one cycle of inquiry**? What were the successes and challenges to implementing a cycle of Community-Based Inquiry?
  - How were **Indigenous processes and time** valued during implementation?
  - How are sites using **BTC training to support cycles of inquiry**?
- What are the partner sites’ **perceptions (pre & post) of research inquiry**? To what degree did their **concept and understanding of research shift** under a Community-Based Inquiry approach? How are sites documenting their processes and progress made?

### Benefits to Children and Families
- In what ways did the partner sites **advance high-quality early childhood development/early childhood education**?
- What approaches, **practices, and trainings supported the community to strengthen its work** with families, children, and early childhood caregivers/teachers?

The questions regarding the long-term collaborative help with understanding the “seeds” or “ingredients” that go into forming equitable community-based inquiries. Questions pertaining to Community-Based Inquiry are directly related to the overarching co-learning question and support deeper understandings of the material and knowledge resources that teams are building. Questions about benefits to children and families address the strengthening of ECE systems.

### Tools to Facilitate the Co-Learning Process

In my role as co-learner, I primarily used five methods to observe and witness the story of the IELC.

1. I facilitated regular calls or reflective sessions with Project Director Dr. Tarajean Yazzie-Mintz and Manager Mr. Joelfre Grant. These sessions were organized around a set of mutually agreed upon guiding questions and/or topical themes, including but not limited to the co-learning plan, characteristics of readiness, memorandums of understanding, implementation plans, data (story) gathering tools, and reporting. At a high level, our reflective process took the following shape: spring focused on planning; in the summer/fall, we turned to story gathering; and in the fall/winter, our process shifted to reporting and (re)storying. My participation in these reflective sessions provided insights into the project director’s and manager’s understanding of the IELC inquiry processes. These sessions also supported a collaborative and participatory process for protocol design.
2. I developed a questionnaire to gather information about the partner sites’ perceptions of the MOU process and their collective work.
(3) I attended and observed gatherings of the partner sites (site visits), listening for and recording accounts of equitable practices as well as how the trainings and community-based inquiries have evolved and contributed to the development of the Collaborative. In Year 1, I participated as a storyteller in the April 23 Launch Event and the October 28 Collective Reflective Inquiry Session. In addition, I reviewed recordings of the December 2021 Reflective Inquiry Sessions at which sites were invited to celebrate their collective work and continue on the journey of building their narratives of success. This activity included reflection around 4 sets of questions, which are depicted in Table 1 below. The recordings of these sessions, coupled with the co-learning sessions that I facilitated with sites, are two powerful “datasets” or “story collections” that shine light on the knowledge the sites have generated about equitable partnerships and Community-Based Inquiry.

(4) In order to be in a reflective space with IELC partner sites and hear their stories within the inquiry process, I facilitated co-learning sessions (focus groups) during the months of September and October.

(5) These face-to-face virtual activities were supplemented by systematically reviewing two IELC documents: (a) the IELC Memorandum of Understanding between each partner site and the Brazelton Touchpoints Foundation and (b) the IELC Implementation Plan of each partner site. This process allowed me to gather information about practices that have been nurtured to support the development of equitable partnerships and Community-Based Inquiry. In addition, I reviewed recordings of reflective inquiry sessions that were held with each site and facilitated by Dr. Yazzie-Mintz and Mr. Grant.

These complementary and inter-related methods supported my process for reflecting upon the set of co-learning questions outlined in Figure 1 and determining how Community-Based Inquiry implemented from within Tribal early learning contexts impacts engagement, the growth of new knowledge, co-implementation of designs, and ECE practices and systems. As I participated in the co-learning process, I also asked a subset of questions about each IELC activity (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IELC Activity</th>
<th>Guiding Questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Partnering with Ready Sites</td>
<td>• In what ways did the project team engage in processes to identify characteristics of readiness among partner sites?</td>
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<td>• In what ways have these characteristics of readiness supported the sustainability of the Collaborative?</td>
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<td>Articulating Memorandums of</td>
<td>• What are examples of the ways in which the IELC supported equitable practices in the processes of articulating MOUs?</td>
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<td>Understanding</td>
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<tr>
<td>Documenting Plans for Implementation</td>
<td>• What are examples of the ways in which the IELC supported equitable practices in the processes of implementation planning?</td>
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<td>• What are the partner sites’ perceptions (pre &amp; post) of research inquiry? To what degree did their concept and understanding of research shift under a Community-Based Inquiry approach? How are sites documenting their processes and progress made?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging in Community-Based Inquiry</td>
<td>• What are examples of the ways in which the IELC supported equitable practices in the processes of Community-Based Inquiry?</td>
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<td>• What are the partner sites’ perceptions (pre &amp; post) of research inquiry? To what degree did their concept and understanding of research shift under a Community-Based Inquiry approach? How are sites documenting their processes and progress made?</td>
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<td>• How far along did each partner site implement one cycle of inquiry? What were the successes and challenges to implementing a cycle of Community-Based Inquiry?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• How were Indigenous processes and time valued during implementation?</td>
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<td>• How are sites using BTC training to support cycles of inquiry?</td>
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There are a number of ways that the first-year story of the IELC could be narrated. For example, the narrative could be organized to report on each question or each IELC activity. As a witness to the IELC process, what is apparent to me and the gift that I might offer are some of the through lines or story spirals that I have witnessed through conversations with the IELC community. These include creating conditions to support a flow of readiness, developing and naming equitable practices, and generating knowledge about Community-Based Inquiry. In the remainder of this report, I share Year 1 teachings by narrating these story spirals. I intentionally use the word "spiral" to indicate a cycle of growth and to signal that the stories may have a shared center point or may have evolved from the emergence of new center points as the work expands and grows. To narrate the story spirals, I share select transcript excerpts from the reflective evaluation sessions. Where pertinent, I link selected excerpts to ideas expressed during the co-learning sessions and perceptions shared in the questionnaire. At the end of the report, I reflect on the following questions:

• Broader aspirations: What are the broader aspirations of the collective partner sites for the collective work? What is the larger hope for change in their respective communities and across the sites?
• Perceptions of high-quality early childhood development/education: In what ways did the partner sites advance high-quality early childhood development/early childhood education?
• What approaches, practices, and trainings supported the community to strengthen its work with families, children, and early childhood caregivers/teachers?
STORY SPIRAL 1
Creating Conditions for Partnership and Community-Based Inquiry

The first through line or story spiral of the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative (IELC) is creating conditions for partnerships and Community-Based Inquiry. To visualize this story spiral, I’ve included a picture of Fiddlehead Fern. The natural spiral found in Fiddlehead Fern can be used as a metaphor for the outward growth that is experienced when equitable conditions for partnership and Community-Based Inquiry are enacted and nourished. The strong mission, vision, and corresponding goals that the IELC developed (see Figure 2) provide a solid foundation for both the leadership team and sites to return to when engaging phases of inquiry.

Figure 2. IELC Mission, Vision, and Goals

<table>
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<tr>
<th>MISSION</th>
<th>VISION</th>
<th>GOALS</th>
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<tr>
<td>The center seeks to address systematic 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 care systems.</td>
<td>To develop phases of development and a systems approach on a continuum starting with prenatal through adolescence. To steward significant support (financial and data knowledge resources) to address gaps and silos in the work of Native/Indigenous early childhood development at a national level.</td>
<td>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.</td>
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The IELC aims to realize the mission, vision, and goals by enacting a theory of change that is centered around locally defined solutions. The theory of change posits that, if Community-Based Inquiry and collaboration are grounded in equitable partnerships with Native families and communities that (+) focus on systems and inquiry development (+) for early childhood development from prenatal to age 8 and (+) strategically engage national associations, organizations, and initiatives, then locally defined change solutions will emerge that lead to stronger early learning interventions that (+) advance family and community engagement in designing culturally grounded early childhood development systems, interventions, and knowledge and (+) expand systems for healthy start and increased quality learning opportunities for children and families, thus (+) achieving equity and access to resources across Native communities.

As previously noted, the IELC is a change initiative. The theory outlined above describes how engaging in change requires an activation of resources (see the text in orange). In other words, there is an understanding that the success of change-based projects is dependent upon processes of engagement and enactment. These processes can lead to change and the development of healthy systems (text in purple).
There are a number of metaphors that can be used to vividly create a picture of creating conditions for partnership and Community-Based Inquiry including the metaphor of gardening. From this perspective, a bountiful or abundant ECE garden (i.e., equitable) requires preparing the soil (i.e., visioning and listening) and planting seeds in a way (i.e., with Indigenous methods) that facilitates thriving (i.e., expansive and healthy systems for high-quality culture- and language-rich learning opportunities). The garden metaphor was used by Dr. Yazzie-Mintz during one of our summer reflective evaluation sessions. During this session, Dr. Yazzie-Mintz described the IELC as being in a phase of “creating the soil.” As Dr. Yazzie-Mintz noted, the IELC is “not in a place where we’re going to see the buds just yet” (August 25, 2021, 17–18).

When working with the garden metaphor, an important first step is preparing. As noted in the Concept Note, the project is “informed by visioning and listening sessions conducted with carefully selected Native-serving early learning centers, agencies, organizations, and Tribal and non-Tribal partners to understand the level of interest in developing local and regional expertise in Community-Based Inquiry within the field of Native early childhood development” (p. 2). Uplifting this aspect of how the IELC developed is important for a number of reasons. First, it demonstrates how the IELC is living Indigenous frameworks of time with regard to relationship building. From the very beginning, Native communities were included in the conceptualization of the Center. In this way, the practice of enacting visioning and listening sessions began a process of equitable relations that would be carried forward in the work of the IELC.

The IELC characteristics of readiness (depicted in Figure 3) can be considered part of the process of preparing the soil and ask what needs to be activated for change to occur. These characteristics, named early on in the creation of the IELC, were developed through an inquiry process demonstrating how the leadership team of the IELC is committed to engaging the very same processes that they are inviting sites to participate in.

**Figure 3. Characteristics of Readiness**

- **Site has areas of need that overlap with the purpose of the center – to engage in strengthening inquiry that is centered on community-based research to improve systems**
- **Site has dedicated time and belief/commitment to their practice to engage in strengthening systems, partnerships, and practice**
- **Demonstrate desire to partner and plan to participate consistently**
- **Prioritize parent and community engagement in visioning, planning, implementation, evaluation, and sustainability**
- **Demonstrate desire to be a leader and contributor to national policy discussions about Native early childhood development and education**
- **On a continuum of previous work, the site has engaged at least 25 educators/parents/families/partners in their work (training with, planning, and designing with, etc.)**
In the May 26, 2021, Reflection Session, I asked Dr. Yazzie-Mintz and Mr. Grant to further describe their thinking behind the characteristics of readiness. As Dr. Yazzie-Mintz explained, at a basic level, activating and “demonstrating a desire to partner and plan and to do it consistently” is necessary and supports the development of a “bidirectional partnership” (p. 5–7). Partnering with sites that want to be there is important. However, according to Dr. Yazzie-Mintz, sites don’t need to initially “commit to full-on change” for the work to be successful; in partnership, it is essential to ask what is doable (p 8–9). This point is related to the characteristic about time and the desire to continuously improve. Inherent in the leadership team’s beliefs about partnership is a commitment to supporting what sites want to do and each site’s “why” for what they want to do.

The IELC leadership team created two documents – the MOU and the Implementation Plan – as material and knowledge resources for sites to support their articulation of a “why” and “how” for engaging in inquiry toward change. Both the MOU and Implementation Plan become knowledge artifacts that support ready or the continuous flow of conditions for partnerships and Community-Based Inquiry by first serving as what Dr. Yazzie-Mintz calls a starting place for documenting questions, resources, and needs. Then, as teams enact cycles of inquiry, these documents can serve as a resource for developing shared place questions – questions that emerge through enacting shared responsibilities and listening to the interests of community. Similarly, the resource of the Brazelton Touchpoints Training also supports a flow of readiness by holding space for sites to both center children and engage with their core values and principles. As Mr. Grant pointed out:

> We have some provider assumptions ... one of them is the provider needs the same respect and understanding that we are asking them to give to families. It’s that parallel process of holding space. We have to hold space for ourselves sometimes, and there’s a principle about that, and then we have to hold space for others. (May 26, 2021, p. 12)

The ideas of holding space and self/communal care were also repeatedly expressed by IELC partner sites. Moreover, the leadership team has voiced that creating conditions for partnership and Community-Based Inquiry (i.e., readiness) is linked to sites’ belief that they have a voice in determining the parameters of partnership that are outlined in the MOU and Implementation Plan. These documents were developed to provide knowledge resources not as tools to promote compliance. This is an important distinction and speaks to the IELC’s commitment to grounded partnerships in Indigenous Knowledge Systems.

Both Dr. Yazzie-Mintz and Mr. Grant are committed to working with sites to unsettle commonplace notions and/or senses of compliance to the granting agency and instead foster a sense a wonderment: What do we want to do? Why do we want to do this? How will this course of action affect change and in what ways?

These stances demonstrate how the IELC leadership team worked to promote attention to equity from the beginning of the project. This was expressed by Dr. Yazzie-Mintz when she shared the following during the May 26, 2021, Reflective Evaluation Session:

> How do you share your story without compromising your identity? Because this is what happens in the funders’ world. Everybody wants to do what the funder wants...We said we’re not willing to compromise on these things. The Center has to be allowed to operate and support Indigenous Knowledge Systems...I think Daybreak Star is starting to really think about how do they go about their funding story, their funding process? How might this help them think differently about that and balance their position alongside a funder? I’m hoping that that’s their story. We hope we learn more about how that emerges because the intellectual space is meant to help us grow in these different parts of the project, whether it’s funding, or practice, or parent and family engagement or in national leadership. (p. 16–18)

As described here, the Characteristics of Readiness are an important spiral in the larger story of the IELC. It is clear from conversations with the leadership team that the Characteristics of Readiness were developed through an inquiry process. For example, Dr. Yazzie-Mintz talked to over 50 different educators to develop the Characteristics of Readiness. This demonstrates how the Center and the Initiative are grounded in the very same values and processes that sites have been invited to adopt. Moreover, the Characteristics of Readiness have not been operationalized as a steady state that sites are expected to maintain. Rather, these characteristics exemplify actions, behaviors, and habits of the mind as well as the heart that sites live in different ways each day. In this way, these characteristics provide the grounding or conditions for partnership and Community-Based Inquiry.
As previously described, since the establishment of the IELC, equitable practices for partnership and inquiry have been a priority. The picture to the left, a common plant growing in cracks of the sidewalk, provides a metaphor for this story spiral. The visual image demonstrates how time-honored ways of doing and being are present, are a part of the pathway (i.e., sidewalk), and provide footings for future paths.

During the reflective sessions with Dr. Tarajean Yazzie-Mintz and Mr. Grant, a number of IELC-wide practices for equitable partnership were described. Dr. Yazzie-Mintz and Mr. Grant also identified equitable practices that have been taking shape at the site level. As discussed during our reflective sessions, the IELC sites did not frequently use the term “equity” when describing their projects. This is not unusual and was pointed out by a Wicoie team member in their December 2021 Reflective Inquiry Session. Indigenous education research that calls attention to equity often uses a unique rhetorical register. For example, Indigenous educators and researchers invite others to consider and/or reach for an understanding of kinship-based relations; the interdependence of life forms and the role that humans and more-than-humans play in creating and sustaining healthy systems; the importance of place, region, and territory in decision-making processes; and the conditions that are necessary for language revitalization, cultural continuance, and resurgence. In short, within the Indigenous Education world, equity includes equal access and the redistribution of resources in ways that account for historical imbalances and calls for epistemological and value-based shifts in ways of doing and being.

To understand the emerging story on equitable practices within the IELC, I reviewed two key knowledge artifacts: the memorandum of understanding and the implementation plan. I also reviewed themes that emerged in the reflective evaluation sessions.

The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)

During our June 16 reflective conversation, both Dr. Yazzie-Mintz and Mr. Grant explained that they did not want the MOU process to be experienced as one in which teams were held hostage to the goals of the funding organization. Therefore, they actively created a process in which the interaction around documenting understandings of the terms of the partnership was different. This included making seemingly small but impactful changes to documents that lay the groundwork for partnership and the stewarding of resources. Through a review of the MOUs and implementation plans, I noticed that the structure of the documents was organized in ways that signaled the IELC’s intent to engage in equitable practices.

Language used in the “Purpose, Background, and Roles & Responsibilities” sections provide examples of how equitable partnerships are being enacted through discursive practices. For example, the purpose states that an understanding is being set forth that positions Brazelton Touchpoints Foundation (BTF) and the sites as partners in the implementation of the IELC’s Community-Based Inquiry projects. This framing of partnership is further elucidated in how BTF describes its philosophical approach in the background section of the MOU. In this section of the MOU, the following key words and phrases signal an ethic of equitable partnerships:

- “sharing responsibility for the success of reaching our shared goals for young children and families”
- “working side by side with a community, center, and/or partners”
In the June 16 Reflective Session, Dr. Yazzie-Mintz and Mr. Grant were asked to reflect on what shared responsibility looks like in the context of the IELC. Dr. Yazzie-Mintz described shared responsibility as “knowing what our roles will be.” As Dr. Yazzie-Mintz explained, understanding each party’s role is important given larger experiences with funding opportunities where Indigenous sites that “receive resources, tend to interpret that power is with the giver.” The IELC leadership team aims to disrupt this dynamic by continuously questioning how resources are cared for and used. As Mr. Grant discussed in our June 16 Reflective Session:

Often historically with funding forces it’s been sort of a one-way relationship where inputs are put into a community and then the community spends the money... but it doesn’t really have a dialogue or a back and forth... we wanted to be more multidimensional so ... we have shared accountability and responsibility to using these resources in a good way, and I think part of that is learning how to ask different questions ... but then I think it’s a bigger piece of that shared responsibility that since we have multiple sites and our goal is ... that there’s learning for the individual site, but there’s also cross-learning, not only about inquiry, of course, they’ll be learning about that, but they’ll also be learning other pieces of ... leadership, how do we build equitable partnership so it’s sort of a parallel process where we’re doing the work and they’re also learning how to do the work in the future ... we want it to be that the lessons that they take from it can be used in many other ways because all of them are thinking about and working with other partners as well, and so we want to support them in shifting their frame a little bit from compliance to regulations or something that might be put upon them so we can advocate...our approach is really... different ... in that from the start we’re coming alongside and we’re going on the journey with you versus checking in later.

The orientation of asking for input and questioning regular routines created opportunities for sites to bring their unique voice to the MOU process. Three of the four sites (Daybreak Star, Wicoie Nandagikendan, and the Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative) added their own philosophical approach to the Background section of the MOU. For example, Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative explained that their approach is grounded in an Ojibwa framework that “honors the individual and the mutual group to which the individual belongs.” This framing offers a view of equity that includes recognizing Indigenous and Ojibwa values around individuality and communalism. Daybreak Star described an approach that recognizes interconnections between Tribes, families, children, and land. Their approach centers relationships to land in equitable partnerships.

The “Roles & Responsibilities” section of the MOU outlines what each partner (BTF and the site) agrees to. This section could be completed in a way such that standardized language is used and each partner’s agreements mirror the other; however, sites modified the sections in different ways in order to account for and honor their local contexts. The various ways this section was completed provides another example of how the IELC is working to enact equitable partnerships that are based in the protocols of each community/place. For example, INPEACE modified their MOU, which resulted in BTF agreeing to the cosmological, spiritual, and genealogical philosophies that guide their community-based work. The addition of these elements demonstrates the importance of including language, culture, and Tribal philosophies for enacting equitable partnerships. Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative modified the “Roles & Responsibilities” section so that BTF agreed to the expertise and qualifications of program staff for supporting strengthening pathways to family security. This seemingly small modification made by the Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative positions them as an equal partner with expertise to add to the IELC.
The Implementation Plan

Like the MOU, the Implementation Plan can also be considered an artifact of the Initiative's processes for working with sites to create contexts for the creation of equitable practices that will inform and sustain site-based activities. In my analysis of the Implementation Plan template, I identified 7 questions that are associated with the identification and creation of equitable practices. These questions are listed below in Table 2.

Table 2. Implementation Plan Questions that are Associated with Equitable Practices

| Front Matter | • Question 1: Describe the roles and responsibilities that project team members have agreed to.  
• Question 2: What strengths do your team members bring to this collective work? |
| Context of the Project | • Question 4: Provide a high-level description of the Native/Indigenous community that your project team serves: Include a general description of geography, history, and overview descriptive demographics of the children, families, teachers, caregivers, partner organizations/programs, language(s), etc. |
| Supports to Implement Your Project | • Question 10: Your project has funding to support engagement of content knowledge experts. Who are the local or traditional knowledge experts that you plan to access to inform or support your project implementation? What other content knowledge experts might you consider inviting to support your work: curriculum consultants, language speakers, research consultants, etc.? Make sure that these critical budget items are included in the budget and budget narrative.  
• Question 11: Your project has funding to support implementation of strategic inquiry-based activities, and/or support engagement of contributors. What are the major budget items that you know you need to fund for your project to be successful? Please describe for both Year 1 and Year 2. Think about using funds to support hosting events, engaging youth to support data collection, purchasing tools or subscriptions to support engagement, or purchasing data storage tools and communications programs, such as video conferencing, supplies, etc. Make sure that these critical budget items are included in the budget and budget narrative.  
• Question 14: Share questions that you have about the Brazelton Touchpoints Trainings.  
• Question 15: In Year 2 (January 2022–December 2022) of the project, the BTC IELC project director and project manager will conduct in-person site visits. According to your plans and projected timeline for reaching project milestones, what part of Year 2 do you anticipate being the best time to visit your site and team? |

Questions 1 and 2 of the Implementation Plan provided sites with an opportunity to reflect on the roles and responsibilities each team member will have and the strengths that support team members in their respective roles. This section of the Implementation Plan mirrors the MOU; however, it is focused on relationships internal to the site. Importantly, based on conversations with Dr. Yazzie-Mintz and Mr. Grant, it is my understanding that the Implementation Plan can be viewed as a living document that can support the creation of conditions for the enactment of equitable practices. In this regard, the document will provide a reference point for sites to return to as they conduct their community-based inquiries and work to ensure that they are carrying out local partnership practices that build on team members' strengths. In addition, sites can return to this document as necessary to reflect on and modify agreed upon roles.

Question 4 provided each site with an opportunity to share the geographies, histories, and demographics of their community. In doing so, the sites storied the grounds (literal and metaphorical) in which the collective work they are embarking upon will be carried out. This information, like the information provided about roles and responsibilities, establishes the conditions of partnership in ways that account for local ecologies.
Questions 10 and 11 are associated with access to funds and training. These questions again signal that sites have access to funds and have decision-making power around how to put those funds to use. Moreover, Question 10 in particular highlights that the expertise of local knowledge keepers is valued and considered valuable for the success of the site-based inquiries and the IELC. In response to this question, sites identified a number of different kinds of content knowledge experts (see Table 3).

### Table 3. Identifying and Accessing Local or Traditional Knowledge Experts to Inform/Support Project Implementation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SITES</th>
<th>QUESTION RESPONSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wiikwedong ECD</td>
<td>Identified content and traditional knowledge experts to serve on an Ojibwe advisory committee and to support events and professional development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wicoie</td>
<td>Identified local experts to serve in the roles of wellness facilitator, strategic plan facilitator, and research consultant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nandagikendan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daybreak Star</td>
<td>Identified local experts in the following areas: Indigenous foods, ecology and land restoration, youth cultural arts, plant knowledge and gathering techniques, storytellers, outdoor education, family support, library services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keiki Steps</td>
<td>Identified local experts to serve as curriculum consultants, cultural consultants, language consultants, framework consultants.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Like Questions 10 and 11, Question 14 signals that sites are considered partners around training (an important goal and activity of the IELC). This question provides sites, the IELC, and BTC more specifically an opportunity to reflect on how Brazelton Touchpoints Training will be implemented. In short, with the inclusion of Question 14, BTC is signaling that they will not provide a "one size fits all" training; rather, trainings will be delivered in a way that accounts for the questions and concerns of each site. Similarly, with Question 15, the IELC is again signaling a responsiveness to and respect for the temporal practices at each site. In summary, questions posed in the Implementation Plan template provide insight into how equitable practices for partnership are being conceptualized and taking shape.
Summarizing Equitable Practices for Partnership

Taking account of the discursive moves that were evident in the MOUs and the Implementation Plans, I identified a number of practices that the IELC is activating to ensure equitable partnerships. I also looked for discussion around these practices in transcripts from the Reflective Evaluation Sessions. The emerging practices for equitable partnerships are reflected in Figure 4. To bring these practices to life, I have included select transcript excerpts from the Reflective Evaluation Sessions and the Co-Learning Sessions on pages 15 through 17 that illustrate three practices: honoring, sharing responsibility, and creating.

**Figure 4. Emerging IELC-wide Practices for Equitable Partnership**

- **Honoring**
  - Tribal Cultures, Languages, & Philosophies
  - Indigenous Processes of Time
  - Local Protocols

- **Articulating Local Conceptualizations of**
  - Expertise
  - Success

- **Access and Accountability**
  - Access to Funding, Training, & Needed Resources
  - Holding Funders Accountable

- **Commitment to**
  - Restoring & Strengthening Indigenous Knowledges
  - Receiving Input from Community

- **Attuning to and Grounding the Work of Community-Based Inquiries in Local**
  - Geographies
  - Histories
  - Demographics

- **Sharing Responsibility**
  - Identifying and Revisiting Roles
  - Foregrounding and Working from Individual and Collective Strengths

- **Local Decision-Making in Relation to**
  - Milestones
  - Use of Funds

- **Creating**
  - Opportunities to receive input from community
  - Space for Tribal and cultural contexts to lead the way in the partnership process
  - Models of partnership that extend beyond the life span of the IELC and that collaborators can use in the future.
...we want to honor indigenous processes in time. That's something that Joelfre and I were reminding the sites about is that, if you’re not ready to move forward [with] your implementation plan, and you understand that that's a place [you] want to spend time in because that's part of the process, then take the time to do it. Many of [the sites] did take the additional time. We had our ambitious timeline, which was to have everything going in April and we would launch and then we would move. Then there's the other piece of saying, “No, but we really do want to honor their processes, where they are, who they want to check in with.” (Tarajean Yazzie-Mintz, May 26, p. 15)

...I think overall our goal is ... to be especially transparent...And if we make a misstep, please let us know that too, because that's how we would learn. Certainly, with the Indigenous groups, we asked about their protocols, even for opening and closing. And so we have included that in our sessions for the Keiki Steps group. So ... they’ll offer their protocols for opening and closing. That's awesome, and that's something that we will do that we don’t necessarily do with other groups. (Joelfre Grant, July 15, 2021, p. 10)

And so sitting with Joelfre and Tarajean and helping them get my foot off the gas pedal and just kind of being like, “Hey, hold on. Remember this is an inquiry.” And I also really love the self-reflection, and I think that's where I dropped the ball in terms of remembering to take a step back and self-reflect. And so being with them reminded me the importance of doing that. And yeah, so I’ll pause there. (Daybreak Star Preschool Team Member, October 4, 2021 Co-Learning Session, p. 1–2)

It's huge because we are able to have the time, have the space, think about it, articulate ourselves, and from that conversation each of us can build off of each other and walk away from a talk story session thinking, "Wow. That was so amazing. I didn’t think like that. Or I didn’t believe we could come up with something like that.” And so, at our last session I think it was really important because Tarajean talked about documentation and about how we have to continue to have these conversations so that things can come out that we then can document. And she encouraged us to get people to videotape us or those kinds of things. So, this recording right here is huge too, right? Because if we say can we please get the transcripts to it, it’ll help us as we move forward, and we’ll have this bit of information that we talked with you about. So, I think that alone is really beneficial in this process.

So, I will share, for me it’s a little different in the way in which I operate within this project, but I think the process alone, the ability to sit with folks like Tarajean and Joelfre and kind of talk through our processes, which is something that we don’t normally do, right? It’s like on the ground and moving and that time is never, ever allotted to us, that space alone I think in this process is huge, right? (Keiki Steps Team Member, October 13, 2021, Co-Learning Session, p. 8)
Creating Space for Tribal and Cultural Contexts in the Partnership Process

... Joelfre and I, we kept underscoring this idea of the teams thinking about their cultural context, their Tribal context, and listing that out. And we were very, I would say intentional, persistent, and continuously supportive of asking questions and then also underscoring the importance of that being present in the MOU... I wonder about how can we put their eye on that specific part, which is about them being present in the MOU. So, because we kept saying it’s a distinctive process, they’re partners in this work, they’re not grantees that we want to go step forward together, and that we want to share this philosophical value, and we want to honor their site and the way in which they want to as well. So we kept emphasizing that part of their engagement. And in some cases, I’ll say with Keiki Steps, they really wanted to take this on and I mean, fully translated their MOU into Hawaiian language. And they took a long time to really think it through and within their site, they raise their own questions about where do they politically stand on their identity as a collective. (Tara Jane Yazzie-Mintz, May 13, 2021, p. 3)

Creating Opportunities to Receive Input from Community

Let’s talk about the rich Ojibwe teaching series. We’ve started some of the work, but we know we need input from elders and culturally strong community members. We are currently developing a survey to go to the selected group of elders in that community, and asking them ... First of all, how are they connected in the community? And who are they? What knowledge and teachings are they holding on to? What do you think would be important to focus on for teaching in early childhood programs? What are some of the strong teachings? So that survey’s going out, but we already did start. And so that survey is being developed, and we did the same thing with the lending library related to the survey. (Wiikwedong Team Member, Co-Learning Session, September 20, 2021, p. 9)
Sharing Responsibility

So this idea of what shared responsibility looks like ... oftentimes what happens is that these sites that receive resources ... then interpret the power is held by the one that's the giver. And in this case, we're working very hard at describing our approach that we're trying to achieve the equitable partnership, I mean, we name it, by bringing resources to historically underfunded communities. But how we care for those resources and use those resources is a shared responsibility. We have to work hard with one another to define how those resources are going to be used towards supporting the greater vision of the work of the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative....So I think about it in that way ... also inherent in that shared responsibility is paying attention to bringing forward our questions or concerns with one another and trying to reach that stronger partnership where we can be vulnerable to one another about, maybe it's expertise, or maybe it's about, we just don't know where to start.

An example is I think many of the groups have heard Community-Based Inquiry, and many of them are doing this work already, but then there's just like a pause moment of not [being] sure what it is. And so most of our first sessions are about what is Community-Based Inquiry. And they're going to find out that they already are doing it, but there's something of a pause that happens. And so, the shared responsibility is they feel okay to ask that question even though they're already there as a part of this work, they're part of a collaborative, they've been in here. Members of the community have been a part of this conversation since the inception of the concept.

So they have their ideas in it. And then I think that we have to keep looking and saying, "We have responsibility, shared responsibility to see if the vision still is connected to what our needs are, what we intended, almost as if what we promised ourselves is coming through some form of that vision." We hold ourselves accountable to that, not that one with the resources holds anybody accountable, but we keep asking ourselves those questions. I think that is a really good way. (Tarajean Yazzie-Mintz, June 16, 2021, p. 2 – 3)

Sharing Responsibility: Recognizing What You Bring to the Interaction

I think sometimes it feels like with some grants that it's like a teacher gives an assignment, and then they check it or there's a test. The report is the test or the narrative ... And our approach is really I would say, different in that it's from the start we're coming alongside. And we're going on the journey with you versus checking in later...

As to the training, I think Touchpoints, one of the guiding principles is to recognize what you bring to the interaction. And I think certainly in communities that are more diverse, I think sometimes that they feel like they understand what they bring, but sometimes they want other people to recognize it.

So, I think there's a piece of using that as a strategy so that you can actually share and become what's sometimes called sort of a cultural broker ... Some of our team members are very connected to Tribes. Some are less connected to Tribes or are just becoming connected. So, they can still be in that unique place of, "How do I support this inquiry in the place where we are?" And I also have a perspective of maybe another place or the place next door or the bigger, broader community that I can help, that I can offer to my team to really say, "Yes, this is who I am." And I know that when we have parents come to us in our programs or even other providers aren't going to have the same perspective that I am.

A lot of it is recognizing your own perspective and then ... acknowledging that other people have different perspectives. And we all are working together. We all, if we're raising children together or caring for someone else's children, we have to recognize how our perspective might sometimes get in the way. And so the responsibility of that is thinking about what part of my agenda, whether it's my own experience or background or bias, or what part of the agenda of the program, maybe where I'm working, that I set aside to meet this family where they are because that's really the shift is that we're meeting families where they are, we're joining their system. We're not forcing them to join our system. And that can be a big shift for some people in early childhood, for sure. (Joelfre Grant, June 16, 2021, p. 4 – 5)
In addition, the sites have access to material and knowledge resources to support their community-based inquiries. For example, reflection and meaning-making of sites’ inquiry processes is supported through Reflective Inquiry Sessions with Dr. Tarajejan Yazzie-Mintz and Mr. Joelfre Grant.

Sites’ processes for Community-Based Inquiry are iterative and include cycles of visioning, designing, implementing, and reflecting. Again, the metaphor of a spiral is useful. Building with the image of seashell spirals, we can envision how cycles of inquiry create opportunities for expansive growth (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5. IELC Cycles of Community-Based Inquiry**
Growth experienced during these localized cycles is then supported through IELC reflective inquiry sessions with the leadership team (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6. Foci of Reflective Inquiry Sessions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Foci of Reflective Inquiry Sessions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>• Alignment of roles and responsibilities; what is CBI?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| July  | **Implementation Plans and Training**  
  • Wiikwedong: Lending Library, Ojibwe Series  
  • Wicoie: Retreat Plan  
  • Daybreak Star: Land-based Curriculum  
  • Keiki Steps: Brazelton Touchpoints Training |
| August| **Data Collection, Frameworks, and Professional Development**  
  • Wiikwedong: Data collection [survey development]  
  • Wicoie: Questions – Gathering data on "space"  
  • Daybreak Star: Aligning questions, leadership vision, and timeline  
  • Keiki Steps: Indigenous learning frameworks and reflection on professional development |
| September | **Implementation, Data Collection, and Frameworks**  
  • Wiikwedong: Lending Library, survey launch, and initial analysis  
  • Wicoie: Analysis of retreat: Collection of healing story  
  • Daybreak Star: Identity of Project – team vision & roles  
  • Keiki Steps: Indigenous learning frameworks, Part II |
| October | **Collective Reflection Inquiry Session: Sharing Our Engagement Stories** |
| November | **Reflection**  
  • Wiikwedong: Question analysis, application to learning series survey  
  • Wicoie: Analysis discussion, meaning of space  
  • Daybreak Star: Fostering community engagement & reflection on community listening sessions  
  • Keiki Steps: What is Hawaiian about our work? |
| December | **Celebrating Contributions, Reflecting on Inquiries and Year 2**  
  • Wiikwedong: Celebrating strengths and contributions, integrating engagement strategies in inquiry, acknowledging knowledge experts  
  • Wicoie: Processing “the process,” discovering new data tools, community advisory  
  • Daybreak Star: Application of listening session ii, year 2 plan alignment to community advisory board  
  • Keiki Steps: Peace and planning; cultivating community engagement, affirming “unconditional aloha,” intimate bias |

As Figure 6 makes clear, each site took a unique path to Community-Based Inquiry and explored a variety of contextual factors that are shaping Community-Based Inquiry in the context of their Indigenous communities and places.
The IELC sites are still in the process of developing local, place-based approaches for Community-Based Inquiry practices and are learning from reflecting on the co-development of these practices. This was made clear by the questions that emerged from the Co-Learning Sessions that were held with each site. For example, members of the IELC partner sites voiced a number of questions about Community-Based Inquiry including:

• What does the process of Community-Based Inquiry look like?
• What questions should be asked through Community-Based Inquiry?
• Can the Community-Based Inquiry process be the product that we develop?
• Who should be involved?

Although these questions arose, it remained clear that IELC partner sites were implicitly articulating theories and equitable practices of Community-Based Inquiry. Many of these practices were named during the Reflective Evaluation Sessions. During these sessions, we discussed how sites were visiting and sharing knowledge with each other, sharing responsibility for developing an inquiry path, identifying and continually reflecting on roles and responsibilities within partnerships, collectively caring for and using resources in responsible ways, and sharing responsibility for developing and reflecting on the vision of high-quality Indigenous early childhood education.

In the remainder of this section, I narrate the IELC story of Community-Based Inquiry as it evolved across time. To do so, I present select excerpts from the transcripts of the Reflective Evaluation Sessions in a chronological order.

**JULY 2021: Revisiting Roles and Articulating Shared Responsibilities**

Following the launch of the Initiative the IELC leadership team worked with partner sites to look at their inquiry questions and put their Implementation Plan into action. This involved reestablishing roles and responsibilities. To support equitable partnerships, Dr. Yazzie-Mintz and Mr. Grant foregrounded their roles as facilitators walking alongside sites, emphasized the power of sites’ local knowledge keepers, and positioned sites as experts and themselves as co-learners. This element of facilitating Community-Based Inquiry was described by Dr. Yazzie-Mintz during the July 15, 2021, Reflective Evaluation Session:

> So, in terms of the implementation plan, some of the ways in which I’ve been working with the sites is to look at their plan, look at the question that they have about inquiry and start to lay out a proposed plan for them to go through a process of workshopping their inquiry. And some of them referred to it as training. And I wanted to use different language around that. I didn’t want to call it training. I wanted to call it work sessions. And that’s the point of the inquiry monthly sessions with the sites to have them be work sessions because I did not want to put in people’s minds that there’s one expert that comes in to help them design their inquiry. They have knowledge keepers in their communities. They have their networks. And I wanted to reemphasize that they should be using their local expert, activate their own expertise and their intuitions around where they want to go with their inquiry. And I could serve and Joelfre could serve as sounding boards, listening, thought partners. And also if it’s very directed, serve as a resource to provide them information that they can grow upon. (p. 1)
Dr. Yazzie-Mintz provided a clear example of processes for rearticulating roles and responsibilities.

**Example 1: Getting Roles and Responsibilities Right Takes Time (Keiki Steps)**

... when we met with Keiki Steps, we went through their plan, and I said, again, that I reframed the sessions as not trainings but work sessions that was first with them because they expected me to come in and do a training on what is Community-Based Inquiry? And so, what I worked with them is I said, I could give you an overview, but it’s going to be specifically reflecting back your plan for you. And it’s not going to be decontextualized as Community-Based Inquiry happens this way out there in the world. I want to bring it back to your plan and use your plan as the talking point.

So, we worked through their plan and showed them where this is already an inquiry. Here’s where your questions are guiding you. And then talked about what resources I currently have on hand to share with them through what each site is going to have access to, which is like a knowledge library. And I said, there’s things I ... bring to you, but there’s also going to be things that your team investigates, and that you do and then we have these conversations, which I hope will help you think through what ... you have access to.

So, the first piece ... started working through that and also defining again what our roles in this process are and how I can help, but how I might be able to help them identify others who might be communicating and talking with them directly. And I said, look, if you can't find the person, then I'll do it. But I really think that this is supposed to be about building those resources around who’s there in your community to help you move this forward. We started out with that and then we set up four months of inquiry ... (p. 5–6)

One thing I do want to say out loud is we’re both trying to be thinking about how much time does it take to set up all of these different things to get to the work. It does take several conversations to do our best to get it right. And so, when we strive to get it right, the cost of that is the time that it takes. (p. 10)

**AUGUST: “What Might a Cycle Look Like?” Remembering that Inquiry Is a Cycle that Takes Many Forms**

During the August 25, 2021, Reflective Inquiry Session, the Leadership Team reflected on the different forms that each site’s Community-Based Inquiry was taking. Dr. Yazzie-Mintz pointed out that inquiry can begin with visioning or it might begin with building something and then asking questions about what is built. To illustrate this point, she provided an example from Wiikwedong’s Community-Based Inquiry process.

**Example 2: Beginning an Inquiry by Building Tools (Wiikwedong)**

For Wiikwedong, they’ve been in a cycle of learning just before this project actually officially launched. They were already in a place of thinking through their alignment and their team roles and responsibilities, so they wanted to build some learning tools that would then become the focus of their inquiry...two areas they’re thinking about is the Lending Library and Ojibwe Series. They started to build that and get their team working on getting that up and running. What is really cool about it is that questions started to emerge about those projects. For example, the lending library, once they got their partner set up at the Lending Library, they started to realize, oh, well, we want to understand who’s going to use it? When they’re going to use it? What should be in it? And so, they started to say, "Well, we want to survey teachers, maybe not parents right now but first to focus on the learning part of it and the activity part of it." They wanted to talk with teachers. They moved into developing questions for a survey that would be just a brief 10-questions survey that would go to their teachers and their providers. That's what they moved into this, so to do some of that in July. And then, in August, they had a full draft of their survey that we just looked at yesterday. We reviewed it two times, and then we're going to look at a finalizing version of it. By September, they would like to launch that survey and do some initial analysis to inform their Lending Library. They're using that as their first round of learning, and then they're going to apply the same approach to the Ojibwe Learning Series.

And then they'll do another round of inquiry with the people who will access that Ojibwe Learning Series. Eventually, I believe they’re going to want to talk to families, but that’s once the thing is up and running and families are actually using it, that’s when they want to talk with them. They’re learning about data collection. They're still learning about how these activities are essential to their inquiry and answering their own questions ... It’s fun to see them keep seeing the movement of their data collection process, and they’re starting to tie it into other parts of their work so that’s really good. We’ll see what happens. (p. 3 – 4)
During the August 25, 2021, Reflective Inquiry Session, we also discussed two important elements of Community-Based Inquiry: building a team and naming the project. To illustrate the importance of these elements, Dr. Yazzie-Mintz shared an example from the work with Daybreak Star (see Example 3 below).

**Example 3: The Importance of Building a Team andNaming (Daybreak Star)**

One of the things that we did in our inquiry session was to help him [Daybreak Star Team Member] realign with his project questions and help make it feel doable. And then also focusing on his leadership and vision, how might that help him bring his team back on to the work that's there? Because he didn’t have to do it alone. He did quite a bit of work to establish the partnerships and to make all the different systems start to work. But now coming back to the inquiry, how does his team come back to it? In September, he's going to focus on the team vision and roles, and then resurface their questions. One of the things that we also asked them to think about was their implementation plan ... We talked a little bit about the implementation plan for this project is over time. There's a little more time. Everything doesn't have to be done in the first six months or the first eight months, or whatever it is. And then really naming the project, they haven't named their work yet. He talked about that he hasn't really shared a lot of the project with the staff members who will perhaps be taking on pieces of the project. No matter what, he wants them to be invested in it, but he kind of, as we talked, realized that he's shared a very minimal amount with them up to now. For him, that was a big kind of a moment where he thought I need to enlist and get them on board.

...It was kind of like as a theme of the identity of the project, coming up with their name, so that's one thing that they're going to be doing between now and our next time we get together because they're going to spend some time naming it. One of the things we've talked about is, when an entity exists without a name, it doesn’t really have a place in the world. And so as a part of our thinking, at least in terms of Indigenous philosophy, naming is such an important part of our community and naming places is also important. There's a lot of connection to that. When we did the tour about the land-based curriculum and the location, there’s so much history steeped in it. Hopefully as they spend some time building the core vision, connecting to the questions, and then figuring out what's the identity of the project and its relationship to these roles and the team, they may actually really move forward with him not having to do everything. I think that that’s going to be a healthy space for them. (p. 5–6)

**SEPTEMBER 2021: Seeing Ones’ Self as a Knowledge Holder and Meaningful Contributor**

During the September 1, 2021, Reflective Evaluation Session, we discussed how iterating upon inquiry questions is useful for gathering information that supports the development of high-quality Indigenous early childhood education. In this discussion, a key element of Community-Based Inquiry was identified: seeing one’s self as a knowledge holder and meaningful contributor. To illustrate this element, Dr. Yazzie-Mintz shared a story from her time reflecting with Keiki Steps (see Example 4 on the next page).
Example 4: Seeing Oneself as a Knowledge Holder and Meaningful Contributor to Inquiry Processes

So, it’s about how is it going, how’s the inquiry process going, what did they feel confident about that it helps them do their work and then where are places they want to grow? Because I think that those are kinds of questions that I’m trying to get at every time I’m talking with them because that helps us tailor resources that responds to their inquiry, that they continuously sit in a driver’s seat. I’m not worried from where I sit that maybe they don’t know where they’re driving. That’s okay. I know that they have some very important areas of work that they’re trying to center in their practice, and that’s good enough for me. And if the inquiry process helps them ask stronger and stronger questions and gives them opportunity to learn how to gather information that helps them make informed decisions, whether it’s about next steps or whether it’s about areas of development in a curriculum or whether they should enter a specific area of work for the Hawaiian group, it could be that there’s certain things they just can’t talk about. They just don’t know that they are authorized to do it.

And so that’s, potentially, what’s keeping them from really digging into this work is they don’t see themselves as the elders in the community. And so, who leads to see this new generation of teachers and leaders? Or do they try to hook into those who have been doing this for 30-plus years? They know those people, but it’s almost like we don’t really want to bother them. They’ve done this before, and this is our turn. But they get stuck because there’s a space of both confidence, but also is it earned responsibility to take this on? Probably there’s that. You know how you can get stuck in a cultural protocol where you’re like, I’m not exactly an elder, but I know I have some ideas and I know we need this and it’s critical, but I don’t want to do it because I don’t see myself as a recognized elder status, so I’m not going to do it. So this group is a little bit like that. But they’re going to find that when they look at these different examples, that there were these moments in history that people push themselves over that edge into the next horizon of work. And I think that that’s just something that they’re going to have to figure out how to feel comfortable with it. And if they learn that, to me, the inquiry process helped them figure that out.

They’re paying attention, right? ... And I said, it’s okay, you can slow down your process, you don’t have to rush through this and you can look at more examples and talk more fluidly with people who’ve done this. And I said, even talk with them about how they felt about needing to step up in a place that just feels so uncomfortable that you think you’re not the ones to do it and somehow you have to get some sort of signal or recognition that you can. I said, that’s the place you can learn about. This is part of the inquiry process. You learn about what were their struggles, their internal struggles about stepping into that space and becoming the knowledge keepers. So, I mean, I kind of think about their work as like that metaphor becoming the knowledge keeper versus trying to figure out what’s the right thing to do.

Who gives us permission? Is it the right thing to do? How do we do it? And you stay in that space versus just transforming into being a knowledge keeper. And they have some models to do that because they’ve moved parents, as we talked about this last time too. You’ve moved parents from the parent role, young moms, young single moms. You’ve moved them from being a single-mom parent into being a full-on professional. And then they start talking about that experience. And one of them that I know is [Keiki Steps Team Member]...she said, I started out as a very young parent and here I am now as one of the executive leadership in our nonprofit organizations. She’s like, I never thought that I would get to that place or this level to be here now.

Yeah. And ... all of them on the team started out as moms first in this program, and now they’re teachers. Now that they’ve learned language. Now they are earning more credentials and getting to a place where they can not only help their family, but they can help their community and then historically contribute through curriculum that they can share or framework that they can share. It’s about refreshing ideas too. So that’s the other thing that they realized when we were talking the last session is that maybe it’s not building new, it’s just refreshing our ideas. (Tarajean Yazzie-Mintz, p. 11 – 14)
NOVEMBER: Centering Children in Cycles of Inquiry, Visiting as a Metaphor, Community-Based Inquiry as Role Remediation

The November 4, 2021, Reflective Evaluation Session began with a conversation about what constitutes a full cycle of inquiry. While discussing this topic, Dr. Yazzie-Mintz shared that cycles are not complete in the sense that pursuing questions can lead to new questions. To illustrate this point, she provided the following scenario:

> You make your way around to identify a question, and then you find information and you might turn, or you might change your question and go another direction, but it’s still a cycle of asking questions and figuring out what’s the best way to understand or respond to a question we have in our practice or in our relationship. So to me, that’s what I keep seeing across these sites is that the cycle of inquiry is generated by the questions they have, and they’ll go around and they’ll keep circling and sometimes they get more clear. (p. 1)

This discussion led us to consider how Brazelton Touchpoints Training can support the centering of children in sites’ community-based inquiries. Both Dr. Yazzie-Mintz and Mr. Grant pointed to Brazelton Touchpoints Training as a context for sites seeing their roles within their respective communities and how their roles contribute to the larger goal of Community-Based Inquiry. The reflection on roles led us to loop back around to the importance of time, the role of ceremony, and the potential for Community-Based Inquiry to create healing spaces (see Example 5 below).

Example 5: Ceremony and Healing in Community-Based Inquiry

When you [engage in] visioning, you do it before the sun hits Zenith day. You’re trying to do that. And then the rest of it is about implementing initial ideas and working back around. And I said, is there something like that? That again, it’s about how we think about time and indigenous planning. Because that’s the other piece, there’s the gentle nudging that keeps happening is we ask each of the team members: Where is your knowledge coming from that you can say is rooted in the Indigenous Knowledge Systems in your traditions or your history? What is it that is driving you? Because that’s what we keep saying …this Indigenous early learning collaboration is all about, is to bring that out as an essential practice.

We want to see how that’s visible in your work. It doesn’t surprise me that they, in their conversation, they’re starting to think about, well, what is healing? Because it’s more than physical healing, it’s mental. It’s also healing leads to that regeneration of creativity, imagining a bigger picture than … I think just finding a funder. That’s one thing, but what are you going to tell the funder? What’s the story? What’s the impact? What’s the purpose of this physical space you’re looking for someone to pay money for? They’re going to have to hear something that moves them. What is it? And I think that that fits both, I think logistically and strategically fits into their picture…I keep asking these questions to just see what are they drawing upon [with] their indigenous knowledge? And if they don’t have that, then what questions might they ask to access it?

Because there are some answers in our communities, which is part of ceremony. It’s a part of time telling when you go visioning, how, what are the cycles of determining what steps you take? Are you the right person to take the step? Is it somebody else? Some communities have different people who are allowed to do that. But in the contemporary society, we may be redefining who’s the visionary…another piece that might come out of all of this is, there’s a lot of roles that are being enacted. And I would say, in some cases, if we were completely intact, some of these people would not actually be recognized leaders. But because of where they find themselves in the geographic locations, as well as their profession, they are these leaders that are going to be visionaries. And so I think that’s another place … we can watch carefully as we’re working with communities is how are these individuals evolving into leaders to the point where they recognize themselves as leaders? (Tarajean Yazzie-Mintz, p. 12 – 13)
Ceremony is an element of Community-Based Inquiry that the sites directly spoke to in the Co-Learning Sessions. For example, both Wicoie and Keiki Steps spoke to the ceremonial and sacred aspects of engaging in Community-Based Inquiry. Wicoie described their staff and board retreat as a kind of ceremony. Speaking to this point, a Wicoie Team Member noted the following:

And I don’t know that a lot of organizations got to do that [go on a retreat]. And in particular, Indigenous lead organizations that got the chance to go and take a retreat and just be out by the water, do some ceremony. And with the intention of let’s take care of ourselves. It really became quite apparent that as community workers and providers, we give 110, 150 percent probably. And we’re out there, and we tend to put our needs last. ... So it was really an opportunity to practice being a good relative to ourselves and each other. And to take care of each other because we’re all this team, and if we don’t take care of ourselves, then we bring that energy into our office, into our work environment. And as we look at what does our own space look like, we want it to be... We want to be as healthy as we can be. Correct? (p. 10)

Building on this idea, the Wicoie Team Member also linked storytelling to the idea of inquiry as a kind of ceremony when she said: “We don’t often get to hear them share some of their personal stories. We just show up and do the work. So, that was really a nice part of the process, I think, for recovering.” (p. 10)

Keiki Steps had a quite lengthy conversation about the sacredness of Community-Based Inquiry. One Keiki Steps team member discussed how they would be able to identify who should participate through the sacred process:

So our hope is that by making these connections and like “Keiki Steps Team Member” said, brainstorming through this actual sacred process we’ll be able to identify specifically who, because they’re out there, it’s just for us to identify them and to work forward with them, and to also be open to the possibility that, “Hey, maybe we were teaching about fishing wrong. What can we do to change that?” That way we can solidify that understanding within us, within staff, and then in teaching our children. So that’s my understanding for community based and also being open to what they have to come, their pohaku, their rocks that they built to help us solidify our foundational learning and going forward with this project. (p. 8)

In this discussion of Community-Based Inquiry as a sacred process, the Keiki Steps Team Member, explored how an adult’s process for solidifying one’s relationship to knowledge also centers knowledge. This small move resonates with other discussions about how engaging in a process of self-care and healing can strengthen educators’ relationships with children and families.

This idea that Community-Based Inquiry is a sacred process was also picked up by another Keiki Steps Team Member:

I wanted to add something in terms of sacredness, and really this process. I think when we came to this process and we were doing all of the logistical components of it, Tarajean had made a comment about looking at it from a different lens and being very connected to who you are as a culture, instead of coming from a Western mindset, just being our true selves. And so I think that in itself is so sacred to us as a people, because every time we would meet we would be crying. And all of our guards are just put down and we are able to have genuine conversations about, “This is what is happening in the Western world, right?” To us, as educators, as people who are trying to move forward and implement what we think in our mind is culture-based education is early learning, marrying the two. How does it look? What standard we got to look at? All of those things, the process, the ability to be ourselves is sacred in itself, in my opinion. And she’s able to do that. (p. 12)
Summarizing the Elements and Practices of Community-Based Inquiry within the IELC

Through these examples, I aimed to illustrate important elements and/or practices of Community-Based Inquiry with the IELC that have surfaced during the Reflective Evaluation Sessions. These practices include but are not limited to:

- Revisiting Roles and Articulating Shared Responsibilities
- Remembering that Inquiry Is a Cycle that Takes Many Forms
- Honoring Indigenous Time in Inquiry Cycles
- Honoring Ceremony in Inquiry Cycles
- Creating Opportunities to Receive Input from Community
- Building a Team to Support Expansive Cycles of Inquiry
- Naming as a Method for Building the Identity of the Community-Based Inquiry Project
- Seeing One’s Self as a Knowledge Holder and Meaningful Contributor
- Centering Children in Cycles of Inquiry

The practices, as I have outlined them here, mirror the language used in Story Spiral 2 to describe equitable practices. This is intentional, as equity is at the heart of the Community-Based Inquiry practices that sites are developing. In addition, the Reflective Evaluation Sessions illuminate the ways in which Community-Based Inquiry is a context for healing and a process of story-making. Community-Based Inquiry as a process of story-making involves maturing and developing into new roles in unanticipated or anticipated ways as well as making one’s own stories about the process that can be shared.
Concluding Reflections

In this final section, I reflect on the following questions:

- **Broader Aspirations**: What are the broader aspirations of the collective partner sites for the collective work? What is the larger hope for change in their respective communities and across the sites?
- **Perceptions of High-Quality Early Childhood Development/Education**: In what ways did the partner sites advance high-quality early childhood development/early childhood education?
- **What approaches, practices, and trainings supported the community to strengthen its work with families, children, and early childhood caregivers/teachers?**

**Broader Aspirations**

To answer these questions, I read across transcripts and notes from Year 1 Reflective Sessions and Co-Learning Sessions. From my perspective, sites’ larger hopes were expressed through their stories of the work they are doing and stories of how they are collectively organizing themselves for refining and developing their early childhood education curricula, frameworks, and spaces for teaching and learning. Reverberating throughout sites’ stories are multiple hopes for change, including:

- **Dreams to Practice**
- **Recovery**
- **Healing**
- **Revitalizing and Reclaiming Language and Culture**
- **Re-Indigenizing - Resurgence**
- **Beginning from Cultural Foundations**
- **Sustainability**

As Dr. Tarajean Yazzie-Mintz pointed out, the hopes for change documented above are similar to the cycles of prayer. As a co-learner, I have the privilege of walking alongside teams as they journey from dreams to practice by incubating ideas. In my role as an evaluator, I have the responsibility of respecting the recovery and healing process. On a practical level, this requires engaging in co-learning processes in ways that do not extract knowledge or do harm, but rather open up possibilities for learning from this work. In this way evaluation, or co-learning, has the potential of also being a healing process.

**Strengthening Work with Families, Children, and Caregivers**

Across sites, a number of different practices have been engaged to strengthen work with families, children, and caregivers. For example, Daybreak Star hosted a number of listening sessions with community members around their inquiry project and land-based curriculum. Both Wicoie and Wiikwedong surveyed community members. Wiikwedong participated in ceremony alongside community members. Keiki Steps attuned their inquiries to the cycles of work and ceremony in their community.

Engaging in these various practices (e.g., surveys, listening sessions, ceremony, etc.) supported sites in clarifying their perceptions of high-quality early childhood education (ECE).
Perceptions of High-Quality Early Childhood Education

In order to better understand sites’ perception of high-quality ECE, I returned to transcripts and notes from Year 1 Reflective Evaluation Sessions and co-learning sessions. Starting from the stance that inquiry, or the questions one brings to practice, is often actualized through doing, I worked to become aware of how sites’ beliefs about early childhood education were embedded in their stories of what they are working on and how they are engaging in the work (e.g., putting together a survey, developing a lending library, hosting listening sessions, talking with elders, engaging in ceremony).

Reverberating across stories were a set of shared perceptions of high-quality ECE. I’ve listed these perceptions as statements.

- High-quality ECE is grounded in Indigenous worldviews, cultural protocols, and processes for building together with families, communities, and elders.
- High-quality ECE provides culturally relevant spaces where health and wellness are experienced through relationships with culture, language, land, and knowledge keepers and where Indigenous identities flourish.
- High-quality ECE provides access to culture-rich curriculum and materials.
- High-quality ECE prepares young children to transition to elementary school.
- High-quality ECE looks and feels like being a good relative. This includes learning about the diversity of language and cultural lifeways within community.
- High-quality ECE is experienced as caring, heartfelt, and nourishing.
- High-quality ECE includes time for ceremony and for teachers to be learners.
Looking Toward Year Two

For Year 1, the evaluation report focused on telling the story of the Indigenous Learning Collaborative. This process involved storylistening across multiple contexts. Dr. Yazzie-Mintz and Mr. Grant listened to the stories of the partner sites during Reflective Inquiry Sessions. Then, during Reflective Evaluation Sessions, these stories were shared with me. As a co-learner (i.e., evaluator), I also sat in the role of storylistener in multiple contexts. Through this process I identified three story spirals:

- Creating conditions for partnership and Community-Based Inquiry
- Developing and naming equitable practices
- Generating knowledge about Community-Based Inquiry

For Year 2, the evaluation/co-learning process will shift to more explicitly focus on the sites’ projects. As a co-learner, I will work to hear and lift up stories from the Reflective Inquiry Sessions and sites’ dissemination efforts. Following the lead of the IELC leadership team and the sites, I will co-design resources and activities (e.g., questionnaires, co-learning sessions, etc.) that create opportunities for reflection and story sharing.

In conclusion, I offer this reflection from Tarajean Yazzie-Mintz: “An equitable practice is a practice that doesn’t disappear” (Tarajean Yazzie-Mintz, November 4, 2021, p. 28). With this in mind, the Year 2 evaluation will examine how the emergent practices detailed in this report continue to take shape as partner sites move along with their implementation plans and vision new phases of work.

REFERENCES


