

## Article

# Supporting the Cultural Identity Development of Indigenous Youth: Findings from an Indigenous Educators' Community-Of-Practice

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**Abstract:** Research reveals a positive impact on educational achievement for Indigenous students when their teachers are also Indigenous. The educational value of shared identity between students and teachers manifests in the form of increased student attendance rates, grades, and graduation rates. Fewer than 5% of public-school teachers in Alaska are Indigenous, while nearly 20% of students are Indigenous. Thus, it is unlikely that most Indigenous students in Alaska will experience a shared cultural identity with their teachers—nor would it be desirable, in this age of global mobility, for society to strive for teachers and students to share cultural identity in all instances. Yet it is important to discern what teaching practices and teacher dispositions support the cultural identity development (CID) of Indigenous children. This project brought together Indigenous educators from across Alaska to critically examine their practice as educators and to seek answers to the research question. Utilizing a collaborative autoethnographic framework, qualitative data were coded and analyzed to uncover answers to the research question. Key findings from this study indicate that teaching and using the local Indigenous language, shared cultural history documented in stories, and experiences related to the Land contribute to students' CID. Furthermore, findings reveal that micro cultural validations, fleeting interactions between teachers and students, play a significant role in supporting the cultural identity development of Indigenous youth. Findings also suggest that Indigenous teachers are best positioned to discern the teaching practices that contribute to students' cultural identity development.

**Keywords:** cultural identity development; Indigenous students; community of practice; micro-validations; land education; indigenizing education



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## 1. Introduction

Identity development is one of the primary tasks of childhood and adolescence [1]. Prior to colonial contact in Alaska, children's cultural identities developed through interactions with the Land (Land is capitalized when it is used to include land, water, air, and all beings, living and non-living, and their spiritual interconnectedness) which sustained them. Land shapes culture: for example, the rich and varied cultures of Indigenous people along the northwest coast of North America are centered around the annual return of salmon [2,3]; their beliefs and values evolved out of co-existence with salmon, their primary food source. Similarly, in the circumpolar Arctic, some Indigenous cultures evolved around whales, seals, or other marine mammals [4].

Prior to Russian and European contact, Alaska Natives were secure in their cultural identities; children were born into a cultural group, and they acquired the knowledge, skills,

beliefs, and values to function effectively within that cultural group. However, with Western contact came a tremendous acculturative clash and an overwhelming pressure to assimilate, exerted by churches, schools, and government [5–7]. Weakening of cultural identity is well documented as an aggravating factor in many of the social ills that disproportionately affect Alaska Natives, including depression and lack of academic success, which are, in turn, implicated in poverty, drug/alcohol abuse, poor health, and suicide [8,9], while a strong cultural identity has been associated with resilience and well-being [10–12]. In the past few decades, there has been a rising voice calling for cultural revitalization among Indigenous peoples from around the world [13–17].

With that history as a backdrop, schools in Alaska continue to struggle to meet the needs of all students; Indigenous students continue to lag well behind their non-Indigenous classmates on standardized tests [18]. Once the majority, Indigenous students now make up less than 20% of Alaska's student body, while only 5% of teachers in Alaska are Indigenous [19]. Yet research reveals a positive impact on educational achievement for Indigenous students when their teachers are also Indigenous [20]. The educational value of shared identity between students and teachers manifests in the form of increased student attendance rates, perseverance, improved standardized test scores, grades, and graduation rates [21]. It is unlikely that Indigenous students in Alaska will experience a shared cultural identity with all their teachers—nor would it be desirable, in this age of global mobility, for society to strive for teachers and students to share cultural identity in all instances. Therefore, one purpose of this research project was to allow Indigenous teachers to discern and describe the teaching practices and teacher dispositions that support the cultural identity development (CID) of Indigenous children with the aim of informing teacher preparation programs, practicing teachers, administrators, and policymakers in these CID-nurturing practices and dispositions.

The second aim of the current project was to bring together Indigenous teachers to share and learn together in a supportive community of practice (CoP), as described by Dubé et al. [22]. Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond contend that feelings of isolation are reduced when teachers participate in CoPs, contributing to resilience and bolstering their resolve to stay in the teaching profession [23]. This project brought together Indigenous educators from across Alaska to critically examine their practice as educators and to seek answers to the following research questions: (1) what teaching practices and teacher dispositions contribute to Indigenous children's cultural identity development; and (2) how does participating in a community of practice support Indigenous teachers?

Utilizing a collaborative autoethnographic framework [24], qualitative data, including teacher reflections, recorded class discussions, and classroom teaching videos were collected, coded and analyzed to uncover patterns in answer to the research questions. Study participants convened for the first time in Juneau, the capital, early in the fall semester when primary teachers across the state were implementing a new reading initiative mandated by the State of Alaska known as the Alaska Reads Act. Some participants expressed concerns that the Reads Act would fall short of its stated goal that "all children would read at grade level by the end of third grade", especially since the approved reading programs were decontextualized and relied on teaching discrete skills in isolation. Teachers from across the state, different nations, and varying degrees of connection gathered in this community of practice with the same goal in mind: to draw on our culture to improve our teaching.

In answer to research question one, four teaching practices were found to nurture Indigenous students' cultural identities: (1) using and teaching the local heritage language; (2) contextualizing teaching within a cultural frame, such as an Indigenous cultural story or oral narrative; (3) teaching *on* and *with* the Land; and (4) emphasizing cultural values. Additionally, micro cultural validations (fleeting interactions between teachers and students) were found to support children's cultural identity development. In answer to research question two, data revealed that Indigenous teachers share extremely strong motivations for teaching that sustain them when they are faced with challenges; participating in the CoP provided a source of encouragement for Indigenous teachers. Surprisingly, teachers

reported that the same teaching practices that nurture children's CID also serve to support teachers' cultural identity development, thus contributing to their own resilience and resolve to remain in the teaching profession.

The authors chose a double-twined cedar rope as a metaphor for the teaching practices that nurture children's cultural identity development. Cedar bark rope is an important traditional resource for cultural groups along the Pacific Northwest coast throughout the geographical range of the red cedar, including the homelands of the Tlingít and Ts'msyen nations in southeast Alaska and British Columbia, Canada. Historically, cedar bark rope was used for fishing lines, anchor lines, buoy lines, and lashing items in ocean-going canoes [25]. Notably, the method of separating the bark into narrow strips, then twining them together into strands, and then twining the resulting strands into even thicker rope results in incredibly strong rope capable of catching large fish, such as halibut, that might weigh up to 100 kg [26]. If one imagines that each of the identified CID- nurturing teaching practices (teaching and using the heritage language of the land where you teach; framing lessons around cultural stories; land-based education; teaching through cultural values; and micro-validations) as a strip of cedar bark that is twined together to make a strand, then twining that rope with academic curriculum, one can imagine the resulting rope as a lifeline that can support Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, leading them toward academic success and positive life outcomes (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Conceptual framework: Twined cedar rope with individual strands of cedar bark representing the five cultural identity development (CID)-nurturing teaching practices. *Note.* Traditionally twined cedar bark rope fashioned into bracelets and necklaces made by Metlakatla High School Ts'msyen Studies students in 2022 in Metlakatla, AK, USA. (Photo courtesy of Naomi Leask).

## 2. Materials and Methods

Study participants were recruited during a culturally responsive education conference to enroll in a continuing education course, *Indigenizing Education for Alaska*. Initially, fifteen women and one man enrolled from across the state of Alaska, but only twelve participants continued throughout the entire year-long course. Participants represented many different Indigenous tribes, including Ts'msyen (Ts'msyen is also spelled as Tsimshian in some texts), Tlingít (Tlingít is used to denote the cultural group, while Lingít is used to denote the name of the language of the Tlingít people), Yup'ik, Athabaskan, Unangan, and Navajo; most reported being bicultural.

This qualitative research project used Indigenous methodologies; as such, the names of authors and other participants are included [27,28]. Informed consent was obtained from all authors and other participants, as required by the University of Alaska Institutional Review Board (IRB # 2137069). The authors of this article are a subset of participants in the study, including Dr. Angela Lunda, Ms. Amber Frommherz, Mr. William Gamaas Bolton, Ms. Chelsea Cook, Ms. Barbara Dude, Ms. Roberta (Roby) Littlefield, Ms. Jennifer McCarty, Ms. Shawna Puustinen, and Ms. Nastasia Vaska. Some participants declined to take part in authoring this article, citing other obligations during the extensive data analysis and writing sessions. Dr. Lunda, herself an Indigenous educator, taught the continuing education course on Indigenizing education; the other authors were Indigenous Alaskan teachers enrolled in the class. This group of educators met together over the course of a year in a *community of practice* to support one another and to begin to discern and describe teaching strategies that nurture Indigenous children's cultural identity development. Research shows that Indigenous students thrive in classrooms with Indigenous teachers [21]; this group sought to discover the reasons *why* Indigenous students fare better when their teachers share the same cultural identity. Because these educators are deeply grounded in their own Indigeneity—they know and/or are learning their languages, they know or are learning their cultural stories and history, and they know and live by their cultural values—they are uniquely suited to discern and describe teaching practices that nurture cultural identity development in their students.

None of the participants were heritage language birth speakers, with some reporting they only knew a few words of their heritage language, while others had been studying said language for decades. Teaching experience among participants ranged from one year to more than two decades. Teaching roles included preschool, elementary, middle, and high school teachers; special education teachers, cultural specialists, reading interventionists, and heritage language teachers. Participants met in person for the first and last class in September and May, and monthly via videoconference throughout the year; they read and discussed two books: *Unsettling Settler-Colonial Education: The Transformational Indigenous Praxis Model* by Cornel Pewewardy, Anna Lees, and Robin Zape-tah-hol-ah Minthorn [29] and *For Indigenous Eyes Only: A Decolonization Handbook*, edited by Waziyatawin Angela Wilson and Michael Yellow Bird [30], as well as several articles on decolonization and Indigenizing education. Participants posted reading responses in an online blog and wrote reflections during key points during the course; they documented their teaching practices by making short videos of themselves teaching and shared their videos for feedback with the instructor and classmates.

The data set included 6 recorded class discussions (three hours in length), 39 written reflections averaging approximately one page in length, and 37 classroom videos ranging from two to fifty minutes in length. Data analysis was aided using ATLAS.ti Mac (Version 23.1.0), a qualitative data analysis package. The first author developed the codebook and coded the data using reflexive thematic analysis [31]; reflexive TA involves a lengthy, recursive, and reflective process between the researcher and the data. The six steps of reflexive thematic analysis are (1) familiarizing oneself with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) generating themes; (4) reviewing and modifying themes outlined in step three; (5) refining the themes and ensuring their alignment with the research questions; and (6) writing a report to tell the complex story of the data [31]. Initial codes were developed based upon teaching practices known to nurture children's cultural identity development (CID): using heritage language [32,33], basing lessons upon cultural stories [34,35], Land education [36–39], and teaching through cultural values [40–44]. An additional code emerged during data analysis, which the authors named “micro-validations;” small, fleeting moves made by teachers, such as using a child's Indigenous name, or making comments linking school to home, elicited positive responses from students, as observed through students' body language and/or comments. Thus, a total of 5 main codes and 35 sub-codes were applied to 137 quotations from the data set. All authors wrote the Results section



collaboratively, working in pairs to write a first draft of findings and then working as a whole group to read, comment, and come to a consensus on each finding.

### 3. Results

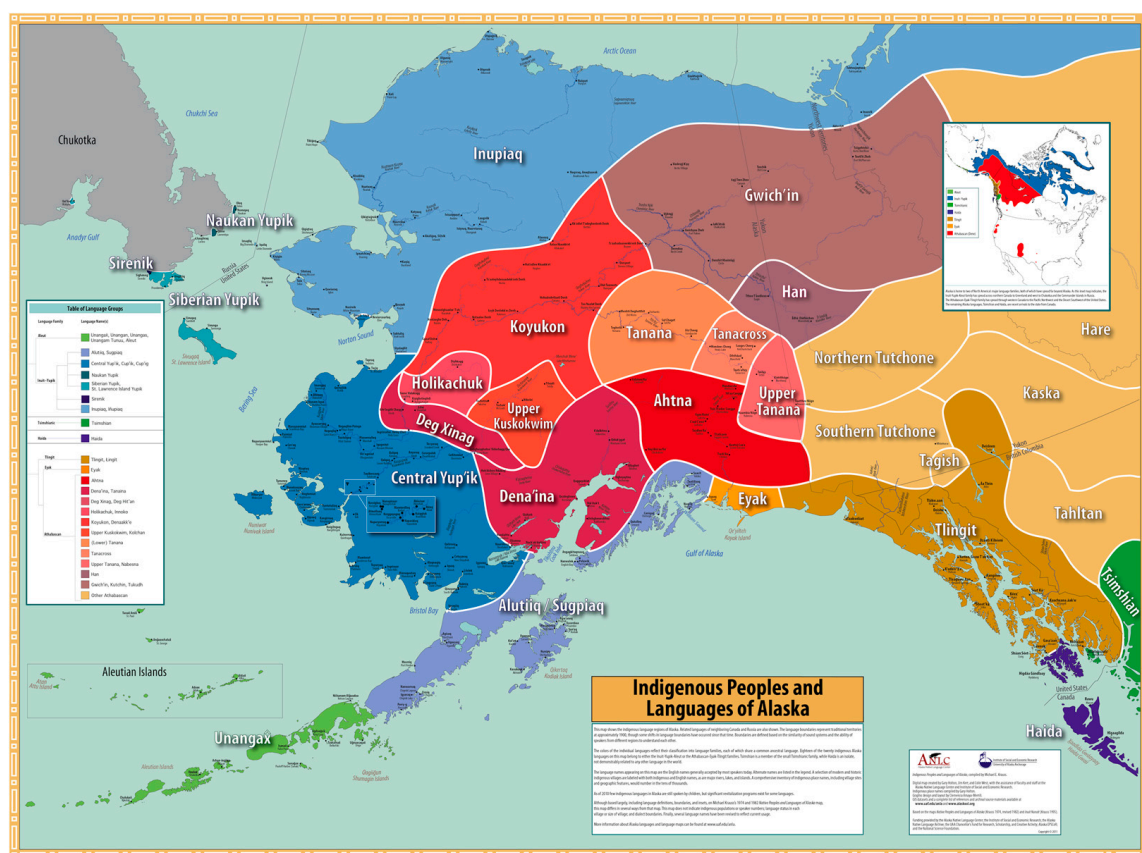
#### 3.1. Teaching Practices and Dispositions Supportive of Cultural Identity Development

Using and teaching the local heritage language, teaching through shared history documented in Indigenous stories, taking students “beyond the classroom walls” to learn on and with the Land, especially when engaging in cultural practices such as harvesting, and teaching through the local cultural values were identified as teaching practices that nurture students’ and teachers’ cultural identities. Additionally, micro cultural validations, fleeting interactions between teachers and students—words and/or body language—were noted as CID-nurturing moves.

##### 3.1.1. Using and Teaching Local Heritage Language

Spread across the vast Alaskan landscape, Indigenous Alaskans comprise 229 federally recognized tribes and at least twenty distinct languages [45]. As a result of colonization and the draconian English-only policies of early government schools, most of these languages are threatened, and at least one, Eyak, is classified as moribund, as there are no living speakers of this language [45].

Figure 2 shows the geographic range of language groups in Alaska. The status of Indigenous Alaskan languages is extremely dire. For example, there are less than 200 birth speakers of the Lingít language in Alaska and Canada [46] and only 7 Sm’álgyax (the language of the Ts’msyen people) birth speakers in Alaska [47].



**Figure 2.** Indigenous peoples and languages of Alaska [48].

Recently, however, there has been a resurgence of Indigenous people across Alaska learning their heritage language as a second language. In part, this social change happened

because, in 2014, in response to pressure from Indigenous organizations, including a sit-in at the state capitol, the Alaska legislature passed a bill proclaiming more than twenty Alaska Native languages as official state languages [49]. This simple action provided protection and encouragement for speakers of Alaska Native languages to use their own language to communicate with government officials and in public. Many young parents in the 21st century are beginning to understand the consequences of heritage language loss. In fact, some participants in this study equate language loss with genocide:

“The mental harm done when you strip someone of their language is immeasurable. When children were taken away to boarding and residential schools where English-only was violently enforced, that trauma was so immense that it was embedded in our DNA and that is why some of our people are still suffering from that era—things are still manifesting.” [Naomi Leask]

“The genocide (from language loss) is not the genocide of the physical human body, but that of the soul because eliminating the language severed a tie to our Ancestors that the younger generation is starting to fight very hard to get back.” [Elizabeth Hancock]

“The genocidal attack made by the Canadian and US governments (through English-only policies) is one of the worst atrocities done to Native American peoples. It has left communities with generational trauma that manifests in high suicide and drug abuse rates.” [William Bolton]

Indeed, in a 2007 Canadian study by Hallet et al., it was noted that Aboriginal communities in which a considerable proportion of the members had conversational knowledge of their ancestral language also experienced low to absent teen suicide rates [50].

Study participants also noted the importance of language revitalization as a source of strength, resilience, and well-being:

“...every time I speak my grandparent’s language on our land, is another way I demonstrate our resilience.” [Barbara Dude]

“Language revitalization is a life-saving measure for our people. Walter Soboleff (a renowned Tlingit Elder, scholar, and Presbyterian minister) once stated that when children and young people know their culture and their language, they are given a purpose. He would say that nobody would commit suicide because they had such a strong sense of purpose.” [Adele Hagevig]

“(Language revitalization) is important for me because we always walk with our Ancestors by our side, and by revitalizing our languages, we are acknowledging the harm caused to them through colonization/boarding schools and showing them that we are willing to do the work necessary to bring our people back to a healthy place in life.” [Elizabeth Hancock]

“Even learning and using one word is holding up the culture and respecting the language.” [Roby Littlefield]

Some participants reported feeling guilt or shame about not speaking the language.

“It is extremely important that we help with language revitalization. We have only one fluent speaker in our community. It makes me sad that I am not putting more effort into helping revitalize the language. I could be doing more. Why does this feel extremely heavy all of a sudden... this burden to help keep it alive???” [Jennifer McCarty]

“This brings me back to the conversation of being ‘native enough’ and has me questioning the limited noun and song work I’m doing in my own life and classroom.” [Barbara Dude]

Hope for the future was expressed by several participants.

“With those that are younger than me I feel hopeful because we are incorporating our language into the schools and that’s helping normalize the use of our language. Children are going home speaking our language and their families and parents are asking about what their children are saying.” [Chelsee Cook]

“A peer from our class reminded me that we can be embers, and maybe what we teach is a spark to someone else. And even if it feels like it’s not enough, it’s still something.” [Barbara Dude]

### 3.1.2. Teaching Through Oral Narratives

Several educators participating in the Indigenizing Education for Alaska Community of Practice (CoP) mentioned the importance of storytelling and using culturally relevant literature in their teaching; some benefits cited by educators included an increase in student engagement, excitement for learning, and active participation when oral narratives were integrated into lessons. In Sm’algayax, the language of the Ts’mSYen people, the word for oral stories is adaawx, defined as “true telling; story; history; teaching narrative; and oral tradition” [51]. This definition demonstrates how important our stories are to Indigenous people. It is the opposite of what is evoked when we hear the terms mythologies, myths, fairy tales, and folklore in the Western classification systems. Those terms imply that there is something false about the oral story. On the contrary, in the 1997 Canadian Supreme Court ruling of the Gitk’san-Wet’suwet’en land claims case, the courts ruled that oral stories were “oral histories as proof of historical facts” [52].

The Ts’mSYen worldview has three realms—land, air, and water. In old adaawx, these three realms describe all living beings that lived within them, just like us humans, in longhouses, and belonging to the same four clans: Eagle, Raven, Wolf, and Killer whale. Although their longhouses were made from different materials, the function of the longhouses were the same; they were used for social organization. In more recent adaawx, it has been said that communication between all living beings within these realms happened at times because there was a mutual respect between humans and other living beings, from salmon to devil’s club. When humans started losing our way and not respecting things as we should, the animals wore their “cloaks” more often to not reveal their human-like form. The animal cloaks are also described as skins or a magical robe that let them change from animal form to human-like form. Also, in this same adaawx, we can see the belief that all living things are sentient.

An example of one such adaawx is the story of “*The Prince and the Salmon People*” [53], which illustrates the connection between traditional ecological knowledge and cultural values related to stewardship and conservation as well as migration patterns, and ha’walks, or protocols. Briefly, this story takes place during a great famine that lasted many years. In this village, there was a young prince, and he had a companion that would not stop crying from hunger. Feeling pity for his companion, the young prince began to search around and found a dried spring salmon that his mother had been hiding. He quickly cut off a piece and fed it to his companion just moments before his parents returned. His mother discovered that half of the large salmon was gone, and she learned that it was her own son who took it without permission. She scolded the young prince so badly that he decided he could not live with the shame, so he left the village that night when everybody slept. After walking all night, he found a place to rest at the edge of the ocean and just as he sat, a canoe pulled up near him that had beings in it that he did not quite recognize. They offered him a ride, and without hesitation, he boarded. When he woke, he found himself in a strange village he had never seen before—which happened to be in the realm of the Spring Salmon. The first person he met in the new village was a man who introduced himself as his uncle who was also the Chief of the Spring Salmon, and he was gravely ill. He said he was ill because the young prince’s mother was careless with the dried spring salmon that she kept hidden away. After spending several years in the new village, learning their migration patterns, and the ha’walks regarding how to treat them with respect so that they might continue to be plentiful again, he was returned to his own village. He was

instructed to teach everyone how to treat salmon, from the moment they are pulled from the water to what to do with their remains afterwards. The deepest interpretation of this story illustrates the intimate connection of people and place. The story acknowledges that the salmon people have their own social structures that the boy discovers when he lives with them for years. The story also emphasizes the complexity of this salmon society, as it took the boy more than a year to learn the important lessons that the salmon wished to teach him. Finally, the salmon boy story demonstrates the spiritual link between people and animals through the transformation of the boy into a salmon. The line separating people from salmon is permeable; the boy simply had to slip under the blanket of the ocean to enter the realm of the salmon.

The story describes the deep ecological knowledge shared by the salmon people. For example, the boy in the story learned that the salmon have an indicator telling them when it is time to migrate back to the streams of their birth to spawn, just as humans know that when we see skunk cabbage sprouting, we know it is time to start preparing for seaweed because they share the same growth cycle. Similarly, in Ts'msyen adaawx, *The Prince and the Salmon People*, when the salmon see mawan (horsetail) growing, they know it is time to start preparing to migrate. Perhaps what is even more important, as Jo-Ann Archibald mentions in *Indigenous Storywork* [54], is that "there is something more than information being transmitted: there's energy, there's strength being transmitted from the storyteller to the listener and that's what's important in teaching young people about their identity" (pp. 84–85). When we did the reader's theater version of the adaawx in my classes, grades 6–12, not only was the participation surprisingly at 100%, students made comments like, "we need to do more of these, I learned a lot and it was a lot of fun," or "I feel like we would learn something new every time we read one of these—even if it was the same one" and "man, our ancestors were so smart!" The sense of pride and knowing a little more about their history was evident in many of their comments.

When teachers use adaawx as the basis for lessons, this important wisdom, passed down through the generations, becomes evident to students. Some information is only accessible through these stories. In his article titled "Decolonizing through Storytelling," Chi'xapkaid, Michael Pavel, of the Skokomish Nation, stated that, "much of what has been missing in the education of Indigenous children is the cultural knowledge and appropriateness that is embedded in the stories of their people" [30] (p. 131).

In response to this statement, a study participant expressed the following thoughts:

"How do we continue to harm students by leaving this important piece out of the education system? Knowing that we can't truly go back to a completely traditional education system (Or can we? Is that my colonized brain talking?) It's important that these teachings and stories be shared in the public education system."  
[Barbara Dude]

When lessons are not based on adaawx, students may be not be motivated to engage, resulting in a lack of learning. For example, during a second-grade literature/social studies lesson taught by Chelsea, the essential question in the curriculum guide asked, "What was life like in the West for early Americans?" Students were expected to read, notice, wonder about, and discuss the life of John Henry, an American folk hero renowned for his strength. In response to the readings, students stated "Why do we have to read about this man?" "How come we have to learn about the things he did?" "John Henry doesn't have anything to do with me." Even at such a young age, these second-grade students recognized the one-sided perspective portrayed in the readings. There are many Ts'msyen or other Indigenous stories featuring heroes that could be taught alongside the stories included in the adopted curriculum, such as *The Salmon and the Prince*; when such stories are included, there is an upsurge in student interest and engagement.

Study participants believe that including relevant oral narratives and adaawx benefits and engages students' learning.



“We all love a good story, but when it is relatable to us, the audience, there is a deep connection, a deeper meaning. When a teacher can make a connection based on the child’s background, I believe that those students will be successful and confident in their lives” [Jennifer McCarty]

Some study participants also noted the importance of stories as being foundational to the very purpose of Indigenous education.

“There is just not enough time to teach everything that needs to be taught. Of course, when I reflect on what I want for my students (to grow into healthy, happy, productive members of our community), I remind myself that indigenous education is solely designed to do just that.” [Shawna Puustinen]

Being responsive to students, building on their background knowledge, including examples from children’s lived experiences, and teachers bringing their own humanity into the classroom all serve to nurture children’s cultural identities. In reflecting on the discussion about including *adaawx* in lessons, one study participants said,

“I learned that I have a story to tell, too.” [Nastasia Vaska]

### 3.1.3. Land Education

In public schooling, “knowledge” is situated within Western epistemology, systems, and narratives that have been extensively shaped by colonialism [14,55]. Today, knowledge is (re)produced or passed down from educator to student in a school building and within the four walls of a classroom. However, the production of knowledge for Indigenous people has occurred in vast and varied ways—always within a meaningful context. As Indigenous educators, study participants are strategically positioned as knowledge bearers, eager to recoup their own language and culture, and to incorporate traditional ways of being into their preschool to high school classes. For Indigenous teachers, Land education is about so much more than taking students out of the classroom. Study participants noted a spiritual connection to Land that fosters a sense of purpose and fulfillment:

“Land based education is about reconnecting learners to the land. . .mind, body and soul. It is learning about, connecting to, and fostering healthy relationships with the land around us through the teachings of our Indigenous Elders. Land based education centers the welfare of the whole child by developing and refining hands-on skills, imparting place-based and cultural knowledge while fostering self-reliance, resiliency, identity and a sense of belonging.” [Shawna Puustinen]

“I find that that sense of purpose and truly being connected culturally to the land and to the people brings great joy and achievement.” [Adele Hagevig]

Participants described the need to help reconnect their students to the Land to find the balance their ancestors experienced in their relationship to Land. Many study participants described the importance of taking their students out of the classroom and onto the paths carved by ancestors engaged in subsistence activities. Through this seasonal subsistence activity Indigenous Alaskans built up an intricate knowledge of, and intimate connection to place.

“Taking students outside of the classroom to learn from the plants and animals goes back to our traditional ways of teaching.” [Jennifer McCarty]

Despite the pressures of an overly full curriculum, pressures to adhere to state-mandated educational initiatives, and frequent assessment, student sorting, and mandated interventions, study participants found ways to include Land education to nurture students’ and their own cultural identities.

For Naomi, as a Ts’msyen teacher in her homeland, she regularly found ways to take her high school students outside the classroom walls to learn about the vast resources available on their island reserve and to engage in subsistence harvesting. Naomi posted one video in which she is seen taking her students out to a field near the school to harvest

k'wila'maxs, or Hudson Bay tea. In the video, Naomi and a student are recorded having a very comfortable conversation. The transition from the classroom to outdoors presented a context in which teacher and student were able to converse in a natural way. In this shift from formal classroom teacher to Indigenous food harvester and cultural knowledge bearer, Naomi shared what to look for, how to identify the plant, and how to discern it from another similar-looking but potentially harmful plant. Later in the video, Naomi and another student interacted playfully when Naomi pointed out spider eggs on the plant and spooked him! They laughed together. This moment organically elicited curiosity, examination/discovery, focus, fear, and joy. As Maya Angelou famously said, "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel," [56].

Sharing the harvest was a natural extension of the Land education lesson. After drying the leaves and packaging it into tea bags, students were invited to share with family and community. Although, at first, some students seemed unsure at how their gift would be received, they soon developed confidence and pride in their ability to share a resource from the Land that has long contributed to the sustenance of their ancestors. Thus, sharing the tea contributed to their sense of purpose and belonging, and ultimately to their identities as capable, respectful Ts'msyen young people.

"Students will remember those "field trips" for years to come! More than the mandated lessons in the classroom, sharing experiences with them is what is most memorable." [Jennifer McCarty]

#### 3.1.4. Emphasizing Local Cultural Values

Cultural values are an integral part of being a "true human being." In fact, that is the literal translation of the words "Yup'ik," "Tlingit," and "Ts'msyen"—the names of our people. Cultural values form the foundation of one's identity, which shapes one's path in life. Family, language, seasonal traditional practices, both subsistence and ceremonial, and intentionally and explicitly teaching those values to the next generation are vital and complex values that are shared with all cultures in Alaska, and frankly, around the world. Family is multigenerational and extended by marriage ties. Elders are valued as respected teachers that teach our values to our youth. Cultural values are not taught in isolation or explicitly as one value; they are Haa Kusteeyí, or our way of life. They are shared with others because they are important and deep within us, and they connect us to one another.

In Alaska, each tribal group is guided by core cultural values [57]. While the Tribes are diverse and spread across the large state of Alaska, there are many cultural values that are shared among them:

- Honoring and utilizing the Land with reverence and respect.
- Striving for strength of the mind, body, and spirit—the whole person.
- Respecting the wisdom of our ancestors and learning so we can pass on that wisdom.
- Seeking social and spiritual balance.

These cultural values are taught and built upon over a lifetime. Some might say they are even in our DNA.

"My native-ness lives deep within my being. I know that whether or not I was given the opportunity to learn about my cultural heritage, it would still be there, dormant and missing. The awareness that something is wrong, the feelings of vacancy would exist even if I didn't know why. The systems of colonialism continue to slowly eat away at our cultures. We are continuously bombarded with teachings that place value on individuality, egocentrism, and capitalism. These values are in opposition with cultural values upheld by indigenous people across the globe. People who are not connected to their tribal heritage are not anchored by tribal values and are easily assimilated into the dominant culture."

[Shawna Puustinen]

It is a collective responsibility among the family and community to teach these values; everyone plays a role in this. Children learn cultural values through teachings from a family member, hearing stories, participating in cultural and subsistence activities, and observing the land and other living things.

“My mother and Em’a (grandmother) are the two figures who dominate my memories of learning, but they are not the only ones who taught me about our values. Every member who was close to me as a child took a part in guiding and instructing me about values: family, faith, daily and seasonal responsibilities, and what is expected of me.

In my community, if one was doing something wrong and was seen by an adult, they would come correct them, take them to their parents to inform them of what one did, what they said, and the parents would thank them for telling them of one’s actions. The parents would also tell the grandparents and together they would inform them what was done wrong, why it was wrong, how it affected both oneself, family and community, and what one should do if one ever encountered that situation again.

The main goal was to know how to support oneself and one another independently in the future. Everything that was taught was to be a true human being—able to survive and thrive in our environment and to help those around us.”

[Nastasia Vaska]

Creating a classroom community that emphasizes and teaches through these cultural values is important to all participants. For example, Roby has been teaching the Tlingít language at the middle school, high school, and college levels for nearly three decades. Although not a birth-speaker herself, Roby learned the language by sitting beside Elders, asking questions, and absorbing not just the nuances of the language, but the cultural values hidden deep within the vocabulary, phrases, and syntax of the language.

“My teachers, the Elders, aren’t here anymore. I hope to be a bridge from them to our next generation and share the knowledge they gave to me.” [Roby Littlefield]

In her first-grade classroom, Barbara, a Tlingít teacher, deeply embraces the cultural value of respect for all beings. This core value motivated Barbara to develop a weekly event designed to show respect and honor her students’ families. During these Family Friday events, students and families hold each other up by sharing space, food, songs and stories. For example, during one Family Friday, the parents of a child of Filipino heritage joined the class to read a story, featuring words and phrases in the Tagalog language, about respect in their culture. After the story, the family asked the audience if they had any questions about Filipino culture. The audience, which consisted of both students and some of their families, put their hands up to ask questions and share connections. Once the sharing concluded, the students sang a song to thank all the families for gifting their time to the class. Barbara and the students discussed the idea of creating a special Family Friday song; after brainstorming ideas for the song, one student shared their hopes of the song being in the Lingít language. The event became so meaningful to the students that a song was created in partnership with other culture bearers and language teachers to share with families, to welcome them and thank them. The words in Lingít are “Haa een.aak’w yee jiyís kusaxan tin héidei shootuwataan haa x’aháatx’i yéi áyá kaa jín dult’eix” which translates to “Our families, for you, with love, we have opened our doors. This is how hands are warmed”. We want our families to feel like their hands are warmed when they enter our space and when they cannot be in school, to know that we are warming the hands of their children every day.

“When a person, young or old, doesn’t know their culture, it truly is destructive. Our culture is our life! It doesn’t matter which culture you come from. My students are learning who they are through our cultural teaching. When they know “who they are”, which family they come from, whichever clan they come

from, it is a form of identity, and when they know their identity, they are confident, they are resilient, and they are powerful!" [Jennifer McCarty]

### 3.1.5. Micro Cultural Validations and Creating Communities of Belonging

In watching classroom videos, it became apparent to reviewers that Indigenous teachers use *micro cultural validations* with their Indigenous students quite often. Smiling, getting down on the student's level, pausing to listen, speaking a word in the student's heritage language, using the child's Indigenous name—all serve to validate students' developing sense of self. For example, in one coded transcript, Yal'aq Adele Hagevig, a young Indigenous teacher, welcomes her students, most of whom are Tlingit, to school. But unlike most classrooms, she does not call out individual names. Instead, she welcomes them by clan. "*Gunalchéesh; haat yi aadi, Wooshkeetaan.*" (Thank you; it is good that you are here, Shark clan.)

She makes eye contact with each clan family, smiling and nodding her head in acknowledgment of their verbal response, "*Gunalchéesh*". In five minutes, early in the school day, she affirmed to her students: *You are important to me. You are important to your clan. You are important to your ancestors. You are important to this learning community. You are seen. You belong.*

Roby, a Lingit language teacher, also spoke to the importance of using Lingit names and referencing students' clans.

"For me, as a non-heritage language speaker, when I was given a Tlingit name, I knew it was a very special ceremony and it made me feel like I was a valued part of the family and community. When a heritage or ancestors' name is handed down, certain responsibilities are implied. Family relationships are strengthened, ancestors are remembered and brought back into the present by giving their names to babies and through adoptions. I was told by our clan leaders that I was now Kaagwaantaan, Tlingit, a human being. This validation gave me the strength and confidence to study and learn from the Elders that wanted to teach me. By 1996 there weren't any Elders who could teach in the schools, so I jumped in and developed my own curriculum and teaching style. In my classroom each student who does not already have a heritage name, is given a nickname based on the definition of their western name, or a noun is taken from one of our curriculum units. One micro-validation in our classroom is to find a round stone from the stream and paint the students Native name on it. It is used to save their seat at the table. This also provides repetition and practice for the students to learn and use each other's names in class." [Roby Littlefield]

Humans are biologically programmed to seek human connection. We enter the world seeking comfort from our caregivers. Babies spend countless hours studying facial expression, voice intonation, physical touch and movement—a study in human behavior. By grade school, children are experts on reading people. They can detect sincerity, even though the nuances of social interaction and relationships escape them. They know when praise is not genuine, and they know when niceties are forced and unfelt. Every interaction is affirming one of the two messages, "you belong" or "you do not belong." As teachers, we have immense power in cultivating a sense of belonging in our students or in destroying it.

In Tlingit culture, connection is the foundation of society. Interwoven webs of familial ties bring us together. We acknowledge these connections every time we introduce ourselves. "I belong" rings true in each layer of our genealogy. I belong to the land. I belong to this group of people, this village, this house. I belong. I belong.

As Tlingit children, we are conditioned to watch our words, to think before we speak, to show respect to all things and all people. Belonging means we are all in it together. Actions have consequences and consequences affect the whole. This understanding, along with gentle guidance, curbs misbehavior. Feeling seen, understood, and experiencing a strong sense of belonging keeps children engaged in learning.



As educators, we can cultivate learning communities where students feel valued and connected by engaging in practices that affirm students' individual and collective identities. For some students, this happens in academic settings without much effort from the teacher. These students share language between school and home and often share cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds with their teachers. They feel connected to the learning through the curriculum, which is developed based on the dominant cultural perspective. Social norms and values within the school are similar, if not reflective of the home environment. Throughout the school day, these students receive validation of their belonging through hundreds of micro affirmations. They feel seen and valued.

Indigenous students and other students whose identities do not match the dominant culture are less likely to find micro affirmations in the structure, culture and curriculum of the school. These students must work harder to navigate the learning environment and to connect with lessons, materials and teachers. Language, cultural norms, and value differences may present barriers to student engagement and learning, which may lead to feelings of failure and a lack of belonging. Over time, the cycle of barriered access and feelings of being devalued and isolated result in lower student achievement and unmet potential. The fault rests squarely on the institution of Western education through unchecked systems of domination and a culture of egocentrism.

While indigenous people and allies around the globe are challenging the status quo and pushing back on institutions that continue to promote colonial mindsets and practices, it will be some time before the culture of education shifts in the walls of American schools. In the time between then and now, we must provide current and future educators with the tools to empower all youth to reach their full potential.

This starts with creating learning communities that promote belonging. The idea is simple, yet in many classrooms around the country, educators fail to achieve learning communities that go beyond shared space. Real community is defined by the emotional attachment and commitment to care for one another. It is a matter of the heart and soul and requires vulnerability and trust, starting with the teacher.

"When I was little, our Elders would tell us stories about their lives. They never excluded the hard things; their stories were raw and unfiltered. They shared the mundane and the extravagant, the joy and the pain. Each story, a lesson in humility, resilience and vulnerability. And while I didn't recognize it at the time, I was in awe of them because of the level of trust they placed in me. They valued me, a small child, enough to share a part of themselves with me. It was a gift that connected us to one another. I learned to work hard, to do hard things at the side of these amazing educators. I wanted to show them how worthy I was of the gifts they willingly passed on to me. I wanted them to be proud of my accomplishments, to take pride in their investment in me. I felt seen and cared for, challenged and supported. I had no doubt that I belonged on the banks of the Jilkhoot River with these people." [Shawna Puustinen]

There is so much power in sharing our stories with our students. We do not have to dive into the most personal moments of our lives, but sharing our humanity with our students makes us real. If we want them to feel seen by us, we must show them that we are capable of understanding where they have been and how that relates to who they are now. Our vulnerability is affirmation of the strength of their character and their place in the community being created together.

When trust has been established, students will share their own stories, giving teachers the opportunity to listen. Like feeling seen, feeling heard builds a greater sense of belonging. Daily sharing creates opportunities for students and teachers to tell stories and listen to the stories of others. Connections are made when students realize that other people share their experiences, dreams, likes and dislikes, and troubles. Many teachers teach students a signal, often the American Sign Language sign for "same," to help students nonverbally connect with their peers' stories. It is powerful to see classmates signing "same" while a

student shares a particularly hard story. What a profound moment for the child sharing. “I am not alone. Other people know how I feel.”

### 3.2. *Participating in a Community of Practice as a Source of Support for Indigenous Teachers*

In addition to teaching, Indigenous educators are often called upon to create a culturally responsive curriculum, create teaching materials for teaching the local heritage language, provide training for other teachers, and to serve in leadership roles at the district level. Serving in all these roles is rewarding, especially for teachers striving to change the system so that it works for all students; however, balancing multiple roles can also be a source of stress for Indigenous educators. The community of practice (CoP) provided a much-needed source of support for members.

“The CoP was a transformational opportunity and food for my soul during a very hard year.” [Amber Frommherz]

“What I hope to gain through COP is the strength to change the education environment. . .our students need to see and hear the stories of those who did, so they know it is possible and where they can turn to when they need help.” [Elizabeth Hancock]

“Every time we meet it feels 100% refreshing.” [Barbara Dude]

Classroom videos collected during this project included many instances in which participants taught the local heritage language, included Indigenous stories in their teaching, taught through cultural values, and nurtured students’ cultural identities in other ways, yet many participants reported feeling inspired to do even more to include cultural references in their teaching as a result of participation in the CoP.

“It is comforting to know that everyone is doing what they’re doing. Seeing them (other teachers in the CoP) in the videos is mind-blowing! It gives me ideas of things I could emulate.” [Nastasia Vaska]

“I feel really motivated (from participation in the CoP) and excited about including more culture this year. I have a bigger passion for it. I wish I could do more other than just including Tlingit phrases or words.” [Kirstin Karsunky]

Participants expressed feeling satisfied, purposeful, and even joyful when they engaged in classroom practices that served to nurture students’ cultural identities, such as when students mastered a particularly challenging lesson in their Indigenous language. Some participants mentioned that they felt their own cultural identity was nurtured when they learned more about their own cultural stories or worked on their own language fluency.

“As I am learning our language, it has been a healing journey and is connecting me more to our place. I want this for my students. I want them to not struggle with self-identity in the ways I did.” [Chelsee Cook]

## 4. Discussion

Meeting together over the course of a year in a community of practice, Indigenous Alaskan educators found mutual support in the face of the demands of an overly full curriculum, pressures to adhere to state-mandated educational initiatives, and frequent assessment, student sorting, and mandated interventions. By examining their practice through the use of classroom videos, reading and reflecting together, participants were able to discern and describe five distinct practices that contribute to their students’ and their own cultural identity development: (1) using and teaching the local heritage language; (2) contextualizing teaching within a cultural frame, such as an Indigenous cultural story or oral narrative; (3) teaching *on* and *with* the Land; and (4) emphasizing cultural values; and (5) micro cultural validations, fleeting interactions between teachers and students that bolster students’ cultural identities. Returning to the metaphor of the cedar rope, when these teaching practices are twined together into one strand, and then twined together with

the curriculum, the resulting rope becomes a lifeline that is able to support Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, leading to academic success and positive life outcomes.

The community of practice approach allowed participants to develop trust, enabling them to “open up their classroom doors” to one another; they recorded videos of themselves teaching and reflected on their own teaching practices in a way that is only possible through the close examination afforded by video. After reflecting on their own teaching, participants viewed colleagues’ videos through an Indigenizing lens. Because these educators are deeply grounded in their own Indigeneity—they know and/or are learning their languages, they know or are learning their cultural stories and history, and they know and live by their cultural values—they are uniquely suited to discern and describe teaching practices that nurture cultural identity. Carefully selected readings [29,30] and honest discussions added to participants’ abilities to layer their own practice over the wisdom evident in the literature pertaining to Indigenizing education.

Participation in the CoP empowered teachers to push back against policies or practices that are detrimental to children’s cultural identity development, as in Chelsea Cook’s case when she spoke out to provide a balanced view of history by including more Indigenous stories in the social studies curriculum, or when Naomi Leask advocated for more field excursions for her high school students to allow them to harvest, prepare, and share resources from the Land with their families and other community members. Barbara Dude stated that she felt the CoP “gave her permission to keep doing what we’re doing.” If we want schools to work for all students, including Indigenous students, we must include Indigenous educators in the decision-making processes—from curriculum adoption to scheduling.

Implications from this research project for teachers, administrators, and teacher preparation institutions are myriad. By incorporating local heritage languages, stories, studies on the Land, and cultural values in their lessons, Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers will nurture the cultural identities of their Indigenous students [21,32,58] and will support their non-Indigenous students in gaining an appreciation for and understanding of the culture of the place where they reside [59]. This requires teachers to study the local Indigenous language, to learn the cultural stories that are important in the region, and to listen carefully to Elders, culture bearers, and others to learn the nuances of local cultural values; this takes time and dedication on the part of teachers. The synergistic interplay between language, story and Land helps teachers, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to internalize the local cultural values, enabling them to effectively nurture the cultural identities of their students.

Administrators are urged to support teachers in these endeavors to internalize local cultural values. This involves allowing time and resources for teachers to devote to language learning, supporting language study groups, and normalizing Indigenous languages in signage, correspondence, bulletin boards, and in all public-facing text. Support for language learning may take the form of tuition reimbursement for Indigenous language courses for teachers, paraeducators, and school administrators at all levels. Administrators may support teachers in the study of important cultural stories by encouraging teachers to enroll in courses through local Indigenous or tribal organizations and supporting the purchase of books by Indigenous authors for the school library. Administrators are positioned as gatekeepers to fieldtrips by teachers and students; recognizing the importance of lessons “on the Land” and trusting teachers to decide when, how often, and for how long students should be out of the class engaged in harvesting activities will accommodate teachers in supporting this important aspect of cultural identity development for students and teachers.

Teacher preparation institutions are in a powerful position to advance the study of local heritage languages, stories, studies on the Land, and cultural values for teacher candidates matriculating into Alaskan classrooms. Requiring a basic competency in the language of the Land on which teacher candidates will be teaching would advance the language fluency objective for Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers. If teachers have a basic grasp of the language, they will be more inclined to incorporate language lessons

in the ways that Yal'aq did so seamlessly, as described above in Section 3.1.5. Including place-based education courses in teacher preparation programs would support teachers in their natural history competency. Offering a cultural history course for teacher candidates would allow them to be exposed to the rich stories that form the foundation of the cultures and the underlying values.

It is the hope of the authors of this article that tribal organizations will be empowered to advocate with teacher preparation institutions to include Indigenous language, oral narratives, Land education, and cultural values in all aspects of teacher certification programs.

Recommendations for future research include continued autoethnographic work with Indigenous educators to further refine the discernment and description of teaching practices that are supportive of students' cultural identity development. In particular, it would be beneficial to study how the intersection of Indigenous language study, place-based, and culture-based education and to describe how the synergy supports teachers to internalize cultural values, thus impacting teachers' ability to support children's cultural identity development. Another recommendation for future research is to explore the impact of Indigenous language, cultural stories, and Land education from the child's perspective.

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