ACTIVATING CHANGE IN INDIGENOUS EARLY LEARNING SYSTEMS

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

A CO-LEARNING REPORT FOR THE INDIGENOUS EARLY LEARNING COLLABORATIVE

PREPARED BY DR. ANANDA MARIN, IELC CO-LEARNER | APRIL 2023
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
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INTRODUCTION

There is a wealth of people engaged in the work of Indigenous early childhood education. This reality becomes visible when we understand that “our teachers are the parents; and our parents have always been there.” Dr. Yazzie-Mintz, Project Director of the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative (IELC) shared these words with me in a co-learning session on August 23, 2022. We were discussing how knowledge resources are conceptualized within Community-Based Inquiry (CBI), a key methodology used by the IELC. As a methodology, CBI works from the core idea that the knowledge needed for change is in our communities. This starting point, opens possibilities for noticing what is and what can be. When we engage Community-Based Inquiry, we collectively ask:

To answer this question is to engage in a process of activation. Answering this question requires carrying out processes for recognizing and reestablishing relationships with knowledge keepers, both human and other-than-human. Enacting relationality, clarifies the role(s) that a person might inhabit. Roles continue to be nurtured through ceremony and ceremony promotes healing. In this way, CBI, as it continues to be enacted in the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative, has a spiral like nature.

Over the last two years, I have participated in the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative as a co-learner. This role, is unique from that of an evaluator. It involves actively practicing witnessing, storylistening, and storytelling. As a co-learner I ask how the IELC and CBI work; not, is CBI working. As a co-learner it is my responsibility to continually work toward understanding my role alongside the IELC leadership team, individual partner sites, and the larger collective. My enactment of this role has shifted over time as I have fostered relationships with the IELC leadership team (Dr. Yazzie-Mintz and Mr. Joelfre Grant) and IELC partner sites. My task has been to listen for the stories of the IELC as they are shared and repeated over time. This task and how I have carried it out, is grounded in a teaching that I have continued to receive from the Indigenous knowledge keepers that I interact with through the IELC – meaningful stories are the ones that get repeated again and again. And so, I listen for the stories that are shared and repeated by IELC partner sites with the purpose of crafting a story that reflects the IELC’s answer to the following question:

In what ways do community-based inquiries activate change and build sustainable material and knowledge resources that strengthen Native early learning systems?

This question has guided my own co-learning process and shaped how I engage in the practices of reflection and storying. For example, as I witness and document how IELC partner sites are implementing their projects, I also ask myself how I can craft a co-learning document so that it becomes a knowledge resource.

As a co-learner I ask how the IELC and CBI work; not, is CBI working. As a co-learner it is my responsibility to continually work toward understanding my role alongside the IELC leadership team, individual partner sites, and the larger collective.
In Year 1 co-learning report, I offered three story spirals: creating conditions for partnership and Community-Based Inquiry, developing and naming equitable practices, and generating knowledge about Community-Based Inquiry. I intentionally used the word "spiral" for two reasons. First, I used "spiral" to indicate the cycles of growth experienced by members of the IELC partner sites. Second, I used "spiral" to signal that the stories told by partner sites may have a shared center point or may have evolved from the emergence of new center points as the work expanded and grew.

The first story spiral – creating conditions for partnership and community-based inquiry – was grounded in the metaphor of a garden. As noted in the Year 1 co-learning report, Dr. Yazzie-Mintz used the garden metaphor during one of our reflective co-learning sessions. In this particular session, she described the activities of Year 1 as being akin to “creating the soil” (August 25, 2021). Building with this shared teaching, I linked specific concepts and processes to the IELC garden including, abundance, equity, visioning, listening, thriving, and culture- and language-rich systems.

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).

Year 1 Co-Learning Report, 2022, p. 8

The second story spiral, named 8 emergent IELC practices for equitable partnerships (see Figure 1). The third story spiral described how the IELC cycles of Community-Based Inquiry are iterative and include visioning, designing, implementing, and reflecting. In this spiral, the seashell was used as a metaphor to describe how cycles of inquiry create opportunities for expansive growth (see Figure 2).
Figure 1. Emerging IELC-wide Practices for Equitable Partnership

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**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.
In Year 1, the IELC sites were still in the process of developing local, community-based approaches for Community-Based Inquiry. 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?

In Year 2, sites began to answer these questions individually and collectively. The co-learning story offered here shares my understanding of how these questions are continuing to be answered. Recognizing that the IELC garden is still in the process of blooming, a primary goal of the Year 2 Co-Learning Report is to document the buds that have developed from two years of engaging in community-based inquiry. In doing so, I aim to celebrate the many accomplishments of the IELC partner sites and elevate teachings that have been developed along the way. Moreover, the teachings from Year 1 as described here laid the groundwork for the Year 2 co-learning process which has been guided by a set of sub-questions across three focal areas (i.e., community-based inquiry, benefits to children and family, and the long-term collaborative).

The Year 1 co-learning account primarily focused on processes of CBI. This account also focuses on process and weaves in two additional threads: (1) moving from inquiry questions to implementation and (2) the creation of knowledge including knowledge shared beyond the local context (e.g., knowledge products and systems related to strengthening inquiry and practice) and cross-site and national engagement (i.e., sharing knowledge gained beyond the local context).
The first thread, moving from inquiry questions to implementation, is linked to conversations about the nature of Community-Based Inquiry. From the very beginning of this Initiative, Community-Based Inquiry was conceptualized as occurring across four phases: visioning, planning, implementing, and reflecting. Within each of these phases, knowledge is both remembered and created. Therefore, this co-learning document focuses on the following set of questions in relation to Community-Based Inquiry:

- What is the nature of locally defined inquiry for each Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative site?
- What is the impact of Community-Based Inquiry for each site's focal areas of implementation?

As I approached these questions, I attended to the following through lines in relation to the implementation cycle:

- engaging in a community of practice (practitioners, educators, families, etc.)
- engagement of community and families
- strengthening systems of care, teaching/learning, and thriving
- ECE provider/teacher practices

In addition, the co-learning process opens up ways to learn and document how each sites' Community-Based Inquiry generated benefits for children and families as well as sites’ broader aspirations for their communities and the collective. Towards this end, the report addresses the following questions:

- In what ways did the partner sites advance high quality early childhood development/early childhood education?
- How do sites put knowledge gained from their own inquiries (i.e., findings) to work to strengthen their work with families, children and early childhood care givers/teachers?
- 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?
- How might this work be expanded to more communities of practice, across Indigenous early learning contexts?

Working Theories of High-Quality Early Childhood Education

The space of Community-Based Inquiry creates conditions for transformational change and thus leads to high quality Indigenous early childhood education. Starting from the stance, 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 7 shared theories of high-quality ECE. These working theories are directly related to the ways that partner sites put knowledge gained from their own inquiries to work in order to benefit practitioners, children and families. Put another way, these working theories, voiced through cycles of visioning and planning and actualized through cycles of implementation and reflection directly benefited each partner sites' community of practice. This benefit extended through to their interactions with teachers, children, and families. For example, during the December 2022 Reflective Inquiry Session each site documented the reach of their implementation practices. In this conversation, it became obvious that at each site hundreds of families and community members were able to participate in programs that (re)connected them with Indigenous worldviews, culture, language, land, water, and other natural elements.

Rather than listing the working theories here, I have intentionally included them throughout the report. In doing so, I aim to highlight the layered and interconnected nature of these working theories and how they have been embodied within the implementation practices of IELC partner sites.
The Nature of Community-Based Inquiry

In this section I address the impact (direct and indirect) of community-based inquiry on (1) the practices of early learning providers and (2) the educational opportunities of children and families. To do so, I first story the continued lessons about how the process of Community-Based Inquiry is experienced. This involves examining the implementation practices that each site is still in the process of developing as well as how sites approach the enactment of their implementation practices.

The Cycles of Community-Based Inquiry

The IELC community-based inquiries are supported by four organizational and system supports and complementary processes of witnessing and co-learning. The four IELC supports include: (1) local community-based inquiries; (2) reflective inquiry sessions; (3) collective inquiry sessions (cross-site engagement); and (4) public sharing (national engagement). I view these four systems supports as interlinked circles of inquiry. I use the term circle here intentionally to indicate both the completeness of each systems support and the holistic nature of the four systems support when combined together.

The first circle, local, community-based inquiries involve four cycles of community informed processes/protocols that are interrelated and iterative: visioning, designing/planning, implementation, and reflection and action. These cycles support engagement with systems thinking and navigating complexity across early learning and care practices and with local partners serving children and families.

In each of the inquiry circles, members have particular roles. For example, in the second circle, the IELC leadership co-creates a context for reflection by taking on particular roles which are outlined in Table 1. In the third circle, local teams gather together to learn from each other and invited guests. In the fourth circle, teams share the story of their processes for knowledge generation toward advancing ECE with the larger public.

Table 1. Roles of IELC Leadership in Reflective Inquiry Sessions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reflecting back and affirming the story that is being shared (e.g., “I want to affirm what you are going through”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognizing the good work that is being done – celebrating successes—offering encouragement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-centering conversation back to inquiry questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opening space for identifying interests, tensions, and needs, toward insights for next steps in phases of work ahead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhibiting productive stances toward gathering data (e.g., data as a source of confirmation. In an April 7 Reflective Inquiry Session Dr. Yazzie-Mintz shared the following stance: “sometimes the data you have is more than enough to move forward. Sometimes more data doesn’t take you in another direction; it’s just confirmation. What did you learn from the survey?”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making connections to resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting the creation of data stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protecting the knowledge generation process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stretching idea space – Imagining future activities and what they look like (e.g., “Think of space a little bigger. Physical space—yes of course; also holding space in other ways; this is what we did; these are the questions we asked; the retreat opened space to document process as you tell your story” (Joelfre Grant, 5/26/22, paraphrased)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holding models of abundance rather than scarcity</td>
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</table>
Working Theory. High-quality ECE is grounded in Indigenous worldviews, cultural protocols and processes for building together with families, communities and elders. This working theory is embodied in the actions IELC sites took, including working with elders and knowledge keepers, organizing and participating in ceremonies, and thinking about the relationship between Indigenous languages and knowledge systems. With regard to cultural protocols, sites attended to how they asked for knowledge, operating from local seasonal calendars, and much more.

Building from the Year 1 co-learning process, I again draw on and extend the metaphor of the garden. In Year 1, we witnessed how conditions were cultivated for planting seeds for culture- and language-rich systems that increase the quality of learning opportunities. This included preparing for readiness, creating equitable partnerships, and generating knowledge of community-based inquiry. In Year 2, we witnessed how the circles of inquiry are generating rain and new cycles of growth. This growth is brought on by the concentration of energy in forming a community of practice that collectively engages in inquiry and is then reflected back in the form of a rainbow. The rainbow, a reflection of this energy, represents each circle of inquiry (i.e., spectrum). This reflection in turn, strengthens the knowledge generation process. In other words, the seeds that the IELC planted in Year 1, are now flourishing, as the circles and cycles of energy loop back into themselves. In the representation below, each spectrum of the rainbow represents a circle of inquiry. The garden, planted under the rainbow, grows by receiving energy from each spectrum. This process benefits those directly involved in the community of practice and the larger community in which the team is situated (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. IELC Circles and Cycles of Inquiry Produces a Rainbow

As this image of the rainbow illustrates, “knowledge is being created by their inquiry” (Dr. Tarajean Yazzie-Mintz, 1/20/22 Co-Learning Session). Participating in the four IELC supports, or interlinked circles, activates a continuum of inquiry and facilitates a learning process grounded in practice, research, and theory. In addition, the metaphor of the rainbow illustrates a key teaching – that everybody plays a role in generating knowledge.
A Note on Methods

The metaphor of the rainbow is also useful for understanding the co-learning process. Rainbows are full circles however, given our position on the ground we only see part of the rainbow. This is very much like the co-learning process. As Dr. Yazzie-Mintz described, there is a line or membrane between the processes of community-based inquiry and the knowledge that is generated. Knowledge rests with the community of practice and they are the ones who decide what gets shared and how it is shared. Furthermore, as a co-learner only certain aspects of the circles of inquiry are directly visible to me. Unlike more traditional research and evaluation approaches, I do not visit sites to directly observe the work they are doing. What I have the privilege of witnessing are the reflective inquiry sessions, the collective inquiry sessions, and public sharing sessions. In addition, I am rarely in the role of “interviewer” or “focus group leader.” Instead, I participate in co-learning sessions with the IELC leadership team and the sites. In these co-learning sessions I offer my reflections on what I have witnessed, pose questions, and at times make connections. My primary role is to be a storylistener and to generate reflective questions for my own process of witnessing and the process of reflecting with the IELC leadership team.

“In short, being a co-learner is about joining the circle and cycle of respect for the protocols and systems and roles that are already there within the community of IELC and the IELC member sites.”

– Dr. Tarajean Yazzie-Mintz, January 9, 2023

Over the last two years I have had the opportunity to learn with and from the IELC partner sites (see Table 2) and the leadership team.

Table 2. IELC Partner Sites and Team Members

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Partner Site</th>
<th>Team Members at the IELC Partner Site</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wiikwedong ECD</td>
<td>Cheryl LaRose, LaRose Wellness Retreat, Community Member, Early Childhood Education Faculty and Department Chair (retired), Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa Community College (KBOCC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kim Swanson, KBOCC Migiizinsag, Early Childhood Director</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lisa Denomie, KBIC Pre-K Early Education Program Director</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Terri Swartz, KBIC Early Childhood Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Heather Wood, Health Promotions Coordinator/MCH Coordinator, KBIC Health Systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wicoie Nandagikendan</td>
<td>Jewell Arcoren, Executive Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fawn Youngbear-Tibbetts, Program Director for Wicoie Nandagikendan and Indigenous Food Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wicoie Nandagikendan Board Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daybreak Star</td>
<td>Nick Terrones, Daybreak Star Preschool Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cynthia Savini, Former Executive Leadership, United Indians of All Tribes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community member/partner, Outdoor Classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Two teachers, Outdoor classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keiki Steps</td>
<td>Kalehua Caceres, Keiki Steps Program Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LeReen Carr, Keiki Steps O‘ahu Island Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Noelani Napueula-Patronis, Keiki Steps O‘ahu Island Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Courtney Perreira, Kaua‘i Island Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Puhala Kamalamalama, Former Keiki Steps Hawai‘i Island Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sanoe Marfil, INPEACE Chief Program Officer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Impact of Community-Based Inquiry

Community-Based Inquiry is consequential to the continuous development of strong early learning systems. The collection of words above represents the multiple impacts of CBI. Each word can be thought of as the bud of a flower that is growing in the IELC garden.

Throughout this document I present select excerpts from the Reflective Inquiry Sessions and the Co-Learning Sessions with the IELC leadership team as a way to narrate how each site’s focal areas of implementation facilitate the growth of these buds (e.g., time, thriving, abundance, etc.).

Example 1 on page 11 presents an excerpt from the October 13, 2022 Co-Learning Session with Wiikwedong. This excerpt demonstrates the essential role of time in forming trusting relationships that are built on caring for each other and strengthening (i.e., growing) early childhood programs.

Working Theory. High-quality ECE is experienced as caring, heartfelt, and nourishing. Care as related to physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual nourishment has been a persistent theme. Sites talk about the care they have experienced across IELC circles of inquiry. In addition, they routinely raise the need and importance of self-care.

The working theory about time that was expressed on that day was also shared on other occasions. For example, in Wiikwedong’s April 7, 2022 Reflective Inquiry Session, a Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative Coordinator noted that it took their team 9 months to get where they are in terms of their relationships with each other. Similarly, in the July 15, 2022 Reflective Inquiry Session, a Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative team member noted having the time “to work together for the betterment of the children” has impacted the development of their teaching/learning practices.
Example 1. It Takes Time to Build Trust and Grow as Leaders

Co-Learner (Ananda Marin):
I’m hearing you all talk about your growth as leaders and also the important role of women as leaders, and women in the community. I’m wondering how the collective inquiry sessions and reflective inquiry sessions helped you to grow your inquiry questions, focus on new areas of practice, and help with your growth? . . .

Wiikwedong Team Member 1:
Well, I think probably the biggest one that helped us all become stronger leaders, better leaders is just the collaboration that we all have shared with each other. So, for [one of our Wiikwedong team members], even though she’s not in a classroom, she still has a lot to offer for our families, our staff, and our children. She’s really good at offering the trainings when we have a training that we would like for our staff to receive. She’s really good for coming up with people and presenters and trainers that provide our programs with that training. So, with that, just the collaboration between all of us is probably the biggest leap that has made us stronger leaders. We’re more confident now.

Wiikwedong Coordinator:
And I think that the key from the very beginning is, we had to build the trust. In the very beginning, we were quiet, we didn’t talk. It took us probably four to six meetings together to build that trust, relationships, to be able to say honestly what we wanted to say and to be honest and not take it personally and know that it was about growth and about growing our programs. Still, sometimes [we] take it personally or whatever, but we still care about each other enough to know that that’s what it’s about. It’s not about liking each other or about all of that stuff. It’s about building that relationship, trusting. It’s the seven teachings of the grandfather, to be honest with you, and that’s what it really is between us, the four of us . . . Yes. It’s being humble when you need to be humble. It’s being truthful. It’s having the passion, loving each other enough. It’s all of the seven teachings . . .

Wiikwedong Team Member 2:
But I agree. I think it took some time, but I think, I feel like, I don’t know, I was thinking maybe more than six meetings. When we first started, it took a long time, just everybody was so quiet and cautious in the beginning, but then I think we just realized that we’re all doing similar jobs and working towards similar goals . . . And it just took time to build that trust.

October 13, 2022 Co-Learning Session
Identifying Priorities and Actualizing Implementation Practices

Identifying priorities for the strengthening of local, community-based early learning systems and actualizing those priorities through implementation practices is just one impact of Community-Based Inquiry. As mentioned previously, the IELC enacted four organizational and systems supports over the last two years. These included circles of inquiry including: local inquiries, reflective inquiry sessions, collective inquiry sessions, and, public sharing. Drawing on the metaphor of preparing the soil, these sessions were built on the work that had been done to: (1) create conditions for partnerships, (2) develop equitable practices, and (3) generate knowledge about CBI. Using implementation planning as tool, sites identified local priorities and desired activities, which they updated at the beginning of Year 2. In order to foreground the unique aspects of each site’s plan as well as the common threads across sites, I gathered information from the implementation plans and have presented this information in Table 3 through 5 on pages 13 through 15.

When looking across the inquiry questions that sites shared, common threads become visible. For example, more than one site, asks questions about cultural knowledge, identity, family and community engagement, space and land, and cultural perspectives and frameworks. These common threads, embedded in the sites’ questions, priority areas, and activities can be viewed as implicit theories about what is needed to advance and strengthen system of early childhood education.

Strengthening Systems for Indigenous Early Childhood Education – Common Threads Across IELC Partner Sites

* Creating conditions for self-care, healing, and thriving
* Operating from local, community-based knowledge of time, cycles, and seasons
* Creating spaces for language immersion
* Connecting to the land, water, and other natural elements
* Cultivating a strong sense of self and Indigenous identity

The sites routinely came back around to these threads in the stories they shared during reflective and collective inquiry sessions, and during times of public sharing. Moreover, sites are continuing to develop practices and systems to support their inquiries of these threads and to implement action in relation to these threads.
Table 3. IELC Sites Inquiry Questions

**WIIKWEDONG: Niwiidosedimin (we walk together)**
- What are the ways in which we can align cultural knowledge and services that touch children and families to help us to heal, thrive, and grow?
- What would be the major benefits of implementing a Native American resource center for the Tribal Early Childhood Programs?
- What are the major components of a rich Ojibwe Education Series which will touch children, families, and the community to help us heal, thrive, and grow?
- What would be the positive impact of implementing a rich Ojibwe Education Series which will touch children, families, and the community?

**WICOIE NANDAGIKENDAN: Finding our place in our own space**
- How are we caring for ourselves and for each other within a workspace environment and how were we as an organization going to recover and remain healthy for our community?
- What are the benefits and impacts of Wicoie Nandagikendan having our own dedicated language immersion space? What are the ways in which our current space fosters learning, family engagement, staff development and connections across our work?
- What needs will this space serve in the community? What needs are not being met in our current space?
- What does this space look like? (location? rehabbed? new?) What expert advice will we need to move forward with this idea of our own space? (building codes, licensure, nutrition needs, architect, legal, capital campaign organizer)

**KEIKI STEPS: The rootlet will creep toward the rootlets. Of the same origin, kinfolk will seek and love each other**
- What is Hawaiian cultural identity?
- Within the current framework that we are using, what is Hawaiian about the framework? And what can we add or strengthen to ensure we focus designing a framework that reflects our community, culture and knowledge?
- If we had the opportunity to operate from a Hawaiian perspective of time, cycle, season and process, what would our framework look like?

**DAYBREAK STAR: ?eslaxdux (“to manage to be in a state of remembering or “to remember”)**
- How does Land-based curriculum promote social-emotional awareness and a sense of self and worth within the community structure?
- How does Indigenous and land-based curriculum promote parent involvement and increased community engagement with Wisdom Carriers deepen Indigenous communities?
- How does active engagement in land-based curriculum promote decolonization of early learning pedagogy for staff and families? (Indigenous language; plant wisdom; storytelling; cultural community roles)
### Table 4. IELC Priority Areas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WIHKWEDONG: Niwiidosedimin (we walk together)</th>
<th>WICOIE NANDAGIKENDAN: Finding our place in our own space</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Partnerships with Native Families and Community: Native American Events, Ojibwe Lending Library.  
• Early Childhood Development from Prenatal to Age 8: Brazelton Touchpoints Training, Rich Ojibwe Education Series.  
• Systems of Development: Work sessions on community-based inquiry and topical areas with Tarajean. | • Health and wellness.  
• Family engagement.  
• Food systems.  
• A space dedicated to providing a high quality and nurturing early childhood education that is centered on language immersion strategies and culturally engaged families. |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>KEIKI STEPS: The rootlet will creep toward the rootlets. Of the same origin, kinfolk will seek and love each other</th>
<th>DAYBREAK STAR: ?eslaxdux (“to manage to be in a state of remembering or “to remember”)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Develop culturally relevant curriculum and program designed to meet school readiness needs and effectively close the opportunity/ academic gap.  
• Increase the number of highly qualified, highly effective, culturally grounded, home-grown teachers and professionals in the field of early childhood education. | • Reconnect staff and families to their traditional Indigenous practices through family activities with local Indigenous Wisdom Carriers.  
• Empower staff and families to heal themselves by learning how our plant relatives can teach social-emotional practices that they can continually come back to through land-based activities, as well as connecting current research in neuroscience and developmentally and culturally appropriate practices.  
• Develop a land-based curriculum with staff and families that can utilize our Bernie Whitebear Garden and Discovery Park trails that encompasses all of the traditional Indigenous practices, including language; storytelling; plant identification and uses; and plant wisdom for social-emotional self-regulation |
### Table 5. IELC Inquiry Activities

#### WIIKWEDONG: Niwiidoresedimin (we walk together)
- Analyze survey/questionnaires to make informed decisions about Ojibwe Lending Library.
- Create an inventory of resources and system for Ojibwe Lending Library.
- Each site will be provided professional development to teachers on check out system, awareness of resources.
- GLIFWC – Waabanong and Zhaawanong Outreach Session.
- Set-up and Implement access to Lending Library.
- Coordinate and participate in Brazelton Touchpoints Training to include 18 participants.
- Create and implement a survey/questionnaire for teachers to determine awareness of Ojibwe culture, cultural teachings.
- Create and implement a survey (or focus group) targeted to content and traditional cultural specialists to provide insight regarding components of series.
- Analyze survey/questionnaires and/or focus group data to make informed decisions about content and best approach to implementation.
- Create and Ojibwe Cultural Advisory Team to meet once a month for 4 months.
- Develop 2 modules for the Rich Ojibwe Teaching Series.

#### WICOIE NANDAGIKENDAN: Finding our place in our own space
- Implement Strategic plan: This plan will include a one, three- and five-year plan with lead and individual task assignments well understood.
- Implement family and community engagement components.
- A solid General Operations fundraising and development plan.
- Network of established stakeholders and invested community members/advisors will be developed and grown to include growing our capacity for development of staff (i.e. H.R/ Admin/FT Finance)

#### KEIKI STEPS: The rootlet will creep toward the rootlets. Of the same origin, kinfolk will seek and love each other
- Engage Keiki Steps staff in connecting with cultural sites of knowledge.
- Learn from Hawaiian knowledge keepers.
- Revive Lunar cycle in practice – in bringing cultural protocols back into practice and alignment.
- Foster leadership amongst the team.
- Leadership inquiry.
- Design cultural framework.

#### DAYBREAK STAR: ?eslaxdux (“to manage to be in a state of remembering or “to remember”)
- Create the land-based curriculum for the Bernie Whitebear Garden and Discovery Park Trails (field guide w/ QR-codes, plant label legends, etc.).
- Formalize the parent and community advisory panel and Na’ah Illahee Junior Wisdom Carriers partnership.
- Virtual Community Listening Sessions.
- Shift funds to provide a means for more Native families to access Daybreak Star Preschool, in particular the outdoor classroom.
Developing Practices to Explore Inquiry Questions and Actualize Visions for Strengthening Indigenous Early Childhood Education

Sites actualized their visions and plans for Indigenous early childhood education by engaging in activities that supported the generation of knowledge in relation to their inquiry questions. Through the act of doing, they also increased their knowledge of what it means to both sit and work from a place of inquiry. By engaging in cycles of visioning, designing, implementing, and reflection, the educators and practitioners who are a part of the IELC saw themselves as knowledge generators and recognized how the knowledge inherent in their own communities can support healing and the growth of strong Indigenous early learning systems.

To illustrate the journey of the IELC I story how each partner site engaged with their inquiry question(s).

WIIKWEDONG EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT COLLABORATIVE

As they engaged with this question members of the team lead their community of practice and the larger community in monthly Grandmother Moon ceremonies, water walks, and culturally relevant teaching circles (i.e., making a ribbon skirt). These activities connected them with a large number of children and families. As the team shared during the October 13, 2022 Co-Learning Session, one of their water walks was attended by upwards of 150 people. Collectively engaging in ceremonies and water walks, enacted forms of individual and communal care, supported healing, strengthened their team, and brought others into relation with their community of practice. The excitement about family and community engagement was evident in how the team discussed these activities. For example, Wiikwedong ECD team coordinator noted that the water “was a knockout” and Wiikwedong team member shared that tribal council “recessed their meeting...just to come and participate.”

In this particular session, the significance of the water walks for reconnecting with cultural traditions, learning about one’s identity, generating love, and operating from a place of abundance was also talked about. The following example, illustrates the significant role of ceremony in enacting Community-Based Inquiry and strengthening systems of early childhood education.
**Example 2. Ceremony as a Way of Engaging with Inquiry Questions**

**Wiikwedong Team Member 1:**
Well, because it’s part of our culture and to me, it was part of the women’s role in our community. And during COVID, I felt that many of our women in our community, I don’t want to say lost it, but were close to it. Many of our women struggled. I mean, everybody did, but because women are the backbones of our family, we were weakening. And I felt that we had to bring something ... back to our community and start somewhere and keep planting with the water walk, continue to plant the seeds and those roots in these young children and building those young children . . . But then on the other hand, with the Grandmother Moon, because we turned a lot of that into talking circles and it was building our women in our community and that’s what I felt we needed that at the time . . .

**Wiikwedong Coordinator:**
[they] also really worked hard on trying to get a younger person . . . to take on that role. So, in the Teaching Series, we actually developed, I would call intimate teaching, . . . for doing a Grandmother Moon ceremony in our culture. And I think we’ve done a good job of that, but we’re still struggling to get somebody to take over [their] role, correct, . . .?

**Wiikwedong Team Member 1:**
Right. And that to me, that’s something you can’t make somebody do. Somebody’s going to fall into those footsteps one of these days . . . you can encourage people, but it’s got to be in their heart . . . I had a good teacher that told me that . . .

**Wiikwedong Coordinator:**
But we got the tools in place, right, . . .?

**Wiikwedong Team Member 1:**
Oh yeah. Just got done with a three-day water walk. That was awesome. Powerful ... And the moon was full, the moon was full for two nights ... it was so awesome, powerful ...

**Wiikwedong Team Member 2:**
. . . the Grandmother Moon and the Water Walk for me, I know that things like that need to be brought back to our community for number one, in order for us to heal, thrive and grow, we need them ceremonies. We need people that are willing to step up and bring them ceremonies back to our community for the healing . . .

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The team also engaged in three other inquiry activities that required the creation of new materials and relations. These activities included the creation of their Lending Library, Teaching Series, and Culture Camp. The following excerpt depicts the power and the reach of engaging in implementation activities that have been designed from within cycles of inquiry that facilitate a shared visioning and planning process.

**Example 3. How the Impact of CBI travels from a Community of Practice to the Larger Community**

**Wiikwedong Coordinator:**
And again, our culture camp ... Tarajean asked us to put numbers to it. And so, when you think about it like this . . . [a team member] did a teaching on the Talking sticks. So, if we were to do a teaching on the Talking Sticks to one of our centers, let’s say it’s Little Eagles, it would be [team members] and maybe a student . . . three people are making a Talking Stick and doing a teaching on the Talking Stick . . . then let’s say [a team member] takes the talking sticks to her parents and they do it at a workshop . . . now, we’re talking 16 parents . . . But what we did [through our collective events, is reach] 45 teachers. Those 45 teachers now, can go back to their classroom and teach 150 kids, let’s say. Those 150 kids, if they . . . go into the homes and . . . do Talking Sticks with all those parents. Now you’re talking 300 and you know what I mean? So now, you’re taking this and you’re multiplying it. So, when you start putting numbers to it, it’s a whole different story . . . But we did this in one meeting with the Culture Camp, one meeting. And it’s kind of a mentor coaching model that you build. And if you do it every year, if you have a Culture Camp every year, and then not only are you talking about building culture and teaching, you’re also building . . . camaraderie between the teachers. The teachers now are not alone . . . They’re starting to talk with each other, they’re starting to feel together, they’re starting to talk the culture. You know what I mean? It’s just a whole other vision.

**Co-Learner (Ananda Marin):**
. . . what’s nice about being in this space is that I hear it in your voices, and I see it on your faces, just the joy and pride that you’re taking in the work that you’re doing and the love that you have for the work.

**Wiikwedong Coordinator:**
. . . When we talk about this culture camp, we had our own Wiikwedong team teaching. We had our advisory committee, two of our members teaching. We had our advisory committee cooking meals. We had our bus drivers cooking meals. We had bus drivers in the teaching pieces. I mean, what more could you want? You know, it was a team . . . and some of those teachers were parents because their kids were in the program. So anyway, I could go on and on. It was awesome.

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From the position of a witness, I see a link between the team’s engagement with these activities and their identity as a community of practice. They describe, with the pride, the work they have done to “break down silos.” Perhaps, this is best exemplified by how they are using a river metaphor to describe their relationships to one another and how these relationships flow into strengthening the larger community of Indigenous early childhood education.
As a witness to the reflective inquiry sessions, I heard members of the Wicoie team approaching this question from a place of history and futurity. They recognized that in the wake of multiple crises (COVID, the murder of George Floyd and the protests that followed, the Derek Chauvin trial, and more) they felt tired and overextended. They also likened that particular moment in time and experience to a longer history of genocide.

For the Wicoie team, recognizing and acting upon the need for self-care was a necessary step for both engaging in inquiry and actualizing the plan that they had set out for themselves. The team organized a retreat on Madeline Island, a place of spiritual and historical significance, in Year 1. In Year 2, this inquiry question led them to ask about what is necessary for creating a healthy work environment and one where leadership is grounded in Indigenous perspectives. The example included on page 20 demonstrates how engaging in Community-Based Inquiry afforded the Wicoie team an opportunity to grant themselves time to engage in visioning and planning.

**Working Theory.** 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. All of the sites focused on the importance of culture, language, and land for health and wellness. Moreover, there was a shared sentiment that investing in the health and wellness of adults and practitioners is necessary for the development of strong ECE systems.
Example 4. Taking Time for Self-Care Expands Visions of What is Possible

And so Tarajean was like, "Slow down. It’s okay to slow down and take time." And we have been in go mode so much. To be able to say, "Hey, we need to stop and reflect and to be slow in the process . . ." And then we did the retreat to Madeline Island and that’s when we really started to shift on space to what is a healthy indigenous led organization look like. Not just physically. How does it run? What is our policy?

So, what we really started looking at was not just space but internal, like the metaphysical space as well. You see what I’m saying? So, it became, like I have a list and it’s like 35 different versions of space. It’s space for language. It’s space for recovery. It’s space for teaching and learning. It’s space for being healthy in our community. It’s a space for ceremony. So, what we’re realizing right, is that some of that space we can do now and some of it is about our vision for what is that space going to serve in the community, not just our students necessarily, but obviously that’s the direct folks, but in the larger community.

So, when we started talking with families, we’ve done surveys and I’ve done some community and parent advisory meetings, bringing everybody together and just having conversations with them. One of the parents said, "Until we have our own space, we continue to remain invisible in our community." That’s huge, right. And so really thinking about what does that serve in the larger context of our community. Then the training programs, and we could do adult learning if we had our own space. So, it’s taken a whole new kind of concept. Space has become physical, but it’s also become what is the internal? How are we holding space?

So, one of the things too is, we don’t have a lot of folks who have the capacity to run an organization like we’re talking about building here. We have to build the community capacity to meet our future need. So, what I’m looking at right now is that teacher training program, but also a food sovereignty person, a program director. [Our executive director] is retiring next year and they’ve offered me that director position. So, I have to get somebody to do my position and I got to get somebody to do the food because really, I’ve been doing probably two or three different positions. I’m food sovereignty coordinator, so I do all of that and then I cook and I put out all those meals, I plan all those events, and then I’m writing grants and I’m doing the program director job. So, it’s really a lot . . . I’m trying to think real critically about where do I need to go and who needs to be trained to do that job?

Wicoie Nandagikendan Team Member
October 13, 2022 Co-Learning Session

Additional inquiry questions that Wicoie pursued include:

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

In response to these questions, they engaged in a number of activities including surveying the community and organizing a strategic planning session with their board of directors. Along the way they engaged the help of the IELC leadership team as well as consultants. They also discussed how the inquiry process led them to new approaches and methods for gathering information. For example, in the December 2022 Reflective Inquiry Session a Wicoie team member discussed how they shifted their perspectives on using surveys to gather information from the community. Now, the team combines celebrations with inquiries. This included surveying people at community events like feasts and powwows in order to hear from the larger community.

Working Theory. High-quality ECE looks and feels like being a good relative. This includes learning about the diversity of language and cultural lifeways within communities. This theory is visible in a number of ways. For example, Wicoie often discussed the relationship between Ojibwe and Dakota language and what it means to be situated in an inter-tribal context.
DAYBREAK STAR

Daybreak Star asked the following inquiry questions:

- How does Land-based curriculum promote social-emotional awareness and a sense of self and worth within the community structure?
- How does Indigenous and land-based curriculum promote parent involvement and increased community engagement with Wisdom Carriers deepen Indigenous communities?
- How does active engagement in land-based curriculum promote decolonization of early learning pedagogy for staff and families? (Indigenous language; plant wisdom; storytelling; cultural community roles)

To pursue these questions, Daybreak Star held community listening sessions. In addition, the team developed partnerships with local organizations and community elders to (1) deepen their knowledge of language and culture and (2) build infrastructure to ensure the sustainability of their project. In Example 5 (below), I highlight in bold accepts of Daybreak Star’s story that I believe are connected to infrastructuring in order facilitate land-based learning. Importantly, this example also touches on how identity is shaping implementation.

**Example 5. Infrastructuring as a Practice for Exploring Inquiry Questions**

... So, we have two non-Native educators that are in the outdoor classroom, but they’re really doing what they can in a good way to make sure that there are Indigenous and local Native teachings being implemented, whether that’s the Lushootseed Welcome Song. And I had some people question, “Why are these two white women teaching this song, right?” And I remind them, I’m like, “Well, remember you told me at one point, if not now, then when, and if not you, then who, right?” ... And so, these are the people that are in the space at the time that are doing this in a good way. And it’s not like they went on YouTube and taught it themselves and whatnot, but we took a nine-hour language class with a Lushootseed speaker back in the spring. And I’m hoping to bring her back so we can keep doing that.

A lot of our Native languages are so intimately connected to the land and even are the foundation of how we say things and whatnot. And I know our language teacher said that some of the Lushootseed letters, they’re not really what we consider letters, right, but they’re more sounds that reflective of the wind or the ocean of our land near us. There’s one letter that looks like this or one sound that looks like that, an X with the W and that’s, yeah, the blowing. So, we learn all that and it’s felt very empowering to be on this land and to teach through that language.

But the one way in taking Tara’s wisdom, her infinite wisdom of making sure that we do have an Indigenous lens on the preschool at all times. And so that comes through one of our community partners. All that I was saying ties into this other component of expansion that ... So [a community partner] and I have been putting all of this dreamy big picture stuff into a curriculum, basically writing a curriculum that is land-based and that can be woven into our city mandated curriculum. And so, I would say that’s this next part of expansion that we’re doing ... And so, we’re really trying to bring all those components into the classroom and then making it, we’re putting the learning outcomes that the teachers have to check the box to from Teaching Strategies Gold, which is a little platform. And so, we’re just putting those, like, “Here’s what we think that this accomplishes. So, when they go on to TSG, then they can just document the experience for the children and then check the box, right? So, we’re helping them work smarter and not harder so they don’t have to think about, “Oh, what does this relate to?” Even though they’re all really fabulous and genius at it. Yeah.

*Daybreak Star Coordinator*  
October 13, 2022 Co-Learning Session

This example demonstrates how the team is strengthening relationships with community partners in order to implement an identified inquiry activity. Here we can see that language, culture, and relationship to the land are central to the implementation process.
Keiki Steps asked the following inquiry questions:

What is Hawaiian cultural identity?

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

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

Keiki Steps developed a number of implementation practices to answer these questions. For example, they shifted the rhythms of their work to be in accordance with Hawaiians perspectives of time. They participated in talk-story with elders and knowledge keepers and asked questions along the way. This in turn, supported their individual and collective explorations of their own identities. Aspects of the team’s evolving conversation about identity and growth are shared in Example 6.

Working Theory. High-quality ECE provides access to culture rich curriculum and materials. This theory came to life as sites continued to work on curriculum in various forms. For example, Wiikwedong organized a culture camp for practitioners and partnered with the Library to offer an Indigenous book lending program to families and teachers. At Wicoie Nandagikendan, a culture rich curriculum is exemplified in their food sovereignty and language programs. For Daybreak Star practicing land restoration was central component of developing a land-based curriculum. Keiki Steps organized their inquiry around creating a Hawaiian learning framework. This theory is also connected to sites conceptualizations of time and seasonal calendars.
Example 6. Deep Thinking, Identity, and Growth

Keiki Steps Team Member 1:
I think for me it's like knowing who you are and where you come from and then from there you're able to help and teach others to be comfortable in knowing who they are and where they come from as well. So, it's kind of like a tree if you think of, and then the tree is being sturdy and stable and then the roots are how you are if you will go ahead and help leave legacies and tradition and knowledge to others . . .

Keiki Steps Team Member 2:
I can share a little bit on that. It has a good concept to it where actually a native tree, if I’m not mistaken, the Iliahi or the Hawaiian Sandalwood, actually only thrives in places where there's other trees because of the root system. And so, I think that's a good commonality where people, in that metaphor of a tree, only see what’s above the ground. So, they don't really see how it's being nourished and all of the things that are happening below the soil.

And so, I think through that, a lot of the commonalities we find are basically, you're kind of attracted to good pulses or good vibes and something that'll help you thrive in that sense. So as [Keiki Steps Team Member 1] was talking about the tree and how all of those essence, that's kind of the thing that came to mind for me is you don't typically see what's happening but that growth is happening because you're able to see the prosperous above the soil. So, I think that definitely helps for me with the visual and then the understanding of where this project and its application of course to everyone, but more so for myself, applies. So yeah . . .

Keiki Steps Team Member 3:
. . . I totally agree with what [the team members] shared. We are growing individually and at the same time collectively and the growth has been... A part of the growth process has been a lot of reflection and a lot of that deep-thinking kind of processes. So, it’s been really, really nice.

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Knowing who you are was central to the implementation of inquiry activities. Knowledge of self and community increased as team members engaged with their inquiry questions. In this way, personal growth and collective growth are linked across the cycles of CBI. In addition, these relationships foster early childhood education systems growth.
Activating Change in Indigenous Early Learning Systems

Generating Knowledge by Engaging in Implementation Practices

Looking across the teams, we can begin to see a common set of inquiry-based activities including **hosting community events and gatherings** as a way of connecting, sharing information, and strengthening the information feedback loop. Practicing ceremony together, building relationships with knowledge keepers, developing partnerships with sister organizations. All of these things take time. Importantly, Community-Based Inquiry, including the reflective and collective inquiry sessions, held space for healing, contemplation, and planning. This aspect of Community-Based Inquiry was appreciated by all of the teams. It also provided an avenue for teams to share the perceptions about the power of Community-Based Inquiry and what it offers.

As a witness to these sessions, and through conversations with Dr. Yazzie-Mintz and Mr. Joelfre Grant, I identified a number of common threads that weave together implementation practices and knowledge generation.

**Community-Based Inquiry and the Generation of Knowledge**

- Slowing down changes relationships with time and supports acting from a place of abundance
- Slowing down is necessary for knowledge generation toward systems for Indigenous early childhood education
- Revisiting roles and responsibilities for the purposes of building a strong community of practice
- Learning by doing – knowledge is generated through action
- “Data” is used for knowledge building and importantly, data and knowledge are linked to doing/implementation.
- Ceremony is a process and place for strengthening relations
- Learning how, when, and where to ask questions
- Operating from a local, community-based seasonal calendars
- Being in relation with lands, waters, and the natural elements
- Visiting and sharing stories offers opportunities for acknowledging what has been created and restored
- Seeing how multiple cycles of inquiry may be happening simultaneously
- Seeing oneself as a knowledge holder and meaningful contributor

These common threads were gleaned by carefully attending to the sites’ stories. Here, I share select examples that are connected to and mirror the common threads listed above.
Wiikwedong named their project Niwiidosedimin which means “we are walking together.” The team’s project name symbolizes the work they have done to break down organizational silos and work together to advance early childhood education. As one Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative team member explained,

So, I would say that it’s reflected in our name because in the beginning, before we were introduced to this project, we all walked our own walk, we all did our own thing. And once we were introduced to this collaborative, then we joined together for the betterment of our community, our children and our families and our teaching staff.

As the team collectively reflected on their journey, the metaphor of walking together was expanded to include the flow of river systems. In this example, a team member and the team coordinator narrate how the community of practice they are developing is like the Gichigami. Each member of the team has a role to play and contributes to the inquiry process, feeding the flow of knowledge.

Example 7. The Clouds are Watching Us Do Good Work

Wiikwedong Team Member 1:
So, we have Gichigami [Lake Superior], which is Lake Superior, right here on our homelands and flowing into Gichigami is a five-mile long Falls River. And when me and [Wiikwedong Coordinator] started doing a little bit more research and digging into it, it was even more like, “Wow, this is what we need to be writing on” because there are five rivers that actually flow into the Falls River. So, were each one of these creeks that flow into the Falls River, which we’re using as our writing for the writing or for the work that we’re doing together.

Now that these five creeks came together, we’re doing this work together as we’re flowing down the Falls River and the work that we’ve completed for the betterment of our children, families, and communities is the work that flows into Gichigami. So we started out as five individuals doing our own thing and then we got together and started doing this work in the Falls River and we’re flowing down the river, we’re doing our brainstorming, we’re starting to work together instead of individually, and then we flow into the mouth before it actually goes into Gichigami and Gichigami is where we’re doing our final work, well, not our final work but our final project of the work that we’re working on for the project.

Wiikwedong Coordinator:
. . . And it’s like not only is it the five creeks, but also, we’ve got the visual of us being a part of the land and the landscape and that we are embedded in that. And at one point, the clouds are actually watching us doing the brainstorming and envisioning as we’re going down the creeks and doing this, so it’s a real... And then once we get to the mouth where that work is happening, there’s a land form change. So, it’s a different, if you don’t see all this beauty and creative and dreamy stuff, now you see some work.

So, it’s almost like neurons of the brain embedding, starting to bedding in the mouth of the river where it’s dendrite-like and in going into the soil. So, the mouth has to swell somewhat for us to leach into the rich soil, so we stay there. So, it’s this whole vision of going into, going from, and at the same time, we started out saying our silos are coming down, but when it’s instead of that, it’s our embankments are coming down and we can feel that happening. Instead of silos, it’s embankments and so [we] worked and then also, [Team member 1’s] done a really nice job of when we work this through, there’s a lot of culture.

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WICOIE NANDAGIKENDAN – PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE AND THE INTERIM

In the knowledge generation process, Wicoie Nandagikendan team reflected on their past accomplishments taking note of where they want to go in the future (e.g., a language immersion institute). Over the past two years they continued to engage in an inquiry about physical space while extending their questions to ask about organization health and working with consultants to develop a strategic plan and physical plan that engenders their values and vision. This effort has been supported by collecting data at community functions and hearing the voices of children, caretakers, and other adults. Importantly, the team is expressing a stance about knowledge generation for the near future and the more distant future. In this way, the team is navigating complex relationships with time while also nurturing their vision. This stance was taken up by a Wicoie team member, in an October 13, 2022 Co-Learning Session. Wicoie Nandagikendan team member noted,

“We’ve gotten really far on our strategic plan. So when I say we have time, it’s because I know that’s 10 years out for me to build a building at state bonding for me to do the capital campaign. That’s like the victory. What do we do in the interim because what we’re doing isn’t working. So, we’re looking at partnerships with the school district. There are six schools sitting empty in Minneapolis right now and one of them is in our neighborhood and they’re using it as storage. So, if we could get that space on the interim, have a lead teacher bring Bdote in from [Kindergarden] to three so we kind of have a seamless transition from the early childhood level up to third grade, then they’ll have a good grasp of education if we put all those people together to that gives us a substitute roster of teachers that we can rotate and it makes all more efficient.

Working Theory. High-quality ECE prepares young children to transition to elementary school. Across the two years each site touched upon the transitions from early learning programs to elementary school. Daybreak Star framed this as taking a yes-and approach to school readiness and the development of strong connections to the natural world.

DAYBREAK STAR – LAND RESTORATION AND LANGUAGE

In describing the process of creating their land-based classroom, Daybreak Star foregrounded the importance of land restoration for their curriculum development project. As Daybreak Star Project coordinator reflected on the significance of what they are accomplishing through the Community-Based Inquiry Process he returned to the importance of remembering for knowledge generation. Example 8, highlights the role of ancestral remembering in CBI. In addition, it speaks to how the act of being able to feed everyone at a community gathering is akin to building strong Indigenous early learning systems.
Example 8. Ancestral Remembering

So basically, all of our community partners are, in one way or another tied into the land development and restoration here at Daybreak. So [our community partner is] contracted through a group called Na’ah Illahee Fund, and they’ve done a lot of ground restoration here at Daybreak, whether it’s our traditional medicine garden, the ponds, which the preschool was involved with last fall. And with that, they partner with Green Seattle Projects, which is a subsidiary of Seattle Parks and Rec. So, then we also collaborate, or at least work with Seattle Parks and Rec, and it’s all very much about the outside infrastructure of things.

I just really feel that most of everything about United Indians and Daybreak always comes back to just this land that we’re on, right? Because it was fought for. And so, there’s significance to it. And then, what was the other part of your question with families, children and-

. . . There’s some signs or something. As we’re coming back altogether for community events, we’re still holding things outside. And so, it’s been wonderful to gather. . . . At the beginning of September maybe mid-September, we did a gathering out on our powwow field, and we brought in a Haida storyteller and singer and her Raven Clan dancers and singers, and they did drumming and singing. And I’m always still in awe of it, but as soon as those drums come out for a little bit, the Eagles come out and it’s like they have this ancestral remembering as well, and then they just circle overhead of us. And of course everybody’s just like, “Whoa.” And then they go off, right?

So, it’s that thing that just really, I think strengthens that coming together. And at the end of it people are like, “Wow, that was a really great event.” We had a dinner, and it was open to the public, because we did it in partnership with Seattle Parks and Rec. And we weren’t sure how many people were going to show up, but there was almost 200 people there. Thankfully, we cooked enough food . . . [names community partner], she also does children’s books based off of Haida stories. And so, she had just come out with a children’s book. And so, she was basically reading it and talking about the book and the importance of not just relying on the written word as developing literacy, but storytelling, right? And then so I chimed in and would talk about the brain development behind storytelling and recalling and whatnot. And then to have the Eagles just make their presence and we’re all a part of it, that in itself really, I think, and deepen like we all had this experience together.

Daybreak Star Coordinator
October 13, 2022 Co-Learning Session
KEIKI STEPS: IDENTITY IS AN INTEGRAL COMPONENT OF INDIGENOUS EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Over the last two years the Keiki Steps team invested in learning from their elders so as to offer children opportunities to engage with their cultural knowledge. In a Co-Learning Session on June 9, 2022, Dr. Tarajein Yazzie-Mintz shared this part of their story with me.

"... revitalizing is a big part of their legacy story about who they are as Hawaiian people. That was, like, their full-on synthesis of boom. We’re not gonna use an outside frame to describe what our framework is or what the timeline is, or even what inquiry is. Because that was the other thing. They were like, we thought inquiry was all about, you know, book research or visiting a place and sort of documenting what they’re doing. But they realized that when they just reenact the restoration of a ceremonial process, that ceremonial process has embedded in it questions, inquiry, documentation of knowledge, that then has a legacy that pushes them forward as strong people.

This legacy is also apparent in the name of their project. Keiki Steps team member shared the meaning embodied by the groups project name in a Co-Learning Session on October 13, 2022:

"we based it off the ‘Olelo No‘eau Number 322. So it’s E kolo ana nō ke ēwe i ke ēwe. So, it’s the rootlets will creep up towards the rootlets. Of the same origin, kinfolk will seek and love each other. So, it also says like roots, we are nourished and inspired by the places and people where we are grounded, but we also nourish and inspire those things around us. So that’s what we based our project around. And then we also use the ko’a as the metaphor. So ko’a is the stacking the dry stacking of rocks or the pōhaku.

Working Theory. High-quality ECE includes time for ceremony and for teachers to be learners. All of the sites shared stories of participating in some form of ceremony as a way of being in relation with and answering their inquiry questions. Wiikwedong held Grandmother Moon ceremonies and Water Walks. Wicoie Nandagikendan, organized a retreat to Madeline Island, a place of spiritual significance. Daybreak Star developed relationships with storytellers. Keiki Steps shared how the building of rock structures is connected to the building of their identities."
Conclusion

The Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative provides an ethical way forward for strengthening the field of Indigenous early learning and systems. Guided by the goal of strengthening teaching/learning practices with children and families, the IELC works to create an equitable system of partnership for collaboratively engaging in cycles of inquiry that center growth. The conditions for partnership are organized Indigenous concepts of readiness – wonderment, paired with an interest and willingness to take on new roles and responsibilities in the pursuit of collective learning for systems development.

The structure of the IELC supports partner sites with developing their own success indicators which can shift as they learn from implementation. The inquiry cycles create conditions for birthing ideas and frameworks. These frameworks are further brought to life thorough a process of sharing stories across sites and with broader audiences. Importantly, what and how the story is shared is up to each site. In this way, the IELC both respects and enacts self-determined approaches to knowledge generation and sharing. Importantly, partner sites found incredible value from engaging in cross-site and national engagement. For example, in Example 9, a Wicoie team member describes the many benefits of participating in the IELC and knowledge gained from being in a community practice that is connected to sister communities of practice.

Example 9. Now Go Ask the Questions

Well I think one of the things like the non-formal conversations and even also meeting in person, what it does, it’s really reinforced kind of the work we’re doing [and] also the need. So, the need for teachers, the need for community partners, the need for all of those things. We’re all kind of in the same space in a way. And so, it pushes me a little more for some of those, like I said, professional development opportunities like the teacher training, that’s huge and so the need is huge.

It’s not just here, it was the people I talked to from Alaska. People I talked to from Hawaii, folks at Wiikwedong. All of us are having the same things, but also making me realize that there’s other ways to do it. And so, talking with Keiki Steps, we know surveys are kind of in our right way, but if you really want detailed information from people, you have to sit down and start talking. Unlike for them to say, “We had to define what Hawaiian identity was.” It was like, “Okay, we got to step back and think about what is that mean for us?”

And that’s kind where these different ideas of space to all come from is having these conversations with the other sites. What are obstacles? How do they overcome that? Who are their partners? Who do they work with? What is the transition process look like for people?

So, I think it’s been helpful that way because we’re always kind of struggling and trying to figure out how we’re going to do it and to be able to have funding, to be able to say, “Okay, now go ask the questions.”

Wicoie Nandagikendan Team Member
October 13, 2022 Co-Learning Session

The idea of being ready to ask questions is reflective of how CBI works. Within CBI asking questions is guided by a process of visioning and questions are refined through designing and implementing inquiry activities. “Now go ask the questions” as an idea is related to the concept of readiness and highlights the important role of time/space relations in CBI. In addition, “Now go ask the questions,” suggests that something is required of the self and the collective in doing this work. That “something” is identified, named, and grown through engagement in cycles of inquiry. Importantly, sites questions took on new meanings as team members re-rooted their questions in local knowledge.

This idea also returns us to the metaphor of the rainbow. The cycles of inquiry generate rain. As these cycles continue and teams pose new questions, these questions act like a ray of light, moving through and reflecting off of the raindrops. Once refracted out again, a rainbow is generated and the cycle continues.