

# Meeting Our Ancestors' Legacy: The Community-Based Inquiry of Wicoie Nandagikendan

*Jewell Arcoren and Fawn YoungBear-Tibbetts*

## INTRODUCTION: SPACE FOR SURVIVAL

*Unless Wicoie gets our own language immersion space, we will remain invisible to the larger community.*

—Wicoie Nandagikendan Parent Advisor

In 1998, the Alliance of Early Childhood Professionals (AECPP) began the *Taking the Lead* leadership project. Seven Leadership Circles formed to make systems changes in early childhood for the betterment of the children in underrepresented communities. Each Leadership Circle consisted of people from the specific community who were early childhood educators. One of these circles was The Native American Leaders' Circle. The Native American Leaders' Circle consisted of a core group of seven women, early childhood educators working in South Minneapolis: Lillian Rice, Jennifer Bendickson, Betty Bowstring, Betty Jane Schaaf, Tammy Shaw, Leila Goggeye, Cleone Thompson and Vicky Chavez. These founding women went on to create "Wicoie Nandagikendan," which means "a place to learn words" in Dakota (Wicoie) and Ojibwe (Nandagikendan).

---

*[The guest editors arranged the essays to be read progressively. We suggest that readers first read the introduction and then approach these essays in their order. —Ed.]*

JEWELL ARCOREN is a Dakota and Lakota Win'yan, and an enrolled member of the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate. Jewell has focused on recovering our spirits and transcending intergenerational historical trauma in the American Indian community. Described as a community activist, Jewell sees that, from an Indigenous lens, language revitalization and community wellbeing are a natural flow of the recovery process. FAWN YOUNGBEAR-TIBBETTS is from the White Earth Band of Minnesota Ojibwe, a mother, artist, activist, educator, and executive director of Wicoie Nandagikendan Minneapolis's Ojibwe and Dakota Language Immersion Early Childhood Center. She has worked in Indigenous environmental education for more than fifteen years.

For two years they struggled to maintain a consistent, solid group and decide what issues they were to focus on. In the year 2000, with the support of the Alliance of Early Childhood Professionals, the Native American Leaders' Circle held a conference called *In the Spirit of the Child* in Mille Lacs, MN. Teachers along with legislative, tribal and community leaders came from around the state of Minnesota to discuss what the community's concerns were for their children. The issues that were most acknowledged were the loss of language and a lack of curriculum for younger children. These issues then became the foci and motivating factors for the Native American Leaders' Circle.

The participants in the Leaders' Circle decided that they were going to have language speakers in each of their respective early childhood classrooms. But they needed financial support to do so. So, in 2002, the AECP Native American Leaders' Circle started the Dakota Ojibwe Language Revitalization Alliance (DOLRA). DOLRA was a support group for people working in language revitalization efforts to network and share ideas. Members of the Leaders' Circle traveled to each of the Dakota communities and Ojibwe reservations to talk about the work that needed to be done and increased participation in DOLRA. They wanted to have all of the tribes represented at DOLRA's monthly meetings as well as gain support for the work that DOLRA did.

While the DOLRA members met, the members of the Leaders' Circle cooked food. They would cook and the people would come. DOLRA then approached all the tribes in the state of Minnesota to have a resolution passed to support language work in Minnesota. This bill was passed in 2005 with the help of Karen Clark, language champion and state representative at the time.

In 2006, the Native American Leaders' Circle began the Dakota and Ojibwe Immersion Program, Wicoie Nandagikendan. There were five classrooms, each associated with at least one of the members of the Leaders' Circle. Of those sites, one is still in existence: Wicoie Nandagikendan, in collaboration with The Family Partnership's Four Directions Early Childhood program. In 2022, Wicoie Nandagikendan has one Dakota full immersion classroom and one Ojibwe full immersion classroom.

In 2007, DOLRA secured ongoing state funding for language teacher training through the University of Minnesota Duluth and Twin Cities. During both the 2009-2011 and the 2011-2013 state legislative sessions DOLRA secured Legacy money to continue supporting language revitalization efforts. We continued to receive legacy funds up into the 2017-19 biennium.

Wicoie Nandagikendan uses a master/apprentice teaching and training model. Since 2006, we have assisted in developing upwards of 50 language immersion teachers. In 2022, Wicoie Nandagikendan continues language revitalization at the early childhood level with our children and their families, and our Dakota and Ojibwe languages are at the center of the work we do in the community. We continue to develop language immersion teachers who will also be certified early childhood educators, and we have started outreaching to Indigenous career days and Indian Education middle school and high school programs with the message that language immersion teaching is a viable

career and a great way to give back to community while helping to revitalize our Dakota and Ojibwe languages. We are growing our own teachers from within our community.

Wicoie Nandagikendan does not have our own dedicated classroom space; our classrooms are housed in an early childhood center and our administrative offices are housed in a separate location. And here begins our journey and process; from the beginning it has always been a dream for this organization to get its own early childhood center.

It's important to look back and give credit to our community. We would not be here if our children were not at the center of our work. Dakota and Ojibwe languages are the heart of our community; our children are why we are still relevant to our community sixteen years later. Community recognizes language revitalization as a pathway to recovery; there is a direct connection between language immersion and our community health and wellbeing. A dedicated language immersion site to nurture not only our children and families but our languages as well is long overdue.

A note about the structure of this article: In our professional relationship, as the full-time administrators and directors of Wicoie Nandagikendan, we do much of the work of planning, brainstorming, analyzing, reflecting, and decision-making through dialogue—raising questions, digging into issues, and building on each other's ideas. Similarly, our article will reflect that process of work, in which the reader will see both our individual thoughts and our shared ideas. This is the way we work, and this is the way we write.

## SPACE OF SYNCHRONICITY: AN OPPORTUNITY TO ENGAGE IN COMMUNITY-BASED INQUIRY

### ***Jewell:***

As Wicoie Nandagikendan began the process of finding a starting point toward securing a dedicated space, there was simultaneously a lot of trauma energy swirling around in Minneapolis, Minnesota. George Floyd had been murdered, our part of the city where our program is located had been vandalized and burnt to the ground, and we were experiencing a food desert. A lot of energy was going into guarding our neighborhoods and workspaces. Our building was boarded up and dark. COVID was rampant and we were isolated from each other. We had to work through new learning curves with technology and virtual classrooms and office space; we of course were adapting, but it took its toll on us.

The day the verdict for Derek Chauvin (on trial for murdering George Floyd) was being handed down, we were advised to exit the city as rapidly as possible and to leave our office space. Nobody knew what the verdict was going to be or what the reaction within the city would be. We packed our computers and put valuable equipment in safe places. There was a sense of urgency and we were on high alert. When a guilty verdict was delivered to Derek Chauvin, there was a notable sigh of relief that perhaps the wheels of justice were finally turning.

It was like a breath of fresh air with many things happening within the same week. I was nearly done with an online application for a fellowship that sounded good as it

was aimed at BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) early childhood leaders and systemic changes. However, it felt that, if I received this fellowship, I would be the educator for the cohort on Native issues and history, as the application process involved me describing and articulating the genocide that was committed in the Americas, the resulting traumas, and how that in turn impacted our social economic factors and family and community stability, as well as describing potential solutions. In the same week, I had also met with a fellow American Indian colleague to talk about our program and the possibility of us working together programmatically (though he was not able to get the sense or the scope of our vision and intentions, and the urgency and the critical need to advance our program from a grassroots level).

At this point in time, we had come to the realization that our current early childhood partner organization would only see us as a vendor agency, and we were in fact in a non-reciprocal organization-to-organization relationship that was on many levels a predatory relationship. As an American Indian organization representing the voice of our community, the importance of our Dakota and Ojibwe languages, and our mission to create a quality early childhood education, we were not being heard by our partner organization. We felt invisible.

The fact that we were still standing as a non-profit organization signaled to our staff and board members the relevance language revitalization held to our community. How were we caring for our responsibility to our youngest community members and their families? How were we caring for our Dakota and Ojibwe languages?

At the urging of another colleague, we met with Tarajeen Yazzie-Mintz of First Light Education Project about the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative (IELC). Synchronicity is a word that comes to mind, or perhaps energies aligning, when first getting connected with the IELC. Despite our physical distance (this was an all-virtual meet and greet), it is a powerful experience when another person honors you by listening with openness and can hear your voice and can understand your intentions and vision. It is remarkably validating. It communicates so strongly that we are not alone, that others understand exactly where we are and can help us refine that vision and find resources to achieve our goals because they too want what is best for our American Indian children and families.

We knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that our organization needed our own space that was dedicated to language immersion. In our metropolitan area, we could see other cultural immersion early childhood centers springing up all over our city. To become visible to our own state funders and other early childhood experts and educators, and to attend to our community's health and wellbeing, we needed to get our own space.

Getting our own space was not a new idea. Circling back to the original founding women of Wicoie Nandagikendan, this was always their intent. Yet at that time we did not have the tools to advance this idea forward. Moving this idea forward involved our community input; we needed to find stakeholders who could help us clarify this vision and we needed to find others who understood our intentions. After fifteen years of doing language immersion work and assisting in the development of a host of language immersion teachers, we knew we could no longer afford to do nothing in regard to

getting our own space. We could no longer be homeless in our homeland. With the help of IELC we were able to craft a work plan and implement it.

***Fawn:***

Jewell walked into my office and asked, “What do you know about Community-Based Inquiry?” I’ve done participatory action research which is similar but not the same and now that I’ve gone through the Community-Based Inquiry (CBI) process, I can definitively say that the two methodologies are different. At the time, I was intrigued by a Native partner funding us to ask any question we want (that’s kind of how Jewell explained it). We could use this opportunity to find out about getting our own space, our own building, and our own classrooms, and to show the need from our communities. I thought it was a great opportunity. I think we knew right away that we wanted to participate. There was no question. As soon as the offer came in, we said “yes,” and we were thinking about how we could use the data that we might collect through this process.

Our community in south Minneapolis had been rocked, turned upside down, burned down, and destroyed, as a result of the murder of George Floyd and the riots that followed. In a way, we were just starting to rebuild and re-clean spaces. On the day before the verdict was read for Derek Chauvin, we cleared out our office, we packed up all the computers and hard drives, and triple-locked them down behind doors with jimmy-proof steel locks on them. It was a mad rush, and we all sat anxiously awaiting the reading of the verdict, not knowing how our community would respond no matter how the verdict came back. The next morning Jewell and I both overslept, and it was a giant relief because there were no riots that night and there were no serious protests.

It’s important to note that everybody in our organization is also a member of the urban Native American community in south Minneapolis. I’m a street medic; I set up the mobile medical response unit on George Floyd Square. I was there for four-and-a-half months and was subsequently present at all the marches and homeless camp evictions and other police shootings in and around Minneapolis. The chair of our board is Lisa Bellinger, the national co-director of the American Indian Movement. All of our board members belong to this community and work with other non-profits and school districts throughout Minneapolis. In our own ways we are all activists. When bad things happen in our community, our community has a phenomenal way of pulling together.

Jewell and I both slept through an important meeting with Tarajeau. We both had a mild freak-out and Jewell sent Tarajeau an e-mail to see if we could reschedule. Tarajeau was very understanding and said, “This is an opportunity to slow down. It’s OK to slow down. We’re not in a rush with the process.” And that really allowed Jewell and I, individually and as an organization, to take time to take a deep breath and to kind of dig a little deeper in our conversations and in our inquiry. Our inquiry question was always about space and, at the beginning, it was about a physical building. That changed quickly once we realized we had the emotional space and the supportive space from and with the IELC to think a little more critically about what space really means to our community.

## SPACE FOR RETREAT AND REFLECTION: EXPANDING OUR CONCEPT OF SPACE

### *Fawn:*

We decided as a group that a staff and board retreat to Madeline Island for a weekend out of Minneapolis would be a great opportunity to have some reprieve and to also be able to work on our strategic plan. We lucked out with the Madeline Island retreat space; the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa had just gotten some land back including cabins on the north shore of the island. They were getting ready to open half of those to the public for rentals; I have some strong connections in Bad River and was able to get us into the cabins a week before they opened. Madeline Island is a significant place to the Ojibwe people; it's part of our creation and migration story and almost all of us have relatives associated with Madeline Island.

Our board and staff is composed primarily of Ojibwe and Dakota tribal members, yet most of our staff and board had never been to Madeline Island before. As a matter of fact, only two of us had ever been out there and one had only been able to go out for day trips; I am fortunate enough to have friends with land out there and have camped there on a regular basis. Through this retreat, Wicoie Nandagikendan gave the Bad River Band their first dollars as a business on Madeline Island.

We tried to plan the retreat around aspects of health and wellness, so we took a massage therapist and two cooks and a whole lot of really great food out to the island. From Minneapolis to Bayfield, Wisconsin, it's about a four-and-a-half hour drive, and then you must hop on the ferry and ride it out to the island. I've had the pleasure of seeing lots of cool things while riding the ferry over the years but it's always interesting to see first-timers cross. It's about a twenty-minute ride and you kind of loop around the little town of La Pointe to come into the dock; you can see the couple of hotels and the small businesses and the dock. Once you get off the ferry you drive through La Pointe and head to the other end of the island, which is maybe nine miles long. Bad River's cabins are on the most northern remote and private location on the island. There are three roads to get out of the little town of La Pointe and they all will lead you to the north side of the island. You must turn down a little dirt road and you drive until you see the lake. The dirt road then curves to the right and the cabins are down that part of the road. There's a tribal member-only section of cabins just a little past where the public cabins are as well, and there were some tribal members staying out in the cabins while we were there. The Tribal Chair and some other staff from Bad River are friends of mine; they stopped in and had dinner with us on a few occasions throughout our visit.

During our retreat on Madeline Island, we were joined by two members of the consulting firm, Headwater People, to help with the strategic plan, and it was a really good fit for our organization. I was a little concerned because it was two men leading this training for a group of women (and older women especially), but they were phenomenal. They participated to the extent that they could in the ceremonies we did. We did a full moon ceremony out there with Lisa Bellinger, a woman's ceremony in which men are allowed to be present and help with the fire but they're not allowed to

participate in the ceremony itself. So the men sat and watched and sang some songs for us and prayed for us in their own languages throughout the retreat.

The facilitators gave us some time at the beginning to think about all the trauma that we had been living through. I really like the way they did it because we didn't have to share if we didn't want to. For me it was a personal kind of reflection. We then walked out whatever that path was for us. If it was a zigzag or if it was a circle, that was what we walked. I hadn't really had time to think about it like that before or had to think about it in a sequence. For a long time I stood in one place because for a good portion of time I had been at George Floyd Square dealing with that trauma, and I was literally stuck in one spot for about four months. I saw everybody else walking around, walking out their path. And I was just standing there on the beach for a while thinking about everything that had happened in our community. And for me, personally, it was a really great way to move past that. It was more about not getting caught up in what had happened, and how do we constructively move forward as an organization? It was a good way to start the retreat. It helped us move forward instead of staying in a reactionary state.

We ended up breaking up into two groups and doing some visioning. At one point the facilitators said, "Hop in the DeLorean and travel five years or ten years into the future. What does Wicoie look like? What's inside the building? What's outside of the building? What kind of learning spaces need to be included?" So we sat, and our team drew out what the building could look like. Ours ended up being a circle-shaped building that included a ton of outdoor learning areas and cultural areas. We also left with a six-month road map of all the things we needed to do to be able to get our strategic plan in place.

It was only the beginning of building our strategic plan. It included engaging with a building owner's representative and talking to a designer and all those things that need to be done and known prior to planning right. For example, what are our options as far as space? Do we stay where we are? Do we rent something? Do we design and build our own building? When we left, we knew who we had to engage in the next six months to complete the plan.

We also realized that we were not necessarily taking the best care of ourselves either. Most of the time I run on autopilot and often don't have time to decompress. Time and space for healing and reflection then became very important to the questions we were asking. What does a whole healthy Indigenous child look like? How can we help develop those children through our program?

This gave us the opportunity to think about health and wellness in the space and within our own organization. We realized quite quickly that we needed to create space for health and wellness spiritually, physically, and emotionally, and that all those things are tied to the wellness and wholeness of all human beings. Through this inquiry process, our definition of space changed dramatically from just a physical space/location to a concept of space as a creation of home, a physical space, a space for all language learners, a metaphysical space, a space for healing, a space for community, a space for reflection, a spiritual space, and a space for wellness and recovery for our community. We realized that we could move from a space of scarcity and survival to a

space of thriving and love. We also realized that we could hold some of this space now even though we are not in our own physical space.

One of the questions that was brought up during this process was whether we can become a licensed training center for language immersion teachers. We have lofty goals and this one is hard to reach; but we also learned that, if we take our time and we do our planning properly, those goals can become reality. It's about building a stronger long-term program so we can think about things creatively and critically.

The retreat also showed me that we have time. Often we are time constricted: there's a feeling of rushing and urgency to the work we do. We found out that it's okay to slow down; these processes take time. We have to really have a good plan in order to be successful in meeting the needs of our community. For example, we need to know what and when certain positions need to be hired. There are a lot of details in running your own space. I think we left the Island with a really good idea of how we're going to do that incrementally now with the data and the information that we've collected in the conversations with community members.

***Jewell:***

Having the opportunity for an organizational retreat was just what we needed post-George Floyd and post-COVID. Looking back a year later and seeing how far we have come is a powerful experience. While we have miles yet to go, we are so much closer now to achieving that dream—our goal of having our own space.

The “retreat as ceremony” that we held on Madeline Island was needed to recover from the whirlwind vortex in south Minneapolis where we were on high alert while guarding our homes and workplaces. It showed us the level of commitment our own board was engaged in as well as allowing us time to continue our dreaming circle in regards to space and health and wellness with staff and board. It was wonderful to hear the stories of our board members' community work and their dedication to our children and families. It was awesome to meet other Indigenous folks from across the waters who helped facilitate our gathering, who understood our vision and helped us craft achievable milestones.

## SPACE FOR INQUIRY: USING COMMUNITY-BASED INQUIRY TO DIG DEEPER

***Jewell:***

Through Community-Based Inquiry (CBI), we realized we were not actually in a do-nothing phase; we were busy attempting to mend a relationship that could no longer sustain us and was detrimental to our long-term health as an organization. We wanted to provide access to language. By remaining in our current relationship without creating plans to move forward into our own space, we were part of the energy that was suffocating our languages.

As we look at future needs, CBI becomes the way to continually feed us and strengthen our organizational voice. We have several pools to draw from within our community: there are our statewide immersion teachers, many if not most of whom have interned and/or apprenticed in our program; there are administrators for

immersion programs; our youth; our families; and last, but most definitely not least, our community.

We had never engaged in a structured CBI. Creating awareness around the approaches was the first step. The next step was becoming familiar with the process and how we could leverage this as a tool to amplify our community voice when it came to our language immersion needs and to revitalizing our critically vulnerable language statuses. CBI also highlighted for us what needs were not being met. This was a huge “aha” moment for me. CBI gave us a map of sorts, highlighting our barriers as well as our achievable goals and vision. If we were asking our community these questions, how did we apply them to our own organization?

***Fawn:***

Our community is large, loud and often dirty, riddled with needles, garbage, homelessness. I’ve had many sleepless nights due to the gun violence in our neighborhood. I live maybe four blocks from the office and on the same block as our community garden. Before we can take students into the garden, I have to clean it first, oftentimes finding needles or people “using” at the site. I usually engage in a conversation with them, and they move on down the road so our students aren’t exposed. Usually the people on the street or in the garden are very understanding, most of them having children of their own. We clean up the space, so no needles are found by kids. Often neighbors come and help and so do the people I meet who are out on the street. They know that they “use” at that site during the night. Mostly it’s safe for them back there behind the garden area at night. So they are usually very willing to help when I tell them students are on the way. It really does take a community to care for the spaces we use every day.

One of the things we learned during our inquiry process is that surveys can get some information but really the time for conversations is just as important, if not more so. Some people are perfectly fine answering a survey question in detail. For example, one of the survey questions asked, “If you could design a space dedicated to early childhood language and culture, what would that space look like? How big would the space be?”

One response was “Playgrounds.” Another response to the same question was:

I would focus on language being spoken throughout the day, not just a block of time. I would also invite parents to participate in more field trips and offer language support so they can learn with their children if they need. Ideally, it would be low to no tuition so that a larger part of the community could have access. Also, it would be cool to see traditional foods as part of every meal whenever possible and get the community involved in providing food for the kids. It would also be nice to see multiple teachers being able to speak the languages throughout the day. I think it would be great to see the other staff also speaking the language as much as possible. I think access to traditional games or other physical exercises after school or during school would be nice to see, so families and kids can practice physical wellness together.

Through engaging in conversation while her daughter was filling out the survey, I found out the woman who answered “Playgrounds” was a grandmother who spoke Lakota. We had a very long conversation about how programs can help families continue to teach the language and that language, food, and culture are just as important to her family as to the woman who answered the survey question in detail. This woman talked in detail about the Veggie Rx program and the lack of access to traditional foods in our community. Veggie Rx is a local program that partners local farms with clinics in the cities, giving patients who are experiencing food insecurity access to free food deliveries and recipes. In the end we gathered way more information from conversations than what she had written in the survey.

These kinds of coffee table conversations are an extremely important part of the inquiry process in our community. Surveys can be helpful but many of our community members won't or don't feel comfortable filling out surveys; they really need to talk it out. In our community, these conversations are just as valuable as (if not more than) the other data-gathering methods that we have engaged in. They give us a much richer understanding and clearer picture of what our community's needs and wants are.

As well as conducting surveys and community conversations, we also held some parent and community advisory meetings and will continue to do so indefinitely. These kinds of conversations are invaluable to the inquiry project we are working on. We hosted another gathering on December 3, 2022. This one included traditional food, incentives, survey collection, and conversations. We invited students and families from two local Dakota and Ojibwe immersion schools and language programs, Bdote Learning Center and Anishinabe Academy High Five Program. Many of the students at Bdote have been graduates of our program and will lend great insight into our site and programming.

As part of the inquiry process, we all went out and took photos of our community (including public art and the cultural corridor), our classrooms, garden, and offices. We also sent a group of kids out to take pictures too. When we sent out the kids, there was a large homeless encampment right under the Franklin Avenue Bridge on the Franklin Avenue Cultural Corridor. We also got photos of injecting needles right in front of the office. Taking pictures of things we've gotten used to seeing around us every day helped show the struggles in our community. We've also been collecting pictures from our interns and staff at The Family Partnership.

From the photos we have taken and collected, two images really stand out: one is a picture of the playground and the other is a picture of a chicken lunch. I feel that these two photos show clearly why this partnership isn't working.

The photo of the playground is actually a photo of a thermometer. When The Family Partnership built their new building, they put the playground on the southern side of the building, which means that the playground—covered in blacktop and right next to the parking lot—is exposed to the sun all day. Because of this, it gets too hot for the kids to go outside and play on the playground; even in the winter that playground can hit 70 degrees, which means it's not accessible to our students for approximately 90 percent of the school year. Despite putting up a canopy and an

umbrella to provide our students with a little shade, this represents another area of our partnership in which we are not included in planning for the needs of the children and our languages.

In contrast to that, we have a beautiful, fenced-off garden space smack dab in the middle of our community. From the photos that the kids took in the garden, you can't tell that you're in south Minneapolis; it is as if even the sounds of the city disappear while in the garden. We have several of these green spaces in the city. Unfortunately, none of these spaces are near The Family Partnership building since that organization moved further out of the community, so the teachers can't take our students into those green spaces during the day for learning.

One of the interns at The Family Partnership sent me a picture recently of the lunch that was being served to the kids: chicken patty on a bun. It looked horrible and none of the kids wanted to eat it. In comparison, I have a photo of the bison taco boxes, a standard lunch that I send home when I prepare food for our children and our families. I stick to serving traditional foods: bison tacos, bison and ground turkey meatballs, smoked fish, baked walleye, wild rice, and blue corn mush. At the beginning of the grant, The Family Partnership was all about supporting the food program, but they are not following through with it so much anymore. I think it would be hard for them to implement a full Indigenous diet because of their food service provider, which serves 12,000 meals a day. It is important to us to provide Indigenous foods for our children and families, rather than continuing to work with partners who do not make this a priority. This gives us a large push to move on to getting our own space.

A lot of the ideas of health and wellness are woven throughout everything we do. We've been asking questions such as, "What does a healthy Native organization look like? What does language revitalization mean today and look like? What does a whole healthy Indigenous child look like? How do we as an organization meet our families' and communities' needs in those regards?" Up to this point we have been using the information collected during the inquiry to inform internal policy, professional development, recruitment of staff, and teacher training.

We have also been using that information to inform our grant applications. For example, Wicoie Nandagikendan applied for and was awarded the Native American Languages—Esther Martinez Immersion program grant from the Administration for Native Americans (ANA) of the US Department of Health and Human Services. We applied for this grant to develop licensed early childhood language immersion teachers, with two objectives: one, to support teachers in getting their early childhood certificates, and two, to increase language fluency among early childhood teachers. For the grant application, we used knowledge gained through our inquiry project about the lack of speakers in our community who are also licensed early childhood teachers, a challenge shared by other early childhood programs in the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative. We know that when we have our own space, we will need more licensed immersion early childhood center teachers. The outcome of this grant will be seven licensed Dakota and Ojibwe language immersion early childhood teachers.

## FINDINGS: SPACE OF DISCOVERY AND CHALLENGES

### **Jewell:**

*The wheels are turning: Community discussion, dialogue, the future for Wicoie are front and center. Today we're in an outdoor/quiet, beautiful writing/retreat space. As I write, I'm struck by the fact that this place is the opposite of where we live and work. How do we bring this learning and reconnection to our community? One of the first things I did today was go outside and breathe and thank the creator for this space. . . . I looked and I felt and I heard the bluejays bringing me a message that we are resilient, we are survivors, we can recover....and the ever loving loudness and beauty of the crow reminding me that we Dakota and Ojibwe people are still here despite efforts to crush us out of existence. (Jewell, excerpt from a reflective writing activity)*

Sometimes you can't go forward unless you look back. Knowing where you come from in our communities is always important. It allows us to remember our ancestors, this place we call *Unci Maka* (Grandmother Earth), the stars, our foods, our air, our water, all of our four and two legged relatives, our people, our community, our families, and how we are all connected and simple human beings full of energy who are many things: traumatized, in recovery, healing, reconnecting to place and language; understanding, being respectful of and honoring others and their journeys, their knowledge and what they too bring to the table of space and language immersion and our beloved children and our future generations.

As I look back on this year of Community-Based Inquiry, it began as a place of discovery and challenges. Being a community member here in the Twin Cities American Indian community, and aging, and looking at transitioning out of a leadership position with Wicoie Nandagikendan, I feel a pressing need to bring in new leaders: to open those doors, to nurture and communicate the sense of responsibility of caring for self and community as it pertains to early childhood and language immersion. Trusting the process is a challenge, to believe that Wicoie Nandagikendan will be okay, that this process is teaching us so much about our community. Our people have survived a genocide, and our languages have survived many, many barriers, and still we go on to learn and teach.

My impacts are the continual and almost daily dialogue Fawn and I have with each other about the future of Wicoie Nandagikendan, options, and the ongoing constant need for community engagement. Understanding and stressing that our community reflects the vitality of our languages on so many levels and how we can gather that feedback and shine that light back to our community as it encompasses our children, our language, our space, and our health and wellness both internally as an organization and as a community.

My learning lessons have been self-care and how to slow down: pace yourself, be strategic, be patient with yourself and your work colleagues and community members, plan, listen to others, value feedback like gold from the *Paha Sapa* (The Black Hills), like food that grows on the water, fragile, yet keystone insights that will show us recovery pathways.

Why is it so hard to take care of ourselves? Why do we give so much of ourselves to our communities? I have learned from CBI that it is critical that we take care of ourselves and to be our own relative in that sense of caring for self as we lead organizational work that is reflective of our community. If we want the community to show up in their own healthiest ways, then we too need to show up in our own best form.

***Fawn:***

One of the biggest barriers we face as an organization is funding. Capital campaigns take a lot of time and effort. We spend a lot of time looking for resources, grant dollars, and other funding opportunities. It's very much a full-time job, and we're all doing that on top of our day-to-day work. Just as funding is a barrier to us, so is it for our families. The base rate of daycare and early childhood education is increasing drastically for our families. We do not set the price point—The Family Partnership does—and we are often struggling to come up with scholarships so that our students can keep attending the program.

Through this project, we were able to lay down a road map and identify resources in our community. We were able to connect with the appropriate community members to be able to help execute our strategic plan that will allow us to keep making connections and identifying community resources. CBI doesn't end when the funding ends. This is a practice that we will continue to use as we progress through the strategic plan and likely indefinitely.

## IMPACT: SPACE OF VISIBILITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

***Jewell:***

Time to move forward. It's hard to believe we stayed this long. With prompts from our eldest board members, we began to gather strength to move and to make long overdue changes. Experience has taught us that one of the only things we can ever count on is change. As a person of the community who held space for Wicoie Nandagikendan for more than ten years, I understand that new leadership needs to be cultivated; this too has been part of the process. Nurturing and mentoring in new leadership is humbling and amazing and, me being a "worry wart," worrisome. It is time to bring in new leadership and younger folks from our communities and acknowledge their experience and wisdom too. I understand that we as Indigenous people all carry this internal and external trauma energy. Despite our own personal traumas, what always strikes me about our Indigenous communities is their willingness to continue to help and give. We still have skills and experience to bring to the work environment.

As the clarity of CBI begins to take shape, I'm excited. Curiosity, responsibility, love, and passion drive much of the work I do with Wicoie Nandagikendan. I'm so excited to see the results of all of the work we've put into this CBI. How will the community mirror their thoughts on health and wellness back to us? How important is it that our children continue to learn their ancestral language? Can we now be proud of our language and move toward seeing that reflected everywhere? Can we hear Dakota and Ojibwe language everywhere, starting in our homes, then moving into

community? This was a vision of the founding mothers. Am I passing that onto the next generation of leaders?

We have learned that we have to be flexible, adaptable, and patient. Some folks in our community still are not comfortable with technology and reading and writing, so we learned to be prepared and be ready to record responses as an alternative way to gather feedback. Another learning lesson is having tools available that help our community express and articulate their concerns, issues, and passions for language learning. Things are never just one way. Just like within our master/apprentice model, some folks come from the higher education system, some are right out of high school, some are grandmothers and fathers and mothers and aunts and uncles. We know that they all love their languages, or they want to learn. Many understand the sacrifices our ancestors made so we could be here, and they are willing to show up.

I was talking with Fawn today, sharing ideas and best strategies for Wicoie Nandagikendan. She was talking about our *Mni'sota* foodshed, how she takes for granted her knowledge and assumes everyone knows about gathering and harvesting and smoking fish. I talked about my days with another food program. I shared with Fawn the amount of research I put in to understanding why our Indigenous communities are hit so hard by various health disparities (in particular, diabetes) and how our government puts such pressure on us to disconnect from ourselves, our culture (and be "American"), and ultimately our connection to place and our ancestral lifeways and language. Many of us can say that we didn't know and many of us in fact no longer know how to gather, hunt, sing our songs, plant our foods, sew our clothes, hold ceremony, and connect to place. At what point do we hold ourselves responsible for our own learning? And if not knowing anymore is an intentional construct, how do we unlearn it? If those of us who know how to connect to language and other language recovery pathways, how do we best share this knowledge so that we have the confidence to want to learn and reconnect with traditional lifeways and in particular raise healthy children that are connected and can speak their ancestral languages?

Wicoie Nandagikendan is really good at collaborating. How do we become vital community partners? How do we continue to embed language learning at the early childhood level? How do we become a world Indigenous language organization? How do we balance the income-generating mindset of offering language and early childhood education so that it isn't cost prohibitive and is accessible to all (free in fact) with the need to pay our teachers and staff and other administrative people to run an early childhood education center that is the best of the best for our children? What does a whole Indigenous child look like? Greeting me in the morning with language is so heartwarming. How do I reinforce the home learning environment? What tools do I need to reflect language in my home space?

The foods we eat, the connection to place and to our medicines. How do we develop a compelling story? We are in a dire partnership; we have to carefully extricate ourselves, we have to prepare, financially. How do we conduct a feasibility study so we have more hard facts evidence of the need for Wicoie Nandagikendan to have its own space?

Community remains connected. Like a tipi and our lodges, we all have roles. We have intentions and part of the work we do is to help our community focus that energy

on working together. How do we address each other? That too is part of the collective group process. Even today as community members, we have roles and responsibilities. I have learned that there is no room for egos in the work that we do with the community. Our “sacred little ones” and our families are who we do this work for. Some of the work has been from the inside. Our goal is to ensure we are all a part of the process. Fawn and I can’t do everything. We can’t afford to be allowed to think that way. We can’t afford to be in this “do nothing” phase anymore. We needed the tools to move in the right direction. Knowing who, knowing when: these are important and a part of the process. Having a mentor(s) who gives objective feedback. Giving us encouragement to do the work. Finding folks who can provide and give honest, constructive, and critical feedback is part of the process.

***Fawn:***

One of the things Jewell always says is that if we had our own building tomorrow, we couldn’t move. Just like other immersion and other educational programs, we need more teachers! We need to be able to pay them a competitive wage and benefits. We need more staff members and administrators, and we need ways to train and develop new leadership within our organization and community. Our community has the ability to meet our organization’s needs in the future; we have people, that’s for sure. If we want people from our community to fill the roles within our organization, we need to have the ability and time to train them. Organizations in our community tend to suffer when we have staffing turnover, so transition planning and professional development are going to be a big part of our organization’s planning process.

We have received a grant for teacher development. We are also looking at other funding opportunities for professional development. Grant applications are now easier because of the inquiry process. We have been able to take the inquiry data and transfer them to grant applications. We have also begun looking at all the positions we will need filled in the future so we can be thoughtful about who and when positions should be hired. We need to reduce costs for our families, and we need to remove barriers to our families’ ability to learn and incorporate the language at home. We learned that cost is really the ultimate barrier for families to be able to participate in our program.

What we learned about our community is that they also want a space for our children to be able to engage in language and culture-based education. We deserve our own space, and we shouldn’t have to pay external organizations for our children to learn the language.

## CONCLUSION: SPACE TO HONOR OUR ANCESTORS

***Fawn:***

Our organization is comprised of our staff, board, and the community; the families we serve all live and work in this urban Native community. Oftentimes we see a need; we all know that our community has extensive needs. We talk and communicate well but we’re not always good at collecting data about the need and how to address it. We have discussions but we’re not documenting those conversations very well or collecting photographs to document the need. Community-Based Inquiry is really Indigenous

inquiry. It is a practice that we engage in regularly as part of who we are, but we are often just lacking in knowledge about documenting, analyzing, presenting, and utilizing data as community-based research.

We are always out and looking at our community and trying to fill the needs through our organization's mission and vision; for us, that's language and cultural revitalization at the early childhood level. Having the opportunity to participate in the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative helped give us a structure and framework for collecting data with and in our community. It gave us terms and frameworks for projects like photovoice. Being able to participate with the three other sites was inspirational and motivational for me; it showed me that the work we do matters. Participation in this program and the data collected from community really changed our perception of space. We had thought about a physical building: a garden, playground, all the stuff that an early childhood center needs. Our definition of space really changed from just a physical space to include metaphysical space as well; the space for healing, retreat, ceremony, wellness, and growth; the space for creativity and learning for our whole community.

Our community knows what they want; community members need the opportunity to share that knowledge. This process reinforced the fact that our community knows what we need, and that we are really creative in the face of adversity. We are strong and resilient, but we also need space and time to decompress. This inquiry changed the way we work on a day-to-day basis and it continues to inform the work we do. We learned that we can start creating this metaphysical space now and we learned to prioritize which type of space is needed first. For example, in working on the new health and wellness plan we are implementing, we learned that taking time to have community members engage in the research gave us a much wider view of what space means to our community. It reinforced that the work we do in this community is important to our community members too, and it gave us an opportunity to develop the space together.

Community-Based Inquiry is a method that works for data collection in our community. As Native organizations and programs, we tend to do this in a more informal way and often don't realize that we are engaging in an inquiry process and research. I think most Native organizations talk and ask questions, track their programs, gather community and family input, adjust as needed, and change approaches to meet needs, but don't realize they are collecting valuable data. This process showed us how to collect data with intent and gave us ways like photovoice to understand and share what we have found out about our community needs and wants. 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:***

We had a writing prompt that included a letter to our ancestors regarding our languages. Today I remain grateful for our ancestors. This is a key component of the work we do, knowing all that our ancestors sacrificed for us to be here, knowing our

ancestors lived through a genocide. We are part of the voices that begin to tell the tale, the process of recovery. Genocide is an important part of our story and our recovery process. Those trails of tears were death marches, and the narrative has to be told by us as Indigenous folks. Policies were implemented to destroy us and our lifeways and our languages. Our children need to know these things. Our narrative needs to be part of a larger curriculum and an ongoing effort to build a larger database of stories and experiences that relate to this telling. I've had to come to terms with fry bread as we focus on food sovereignty within the language. I've had to realize that it is a survival food, and it helps us remember our ancestors.

Wicoie Nandagikendan chose to use the photovoice method paired with surveys. These were powerful tools both visual and verbal. We learned to be prepared with a recorder as some folks just are not comfortable elaborating their thoughts with a digital device. With photovoice we were all over our neighborhood. Tent city had just exploded so we got a lot of harsh yet real pictures; this is what our children see every day. Yet despite some of the real photographs, the beauty of our children engaged in language and food sovereignty far surpassed the ugliness of urban life. Trust the process: we captured some amazing moments! The photos had a natural flow: our children engaged in language, cultural activities, growing and eating our food, community and environment all rolled out quite organically into their own themes. As we started the CBI, it was great to have advisors and mentors who could spend time with us to tease out what we were trying to do with the survey questions. Learning how to gather and synthesize data gave us a valuable insight into community thought processes. As I look back on this year of amazing growth from an internal scope, I know that we have accomplished a lot! So many doors have been opened, resources and networking have happened, all critical components of a healthy growing Indigenous-led nonprofit organization. We learned that the community (our babies, our language, and our families) are always the center of the work we do and we remain rooted in community.

