

# The Wisdom of Plants: Guides in a Journey of Community-Based Inquiry

*Nick Terrones*

## PLANTING A SEED

When I took on the role of Preschool Program Director at Daybreak Star Preschool, an entity of United Indians of All Tribes Foundation (UIATF), located in Daybreak Star Indian Cultural Center, I also took on the community that built and sustained a palpable culture of resiliency, passion, honesty, strength, and love. UIATF serves urban Natives and Alaskan Indians in the greater Seattle area, once a relocation city for American Indians. As an organization, we provide holistic human wraparound services beginning with a doula and prenatal care program all the way up to our Elders program. The preschool is right in the middle, not just programmatically, but at the heart of the organization. I entered at a time just after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in September 2020. The new school year had just begun, and I was coming from fourteen years as an early childhood educator, twelve of those years as a toddler and family educator, at the same school, made up of mostly affluent white families. The state of the world was unknown and uncomfortably new, so I thought, why not take on an entirely different kind of job with much more responsibility?

Being in this new role as a director wasn't the only newness of this journey; this would be the first time in a while that I would be surrounded by people who looked more like me than not. UIATF is made up of a racially diverse group of people who are

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*[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.]*

NICK TERRONES is Mexican–Native American, a descendant of the Chumash people whose traditional lands span a large part of Southern California. Nick has been in the early childhood education field for more than fifteen years, twelve of those years working directly with toddlers and families. His practice is rooted in antiracist, antibiased, land-based pedagogies that promote restorative and social justice.

also diverse in their upbringings, cultures, languages, and socioeconomic status; many of these people are also of Native American descent. The shroud of uncertainty and social trauma maintained its presence for some time, as the various programs needed to figure out how they were going to maintain the delivery of service. Questions about funding sources lingered as funders also had to figure out their own systemic approach to sustain the programs they supported.

The tight-knit community of UIATF, specifically those working at Daybreak Star Indian Cultural Center, was and is the force that prevented everything from imploding on itself. At the onset of the lockdown, with about one to two weeks' time, the remaining preschool staff made a quick pivot to open up care for essential workers, eventually opening up to other families with many of the heavy regulations we all experienced in one way or another. Likewise, other programs of UIATF found themselves with a unique opportunity to distribute funding to community members who needed rental assistance, gas vouchers, grocery vouchers, etc.

The preschool program, like many other programs within UIATF, was greatly impacted by the pandemic and it became apparent that a great deal of healing and rebuilding would need to be done. How would this healing process begin? Who would facilitate this process? From whom do we have to learn lessons? The answer lies with our plant relatives. As with most answers to big daunting questions, the answer to our communal healing surrounded us, for plants carry wisdom if we're ready to take it in. All around Daybreak Star Indian Cultural Center are probably *thousands* of plant varieties—some indigenous and some not, some invasive. The preschool has several growing boxes and a small plot where tobacco and strawberries grow alongside one another. One planter box is a treasure trove of ozette potatoes that children unearth every so often. And of course, blueberry season is highly anticipated among children. Beyond our little garden are communities of alder trees, groves of cedar towering above the trails that meander around Daybreak Star, and many conifers that share their cones and branches for various lessons and activities.

In this article, I aim to illustrate the community inquiry we dove into while outlining lessons learned (and still being learned) as they relate to the wisdom of our plant relatives. The focus and intention on the teaching from our plant relatives comes from *Plant Teachings for Growing Social-Emotional Skills*, a toolkit of a book and a set of cards aimed at guiding individuals in their journey to deepening their capacities of self-reflection to lead healthier and resilient lives. This toolkit came to fruition through a collaborative effort between GRuB (Garden-Raised Bounty, a nonprofit organization based in Olympia, Washington), Northwest Indian Treatment Center, and the Seattle Indian Health Board to aid individuals going through recovery from addiction but is applicable to early childhood learning centers.

Throughout this article, I will introduce a plant relative and their lessons as they relate to my journey in our Community-Based Inquiry.

## CONTEXT

In the early spring of 2021, my curiosity about finding ways to push the school forward was poked by the leaders of the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative (IELC), Tarajean and Ethan Yazzie-Mintz, Joelfre Grant, and others with the provocation to embark on a journey of inquiry within our community setting. As I was ingratiating myself into the UIATF community as a newbie, I searched for questions within our preschool community I would want to explore alongside those who have been with UIATF. This search process was primarily observational, seeing and listening for issues and concerns within our early learning community of families, educators, elders, and children.

A silver lining of the COVID-19 pandemic was that there was a significant level of understanding that spending time outdoors was an effective way to prevent the spread of infection. The already established preschool classrooms had dedicated much of their time to being outside, transplanting learning experiences and outcomes to the temperate climate of Seattle, Washington. Yet there was an increasing need for families and their children to have access to early care and education, and at the same time, the adults in children's lives wanted to make sure their children were safe from potentially contracting COVID-19. These needs paired with the potential of elevating Daybreak Star Preschool into a new phase of evolution sparked my curiosity to home in on a community inquiry.

Daybreak Star Indian Cultural Center, where the preschool is housed, is set in an urban forest which affords many opportunities for land-based learning. My natural state of curiosity beckoned me to wonder: What would an outdoor preschool class look like within an urban Native context? And why hasn't this happened yet?

In the Pacific Northwest, where we are located, outdoor preschool settings are on the rise. The North American Association for Environmental Education reports that there has been a twenty-fivefold increase in nature-based preschools just in this past decade. Currently, there are 585 nature-based preschools in the United States alone<sup>1</sup>. Our state, Washington, has become the first and only state to license outdoor nature-based (ONB) early learning centers. The growing trend in nature-based learning environments indicates a progressive movement to create early learning experiences that not only offer a counternarrative to how preschool is taught and experienced but also expand the opportunity to foster a sense of love and respect for the natural world in young children. For our diverse urban Native context, nestled in a beautiful urban forest, an ONB program can offer a way to restore early learning to knowledge systems that "Indigenous societies have long practiced . . . in which land-based, play-based, intergenerational, and applied learning strategies have helped the next generation learn what it means to live in ethical and sustainable relationship with all living beings."<sup>2</sup>

We started off with a leadership team of five and set out to weave in the teaching staff, which at the time was numbered at six. With the initial leadership team, we landed on these three questions that would not only guide our inquiry but also serve as an anchor as to why this was important at this time and to provide a way back should we find ourselves drifting from our goal.

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

These three guiding and anchoring questions came to be through collaborative conversation with the other initial leaders on the inquiry team. With a vague idea and curiosity to build out an outdoor classroom, these questions helped guide our imagination and intent to expand the preschool program (and eventually bring in more revenue other than grants) as well as gave us a trajectory of how an outdoor nature-based curriculum within an urban Native context might take shape.

These guiding questions, it later became apparent, were not going to only be applied to the curriculum and pedagogy of the outdoor preschool class but would also become a process to integrate the practices into our indoor preschool classrooms that utilize an out-of-the-box curriculum called HighScope. This framework of questions gave us an opportunity to adapt our practices and pedagogy in a challenging time and circumstance; to refocus our intentions as an early learning community so that we made sure that the way we learned and played aligned with Native principles. An underlying hope was that our innovation and adaptation would bring forth healing in a time of social trauma, as well as bring forth a sense of educational sovereignty in which we could self-determine what learning experiences and outcomes look like for our Native and non-Native children.

## DOUGLAS FIR: ADAPT

Throughout this initial phase, adaptability in uncertain times remained a centerpiece of the work. Douglas Fir is a species of tree who has lived on Earth for millions of years and they reflect adaptability and resilience in times of change through their appearance. Hearty pine needles withstand freezing temperatures and retain water in times of drought. Unmistakable bark protects them from fire.<sup>3</sup> As challenges arose, Douglas Fir would remind me to consider my inherent resiliency, to recognize when challenging situations may begin to brew and to consider what helps me adapt to these challenges.

Adapting to these new and uncertain times meant re-memembering and cultivating the genius our ancestors left in our blood. United Indians leadership, including directors like myself, would need to find healthy and responsive ways to be resilient for and with our programs. For me, I had to find a way to learn and uplift our preschool's operation pedagogically and financially, as well as consider how to move us forward in a way that was mindful of the Daybreak Star community's values (which varied) and expectations of tradition. The adaptation of our early learning program wasn't to supplant what educators were already used to doing but to bridge the gap(s) that the

current Western curriculum and pedagogy couldn't. Indigenizing education is to help morph and uplift what colonial-settler education systems cannot, and this often means adapting structures to best fit an Indigenous community's ways of knowing and being.

As the discussion went on in the beginning, one of our leaders, our former Family Services Director, Cynthia Savini, spoke to how this is a process of re-membling, not so much as a cognitive recall related to memory but to bring fragmented pieces back together: to reassemble and unite; to make whole. The historical link and context of education and land are woven together for Indigenous and Native peoples, especially here in the United States. Because the Native people of this country have had their land stolen and swindled away from them, education has been a systemic plight and institution of harm. If Native education-based programs can reclaim and re-member their own pedagogies and practices, then perhaps healing and prosperity can be sustained to flourish. I felt, and still feel, that adapting to land-based learning can sustain this.

### HAWTHORN: COURAGE

Hawthorne has medicine beneficial to the heart and can alleviate moments of physical and emotional stress. In times of stress and immediate pressure, Hawthorne implores us to think, *when I feel isolated, what will nourish my heart and help me feel connected?* For me as a new leader, feeling connected meant being courageous in admitting my faults and inviting others in to collaborate. To know when I'm picking up pieces of others' unfinished work and all the emotional residue associated with it.

Operating a preschool is challenging enough, let alone navigating the ins and outs of starting up an outdoor nature-based preschool, but I knew that given the times we were facing, living in a pandemic, it would be a worthwhile attempt and investment to start up an outdoor nature-based (ONB) program that met families' needs for care and education, and did so in a way that also answered concerns of being indoors. I sought out not only the space to have such a classroom on the premises of Daybreak Star but also the resources and partnerships that might help actualize this. Beginning within the United Indians of All Tribes Foundation (UIATF) community, I sought and received permission from the executive leadership team, as well as the wisdom of one of our elders who has an intimate knowledge of the land we are on. It was encouraging to know that many people at UIATF loved the idea of an outdoor preschool being a part of the community, and I found myself being cognizant of balancing my ambition of leading our preschool in a new direction and doing so in a good way. Though to be truthful, my ambition and determination often got in the way of consistently consulting with the community about my intentions.

There were, and still are, moments when I was scrutinized by members of the community who brought their concerns and questions to a virtual community listening session. The first of these shone a light on areas where I could grow as a new leader in the UIATF community, and it also highlighted the need for the community to heal, as past transgressions and frustrations were made relevant to our current experience. We learned from a handful of community stakeholders that our first step should have been

to address the accessibility of the outdoor class. This meant getting our two school buses up and running, without a long-term funding plan.

“Before starting up this outdoor class, you should have first prioritized having Indian children who could attend,” one community member expressed passionately. They continued about how without engaging the community first, I was whitewashing the program. Interestingly enough, this community member, as well as others, would remind me of my “colonizer mentality” and acts of whitewashing the preschool program in one sentence, and then in the next glorify the Head Start programming model, which carries a lot of bureaucratic red tape and out-of-the-box curriculums, and essentially is a modern form of assimilation for Indigenous children. Over the almost two-hour listening session, it was clear that a lot of this was a fear response to change: change to new ideas, new people, new world.

While this initial community listening session felt somewhat deflating and isolating, I knew I had to muster a bit of courage to push forward with this idea that I felt, in my heart, was a worthwhile course of action. To muster that courage, I found myself reframing criticism as shared questions. This wonderful reframe came from the wisdom of Tarajeen Yazzie-Mintz after one of our in-person Reflective Inquiry Sessions and helped shape my perspective and mindset moving forward. This mindset of reframing criticisms as shared questions keeps me grounded and really subdues my own feelings of taking criticism personally, redirecting criticism of me individually into questions that drive a collective inquiry. In this incident, once I felt there was a bit of a lull, and that everyone seemed to be awaiting a response from me, I decided to implement a listening technique and said something to the effect of, “You’re absolutely right. My not consulting with stakeholders in the community reflects these issues you’re expressing. I will forever keep this in my mind and heart as we continue this journey, and I wonder what you suggest for me to consider moving forward?”

This seemed to disarm the most vocal community members, and they shared that they just want me to make sure that Native children have access to this opportunity. I agreed and named a few ways how we were planning to do that.

## HEMLOCK: HUMILITY

If it wasn’t for natural disasters and human disturbance, it is said that Hemlock would dominate the Northwest forests. They outlive other trees and can grow in full shade. Hemlock begins their life on stumps and logs, tiny and vulnerable, but over time become resilient and strong, often living over a thousand years. Hemlock teaches us humility by reminding us that we should always be learning and growing. Instead of defending our impulse to be right, we can own up to our mistakes and learn and grow from new perspectives. We can embrace the value of not knowing and show a willingness to discover with others.

This relationship with the First Light Education Project and the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative kept the motivation for having an outdoor preschool classroom going and it deepened my capacity for being curious by focusing on a key element of curiosity: inquiry. In this experience, I found that inquiry is the process of

revealing what you might be curious about; it's the boots-on-the-ground approach to satisfying a curiosity. However, the process of inquiry is never isolated, it is dependent on relationships. Those relationships happen not just among people, but with whatever is used in the process of inquiry: environment and materials, for example. But most importantly, the personal relationship within the individual person(s) embarking on a process of inquiry. Additionally, I have come to understand and respect that authentic learning happens with a hefty amount of humility. In order for one to learn and for that learning to turn into meaningful action, the learner must humble themselves to other ways of thinking and teaching. "Empty your cup," as one of my kung-fu Sifus would say, or as I have more recently learned: steady one's mind. This concept is taken from Apache lifeways:

[B]ecause the essence of mental steadiness lies in a capacity to do away with self-serving emotions that exploit or demean the worth of other people, wise men and women rarely encounter serious interpersonal problems. Free of conceit and hostile ambitions, steady minds 'forget about themselves' and conduct their social affairs in harmony and peace.<sup>4</sup>

Considering this impactful piece of wisdom, humility for me meant being aware of how I was maintaining a steady mind.

The community listening sessions were lessons in humility; they opened my eyes to what I needed to do to empty my cup, forget about myself, remain steady in mind, be like our Hemlock tree relative, and be humble to cultivate wisdom and strengthen relationships with others. This act and practice of humility helped me identify those shared questions brought in the community listening sessions. One of our long-time community members told me a story of a past director of the preschool. He explained that this director was approached by some community members about some ongoing issues typical of preschools (funding, recruitment, family engagement, etc.) and that this director kept stating what he wasn't able to do. The community member said that he asked the director, "Well what are you able to do?" I took this story as a lesson in humility, to not defend what *can't be done*, but to find collaborative opportunities to discover *what can be done*. However, in collaborative moments it is important to balance expectation and reality. One group may have an expectation that can't quite be realized because of the realistic circumstances, but a leader (hopefully a humble one) can see these moments of opportunities: *I get to figure this out with and for the community.*

## OAK: PATIENCE

The mighty Oak Tree takes their time growing, establishing deep roots, thick bark, and nutritious nuts. All of the time taken in this process enables Oak to thrive in many habitats and endure harsh conditions. The slow and steady process of the Oak also supports a diverse community of plants and animals by providing sustenance and shelter. The fruits of Oak's labor take time.

As mentioned before, in our community listening sessions, we learned from a handful of stakeholders that our first step should have been to address the accessibility of the outdoor class, in addition to the general program overall. This meant identifying funding for the use of our stagnant bussing service for Native families who may not be able to drive to our somewhat isolated location within the city, our island on an island. Since a major value of ours is to recruit and serve Native children and their families, who generally live far from Daybreak Star, solving the transportation issue first would have alleviated many community concerns. While we have not fully solved the issue, what we have put in place is some funding to help offset gas costs and some school tuition, which has helped some of our families who have needed it.

Additionally, it would have gone over well with the community to take the extra time and recruit Native educators and train them to implement outdoor education, as well as take time to see if Native educators interested in outdoor preschools were in the hiring pool. Since the onset of the pandemic, though, there has been a steady decline in early childhood educators. “The Great Resignation,” as it’s called, has hit many employment sectors and the early learning and care field is no exception to this. As of early 2023 we still face challenges in recruiting Native educators, and I am reminded by our Human Resources Department that we must practice nondiscriminatory and inclusive hiring practices as a non-profit organization, but slow progress is being made.

Though many reasons can be named why we couldn’t do some things, we project leaders tried to emphasize the bigger picture we were trying to achieve and focus on what we *could* do in hopes that once a solid operational structure was in place (building capacity in our early learning community) we could effectively meet these identified needs. It takes an ample amount of patience to consistently hear what is being implemented is wrong and potentially “whitewashing” what others have worked so hard to build and sustain. However, leaning on the wisdom of our relative, the Oak Tree, I am reminded that, “My patient efforts help me get through challenges and create a supportive environment for species around me.”<sup>5</sup> In these challenging times, Oak also reminds me to think about my long-term goals and act mindfully from a place of calm.

Though patience is an incredible quality and value to hold, it eventually runs out. It is a finite resource within humans and needs to be replenished from time to time. One thing that I often try to pair with my growing patience is understanding. Understanding, unlike patience, doesn’t run out but sustains learning and awareness. Understanding affords us longevity in our efforts to accomplish a goal, clarify a vision, and see through a mission. Understanding can sustain a community.

## ALDER: BUILD COMMUNITY

When Alder meets the end of its life cycle, they fall to the ground and their composition as a tree releases compounds that promote the growth of beneficial fungi and flora. Alder builds community through sacrifice, selflessness, and generosity. They promote others to grow around them by adding strength to the existing soil; they contribute to

the growth of others, contributing to the health of their community. Even after Alder is completely gone from the eye, they continue to exist in their ongoing giving legacy.

There will be a time when I am no longer at UIATF, and possibly no longer in the same geographical area as Daybreak Star, but I hope that through my efforts and intention for our early learning community, I can contribute to a long-lasting healthy community. Alder reminds me that there are many opportunities to learn from others who are different from myself and that our ideas and lived experiences related to indigeneity are vast and equally valuable. Each person who comes through Daybreak Star Preschool, for however the amount of time, and then leaves, contributes to the health and growth of our school. As a leader of the preschool, I must consider how I will identify, foster, and cultivate each person's contribution to building up our community, and what legacy will be left for us to continue to grow. This begins with relationship that has strong and healthy components to grow and flourish. Every now and then there are elements of the past that remind us to reexamine the health of the soil, so to speak, and figure out what needs to be done to replenish the space in which our relationships take root. For example, at one point, a community member snapped that I should just get the buses up and running anyway, and let the organization figure it out. There's no need for me to ask permission. In my first weeks of starting at United Indians, I was given a crash course in the history of how things used to operate, how relationships within the community were established, and how they thrived (for better or worse). The act of doing something without considering the community as a whole would mean, to me, that I would be accomplice to adding toxicity to soil in need of tending. And the trickiest piece of this was to implement change that would somehow, some way benefit everyone.

Relying on fellow alders, such as our community partner, Shameka Gagnier, I would discuss long-term goals and outcomes and we would find a middle ground of how to share upcoming experiences, intended expectations, and ways to provide feedback. In this sense, I felt our collaboration cultivated the necessary nutrients to improve the soil for future relationships to grow and flourish within the organization.

A community is made up of the people who are present at a particular time and place. Certainly, a community carries on the tradition and culture of those who came before, but a community can be flexible and ever-expanding, and in this process, the capacities of a community deepen and potentially a sense of empowerment and cohesive identity emerge and flourish. All of this takes time, and most importantly it takes a collective understanding that immediacy is not always going to be a valuable approach to remedying communal issues and concerns.

## DANDELION: PROBLEM SOLVING

Dandelion is often seen in patches, but they are also seen solo away from others like them; still, you know them and their persistence. Dandelion reminds us of the importance of being in community to strengthen our identity, that even though we may find ourselves alone, our connection to our communities keeps us strong and resilient. They tell us that there are others before us who have endured hardships.

Additionally, Dandelion conjures up possibilities of problem-solving, that there are multiple approaches to a challenge.

Though the initial team of this inquiry project has since disbanded, either to new opportunities or simply stepping aside, I found that their experience working in and with Native communities, as well as leading similar endeavors, provided me with experience and lessons I could subsume into my toolbelt of growing leadership qualities. The experience and advice brought to me gave me multiple angles to see the same issue, and to remain flexible in my problem-solving abilities.

My other Dandelions who were ready and willing to spread and share their seeds of knowledge were found in relationships with community partners. These community partners, though located elsewhere, had endured their own organizational hardships not too dissimilar from UIATE, but persisted through collaborative problem-solving.

One such community partner is the Na'ah Illahee Fund whose mission is to support and promote the leadership of Indigenous women in the ongoing regeneration of Indigenous communities in the Pacific Northwest. An essential lesson I learned from the leaders and collaborators of Na'ah Illahee was to gather like-minded people around one task, issue, or goal, and before taking action, hear and process all the possible approaches. This practice, of simply being in conversation, allowed my "get it done" mentality to take a backseat to relationship-driven approaches. This approach ensured the success of more than 500 plant relatives to be homed around Daybreak Star with the assistance of children and families in our preschool.

I wasn't sure what could be safely done for family engagement, and the outdoor class space needed some landscape maintenance. Na'ah Illahee needed to begin their process of restoring the natural spaces around Daybreak but also needed people power, and they had the desire to work with the preschool.

Another situation that needed multiple perspectives was what to do with preschool food waste. About seventy-five percent of the methane gas released into the Earth's atmosphere, which contributes to climate change, is caused by improperly disposed of food and food products decomposing in landfills. Serendipitously, a gentleman reached out to us and offered to build us something called an EarthCube, a food and yard waste composting receptacle. I talked with the educators about the idea and invited this new community partner to discuss the ins and outs of an EarthCube. While it took some further discussion between the preschool staff and me for them to buy into the idea, it ultimately seemed like something everyone was interested in but wanted to know more about the logistics. Fortunately, solutions were brought forth, not just by me, but by a good number of the team members. We've been creating compost since then and we have plans to distribute it to our plant relatives in our traditional medicines and preschool garden, the Bernie Whitebear Garden, which is home to indigenous plants in the area, and around the trails the children frequent. We may even sell small bags of it as a fundraiser for the preschool. We also plan to use the compost in the food that the children grow so that it will go right back into their lunches, creating and experiencing a full food cycle.

## NETTLE: BUILD INNER STRENGTH

Our relative, Nettle, reminds us of the importance of balance. Physiologically, Nettle balances the blood and aids our kidneys and liver in efficient cleansing. Though to begin an approach to being balanced, Nettle also reminds us to be mindful, to be aware of one's state, and cognizant of where feelings are occurring and why they are there. Harvesting relationships, much like harvesting Nettle, requires a sense of awareness of others and self simultaneously. And also like Nettle, sometimes relationships leave you with a sting, a sting that can linger for a while, and encourages us to be fully present with the people we engage with. Sometimes those stings are warranted, and other times it requires a sense of mindfulness and active listening to see where they're really coming from.

Thinking back to the community listening sessions, I remember a sense of calm coming over me while being lambasted, because I first called attention to my solar plexus and my palms becoming moist with sweat. I felt a warm buzz in between my shoulder blades as it migrated between there and the nape of my neck. I felt the internal urge to argue and defend my position and thinking with hope that this would rid me of those physical sensations; just get them out.

Instead, I breathed in these sensations, allowed them to exist, called them out, and carried on with active listening. Being mindful to name these sensations, even going so far as giving them real names like "bummer-buzz buzz," puts them on the spot and they retreat to the corners of my being where they hide. This process of recognition and naming is also a lot like weeding: one must be able to differentiate a weed from a desired plant and take preventive steps to keep the weeds from overgrowing.

The stings that come from engaging others who openly share their criticism can either linger and bring a sensation of pain, or the stings can be viewed as bitter medicine worthy of intaking and growing from. This relates to the Hawthorn idea of turning criticism into shared questions, and it is no coincidence that these two plant relatives provide complementary components to fortify an individual's inner strength.

## CONCLUSION

A couple of years after the start of our community inquiry, I understand this process to be just that: a process, and a journey. While there are outcomes that ought to be achieved, the essence of a community inquiry, from my perspective, is to deepen the capacities of the community, to effect sustainable change through empowerment and strength-based approaches. For us at Daybreak Star Preschool, the journey in reshaping and reclaiming how early learning can look from an indigenous lens is still well underway. We may never get to an end point, a destination, and I hope that we do not. I hope that the journey will continue to redefine, strengthen, and empower the community who are there, at that time.

The inquiry questions we started off with at the project's inception continue to be relevant, and as the early learning community at Daybreak Star evolves, I wonder how these questions may shift. In my brief time with this project and Daybreak

Star community, I now look at these questions with the wisdom shared by several plant relatives:

1. *How does a land-based curriculum promote social-emotional awareness and a sense of self and worth within the community structure?*

Embarking on solidifying a land-based curriculum not only promotes social-emotional awareness for the children but for myself as the school's director. Many plants referred to in this text can be thanked and drawn to, but it is Hawthorne (Courage) that resonates within me to this day. Having the courage to sit with immediate pressure and discomfort while keeping the big picture in mind kept my focus and determination to press forward, though there are and were times I wanted to just walk away.

2. *How does Indigenous and land-based curriculum promote parent involvement and how does increased community engagement with Wisdom Carriers deepen Indigenous communities?*

Adages of human and more-than-human interconnectedness and that we're "all one" have become clichés over time. But perhaps clichés are overstated truths that continue to call us back into remembering what is important: being in relationship and in community with each other. Alder (Build Community) is an essential relative to our community inquiry, as it reminds us that selflessness and generosity to empower those around generates unwavering community values and can awaken community strengths perhaps not realized. Our community inquiry revealed to me the wealth of relationships that Daybreak Star has with inside and outside community members. They come from all walks of life, Native and non-Native, and all share a deep caring for helping United Indians of All Tribes Foundation and Daybreak Star grow into its next phase(s) as an organization.

3. *How does active engagement in land-based curriculum (e.g., Indigenous language; plant wisdom; storytelling; cultural community roles) promote the decolonization of early learning pedagogy for staff and families?*

Hemlock teaches us humility by reminding us that we should always be learning and growing. Instead of defending our impulse to be right, we can own up to our mistakes and learn and grow from new perspectives. We can embrace the value of not knowing and show a willingness to discover with others. When considering decolonizing and re-indigenizing anything (lifestyle, mind, teaching practices, etc.), an ample amount of humility is needed for any sustainable change to take place. Using an inward gaze to recognize, acknowledge, and confront colonized ways of being is difficult; it often means challenging yourself and beliefs and reconfiguring how you operate in the world. Trying to do this or to encourage a community to do this is a daunting task and requires the utmost tact and respect. And it is not so much trying to convince anyone of being "wrong," but more of everyone in the community taking a hard look at where organizational practices and perceptions come from, why they are there, and who is benefitting from them. While we continue our journey in shaping our land-based curriculum, there will be buy-in needed from veteran teachers who are used to doing things a certain way, and deviating from those ways can be difficult. As a leader,

I hope to model humility in an effort that if I want to effect change, then I must also be willing to be changed.

As an educator in the early learning field, I recognize that change is ever-present. Children constantly teeter on the brink of change, reminding us adults that development is never linear and stable. Children remind us that the only constant in life is change. Every so often we educators are fortunate enough to experience young children's natural ability to absorb information and synthesize it to create new ways of understanding themselves and the world. These are the outcomes we hope to see: critical thinking applied to experiential provocations, in a time and world where the term, "outcomes," is tied to hard data backed by particular numbers.

During the course of a little over a year, educators at Daybreak Star navigated their own path in implementing the wisdom from *Plant Teachings for Growing Social-Emotional Skills* with the children in their classes. I recall a particular moment in the class I was teaching in, when a child who was having some difficulties with sharing commented, "Teacher Nick! Did you see that! I was using those magna-tiles, and I had so many squares, and Josh came up and took some! He didn't even ask! But I knew I had a lot, so I took a deep breath and thought"—at this point she modeled her thinking by tilting her head to one side, tapped her index finger on her chin, furrowed her brow in thoughtfulness, and continued—"well I don't need so many, I have enough for my kitties. See, I was flexible like Willow and generous like the Cedar relative!"

Another time a child wisely reminded me to be like Willow, to be flexible with the schedule of the day. For some reason I was hung up on moving the class along and abruptly tried to cut our free-play time short, though it was obvious all twelve children were deeply engaged with one another and their activities. When I gave the announcement that it was time to clean up, a collective stare like I was crashing their party shook me out of my time gatekeeping. "Teacher Nick," a four year old spoke up, "can we keep playing? Maybe you can be like the Willow relative." I simply nodded and the play continued. In this moment, not only was Willow being called forth but, in the play of the children, Alder, the community builder, was at work as the children deepened their bonds with one another and sharpened their social-emotional skills.

Our plant communities carry stories reflective of our human lives, lessons in resilience and adaptability; digging deep within to keep moving forward; moving with humility to strengthen patience and understanding. Recognizing this power and wisdom that our plant relatives provide us encourages us to re-indigenize our thinking, to listen to and feed our ancestral spirits deeply ingrained in our DNA. Leaning on the wisdom of our plant relatives as a leader of children and adults, I continue to plan to move our early learning program in a direction that adheres to the wisdom of our plant relatives in the hope that our Indigenous approach to early childhood education is one that is authentically rooted in Indigenous knowledge systems. I believe our opportunity to diligently and firmly root our pedagogy in a land-based curriculum can bring a sense of healing from current societal ailments and serve as preventative medicine by reminding us that Indigenous ways of knowing (community, interconnectedness, steadiness, etc.) strengthen our bonds and bring clarity to our purpose. And all the while, by our sides, cheering us on and supporting us, are our plant relatives.

## NOTES

1. Natural Start Alliance, "Nature-Based Preschools in the US: 2020 Snapshot," *North American Association for Environmental Education* (November 2022). [https://naturalstart.org/sites/default/files/staff/nature\\_preschools\\_2020\\_snapshot\\_final\\_0.pdf](https://naturalstart.org/sites/default/files/staff/nature_preschools_2020_snapshot_final_0.pdf)
2. Meredith L. McCoy, Emma Elliott-Groves, Leilani Sabzalian, and Megan Bang, "Restoring Indigenous Systems of Relationality," *Center for Humans and Nature* (October 7, 2020). <https://humansandnature.org/restoring-indigenous-systems-of-relationality/>
3. Sable Ka'ohulani Bruce, Chenoa Egwa, Rachel Smart, Lisa Wilson, Elise Krohn, June O'Brien, Ofialii Tovia, Nakia DeMiero, and Sonja Ibabao, *Plant Teachings for Growing Social-Emotional Skills* (Seattle: Chatwin Books, 2020): 12–38.
4. Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996): 133.
5. Sable Ka'ohulani Bruce, Chenoa Egwa, Rachel Smart, Lisa Wilson, Elise Krohn, June O'Brien, Ofialii Tovia, Nakia DeMiero, and Sonja Ibabao, *Plant Teachings for Growing Social-Emotional Skills* (Seattle: Chatwin Books, 2020): 38.