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# Community-Based Inquiry *from within* Indigenous Early Learning Communities of Practice: Introduction to the Special Issue

*Tarajean Yazzie-Mintz, Amanda LeClair-Diaz, and Ethan Yazzie-Mintz*

*This work isn't about us and them, it's about we and us.*

—Jessica Saniguq Ullrich, Evon Taa'ąįį Peter, and Jessica Black

## FOUNDATION

*Community-Based Inquiry begins with relationships. Relationship to one another. Relationship to our natural and historical surroundings. Community-Based Inquiry for us is fueled by deep commitments to find the way back to our roots.*

—Sanoë Kinikela Marfil, Brandy Kalehua Kamohali'i Caceres,  
LeReen Iko Aranaydo Carr, Courtney Pualani Perreira, and  
Pūhala Kelly Pe'a Kamālamalama

Indigenous knowledge originates from and is centered in Indigenous communities. Research *on* Indigenous communities, however, often originates from and is conducted by researchers outside of Indigenous communities. Community-Based Inquiry (CBI) is a research method in which Indigenous communities engage in asking and answering their own questions about their early childhood practices, calling on ancestral knowledge, the wisdom of elders, data-gathering methodologies, and an intimate understanding of

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their own communities. In Community-Based Inquiry, community members *are* the researchers: they formulate the questions based on community needs, create the methodology to pursue answers to those questions, find solutions, and put those solutions into practice to strengthen early childhood education in their communities.

Indigenous communities are over-researched by external researchers, who are afforded legitimacy by institutions of higher education but often conduct inquiries that serve their own professional needs rather than the needs of the communities they study. This cycle generates bodies of research that are *about* Indigenous communities but not *with* Indigenous communities, research that is often not useful to communities, both because of whose questions the researcher is answering and the lack of timeliness of the findings.

Community-Based Inquiry re-locates the research into the community; community members create and conduct the inquiry into their most relevant and pressing questions of practice. Recent movements toward using “participatory research” with Indigenous communities and creating “research-practice partnerships” are steps toward involvement of communities in the research process. However, while these methods are more progressive than earlier research models, both still frame the outside researcher as expert and Indigenous communities as receivers of knowledge, subjects of someone else’s inquiry, and providers of feedback on someone else’s work. By contrast, CBI fully transforms the older conceptions of research, conceiving of community members—knowledgeable experts—as researchers.

The Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative (IELC) was founded in 2021 to support Native communities of practice in becoming the researchers, conducting their own inquiries into their own questions of practice in early childhood education and putting their findings into action as part of a cycle of inquiry and implementation to create knowledge that is immediately usable. Starting with four sites—Wiikwedong Early Childhood Development Collaborative (L’Anse, MI), Wicoie Nandagikendan Immersion Program (Minneapolis, MN), Daybreak Star Preschool (Seattle, WA), and Keiki Steps (The Institute for Native Pacific Education and Culture, Hawai’i)—the IELC is now, as of 2024, the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative Institute, a national center focused on supporting Indigenous communities in restoring practices of knowledge-generation that these communities have engaged in since the beginning of time, and using that knowledge to strengthen education for these communities’ earliest learners.

## A SPECIAL ISSUE

*Research can help us take our power back and know that the solutions to the challenges we face come from within our communities.*

—Jessica Saniguq Ullrich, Evon Taa’ājj Peter, and Jessica Black

The Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative and the partner sites documented—through conversation, talk story, coaching sessions, reflective sessions, writing, and film—their use of Community-Based Inquiry to: generate inquiry questions, develop methods to answer their questions, analyze data, and put their findings into action. As these four

communities—the partner sites comprising the first cohort of the IELC—worked to identify and investigate questions, and strengthen practices in early childhood education, lessons began to emerge that could help other communities engage in this work. Each site recognized they had stories to share with each other and with the wider world, as they began to see themselves not only as practitioners and program implementers but as researchers.

Out of the stories that emerged from the sites and the desire to share them with communities beyond the IELC, the idea of collecting these stories in a special issue of the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* was born. This special issue, *Community-Based Inquiry from within Indigenous Early Learning Communities of Practice*, presents stories of Community-Based Inquiry from the perspectives of those in communities implementing CBI as well as researchers from external contexts who use CBI authentically in their work.

We envision this issue to sit solidly within the continuum of scholarship that exists in the field of early learning, Indigenous research, and community-led research. The existing continuum spans across sectors from research *on* communities (community members as objects of research) at one end to research *from within* communities (community members as researchers) at the other end. Along the continuum are various forms of research *for* communities and research *with* communities, in which community members participate in research (conducted by researchers external to the community) to varying degrees. Built on Community-Based Inquiry, this volume is aligned most closely philosophically and practically with research *from within* communities.

This special issue presents voices from within communities—the voices of practitioners who now also identify as researchers, the voices of researchers trained in universities who connect and reconnect with ancestral knowledge and communal ways of knowledge-gathering, the voices of those on a journey to discover ways of asking and answering questions so familiar to communities but so at odds with what is accepted or valued in the wider academic world, and the voices of ancestors and elders asking questions that we have always had about ourselves, our relationships with each other, and our relationship to the natural world, while providing guidance as to how to discover answers to these questions.

Our communities have processes, rituals, ceremonies, and traditions that point us toward individual and communal balance, health, harmony, and wellbeing. When our Indigenous ceremonies are enacted, the meaning of the ceremony is not always explicitly articulated. The ceremonies are enacted over and over and over, and at some point we realize the meaning—the meaning is in the act of the collective coming together to make meaning *as a collective*. This special journal issue represents *this* collective coming together—not to gain individual recognition as research methodologists, but to be in dialogue with one another, to share stories that connect ancestral knowledge to the learning and development of Indigenous babies, to discover truths, and to gather knowledge that keeps all of our communities on the path to greater strength and wellbeing.

## PROCESS AND STRUCTURE

*CBI is a valuable and valid research process, and it's something we can and should all do. It engages and envelops the community in our development process. I think that everyone should be engaged in this kind of research and not be afraid to ask the hard questions.*

—Jewell Arcoren and Fawn YoungBear-Tibbetts, Wicoie Nandagikendan

Emerging from the work of the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative, the four sites that comprise the first IELC cohort were invited to write articles to be included in the issue. In addition, we invited four Indigenous scholars from universities to join and contribute to the dialogue by writing articles, bringing to this special issue their insights and reflections and their own stories of personal and communal transformation, as they seek stronger ways to support Indigenous communities in strengthening learning and education from prenatal to elderhood.

All contributors were focused on Community-Based Inquiry in their work, inquiry being conducted *from within* communities. The perches on which they sit differ, from teachers to practitioners to administrators to evaluators to graduate students and university faculty, with some occupying multiple perches simultaneously. All, though, through the course of their work find insight and transformation in this approach that takes them into their communities—not as the bearers of knowledge but as fellow travelers on the road to communal knowledge and discovery.

Our process of moving the special issue from a concept to a reality was based on a teaching and learning model (as opposed to the submit-and-review model of academic journals). The experience of writing articles among our invited authors ranged from some never having written a piece for a forum like this one to some having a great deal of article-writing experience, and many somewhere in the middle. To address these issues during the COVID-19 pandemic, we held numerous virtual sessions with each of the authors and author teams: brainstorming, sharing ideas and progress, coaching, and reviewing writing together, with all sessions focused on helping authors bring out the story they desired to tell about their work using CBI. We held a two-day virtual writing retreat, starting out each day with group writing prompts, and meeting with each author and team as they worked on their writing throughout the two days. As travel was possible, we visited two of the sites in person specifically to work on developing an article for this special issue, providing guidance in turning ideas and insights into a finished piece of writing.

This special issue, then, represents not only journeys of inquiry but journeys of process. The authors who previously thought of themselves solely as practitioners now think of themselves as writers (and researchers) as well. The authors who previously thought of themselves as academics, or who struggled with how to capture their work in communities in ways acceptable to their institutions, now know that there is a way to write, to tell stories, to document, and to participate that honors their communities, their ancestors, their relatives, and their fields of knowledge and expertise. The voices you hear in these pieces are both varied and authentic, telling the stories of their work in communities and their own emerging insights into who they are and what inquiry means in this communal context.

## THE COLLECTIVE INQUIRIES

*Sometimes it feels like we are spending so much precious time convincing others how important the work is rather than getting to a place of how to do it and do it well. The articles in this special issue give us the chance to skip all of the convincing and get into the work, to learn, troubleshoot, reflect and get different perspectives on how to continue on.*

—Sara L. Chase Merrick

In many Indigenous communities there are protocols that mark order. Inspired by this practice, we have created a protocol of order for reading the articles in this issue. We have set the articles in the order to be read, starting with the pieces written by the four IELC partner communities, followed by the pieces written by the four scholars who come from university contexts, either currently or recently.

First, the community pieces are presented in order from East to West, following the direction of the sun's path across the sky, from sunrise to sunset. In order, these pieces are from members of Wiikwedong Early Childhood Development Collaborative, Wicoie Nandagikendan Immersion Program, Daybreak Star Preschool, and Keiki Steps. The articles they have written about their process and their work share the ways in which engaging in Community-Based Inquiry not only strengthened (and continues to strengthen) systems of care and learning in early childhood education but led to their own discoveries about themselves and their communities. Individually, these four articles tell the stories of the work these teams engaged in within their own contexts—the questions they asked, the challenges they faced, their strength and their self-doubt and their persistence in engaging the broader community in their work, and the discoveries, progress, and new questions that emerged for them throughout this process. Collectively, the articles tell the story of the possibilities for Native early childhood education when Indigenous communities have the space and the resources to ask—and pursue answers to—their own questions of practice.

### *Wiikwedong Early Childhood Development Collaborative*

Like the five distinct rivers that flow into Gichigami (*Lake Superior*), the five women who comprise the Wiikwedong Early Childhood Development Collaborative have worked for decades in different early learning programs—“silos,” by their own description—in the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community. In “Niwiidosendimin (We Walk with Each Other),” two members of the Wiikwedong Collaborative document, through both narrative and metaphor, the ways in which the IELC provided an opening for these five educators—who collectively embody a range of expertise, backgrounds, and interests—to start the process of breaking down the silos and putting together their wealth of experience to strengthen not just five separate programs but early childhood education across their community. In partnership with their natural surroundings—the land, the water, the clouds, and the sky—the Wiikwedong Collaborative points the way (in a field dominated, even in small communities, by competition for families and dollars) toward working together for the greater good. Toward a goal larger than one program or one person. Toward a place of collaboration and connection. Toward language and culture. Toward Gichigami.

## *Wicoie Nandagikendan Immersion Program*

*A place to learn words*—that is the meaning of the Dakota and Ojibwe term, *Wicoie Nandagikendan*, as in Wicoie Nandagikendan Early Childhood Urban Immersion Program. The connection between language revitalization and community wellbeing and the continuation of ancestors' legacy is what drives Wicoie Nandagikendan's Community-Based Inquiry. Through dialogue between Wicoie Nandagikendan's Director, Jewell Arcoren, and Program Assistant/Indigenous Food Coordinator, Fawn YoungBear-Tibbetts, we see the initial steps that were taken by seven founding women of the Native American Leaders' Circle to create Wicoie Nandagikendan in 2006 to address the concerns of language loss and lack of curriculum for young learners. In "Meeting Our Ancestors' Legacy: The Community-Based Inquiry of Wicoie Nandagikendan," the conversation between Arcoren and YoungBear-Tibbetts illustrates their commitment to locating a permanent physical space for language classes, positioning the needs of Indigenous families and their children at the forefront of their efforts. Arcoren and YoungBear-Tibbetts ask reflective questions (of themselves and of the families their program serves), revealing the importance of taking care of oneself and community members, slowing down when needed, trusting the process, and identifying community resources to accomplish communal goals. Through the CBI process, they come to understand the breadth of the concept of space, including the ways in which metaphysical space for wellbeing is as important as a dedicated physical space.

## *Daybreak Star Preschool*

Douglas Fir. Hawthorn. Hemlock. Oak. Alder. Dandelion. Nettle. Our plant and tree relatives, all around us in the outdoors, guide Nick Terrones and the Daybreak Star Preschool as they engage in Community-Based Inquiry to design and develop an early childhood year-round outdoor classroom in Seattle, Washington—on lands that once housed a military base, Fort Lawton, reclaimed by United Indians of All Tribes in 1970. In "The Wisdom of Plants: Guides in a Journey of Community-Based Inquiry," Terrones documents the ways in which lessons from plant and tree relatives provided personal guidance for him as he took on the position of Preschool Program Director in 2020 in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, providing a foundation upon which he, his staff, and the community could build a year-round outdoor classroom for the young children of the community. These lessons from plant and tree relatives—*adaptability, courage, humility, patience, community-building, problem-solving, and inner strength*—sustain teaching, curriculum, and, most importantly, learning for the children of Daybreak Star Preschool in their outdoor classroom.

## *Keiki Steps*

*What is Hawaiian cultural identity?* The Institute for Native Pacific Education and Culture (INPEACE) Keiki Steps early childhood education program leadership started their Community-Based Inquiry journey while in a process of working on creating a curriculum built on culture and language. Engaging in CBI as a way of

enhancing the curriculum-building process led them back to their roots, where they asked fundamental and deeply personal questions about Hawaiian culture and identity. *What does it mean to be Hawaiian?* became the focal question for the Keiki Steps team members to investigate and, ultimately, to answer. “E kolo ana nō ke ēwe i ke ēwe (*The rootlet will creep toward the rootlets*)” takes us on a journey of inquiry, discovery, and understanding; the authors are educators who explore their own identities and the identity of the community they serve, each contributing their own pōhaku (*stone*) to their communal ko’a (*ceremonial stone structure*), a practice “intended to nurture and increase Hawaiian wellbeing for ourselves, for the keiki (*children*) of our lāhui (*nation*) and for the future of our hanauna (*generations of family*).”

The second part of the issue invites Indigenous scholars working in universities, currently or recently, to share insights from their own work in Community-Based Inquiry, as they straddle both their commitments to their communities in the inquiry process and the expectations from universities of what “acceptable” research is. Academics who conduct research in communities often talk about an “insider-outsider” dilemma, in which they enter the work as outsiders to the communities but work to become considered “insiders,” as that will allow them access to “robust data” embedded within the community. This dilemma is heightened and exacerbated by an academic definition of research that distrusts research done by researchers in their own communities, particularly in relation to communities of color and under-resourced communities. By contrast, the authors of the pieces in this section navigate “insider-insider” challenges: insiders in the academic world and insiders in their own communities, these researchers marshal the resources they have access to in their universities to support communities in answering their own questions by honoring community culture and language, and ancestral knowledge and ritual. Through this process of Community-Based Inquiry, these authors document the powerful ways in which communities conduct inquiry that is relevant, useful, and actionable for strengthening the work the communities are doing.

### *Amanda LeClair-Diaz*

Teaching, despite efforts at mechanization and standardization, is an immensely complex and personal profession. Who we are affects what we do as teachers and how we perceive the students and the material we teach. Amanda LeClair-Diaz opens her article by recounting several incidents from her time as a paraprofessional in a school in the community in which she grew up on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming. In a school in which the students are predominantly Native and the teachers are predominantly non-Native, non-Native colleagues repeatedly demean the knowledge and experiences of their Native elementary grade students. Returning to the school to do her dissertation research as a graduate student, LeClair-Diaz designed an inquiry to investigate the ways in which Native teachers pass on the knowledge they have to their students through their teaching. In “Why Don’t We Try Something New? How Indigenous Educators Supported One Another in *Leaning Toward* in Community-Based Inquiry,” LeClair-Diaz documents the challenges, struggles, and achievements

of a group of Native teachers—members of a staff with mostly non-Native colleagues teaching mostly Native students—in coming together to address local problems of teacher practice and creating pathways to learning by prioritizing the language and culture of the students they teach. Most importantly, LeClair-Diaz finds that the teachers asked the questions and worked together toward finding answers, supporting each other in their shared quest for actionable solutions: “the teachers leaned on one another for support and were also leaning *towards* how to challenge practices and curricula they felt weren’t suitable for their students and community.”

### *Sara L. Chase Merrick*

*One must always gather with a purpose.* Sara L. Chase Merrick’s piece “Łe:k’iwhlaw ‘O:Its’it: Knowledge-Gathering as a Methodological Approach to Na:tinixwe-Based Inquiry” conceptualizes her work as “*with and from my community*,” identifying Community-Based Inquiry in the Na:tinixwe (Hupa) tribe’s language as łe:k’iwhlaw ‘o:Its’it (*knowledge-gathering*) and a process of gathering that consisted of ch’idilwa:wh (*conversations*), łe:ne:t’-te (*meetings*), and ye-silin (*[re]envisioning as reflexive praxis*). Merrick asserts that the process of asking questions and finding answers is not specific to academics; Indigenous communities have engaged in an inquiry process that is navigated by their ways of knowing for generations. In Na:tinixwe belief, “one must always gather with a purpose,” meaning that a scholar must be intentional in how information is gathered, how information will be used, the times they are gathering information, and not to gather too much. She highlights how this belief guides her “as a Na:tinixwe and Shinnecock thinker and scholar” and shows how this methodology reconceptualizes data as information that contributes to a “larger project of creation” instead of new knowledge. Centering and honoring Na:tinixwe epistemology in her scholarship through łe:k’iwhlaw ‘o:Its’it and ch’idilwa:wh, łe:ne:t’-te, and ye-silin created a dialogue that extended beyond her study to address and plan for long-term solutions and honored ancestral knowledge, centered contemporary Hupa community’s concerns and needs, and nurtured Hupa youth’s future.

### *Jessica Saniguq Ullrich, Evon Taa’qijj Peter, and Jessica Black*

The purpose of inquiry is to investigate the answers to questions. For some researchers, the work ends at finding and articulating conclusions. For communities, the cycle of inquiry continues on to the implementation of solutions, thus changing and strengthening the communities through the work; this is a key foundational piece of Community-Based Inquiry. Jessica Saniguq Ullrich, Evon Taa’qijj Peter, and Jessica Black tell the story of their work as part of a collaborative in Alaska working together—researchers, community members, tribal leaders—to enhance well-being, particularly for youth. The authors, in “Centering Community, Indigenous Relationships, and Ceremony through an Alaska Native Collaborative Hub to Prevent Suicide and Promote Youth Wellbeing,” define inquiry as a “relational process,” clearly and powerfully articulating the relationship between communities and inquiry: “The answers to the many challenges we face are indeed within our communities, embedded

in our cultural values and teachings, our stories, our languages, our lived experiences and ceremonies.” Ullrich, Peter, and Black describe a process of Community-Based Inquiry in Alaska that transforms communities through both the knowledge they collectively create and the relationships that drive the work, ultimately transforming the researchers themselves.

### *Ananda Marin*

Evaluation is a particular type of inquiry, one that answers particular questions for a program, activity, or organization—questions about effectiveness, value, achievement of goals. Ananda Marin served as the evaluator for the first two years of the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative, a title that was changed early on to “co-learner.” In “From the Light of Rainbows: Growing the Spiralic Garden of Community-Based Inquiry and Co-Learning,” Marin describes how this change in title guided the way she listened to, observed, documented, and saw the work that communities were doing to answer their questions through Community-Based Inquiry. Sharing the metaphors she used to capture the work of the IELC—a spiral in Year 1 that evolved into a rainbow in Year 2—Marin also reflects deeply on her personal connections to the work communities were doing and the ways in which approaching this kind of inquiry as a co-learner impacted her process and methodology, providing her an opening to more deeply engage in understanding and documenting the work: “Along the way, I embodied multiple ways of being and knowing including observant witness, storyteller, question-asker, wonderer, and storyteller. These processes provided grounding for making connections across shared stories.”

### AN INVITATION

*Practitioners being able to lean on one another can lead them to focus on transformative changes.*

—Amanda LeClair-Diaz

Our intention is for these pieces to be in conversation with each other; as you will see, authors—particularly those in the second section of this special issue—while telling their own stories of inquiry, also engage with and reflect on the writings in the first section of the volume. The purpose is to create circles of inquiry that collectively build knowledge about Community-Based Inquiry and expand the opportunities and resources for communities to be both practitioners and researchers, askers and answerers, conceptualizers and implementers of strong practices in early childhood education.

The first circle of inquiry includes the four sites comprising the initial cohort of the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative. The second circle of inquiry brings in the four articles written by researchers from universities, adding their insights to the conversation as they listen for the stories from communities. We invite you to join us in a third circle of inquiry, in which you read these pieces from your own vantage

point—whether that be as researcher or practitioner, from a community or university, with experience in this field of inquiry or as a newcomer to this work. *What are the stories that you hear in these pieces, individually and collectively? What do you learn about inquiry and community from the articles in this special issue? What more do you want to know about the ways in which communities generate their own questions about practice and work to find the answers to those questions?* Thank you for joining us—we welcome you to our collective journey.