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Remember, Reclaim, Restore: A Post-Pandemic Pedagogy of Indigenous Love in Early Childhood Education

Trisha L. Moquino and Katie Kitchens

In many ways, COVID-19 has uncovered what we've always known: The structures and systems that shape the United States are built on White supremacy. Early childhood education is no different; it is deeply rooted in anti-Indigeneity. Inviting educators to envision the pandemic as a portal and rejecting the notion of a return to the White supremacy inculcated in young children from the earliest years by American schooling, we reflect on the need to leave behind White supremacy and systems of oppression. We take with us spaces of resistance and the resolve to engage in intentional acts of solidarity whereby White non-Indigenous educators take on responsibility to uproot anti-Indigeneity in early childhood education. Although anti-Indigeneity is longstanding, we see the pandemic as a portal to center pedagogies of Indigenous love in early childhood education. To do so, in this paper, two early childhood educators, one Indigenous (Kewa, Cochiti, and Ohkay Owingeh Pueblos) and one White, name the legacy of harm perpetuated in early childhood classrooms and preschools and articulate a vision for “a Pedagogy of Indigenous Love.”

Trisha Moquino and Katie Kitchens, co-authors of this paper, are co-teachers in the Keres Children's Learning Center (KCLC), a school dedicated to revitalization of the Cochiti Keres language. Keres is one of five languages spoken among the 19 Pueblo Indigenous Nations in New Mexico, and Cochiti Keres is fluently spoken by about 100 people in the world. This paper explores the role that critical love has played in the affirmation of Indigenous young children, families, and communities prior to, amidst, and beyond COVID-19.

Here, when the pronouns “I,” “we,” “us,” and “ours” are used, Trisha is sharing her stories and the stories of her people. Katie's contributions speak to the need for responsibility-taking among non-Indigenous early childhood educators and other stakeholders to uproot anti-Indigeneity. Co-authoring this paper is an intentional act of solidarity; the solidarity we need to imagine in a new world, where anti-Indigeneity is part of the past and a Pedagogy of Indigenous Love becomes the norm in early childhood education.

A PEDAGOGY OF INDIGENOUS LOVE

My grandparents taught us love, generosity, kindness, the importance of family, hard work, and respect, the importance of our Keres language. Those values are what grounded me. Those values ground our children. Those values ground the tribal nations I come from. And those values should be prevalent in early childhood programs in our Tribal Communities.

Early childhood environments which center whiteness implicitly and explicitly denigrate the languages and cultures of Indigenous children, chipping away at the sense of safety and protection offered by their communities and families as they are beginning to build their sense of either trust or mistrust in the world. Indigenous histories, language, and love are all but absent from the “data banks and dead ideas”

(Roy, 2020) that propel the work of American schools from the earliest years. Schooling in America has marginalized, violated, and devalued Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), furthering the legacy and ongoing realities of systemic racism for BIPOC children.

Against the backdrop of a devastating pandemic that has unnecessarily taken the lives of hundreds of thousands of people living in the US, unrelenting anti-Indigeneity is visible in the disproportional impact of COVID-19. The pandemic also reflects the ways in which there has always been resistance to White supremacist systems of oppression in our communities. We have seen the legacy of this resistance in mutual-aid, in sustained protests and organizing, and within the walls of schools dedicated to liberatory practice. Recognizing that when regarded as a portal COVID-19 offers an opportunity to reimagine American schools, we take this time to share a Pedagogy of Indigenous Love as a post-pandemic pedagogy for American schools. In doing so, we offer insights into our sacred ways of talking, being, and knowing. We do so in hopes of inspiring a break with the past, which has sponsored anti-Indigeneity in and through American schools, and centering Indigenous love.



Figure 1. Keres children's learning center students

A Pedagogy of Indigenous Love engages with Pueblo-Revolt-style radical love and begins with truth telling about the ongoing realities of settler colonialism, anti-Blackness, and anti-Indigeneity as visible in systemic racism and economic exploitation. It requires challenging White supremacy at its foundation and in early childhood education. Remembering, reclaiming, and restoring are central. Loving resistance has been a guiding force for Indigenous communities dedicated to language revitalization, sustaining our practices, our ways of communicating, our values, and our identities. Here, we review three key tenets of a Pedagogy of Indigenous Love: *remembering, reclaiming, and restoring* in the context of the Keres Children's Learning Center (KCLC).

REMEMBERING

In her book *To Educate the Human Potential*, Maria Montessori (1991) wrote:

let us give [them] ... a vision of the whole universe. The universe is an imposing reality and an answer to all questions. We shall walk together on this path to life, for all things are part of the universe, and are connected to each other to form one whole unity. (p. 9)

KCLC has chosen to use the Montessori method as a tool for our work because of the ways in which it aligns with our values around reverence for the child, care for the community, and responsibility-taking. The Montessori method offers the opportunity for children to cultivate independence so that they can develop their own unique talents, which they will use in service of the community. The rigorous pedagogy also allows a strong academic framework, freeing us up to spend more time creating the language and culture lessons that are the most important aspect of KCLC's work. While we appreciate Montessori for the freedom that it grants us, we also recognize that the ideas that Maria Montessori codified were not always her own—they are values and approaches to learning that have been held by many Indigenous peoples for millennia. At KCLC, we reclaim these practices in and through our teaching.

Maria Montessori believed in opening each school year with what she called “Great Stories,” which were intended to provide children with a sense of their place as humans within history and the universe. While inclusive in its theory, in practice each of the Great Stories presented by Maria Montessori and taught in Montessori training programs today apply Eurocentric understandings of the universe, of life, and of humanity. As a way of de-centering Whiteness, Trisha, the founding Keres-speaking elementary guide, and Katie, the English-speaking elementary guide, decided to reimagine a central component of the Montessori elementary classroom: the Great Stories.

We introduced the story of the Pueblo Revolt as a Great Story, focusing on the history of Pueblo people as a legacy of resistance, resilience, rebellion, and love for future generations. We told the students: On August 10, 1680 our Ancestors enacted the Pueblo Revolt, the earliest successful rebellion by Indigenous people in the United States, during which our ancestors drove out the Spanish conquistadors and settlers for 12 years. This revolt was an act of love for their people and their way of life. An act of love for future generations to know who we are and what we value. An act of love which was not soft or passive, but a love that stood firmly for justice.

At KCLC, we helped children to see this love through our yearlong study of the Pueblo Revolt. We reminded our children that continuing to learn and speak their language every day is a demonstration of the love their ancestors enacted.

At KCLC, The Great Story of the story of the Pueblo Revolt is first told by Trisha through Keres language immersion, and then touched upon in English by Katie. As Trisha first told this Great Story, the children were enthralled, inspired, and emboldened. At the end of that day, when children were sharing what they were grateful for, one student excitedly proclaimed, “I’m glad our people won the Pueblo Revolt!” This spirit of resistance and resilience that is part of the cultural intuition (Bernal, 1998) of Indigenous peoples continues to manifest through the existence of schools centered around the reclamation of Indigenous children’s education.

At KCLC, the lessons are taught not only by teachers, but by Pueblo elders as well. Pueblo elders offer invaluable intergenerational wisdom at KCLC. As respected teachers in the Pueblo, they remind our

children that tending to plants is like caring for children—plants, like children, need to be loved, nurtured, watered, have good soil and constant tending. This kind of intergenerational teaching is an example of a Pedagogy of Indigenous Love in practice.

RECLAIMING

The work that KCLC does is not new, it is not something that we are inventing. It is the way that our people have loved and cared for our children long before colonization. As Dr. Joseph Suina (Cochiti Pueblo) says, “We did not come to America, America came to us.”

KCLC is a place of hope because it is a place of reclaiming that which is already ours. It is a place to practice and embody generosity as demonstrated to us every day by the language of our elders who work with our children and our staff. A place where our children can value, honor and know what matters to our people: generosity and caring for one another and holding dearly to and honoring our ceremonies, rituals, values, and beliefs. This act of Indigenous love is a reminder of the need for justice and truth-telling as the only pathway forward in which we are all humanized and connected. It is only through truth-telling that there can be reconciliation.

Indigenous love as reclamation can be observed through everyday rituals like Cochiti’s form of prayer, which is woven into the children’s school life. With the guidance of an elder Pueblo teacher, children grow, prepare, and eat our ancestral foods in our ancestral ways as a means of reclaiming food sovereignty and the knowledge passed down from our ancestors. Preparing meals with traditional foods allows our elders to tell stories to the children about food, our beliefs, what we ingest, and why ancestral foods are good for our bodies.

Our elders, who are our most fluent Keres speakers, continually lead our language and culture lesson planning. These plans follow the cycle of our traditional, seasonal calendar, not the Western calendar, an act of reclaiming our ancestral understanding of time.

A beautiful example of the commitment of our elders is our Elementary Keres Language and Culture teacher who continues to develop the outdoor classroom, disrupting the settler colonial narrative that learning just happens inside the four walls of the school building. Our outdoor classroom embodies the ways in which we believe that schools are integrally connected to the whole-community—land, living beings, the elements.



Figure 2. Keres children’s learning center outdoor classroom

Lessons, resources, and activities in the outdoor classroom are available to the children and families who are enrolled in the school, as well as to the larger community. This is one way that KCLC demonstrates our commitment to preparing children for success and survivance in the way we define it: becoming whole people connected to land, rooted in our language, culture and values, so that we can all be loving, contributing members of our community. Jeremy Garcia (2020) speaks to the ways in which for Indigenous peoples, there

is a powerful connection to sustaining identity in relation to land, spiritual beings, symbols, and history that remind us of who continues to be affiliated with this landscape. It is where Indigenous peoples return to as a source of knowing, to offer prayers, and to reaffirm their identity. (p. 578)

Children can see all generations represented and respected in our school in the same way they are respected in our other communal spaces. KCLC is a place of healing for every member of the community, including the adults. In order for educational spaces to be liberatory, they must honor the contributions of each and every person. Central to KCLC's work is the belief that love has a place in our schools, in our classrooms, and in our organizational structure and climate each and every day. Because our elders, tribal leaders, have modeled to us—in the ways they speak gently, but firmly—the importance of what that love looks like in community and in our communal spaces.

RESTORING

When we imagine going forward, we dream of learning environments that put community and our values first. We dream of schools connected across generations through love. We know our children can be academically strong without sacrificing who they are. Post-COVID-19, the early childhood education we continue to imagine is marked by our children being able to access their heritage languages freely. We will continue to strive to realize early childhood education programs that can truly exercise educational sovereignty because they have access to state and federal funding without restrictions tied to mandated assessments that center English and whiteness. This funding rightfully belongs to Indigenous Nations, and the withholding of these funds is an act of further settler colonial aggression. Imagining racial justice and healing means reallocating these funds in ways that do not fragment our identities, deny our humanity, or compartmentalize our programs. This means moving beyond settler colonialist questions, such as: Are we a place-based school? An immersion school? A community-based school? A project-based school? The reality is KCLC is all of these things by virtue of our language. Our Keres language encompasses and integrates all these areas and beyond. This wholeness needs to be restored in early education policy, funding, and practices in the US.

As we continue living the legacy of the love of our ancestors through resistance, joy and the centering of Indigenous children and communities, we call on non-Indigenous educators to break with the past in hopes that post-pandemic, a Pedagogy of Indigenous Love will serve as a compass to American schools, enacting solidarity. It is with this hope that we offer some questions for reflection (Moquino & Kitchens, 2020) that can help non-Indigenous educators (re)consider how to show up in solidarity with Indigenous children, educators, families, and nations. Consider:

- How am I uplifting Indigenous people beyond an obligatory opening or closing statement? How have I failed to build relationships with Indigenous partners in the past? And how am I ensuring that Indigenous voices are involved?
- How have I taken responsibility to undo the miseducation that I have received about Indigenous peoples?

- What are the narratives that I've consumed, and how do they contribute to the invisibilization of Indigenous children?
- How have I actively contributed to the erasure of Indigenous children in my own classroom?
- How am I using financial privilege to redistribute resources to Indigenous-led organizations?
- How do I ensure that the national organizations I belong to are accountable and do not perpetuate the erasure of Indigenous peoples?
- Where am I investing my time, money, and other resources? Am I:
 - *Purchasing materials on Teachers Pay Teachers about Indigenous peoples made by non-Indigenous creators?*
 - *Buying books, materials, and attending workshops about Indigenous people with no presence of Indigenous peoples?*
 - *Participating in anti-racist workshops run solely by White individuals?*
 - *Centering myths, such as the Thanksgiving myth or the Columbus myth?*

IMAGINING POST-PANDEMIC PEDAGOGIES

As we educators envision ways of being and educating post-pandemic, we believe that American schools must strive toward culturally sustaining revitalizing pedagogy (CSRP) (McCarty & Lee, 2012). The Pedagogy of Indigenous Love at KCLC is one situated representation of CSRP. We know that this vision for early childhood education is possible and was possible, both before and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Yet the pandemic offers us the space to encourage educators in American schools to leave behind a settler colonialist agenda and move toward a Pedagogy of Indigenous Love. As we imagine pedagogies and schools post-pandemic, we invite educators to consider centering a Pedagogy of Indigenous Love in early childhood education via remembering, reclaiming, and restoring. This, we believe, will allow us to imagine education anew while attending to the harm and damage enacted by a past marked by the legacy of settler colonialism.

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Katie Kitchens (they/them/she/her) has worked in public, private, and non-profit Montessori environments for the past decade as an instructional coach, teacher trainer, and primary and elementary guide. Currently, Katie serves as the English-speaking elementary guide at Keres Children’s Learning Center (KCLC) and is pursuing a PhD in educational studies, researching racial identity development in young White children. They strive to work in partnership to uproot racist ideology within themselves and their community, and work in coalition toward what Dr. Montessori called universal liberation.