

## **Indigenous Kinship in Education: An Interview with Michelle M. Jacob and Leilani Sabzalian**

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**Chloe: First, I want to thank you for your time as you share your knowledge and experiences with us based on your commentary. Before talking about the commentary specifically, do you want to tell us a little bit about yourselves and what you are currently working on?**

Michelle: Shix̱ páchway! (Greetings!) I am honored to be working on a project examining the importance of my Yakama storytelling tradition. Our stories are the foundation of our Indigenous education systems, which have sustained our people Since Time Immemorial, as our Elders instruct.

Leilani: Cama'i. My heartwork has been leading the Sapsik'wala Program alongside Dr. Jacob where we prepare the next generation of Indigenous educators to support Indigenous youth and communities. It has been such a joy to take part in this work and help cultivate a beautiful network of Indigenous educators that are committed to Indigenous self-determination in education.

**Chloe: You mention in your commentary that it is important to build relationships that ensure Indigenous children and youth will have schools and communities enriched with ethics of love and care. Can you elaborate on what this ethics of love and care looks like in praxis and how it is cultivated?**

Michelle and Leilani: We envision schools that are places of belonging, in which children and youth feel welcomed and know their strengths are honored and affirmed. This is cultivated by our schools and communities aligning with Indigenous values of love and care and the basis for responsible relationships. Indigenous children and youth benefit from this; Indigenous communities benefit from this; all peoples benefit from this approach.

**Chloe: Your commentary paints a beautiful picture of Indigenous kinship and relationships not only to each other but also to the land. Would you be willing to further elaborate on this “web of connections to each other” and on what it means for the “actual relationship” to be recognized within Indigenous kinship systems?**

Michelle: In my Yakama storytelling tradition, we understand that humans are humble beings who only exist due to the generosity of our more than human relations, who are the First People. This humility and gratitude guides our understanding of how precious our web of connections is.

Leilani: Indigenous kinship is such a beautiful and expansive practice! Within Indigenous kinship systems, it is not only our biological relationships that are valued, but also the various people and places—human or more than human as Dr. Jacob highlighted—that we are in meaningful relationships with. As an example, many of the “Aunties” and “Uncles” in my own children’s lives aren’t actually related to them by blood, but they are nevertheless precious and important relatives to my children and considered members of our family.

**Chloe: Could you further explain the significance and importance of raising up Indigenous teachers and scholars to teach and educate from an Indigenous worldview?**

Michelle and Leilani: The Sapsik’w’alá Program is guided by the belief that *education strengthens our people*, or Sápsikw’at xtúwit naamí tananmamíyau in Ichishkiin, a phrase gifted to our program by Átway Arlita Rhoan and Suzie Slockish from the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs. To me, this highlights the vital role that Indigenous educators have within in our communities’ broader movements of Indigenous self-determination and nation-building.

Readers interested in this topic can benefit from engaging Dr. Sabzalian’s excellent book, *Indigenous Children’s Survivance in Public Schools!*

**Chloe: You discuss the importance of intergenerational learning within the classroom and how Elders are typically kept out of schools because of a lack of “formal” credentials. Can you further highlight the significance of centering Elder wisdom within the classroom? Could you also discuss the harm in keeping Elders out of the classroom and how their inclusion could help to disrupt dominant colonial ideology that prioritizes credentials over lived experience?**

Michelle and Leilani: Elders are our most revered teachers. It makes no sense to keep experts out of learning environments. It makes no sense to have a credentialing system for educators that denies Elders' lifelong experiences and knowledge. It makes no sense to have children being denied meaningful intergenerational connections and relationships in the settings in which they spend the majority of their days.

**Chloe: In thinking about applying these lessons to the classroom, are there any resources or other works you would like to share or highlight that would provide additional learning relevant to Indigenous kinship systems in education?**

Michelle and Leilani: A beautiful way to understand Indigenous kinship systems is through Dr. Jacob's [book series](#). In each book, she shares her Yakama way of understanding kinship and invites readers to reflect on and appreciate the vast network of relations in their lives.

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