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## **Education and birthright: Lessons from small Indigenous schools in the Americas**

**Elizabeth Sumida Huaman**

**Abstract:** Indigenous educators worldwide have made considerable strides to resist formal schooling as an instrument of coloniality. New, alternative approaches re-envision education as both space and process toward protecting and revitalizing Indigenous epistemologies and cultures. Drawing from qualitative Indigenous research, this chapter highlights recent examples of this movement with small Indigenous schools in Peru, the United States, and Canada that exemplify community-based educational design focused on reclaiming education through Indigenous knowledges. The chapter describes the epistemological landscapes of the schools and identifies a common principle that drives their purpose—the (re)centering of the natural world as educational mandate. This chapter argues that small Indigenous schools challenge dominant discourses of rights stemming from state-centered ideologies. Ultimately, Indigenous educational endeavors enrich our collective understanding of how we might teach for the healing of our world today.

**Keywords:** Indigenous schools; Indigenous environmental education; Indigenous rights education

### **Introduction: The question of birthright**

In the world of today it has become important to know who we are, where we come from and what we are born with. There is a felt need to know our roots and to belong to some place that we call home. But as well as being concerned about identity and our place in society there is also the question of birthright. Do we have a birthright or has it been denied, suspended, removed, or is it in doubt that we ever had such a thing? (Mead, 2016, *Te tapu o te tangata, the tapu of the person,* para. 1)

In *Tikanga Māori: Living by Māori values*, Hirini Moko Mead recounted cultural philosophies and practices embodied by tikanga Māori, which Justice Durie described as “proper or meritorious conduct according to ancestral law” (Durie, 2016, “Foreword,” para 1). According to Mead, renewed interest in the 1980s for discussing and documenting tikanga Māori emerged from the popular (mis)use of Māori cultural protocols named in the Māori language, *te reo*, among other concerns. Through generations of co-existence among Māori and pakeha (European settlers) in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Māori knowledge directly related to ceremonial protocols and daily behavior had been suppressed by settlers with difficult ramifications for Māori people. Mead’s work, along with that of other Māori scholars and generations since, provides the contemporary foundations of Māori cultural, linguistic, and political revitalization.

As a non-Māori person, I do not venture to offer explanation of tikanga Māori—this is not my goal. Instead, I open this chapter with inspiration gained from Mead’s work: First, tikanga Māori represents the spiritual and cognitive depth of Indigenous knowledges. Mead and other contemporary and historical Indigenous scribes and orators—Guaman Poma de Ayala

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(Quechua), Handsome Lake (Haudenosaunee), and Edward Benton Banai (Ojibwe)—remind us that Indigenous peoples did not haphazardly organize our communities, nor were we merely lucky to somehow survive over generations. Indigenous peoples established structures of governance and law and critical strategies for how to live within a particular environment. Second, there are people within Indigenous communities who are doing the difficult work of nurturing knowledges that direct Indigenous peoples how to live properly with each other and the beings on this earth.

As Mead asserted, there is a need for people to know who they are and where they come from, and in coming to know this, there is an inescapable agenda of responsibility or *how* to be here in this place, which refers to that which is given—both what we inherit and what we give in return. Mead referred to this as *kaihau-waiū*, the attributes gained through your mother’s milk, or birthright. For Māori, these attributes were sets of supra-biological, social/kinship, and spiritual inheritances. As Indigenous peoples, we might then think of knowledge of one’s history, people, and purpose as part of the birthright of every living being. Importantly, Mead noted that birthright is the responsibility of parents, relatives, and the individual to “maintain and cherish” while fending off loss or damage by others. Today, Indigenous peoples continue to observe this tension due to the impacts of coloniality on our lands, our social and political institutions, and our bodies and minds (Mignolo, 2009; Quijano, 2000; Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012). In such circumstances, Mead’s questions are decisive: We must ask ourselves about the state of our birthright—do we have birthright? What constituted birthright in the times of our ancestors? What does it look like today? Has it been denied, suspended, removed, and if so, to what effect to individuals, communities, and the world around us?

In this chapter, I frame Indigenous education as a resolute mechanism of reclaiming birthright, including the foundational knowledges and related language-based cultural practices that Indigenous ancestors held for their descendants. Indigenous educators worldwide have already made considerable strides to resist formal schooling as an instrument of coloniality while offering viable approaches that re-envision education as space and process toward protecting and revitalizing Indigenous epistemologies and cultural practices (Battiste 2000; Goodyear-Ka’ōpua 2013; Kawagley 2006; Smith 2003). Drawing from qualitative Indigenous research methodologies, I highlight examples of this movement in discussions with three small Indigenous schools<sup>ii</sup> in distinct geographies. Located in Peru, the United States, and Canada, these schools exemplify community-based educational design that is focused daily on reclaiming Indigenous knowledges in spite of tensions with mainstream standards of educational achievement. Next, I describe themes that characterize each school through the voices of school founders who underscore a common principle that drives their purpose—the (re)centering of the natural world as educational mandate. I argue that through Indigenous worldviews, small Indigenous schools challenge dominant discourses of rights and resource protections stemming from state-centered ideologies and human arrogance, and that ultimately, in the age of the Anthropocene, Indigenous educational endeavors enrich our collective understanding of how we might teach for the healing our world today.

## **Indigenous knowledges and rights: Intersections and departures**

*Knowledge is the birthright, and education is the gift*

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I begin by discussing my positionality as a Wanka and Quechua person and by introducing two interconnected themes: Relationships mediated through place, and the idea that the perpetuation of birthright knowledge cannot be taken for granted.

In 2000, I was a researcher on an all-Indigenous research team based in northern New Mexico. Under the tutelage of Pueblo scholars, I gained critical exposure to theories and practices of Indigenous community-based education. For example, I observed how Indigenous community members and Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators were drawing from local cultural practices to build curriculum in Indigenous-serving schools. Our project was part of a network of other Indigenous sites, including Diné and Alaska Native partners.

This work was very personal. Growing up, I had gone to mainstream schools where I learned to perform according to dominant expectations. I did not learn about Wanka and Quechua history but was taught that Indigenous people were primitive and uncivilized and that European colonizers brought order to the chaos of a brutal “New World.” However, what I understood from my own family members was quite different. Since I was very young, I was told that we are a great and interconnected people across the Andes who mastered astronomy, architecture, engineering, agriculture, medicine, and the arts, but that much had been destroyed by the Spanish. Generations of my own family had been farmers and weavers, historians and storytellers, healers and herbalists, leaders and lawmakers, and more recently, teachers, attorneys, agronomists, and medical doctors. Working with Indigenous educators validated that we did not have to choose between suppression of identity and advancing professionally. Schooling could be something different from what had been forced; our greatness was not in our past.

During this time, I met Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley, Yupiaq scholar of Indigenous knowledge systems<sup>iii</sup>. I treasured him—he had a sweet smile and laughing eyes, and he was a humble yet powerful speaker with a way of choosing each word to convey great meaning. He wrote my recommendation to graduate school in 2001. I will not forget what he said after reading my statement of purpose as his words have served as a reminder of the commitment that Indigenous education requires and what is at stake when we falter.

This kind of work is needed to make understanding of harmonious living and life shared to make this world safer for cultural diversity and biodiversity. Our younger generation don't have a mastery of their own Native languages and that of English, they are caught in the grip of confusion and drifting aimlessly in a world that they never made... (e-mail communication, 2001)

I had set out to study how land-based cultural practices constituted Indigenous education, and Angayuqaq's work remains tremendously important in this pursuit. Raised by his grandmother in Bethel, Alaska, he described his childhood as so beautiful—until he was taken away to school. His stories of juxtapositions experienced through the trauma of a system that made Indigenous children ashamed of their identities made me think very deeply about educational policy and design. Not only were his personal narratives compelling, but he had also carefully accumulated understanding of the Yupiaq knowledge system, including ecological philosophies central to science, history, and social studies. In his book, *A Yupiaq worldview: A pathway to ecology and*

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*spirit*, now in its second edition (2006), he shared how his people thrive in their environment and how these ways of knowing can inform schooling for all children:

Yupiaq thought holds that all creatures, including humans, are born equal. This does not imply that all functions or jobs of the creatures are equal but, rather, that each does its job equally well. All human beings are equal as they have been endowed with consciousness, thus having the ability to develop culturally, intellectually, and morally, each in its own way. (Kawagley, 2006, p. 16)

In his proposal for *nature-mediated education*, he emphasized the idea of “teaching through the culture,” whereby Indigenous environmental practices serve as learning contexts and content, simultaneously reinforcing human relationships with the world around us through purposeful cultivation of values. Kawagley wrote that humans are not apart from or above nature but that we are instead participant observers in the universe.

I think of Kawagley often—his was the work of rebuilding education and envisioning another way forward. I think he would be happy to know that Indigenous scholars have continued to write about Indigenous knowledges as inextricable from education. For example, Ojibwe scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson explained, “Indigenous education is not Indigenous or education from within our intellectual traditions unless it comes through the land, unless it occurs in an Indigenous context using Indigenous processes” (Simpson, 2014, p. 9). This is a critical pronouncement—*Indigenous education* is Indigenous precisely because of connection to place and the knowledges and practices that establish and maintain relationships in this place. Our knowledge is our birthright, but the sharing of that knowledge is a gift borne by responsibility that often persists under threats<sup>iv</sup>. Thus, while Indigenous knowledges and education are endangered in a world of implacable development projects and the pursuit of progress, the call for Indigenous peoples is clear—recover, maintain, and protect our knowledges and be steadfast in upholding the responsibility to receive and share the gift.

#### *Dominant rights discourses and Indigenous rights education*

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UN Declaration<sup>v</sup>) is a compilation of comprehensive articles based on years of Indigenous consultation and leadership. However, the language and practice of rights outside of international law and policy networks is contentious, and important questions remain regarding theory and application of individual and collective rights (Holder & Corntassel, 2002), the intersections and tensions between Indigenous self-determination and gender (such as violations against Indigenous women) (Kuokkanen, 2012; Lorenzo, 2019), and even the appropriateness of the term “rights” given its European etymology and ideological roots. For example, Tsalagi scholar Jeff Corntassel (2012) argued that being Indigenous (as a way of asserting identity and resisting coloniality) requires Indigenous peoples to recognize how the state has co-opted discourses. Namely, “rights” require state recognition, “reconciliation” decenters Indigeneity, and referencing Indigenous ecologies as “resources” shapes our homelands into economic commodity. Corntassel advocated for reframing rights as *responsibilities*, reconciliation as *resurgence*, and resources as *relationships* (2012, p. 91-92), which is a call to not only rethink how what we name ideas in English but also to reconceptualize discourses according to Indigenous worldviews and languages. Kanaka Maoli education scholar Julie Kaomea does this work through her

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presentation of kuleana where kuleana signifies in Hawaiian language “rights,” “privilege,” “concern,” and “responsibility.” Part of the richness of kuleana is not just that it emerges from Kanaka Maoli worldview but that the distinctions between its forms are based on context—time, place, and the interactions between kama‘āina and ho‘āina, respectively children of the land (Kanaka Maoli) and friends of the land (visitors who should also care for the land).

In terms of education, our concern as educators becomes how rights—presently constructed *and* reimagined—are taught. Since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the 1940s, there have been a series of pragmatic versus dialectic educational approaches which now comprise the field of human rights education (HRE) (Ely-Yamin, 1993). One focus in HRE over decades has been to consider HRE goals as subjected to curricular demands, whereby educators identify common characteristics of HRE related to educational and social outcomes—cognitive, affective, and action-oriented (Tibbitts, 2005; Bajaj et al., 2016). However, HRE is evolving, and key principles today include education *as* human right, education *with* human rights, education *about* human rights, education *through* human rights, and education *for* human rights—where these may be singularly utilized or practiced in concert with one another (Bajaj, 2011, 2014). Building on her work with schools in India, Monisha Bajaj more recently proposed transformative human rights education (THRED), which makes a community-based link with human rights pedagogies in and out-of-school and aims to close the gaps between rights and the daily realities of students and educators (Bajaj et al., 2016). Relatedly, HRE scholars bridging pragmatism and idealism are posing critical questions regarding the role of agency in HRE, its enactments, and its evolution—within schools, communities, the state, and the “goodwill” of state actors (Tibbitts & Katz, 2017).

My work has attempted to introduce to HRE Indigenous knowledge systems—the interconnected networks of ways of knowing and doing that extend across and encompass environment, economy, governance, health, education in Indigenous communities (Sumida Huaman, 2018). I have argued that when Indigenous communities reclaim education based on our knowledge systems, we invariably challenge dominant rights discourses while reconfiguring the purpose of learning towards Indigenous self-determination and environmental stewardship. I call this Indigenous rights education (IRE) (Sumida Huaman, 2017), a heuristic stemming from reflection on what Indigenous communities prioritize as vital elements required for honoring ancestral places and considering the universe as shared. In other words, Indigenous rights education re-centers good relationships and restoration of broken relationships among living beings. Founded by local Indigenous knowledge systems, IRE offers approaches to educational design and pedagogy with, about, through, and for *Indigenous knowledges*.

Essential to this proposal is distinguishing between the discourse of human rights and related education for development approaches (for example, capabilities<sup>vi</sup>), which center the human through the person and their entitlements, whereas Indigenous knowledges define *purpose of being* in Indigenous languages and according to Indigenous worldviews, never disconnected from place and the relationships required to be here. Thus, to refer to human rights without consideration of the world around us is a misnomer. We are not entitled to the things we have constructed or taken, and this belief is at odds with the material realities of human social and economic systems today. Hence, there is great tension for how to be Indigenous and act properly in a global economy that does not value this way of thinking (Merino, 2016).

Although Indigenous knowledges affirm that rights are not human-centric (which is the thinking and action that characterizes the Anthropocene), these teachings have been obstructed



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by conquest. As a result, Indigenous peoples worldwide struggle to simultaneously gather knowledge while building educational programs within communities where not all Indigenous people are invested. Fundamental to Indigenous knowledges is acceptance that life too is a gift—ours and all species. We conduct ourselves properly so that we may have the privilege of returning the kindness to the world around us. This is makes a full, rich, and good life, which in Quechua is *sumaq kawsay*, a worldview popularly taken up as a banner for alternative development in Andean nations (Gudynas, 2011; Merino, 2016; Villalba, 2013). However, how to honor *sumaq kawsay* or other Indigenous worldviews in educational practice remains a major challenge facing educators and policymakers. The remainder of this chapter addresses how three small Indigenous schools in the Americas address this task today.

### **Tsi ni yu kwali ho:tu, Kusi Kawsay, and Niigaane**

In 2011, I organized a research project with small Indigenous schools in Canada, the United States, and Peru. During the previous decade, I had worked on in- and out-of-school initiatives on culturally-based curriculum development, youth and language revitalization, and social impacts due to environmental shifts. As a comparativist, I sought to address the lack of Indigenous leadership in comparative and international education research and program development where Indigenous and minoritized populations are treated as subjects of study rather than as agents of social transformation.

Based on relationship-building with Indigenous communities, I had established long-term commitments with Indigenous nations, including the Onyota'aka (People of the Standing Stone) of the Oneida Nation of the Thames, part of the Haudenosaunee or Six Nations of the Iroquois whose homelands spread throughout the eastern part of North America, southwestern Ontario, Canada, and into the midwestern United States. For years I had admired *Tsi ni yu kwali ho:tu* (“learning place” in the Oneida language), a school established by Onyota'aka traditional chiefs<sup>vii</sup>, cultural leaders, and families who built a log schoolhouse in the community in order to teach ceremonial knowledge that had been diminishing with the passing of each spiritual leader. As explained by co-founders and brothers Bruce Elijah and Howard Elijah, *Tsi ni yu kwali ho:tu* was not accountable to provincial policymakers or indebted to Canadian government funding but was supported by the traditional chiefs. A mixed group of about two dozen students would gather in the large main room of the school for lessons, play lacrosse in the nearby field during breaks, and travel together to local places to gather medicines or materials for ceremonial items. Teachers, like lead teacher Lo:t^t Honyust, were hired based on their cultural knowledge, language abilities, and the upstanding character of their person.

Among my *runakuna* or Quechua people, I had begun visiting *Kusi Kawsay* (“happy life”) and reflecting the highest aspirations for students by school founders. Located in the Sacred Valley of the Inkas in the region of Cusco, Peru, *Kusi Kawsay* is part of a landscape of contrasts—Inka archaeological sites and Quechua homes and farm fields and former hacienda plantations where Quechua people were forced to labor under the descendants of the Spanish. As well, communities are encountering extractive industry, massive tourism and the proliferation of foreign-owned businesses. The school had been built by hand by co-founders Roman Vizcarra and Rene Franco Salas and their families, and the adults and children of the region. Constructed using local adobe and natural materials, the school blends into its environment rather than

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upsetting it, and is surrounded by ancestral Inka farming terraces in use to this day. At the start of the study, the school served approximately 100 students. The curriculum was based on the Andean calendar, which reflects the Quechua ecological cycles and Quechua cosmology. As such, lessons and activities reflected the daily and ceremonial lives of students and their families in the region.

In 2012, I visited Niigaane Ojibwemowin Immersion school<sup>viii</sup> at Gaa-zagaskwaajimekaag, Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe, in northern Minnesota in the U.S. At the time, Niigaane had shifted full administrative control to the larger school system on the Leech Lake reservation, Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig (“Bug School”). Although students were situated in modular classrooms, Niigaane was surrounded by tall pines, lakes, and endless sky. As a language immersion school, instructors, resident Elders, and students were expected to engage each other and coursework only in Ojibwemowin (Ojibwe language). Students were addressed using only Ojibwe spirit names, not their English names. Subject areas were taught in Ojibwemowin, resources and materials were in the language, and there were written and verbal philosophical reminders of proper behavior and Ojibwe values throughout the school spaces. Leslie Harper and Adrian Liberty, two of the original co-founders of the school, met with me. I learned that Niigaane, like Tsi ni yu kwali ho:tu and Kusi Kawsay, had been established by families—community members of different generations who strived to create a healing, revitalizing, and positive educational experience for their children and grandchildren. In their own way, each school offered this wish in order to counter multiple traumas<sup>ix</sup> experienced within their families.

From 2012 to 2014, I collected data and shared it back with the schools. The perspectives of seventeen Indigenous educators and co-founders inform the ideas presented in this chapter—seven individuals from Kusi Kawsay, six from Niigane, and four from Tsi ni yu kwali ho:tu. Their words capture the centrality of Indigenous lands and knowledges thus reframing rights discourses aligned with Indigenous languages and worldviews. Although I utilized ethnographic approaches to data collection (semi-formal interviews, participant observation, member checking, etc.) and publish in academic venues with the permission of the schools, the research paradigm that informs this work is Indigenous research methodologies (Atalay, 2012; Chilisa, 2012; Deloria, 1991; Johansson-Fua, 2014; Kovach, 2009; McKinley & Smith, 2018; Oliveira & Wright, 2016; Smith, 2012). Research is not “Indigenous” simply because the study involves Indigenous participants or is conducted by Indigenous researchers (Sumida Huaman, 2019). Rather, Indigenous research methodologies are concerned with power, representation, ownership, accountability, and social justice in, through, and as an outcome of research with Indigenous populations. Indigenous research calls us to interrogate the utilities of research and to re-evaluate its benefits for Indigenous individuals, communities, and institutions for as long as they require it.

## **Lessons from small Indigenous schools: Ecology, identity, and happiness**

### *Ecology*

Among the reasons that each school founder can cite for the creation of their school are two prominent and intersecting sources—the motivation to reclaim what has been disrupted due to colonial violence and the ongoing oppression of Indigenous peoples (including resulting

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lateral violence) *and* the aspiration to build something different, something beautiful for future generations. Seminal to this work is knowledge of place, land, and relationships, which requires living in ecological practice.

Of the three schools, Tsi ni yu kwali ho:tu is the oldest at this work. Established in 1987, the school began out of a barn and then a vacant home on the Oneida reserve until it was built by community members on the land where it currently stands. Co-founder Howard Elijah recounted the history of the community's struggles but described the current optimistic moment:

There is a re-emergence of our culture in our community. The younger people want know who they are. They want to know about their history. They want to be proud of who they are and that's not happened just in our community. That's happening in all communities. So for our community, it's really important to us that we keep the ceremonies going. We keep our medicine society going that takes care of our people because what we're finding is that everybody talks about Western concepts, Western society. And what we have studied in recent years is the diseases our people are getting. They are getting diabetes. They are getting heart diseases. They are getting cancer. They are getting all the sicknesses because of the food that they eat. That's what it comes down to—*environment, what society out there is doing to our land to our water, to our earth and that's what causing all these sicknesses ...* The reality is that we have to educate ourselves to eat healthier, to plant our own food, to be in control of our own lives, and *that's what brought us health in the first place.* (Howard Elijah, 2013 Interview, my emphasis)

Howard pointed out that Oneida relationships to land consist of spiritual connections that are apparent through what people (and other living beings) on the land consume. Understanding what is happening to the environment and community control of food production has clear physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health implications for Oneida people. Also expressing broader political and economic concerns, Kusi Kawsay co-founder Roman Vizcarra, stressed that growing disconnection between humans and our environment served dominant purposes. He asked me rhetorically what it meant if in a global capitalist order communities like ours had no purpose for or interest in participating in capitalism and mass consumption:

A lot of people, they want Indigenous culture as a museum piece. That's okay and beautiful, we are all proud of that. But when the mummies start talking again, they have a problem. See? Again, I want to [make] very clear that if something makes us very strong here, it's that we are re-evaluating the ancestral calendar ... It has to do with agriculture. Because we are an agro-centric culture. So when we take all that, *we will come back to the language of nature*, that has been expressed in that way here for thousands of years. And that's all. (Roman Vizcarra, 2013 Interview, my emphasis)

According to Roman, mainstream society enjoys Indigenous peoples as colorful adornments, snapshots of a distant past. However, when Indigenous people reject this role and demonstrate



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that they are willing to fight for land and environmental protection because it is in our worldview to do so, this sentiment goes against the trajectory of so-called progress and national development and is viewed as insurgent. Kusi Kawsay co-founding member Carlos Franco Salas deepened this sentiment and personalized the meaning of ecology:

The thing about ecology, in reality is our ancestral culture, all of this. Without calling it as such—the word ecology didn't exist in our language—[our ancestors] were very ecological, one hundred percent, because culture was based in respect. Ultimately, it's respect. That's where everything falls. Everything that our culture deals with, in one single word, is respect. And when you respect, automatically you do not need to define "ecology" because if you respect the plant, you feel its being, and you are not going to be destroying it or killing a little bird just for fun, which is normalized—or littering trash, plastics, contaminating the rivers because this is a living being. In other words, how could I do that? Where is my respect? She gives me water through her rivers, the plants grow, and as gratitude I throw trash on them? I couldn't. When you understand that all of this is respect, then without understanding the word ecology, *you are doing ecology because you are respecting everything*. (Carlos Franco Salas, 2013 Interview, my emphasis)

As a way of being, Quechua knowledge directly informs individual comportment and emanates from understanding what living within a particular environment requires, which is unified with values that embody feelings and produce actions (to live harmoniously with and protect, not destroy). The vast Quechua landscape and human ability to care for -- and be cared for by -- the environment depended upon this way of being for generations. Co-founder of Niigaane Leslie Harper expanded this notion by reflecting on the contemporary experiences of Ojibwe people—where deep appreciation of ecology is not limited to rural regions.

We want to place it [language] in a contemporary setting that is useful. We want to prove those people are wrong saying it's never got me anything in my life only hold me back. I could never get a job with that, that was a big one you know—economic loss—because lots of it ties in to politics of poverty and that rapid economic shift, rapid cultural shift that happens in communities worldwide ... Again thinking, "What are you going to be—a bunch of bilingual Ojibwe speakers in lands and woods?" "How are you going to take care of your family?" And we decided that *no, our goal is multilingual people who know who we are so that we don't feel ashamed so that we can operate and fulfill that part of us ...* All the Ojibwe are very strong, this is very apparent in cultural teachings and cultural practices. Why should I have to put that aside when I interact with any educational setting in the community? Why should I put that aside when I go to grocery store, put that aside when I go to a show, when I go to the doctor, when I go to anywhere. You know I am trying to be what I am not ... There has got to be *a place that we can have ourselves*. (Leslie Harper, 2013 Interview, my emphasis)

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Leslie argued that Indigenous educators have a responsibility to think about the multiple spaces where our children will set foot and the tools they will need to carry with them, especially language. She also recalled the difficulties that emerged when her own community members were skeptical of the value of Ojibwemowin in a country that demands English proficient workers, and where schooling is still viewed as a promise of guaranteed social and economic mobility. The inherent value *and* utility of Ojibwemowin and all that the language expresses had been separated over time. Something can be of value, perhaps sentimentally, but not considered useful, and Indigenous knowledges, cultural practices, and languages are constantly facing this question—whether or not, where and how they “fit” in a world defined by what is produced and consumed within the global economic marketplace. As Leslie contested, Ojibwemowin is embodied, mobile, and expansive, and Ojibwe people have the ability to reclaim its value and imagine its utility.

### *Identity*

All three schools were well aware of the challenges regarding the value of Indigenous knowledges, and they pointed to benefits that they believed transcended economic wealth, like the positive identity development of the Indigenous child student. Previous generations had gone through dehumanizing schooling experiences, and co-founders themselves had experienced dislocation from languages and cultural practices. They were concerned with what the institution of schooling represented in terms of assimilation to normative expectations and impacts to children’s potential. At Tsi ni yu kwali ho:tu, teacher Lo:t’t Honeyust stated,

That’s kind of the way that I look at the education out there: There’s all these square pegs and you have to conform to their system, and if you do that you’ll fit in...but what happens if you don’t fit? I remember that when I was a kid I had this toy and that’s what it was. It was like a red and blue ball and had these yellow shapes, and I had to find out what shape to put in each one ... That’s kinda the way that I look at the children. Children aren’t the same. Every child is different and you can’t force this child here, maybe that star shape, to fit in that square hole. The only thing that is gonna fit in there is the one that is square shape ... So we can’t do that to children because they have their own gift. The Creator sent them here for a reason, for a purpose, and I guess it’s a philosophy or belief that our job here as their parent or whoever is to try to identify those gifts—what is the kid, a star shape or square shape? What is he? So he can find his place in that world. And so that’s what our job is. Here it isn’t to try to take that star shape and make them into square shape or make them into a circle. *Let them be a star, let them be a circle, let them be square, let them be who they are and help them to nurture their gifts.* (2013 Interview, my emphasis)

The notion of children’s gifts and purposes figures prominently in understandings of student identity. At Niigaane, co-founder and teacher Adrian Liberty also referred to gifts when he described the clash between mainstream education and Niigaane’s pedagogy and the Ojibwe philosophies related to why and how they teach.

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We're following the school setting that has been proven not successful, this American education system, and for some reason we always want to model something after a program that doesn't work. We need to step up and look at what would *we* do. How would *we* teach? ... Everybody has been through this system, and that's all they think education is ... When we first started, kids would go home and say we'd played all day, and parents would call and say, "Oh my God, what are they are learning?!" I'm like, that's exactly what I want them [students] to feel. I want them to feel like they are playing all day ... if we listen to them, they will tell you what they are struggling with and what they are ready to learn and what they are interested in. To me children need to drive their education, not the teachers. We're there to guide them, to strengthen them in the gifts that they're born with ... We seem to forget where our children are coming from and I'm talking in that spiritual aspect. *They've come gifted with things, and they have a task to do, and they are given a job to do. Our job is not to shape them into something that we need. Our job is to help them develop what it is that they need and what they're supposed to do.* And I think education [schooling] kind of screwed that up. (2013 Interview, my emphasis)

Both Adrian and Lo:t refer to their respective cultural teachings that describe the birth of children who come with gifts already bestowed—discussed earlier in this chapter as what Mead referred to as a “bundle of attributes” (2016). They challenged the role of schooling and the hierarchy of teacher-student interactions that has been historically characterized by what famed Brazilian scholar Paolo Freire called “banking education,” expert teachers depositing (Western) knowledge into empty heads (2005). At Kusi Kawsay, co-founder and music and art teacher Carlos also expressed a more child-centered approach to education that considers humans in development with the world around us.

It's very lovely that some families have come, parents themselves, to say “thank you because our children have taught us how to live better”... that for me, and I believe for the entire school association, is lovely because unfortunately no school teaches the child through values ... all of the values are ancient, and you have to focus very much on values. We are proud because we are giving to the children what was never given to us [in school] ... the custom is normal that ... the child lives like an adult, not like a child, does not enjoy their childhood as their nature requires ... and that has consequences. From that comes conflict, suffering, self-destruction, vicious cycles of destruction and death. And this is not just an issue here in PISAQ or in Cusco or in Peru, it is like this worldwide. So sometimes, I do not see Kusi Kawsay as solely recuperating our Andean culture but recuperating the life of the human being because we are arriving at an ugly extreme where we have forgotten how we should be, what is humanity really ... our work is not only cultural but also to recover the real life of a human being, how they should live, how they should live together with everything that surrounds us, with all life. (Carlos Franco Salas, 2013 Interview)

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Too often, Indigenous cultural practices are viewed as static and incapable or resistant to change; when in reality, sense, adaptation, innovation, and creativity are characteristics that Indigenous peoples have employed to persist through mass genocide and linguicide. Carlos also added that people adapt knowledge and traditions, which is the hard work of Indigenous educators—to be observant of the world around us and to steadily reassess our approaches and actions.

### *Happiness*

The final theme that I discuss here is happiness, which speaks to the question of purpose in education. Just as Leanne Simpson's definition of Indigenous education revolutionizes education by returning it to place and Indigenous thought processes and orientations, Tsi ni yu kwali ho:tu, Niigaane, and Kusi Kawsay recognized the limitations of formal schooling and shared what they believe matters most.

I got my grade in twelve, and I went to Europe in college, so I got that education out there *but that's not what makes me who I am today or drives me, or that's not what I identify with as being my education*. I think it was part of my life that I went through that it helped to form me who I am today that's helped me to understand where I needed to go and so in that regard it did help me you know in some ways but everything that I learned coming here, helped me much more. I think again going back to residential school and colonized thinking that generation that raised children that to believe that in order to be successful you have to go out there, you have to get your education, you have to get a job, a good paying job and raise your family and all that kinda stuff and that's fine. That's alright to do but I was talking with the kids today is your spirit you know... you know it can address your intellect, your education, you can go out there, and you can be the smartest person out there but you are not gonna be happier. *Your spirit isn't happy*. (Lo:t^t Honyust, 2013 Interview, my emphasis)

Lo:t^t recognized Western formal education in his own development—schooling conveys knowledge that can be used by Indigenous peoples to understand the issues that matter to us through history, science, maths, language arts, political science, anthropology, and so forth. Lo:t^t's own journey had been to gain a Western education and to then return to his home community in order to immerse himself in his cultural practices. In his case, schooling provided the skills and experiences needed in order to make the choice to return home toward his own fulfillment—schooling offered mobility, and Indigenous education offered liberation. Likewise, Leslie Harper of Niigaane shifted the main purpose of Niigaane away from material and economic gain while also acknowledging that material needs are real.

And I was taught about all strengths, you know, it was engrained in me that we have those strengths, even though we might be cash poor right now. Right here today, we're amazing. We're amazingly powerful. We had that, we had that kind of energy and those kinds of correlations and all of that political knowledge for

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centuries. Why did we drop it? *Why did we drop it?* (Leslie Harper, 2013 Interview, my emphasis)

Leslie noted that what small Indigenous schools do exceptionally well is basing their work on strengths—of place and community togetherness, cultural teachings and practices, community member teachers and allies, and students. At the same time, she also challenges Indigenous to think about our legacy and agency. In her view, the greatness of Indigenous nations lives on through our knowledges and languages and within the people. The power of what is within us was echoed by Kusi Kawsay co-founder Roman through his recollection of the significance of the name Kusi Kawsay:

Happy life. A quality of life. We call that *sumaq kawsay*. What is successful? Why do we live? What is the ultimate goal? It's being happy. And...*you cannot be happy if you deny who you are*. If you deny, if you don't have pride in yourself—to have pride in yourself, you need to have pride in your ancestors, and your traditions. So traditions...are so important for us. But they're only a tool to be happy. The ultimate thing for me is to be happy, because I saw also people that know the traditions, or they think they know the traditions, because they know the forms. But they're not happy. And there might be traditions that need to be changed. Because circumstances have been changed. Because if they don't make me happy, why?...So for us, it's very functional. And that's what we want. To enable to be happy, you need to live with dignity. You need to have respect for yourself, and you need to claim respect for yourself when you give respect.  
(Roman Vizcarra, 2013 Interview, my emphasis)

Roman outlined key points regarding happiness as a goal. Happiness is not a nebulous sensation but results from knowing who you are, and part of knowing who you are is learning the knowledge of your ancestors and most importantly, why they practiced as they did—not merely following tradition without deeper grasp of *why* cultural practices are significant. This learning process is intertwined with dignity, respect for others, and self-respect—collectively contributing to one's belonging to a place, a people, and a belief system that are meaningful in this world.

### **Conclusion: Looking around, back, within, and ahead**

Tsi ni yu kwali ho:tu, Niigaane, and Kusi Kawsay underline vital perspectives regarding what small Indigenous schools in the Americas do and why. Through discussions of ecology, identity, and happiness, they point out distinctions between centuries of dominant schooling for Indigenous peoples and initiatives towards re-creating schooling deliberately as *Indigenous education*. These schools are imperative, especially as we witness Indigenous ecologies hammered by exogenous development projects, climate change, social dysfunctions, and political and economic disempowerment. These schools function while confronting the demands of universalizing national (and international) standards of achievement that often label Indigenous children as underachieving and their families, lives, and places of origin as projects



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to fix, escape, and overcome. Despite these perceptions, there are things that small Indigenous schools do very well, and they offer vital lessons in a troubled world.

*1. Small Indigenous schools are place-based.* They necessarily pay attention to place and keenly and profoundly understand their geography and location, which are not the same thing but refer to terrain and standpoint. They build infrastructure using local materials, and they fit into their environments without creating imposing structures that disrupt the world around them—such as large concrete or glass behemoths into which migrating birds crash, for example.

*2. Small Indigenous schools use local knowledge as the curricular foundation and explicitly define what they hope their children come to know.* They set learning goals and determine how knowledge is structured and imparted based on their ecological-cultural calendars, seasonal activities that include observation of nature, and what all species do during these times. Student learning and assignments are linked to practicing co-existing with the world around them and include seasonal food gathering, medicinal gatherings, offerings and prayers.

*3. Small Indigenous schools use cultural values as their foundation for behavior and what they hope their children embody or come to be.* They emphasize comportment of all those involved with the school—from the way students are greeted and addressed to hiring practices and staff conduct, to how students are disciplined in ways that do not exclude or isolate them but bring them closer in touch with their own feelings, the land, cultural practices of intervention and healing, and through caring from educators and peers.

*4. Small Indigenous school teachers are largely from the local community.* Most teachers have familial and cultural ties to the communities where the schools are situated, which means they know the families of students and participate in cultural activities as community members. Additionally, whether or not teachers are directly from the surrounding area, they live in and invest monetarily and non-monetarily in the community. They do not drive in and drive out. Teachers are or become relatives to the children and act accordingly. They know the families or work hard to get to know them. Teachers not directly from the community are asked to constantly learn about the community and students and their families, but they are provided with explicit and regular opportunities to do so and to become part of the place.

*5. Small Indigenous schools are self-determination minded.* They make decisions as independently as possible of regional, national, or international standards. This is especially evident as they aim for self-sufficiency in multiple ways—from funding to meals for students and materials in the Indigenous language. They often resist, and this causes tension between them and the state and at times, the local community, which may fear repercussions from the state. Small Indigenous schools exercise agency toward liberatory practices and policies, and they sacrifice stability because of it.

Small Indigenous schools have emerged as a response to the violence of coloniality, particularly through systematic enforcement of institutions that define and regulate what constitutes knowledge and how that knowledge is transmitted. Formal schooling under Western

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invention reflects industrial goals, which is antiquated and failing us all. Small Indigenous schools re-envision schooling as Indigenous education that is place-based, conducted in relation to respect for one's environment, and distinctly connected to Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies. Schools like Tsi ni yu kwali ho:tu, Niigaane, and Kusi Kawsay dispute normative ideas of human rights and the right to education and challenge us to ask if in this time of rampant ecological shift and destruction, especially on Indigenous lands, we can be compelled to rethink the meaning of rights and what is intended for Indigenous peoples through education. Their work shifts our focus towards recognizing and reclaiming birthright and shaping the responsibility to protect and nurture it.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> I do not italicize Indigenous words. This is part of a scholarly movement across Indigenous literature and research to make a statement about normalizing Indigenous words in daily speaking and in writing. Why should Indigenous words be viewed as foreign and highlighted amongst English words? I credit to my colleague Māori scholar Huia Tomlins-Jahnke in 2015 of Massey University for issuing this challenge.

<sup>ii</sup> Small Indigenous school is in reference to schools serving less than 100 students. The designation is also used in relation to small schools that re-envision mass education and defy neoliberal agendas through transformative curricula and pedagogies. See Maria Hantzopolous and Alia Tyner-Mullings (Eds.) (2012). *Critical Small schools: Beyond privatization in New York City urban educational reform*. Charlotte: Information Age.

<sup>iii</sup> The presence of Indigenous knowledge systems questions dominant European assumptions regarding what is knowledge and how knowledge is used (such as, towards what purposes). I also see Indigenous knowledge systems as values-oriented, observant of the physical and metaphysical world, and concerned with practical application of knowledge and skills exercised. For more information on Indigenous knowledge systems, see Barnhardt, R. & Kawagley, A.O. (2005). Indigenous knowledge systems and Alaska Native ways of knowing. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 36(1), 8-23 and Sumida Huaman, E. & Martin, N.D. (Eds.) (in press). *Indigenous knowledge systems and research methodologies: Local solutions and global opportunities*. Vancouver: Canadian Scholars' Press.

<sup>iv</sup> Over time, communities developed sophisticated ways of caring that we can still access despite colonial impositions like the legacies of Indian Residential Schools. Based on the 2008 Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA), which acknowledged the history of the 86,000 First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children placed in residential schools, Canada organized a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, releasing its report in 2015. In 2017, Trudeau issued an apology to Indigenous peoples for the nation's part in their abuse and cultural and language loss. For more information and video links of the apology and Indigenous reactions, see:

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/justin-trudeau-labrador-residential-schools-apology-1.4417443>. For more information on Indian Residential Schools in Canada, see:

<https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/specialseries/2017/01/canada-dark-secret-170130091149080.html>,

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-49884387>, and <http://www.trc.ca/about-us.html>.

<sup>v</sup> According to Indigenous scholars working with the United Nations on matters pertaining to this Declaration, the increasingly preferred way to refer to the document is “UN Declaration” and not UNDRIP as is more commonly written. See the work of June Lorenzo, for more information and for the way she references the document:

<https://repository.usfca.edu/ijhre/vol3/iss1/3/>.

<sup>vi</sup> For capabilities approaches to education see Nussbaum, M. (2003). Capabilities as fundamental entitlements: Sen and social justice. *Feminist Economics*, 9(2-3), 33-59.

<sup>vii</sup> Haudenosaunee nations adhere to a traditional chief system of leadership. In Canada, this representation is not synonymous with elected leadership or Band Council. It is not my intent to impart cultural knowledge (which would not be respectful as I do not speak for the communities), and no further description is relevant or appropriate in this space.

<sup>viii</sup> After the completion of data collection, the school underwent major restructuring and founding Director, Leslie Harper, is no longer affiliated with the school. The school remains in operation today, and changes were the result of administrative decisions at the larger school level.

<sup>ix</sup> In other writing, I have argued that traumas—Indian Residential or boarding schools in the Canada and the U.S. or *hacienda* (plantation) labor and extractive industry in Peru are not singular events that traumatize Indigenous people but a continuous pattern of coloniality and the nationalized oppression of Indigenous peoples. See: Sumida Huaman, E. (2020). Small Indigenous schools: Indigenous education and resurgence in the Americas, *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, pp. 1-20, online first article.