

# Reclaiming Indigenous Kinship Education: Lessons from the Sapsik<sup>l</sup>w<sup>a</sup>łá Program

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## Introduction

“Love each other. Take care of each other. Be good to your land. Take care of it and all those who walk on the mountains, the four legged, those that swim up the river from the ocean. All of these things that grow in the mountains: the berries and roots that feed the people—that fed them from time immemorial. These things shall not be forgotten because they are still there. And it’s important to discuss this with the little children...and also college students...anywhere.”

Advice to Graduating Indigenous Students given by Yakama Elder, Tuxámshish (Beavert 2021)

We begin with a powerful vision of Indigenous kinship in education, as shared by Sapsik<sup>l</sup>w<sup>a</sup>łá Program Distinguished Elder Educator, Tuxámshish. In her speech to graduating Indigenous students, Tuxámshish intentionally focuses on an ethic of love and care in our relationships with humans and our more than human relations. She reminds our program graduates, all entering their careers as elementary and secondary school teachers, that it is important to discuss our commitments to reclaiming Indigenous kinship “with the little children” and also to keep doing this important work “anywhere” as it is our responsibility to keep building relationships that ensure Indigenous children and youth will have schools and communities enriched with ethics of love and care so that our kinship ties are strong and well. This work is crucial for all peoples, and particularly students training to be teachers serving Indigenous children and communities. Indigenous students taking on this important work have a special role to play. This is the focus of our program and this commentary.

Settler colonialism has always sought to control and eliminate Indigenous peoples, including imposing gendered heteronormative structures designed to displace Indigenous kinship systems (Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill 2013; Simpson 2017). Despite historic and ongoing forms of structural and colonial violence (Kim 2021), many Indigenous peoples, including our own Yakama and Alutiiq peoples, have maintained our practices of kinship, defying normative conceptions that

privilege blood, the nuclear family, and a human-centric vision (Bang et al. 2019; Jacob 2020a; 2020b; McCoy et al. 2021). Indigenous notions of family are inclusive, diverse, and recognize our kinship with land and more than human relations. Within Indigenous kinships systems “it is the *actual* relationship that is real and recognized” (Monture-Angus 1999, 159). Moreover, Indigenous genealogies often recount lands and waters in addition to our human relatives (Smith 2012). Elders, and precious teachings they graciously share, are central in helping us reclaim our broad and inclusive views of kinship and community (Beavert, Jacob, and Jansen 2021; Wilkins 2008).

We approach the work we analyze and describe in this commentary with deep love and care, reflecting both our commitments as Indigenous education scholars as well as Indigenous scholars who bring our own Indigenous teachings into the academy for the purpose of Indigenous liberation. In this article, we describe how Indigenous kinship informs our approach to Indigenous teacher education. We are Yakama (Jacob) and Alutiiq (Sabzalian) and we co-lead an Indigenous teacher education program that operates as a Consortium with nine federally recognized Indigenous Nations and has alumni from 49 Indigenous Nations. Our students and staff often refer to our program as “family” and in doing so we honor Indigenous kinship traditions and our Elders’ instructions: to affirm our good relations with Indigenous peoples and lands and thus we disrupt narrow definitions of kinship prevalent in dominant society. Importantly, dominant discourses around heteronormative nuclear families that are prevalent in education harm *all* children, not only Indigenous youth (McCoy et al 2021). As such, Indigenous kinship pedagogies are vital for preparing future teachers, and students they will educate, to recognize families, “not as the nuclear family that has been normalized in settler society, but big, beautiful, diverse, extended multiracial families of relatives and friends that care very deeply for each other” and include “a web of connections to each other, to the plant nations, the animal nations, the rivers and lakes, the cosmos, and our neighboring Indigenous nations” (Simpson 2017, 8-9).

We discuss two key areas we witness and experience in our work leading an Indigenous teacher education program, and we offer them here as a guide for researchers and teachers whose work impacts children and youth. In doing so, we honor the instructions of Tuxámshish (Dr. Virginia Beavert), who advises that the need to reclaim Indigenous kinship structures in education needs to be one of our highest priorities as we seek to build generative futures and opportunities for children and youth. We recruit and train master’s level Indigenous teacher candidates who are dedicated to teaching in Indigenous-serving schools (for a more detailed program description: <https://sapsikwala.uoregon.edu/>). It is within this context that we affirm the importance of Indigenous kinship in education, by: 1) modeling an intergenerational approach to education that purposefully centers Elder wisdom, and 2) engaging Indigenous Storywork that more deeply connects students to families and communities.

**Centering Elder Wisdom**

Indigenous education systems value Elders as our most revered teachers. In contrast, whitestream education systems (Grande 2015), which normalize age segregation in learning, nearly always exclude Indigenous Elders from the classroom. Even in Indigenous language teaching, Elders are often kept out of schools due to a lack of “formal” teaching licensure or credentials from settler higher education institutions, even when Elders are typically the foremost experts on their own Indigenous languages. Such exclusionary practices are in fact ways of disrupting Indigenous kinship systems, as students are denied the opportunity to connect with and learn from Elders. We resist this form of education that perpetuates epistemic, linguistic, and familial violence. As program leaders, we took on the work of creating a new position at the university, Distinguished Elder Educator, and are honored that Tuxámshish chooses to serve in this role, mentoring and teaching faculty, staff, students, and alumni. Tuxámshish is now 100 years old and grew up in a time before English language dominance on Yakama homeland. Tuxámshish is world-renowned for her work leading language revitalization for Ichishkíin-speaking peoples, and for the most comprehensive gathering of traditional Yakama stories in the *Anakú Iwachá* project, along with her book, in which she recounts teachings learned from her family (Beavert 2017). All of these important resources are required readings in our program and are treasured gifts that connect students with multiple generations of Elder wisdom. What students treasure most, however, is time spent with Tuxámshish, who encourages students to take what they are learning about her Yakama teachings and compare and contrast them with students’ own Indigenous teachings. She constantly advises students to approach Elders in their families and communities, and in doing so she affirms the teaching that intergenerational connections benefit us all. In multiple ways, students benefit from Elder wisdom in our program, and we hope that by witnessing and experiencing the power of intergenerational models of teaching and learning, they will foster Elder-guided, intergenerational learning spaces in their future classrooms. This is a gift students experience and are highly motivated to give to their future students, the youth of today.

Another lesson Tuxámshish imparts upon students is the necessity of engaging their Indigenous languages. Required readings in our program curricula affirm the importance of learning and using Indigenous languages in our classrooms, and students are required to engage Indigenous languages—either their own heritage languages, or to learn and use Sahaptin/Ichishkíin, the language Tuxámshish has taught for many years, including founding the Ichishkíin language program at our university. In our program, students are from many different Indigenous Nations, and they go on to teach at schools across the U.S., sometimes on their own homelands and sometimes on the lands of other Indigenous Nations. In their training with us, and under the advisement of Tuxámshish, students recognize how language affirms and strengthens our kinship systems and learn basic approaches to bringing Indigenous language into the classroom; these are skills that serve our students well as they launch their teaching careers serving Indigenous youth,

typically in schooling systems that have ignored or suppressed Indigenous languages in the classroom.

### **Engaging Indigenous Storywork**

Indigenous education systems are rich with kinship meaning and description. Much of this important work takes place through our powerful storytelling traditions. We reclaim this curricular and pedagogical approach through an emphasis on what Stó:lō Elder Q'um Q'um Xiiem Jo-ann Archibald (2008; 2022) calls Indigenous Storywork, which has seven values: respect, responsibility, reverence, reciprocity, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy. While storytelling is a tradition shared across Indigenous communities, common features include a collaborative approach to teaching and learning, honoring that story readers/listeners have wisdom that will allow them to grasp the lesson most important for their situation, and an expectation that listeners/readers will continue to learn from stories shared with them. In this way, stories connect us to place and to each other, affirming and strengthening kinship. We engage Indigenous Storywork throughout Indigenous students' journey in higher education. We place an expectation that they will continue the tradition with their own students, as the whole purpose of our work together in Indigenous teacher education is to serve Indigenous youth, families, and communities. On a practical level, students read *Anakú Iwachá*, the collection of Yakama traditional stories, all of which Tuxámshish collected from Elders who intended the stories to be shared and used as curricular materials for Indigenous youth and anyone who wants to learn from our powerful stories (Beavert, Jacob, and Jansen 2021). Students also read and reflect on Jacob's collections of stories about contemporary Indigenous communities, all of which have prompts that encourage students to reflect on meaningful relationships and teachings from their own communities (Jacob 2020a; 2020b; 2021).

Collectively, stories instill in students a sense of reverence and accountability to the vast network of relations in their lives, only some of whom are biologically related or human. We intentionally model practices students can take into their own careers as they prepare to teach the next generations of Indigenous youth. Stories are a generative way to help children develop a deep sense of love and responsibility to their homelands and communities. Stories can foster resurgence by helping turn children toward the brilliance of their communities (Simpson 2017). As a pedagogical approach, stories defy coercive forms of pedagogy by respecting children's capacities as learners to make meaning. Just as Elders are respected within Indigenous kinship, the rights and responsibilities of children are also recognized and cherished (Simpson 2017; Wilkins 2008).

### **Conclusion**

Our work is built upon a long-term, intergenerational commitment we have learned from Elders and are bringing into settler schooling systems. All of this work to transform schooling spaces is

to benefit children and youth, who have too often been harmed by systems that deny opportunities for kinship systems to be reclaimed in education. We seek nothing less than to transform education

systems so they are in alignment with Indigenous desires for schools to be places of learning that affirm our kinship structures. For generations, Indigenous families and communities have been disrupted by settler state-imposed structures of schooling and “the social and psychological pathologies that colonization unfailingly trails in its wake” (Collingwood-Whittick 2020). In contrast to Indigenous education systems that are led by Elders and are deeply place-based, today’s public schooling system is nearly always led by people who are not required to have knowledge of place, Indigenous languages, or cultures. In our work in Indigenous teacher education, we are leading the way to disrupt such harm, and in doing so we are upholding a vision Elders have urged and honored across generations so that our future leaders—today’s children and youth—may have a strong and vibrant future.

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## Author Biographies

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