

Our Ways: Culture as the Heart of the Indian Community School

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Carol Ann Amour is the Founder/Director of Creative Education Associates. She has been honored to work with the Indian Community School for the past three years on the Listening to Tribal Voices project to help develop a model for strengthening culture as the heart of everything that happens at the school. She has coordinated the development of the Our Ways teaching framework at ICS and was recently accepted into the Doctoral program in First Nations Education at UWGB. She is pictured with master canoe builder Wayne Valliere (Lac du Flambeau Ojibwe) who recently completed construction of another traditional wigwaasi jiiman (birchbark canoe) with students, staff, and families at the school.

Currently, Anthony Brazouski, Ph.D., serves as the CAO of the Indian Community School in Franklin, WI and has previously served as an executive director of academic achievement, high school principal, assistant principal, K-12 language arts coordinator, and high school English teacher. He teaches at the graduate level and founded a consulting firm dedicated to developing organizational and membership capacity to affect lasting change through research, dialogue, and innovation. Recently, Brazouski co-authored an international book chapter, "Teachers Leading Educational Reform: The Power of Professional Learning Communities," based upon extensive work with teacher learning teams and sustaining a culture of professional learning resulting in increased student performance. He has been privileged to contribute to many regional, state, national, and international committees, panels, conferences, and endeavors related to standards-based grading, leadership through systemic change, and the development of professional learning and innovative cultures. He currently serves as an advisory committee and board member for the Wisconsin Environmental Education Center, Wisconsin School Forest Program, the Public Policy Forum, and Repairing Together, Inc. in Milwaukee, WI.

As the Head of School, Jason Dropik works with families, teachers, students, staff, and community members to provide the best possible learning experiences for everyone. He takes great pride in their commitment toward continuous improvement as they go about bringing their mission to life each day at their School. His goals are to foster meaningful relationships within the School and in the community, while building strong partnerships with other Native organizations. He has an undergraduate degree in early and intermediate education from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and a master's degree in Administrative Leadership from Concordia University. He received his Wisconsin Certification in School Safety and Security in 2017. He is a member of the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Ojibwe. Because language is important to who they are as people, he is committed to expanding his own understanding and use of their language. As a leader of an intertribal school, he continually seeks out opportunities to learn about all of the Nations. When he's not working, he enjoys spending time with his family, learning about their culture, camping, hiking, canoeing and playing sports. His wife Jamie and he have three children: Caden (15), Brennan (9), and Rilynn (7).

Jacob Jones has been a Teacher at the Indian Community School for 16 years. He started the school garden with students in 2009. He works with them to learn about food sovereignty and traditional protocols for planting and harvesting. They recently constructed exhibits on food sovereignty for display at the Kenosha Public Museum in Wisconsin.

Mark Powless is a member of the Oneida Nation and of the wolf clan. He maintains involvement with Oneida language and Longhouse ceremonies. Mark has a background of serving the Native American community of southeastern Wisconsin. He is currently the Our Ways Director at the Indian Community School where he works to ensure that culture is at the center of every part of the school. Mark's professional history includes providing psychotherapy as well as clinical supervision and consultation while working closely with local community service providers. His history also includes behavioral health program development with the Menominee Nation, and at an urban health center. Mark has worked with mental health services alongside of Native spiritual helpers, social services and related programs essential in addressing multiple needs of our community. In addition to his clinical experience, he has also lectured at the University level and worked with schools and community organizations on training and education programs throughout the state. Dr. Powless completed his Ph.D. in psychology at Marquette University, and is a licensed clinical psychologist through the state of Wisconsin. He is a member of Marquette University's Council on Native American Affairs and a long-standing member of numerous Psychology Associations and Societies.

Abstract: Since the 1990s research has been telling us that indigenous students do better in school when they are connected to their cultures. Our experience affirms studies concluding that students who have strong connections to their culture are more resilient and have a stronger sense of efficacy.

Keywords: decolonization, tribal revitalization, indigenous education, community based education

“Let us put our minds together and see what life we can make for our children.” -Sitting Bull

Since the 1990s research has been telling us that indigenous students do better in school when they are connected to their cultures. Our experience affirms studies concluding that students who have strong connections to their culture are more resilient and have a stronger sense of efficacy.

The growing movement in Indian country toward decolonization and the revitalization of tribal languages, tribal ways, and tribal knowledge has put that research into action and has given the Indian Community School (ICS) the courage to listen to tribal voices as we have developed and are introducing a curriculum that strengthens indigenous culture as the heart of our school. We knew that criticism might be strong from many directions. There is often contention about what is the “right way” to incorporate culture and argument about who gets to say what culture gets included.

But implementing such a curriculum makes sense in the context of sustainability. We think often of what actions will sustain our environment. But, if we do not also concern ourselves with sustaining culture, especially cultural knowledge that supports sustaining our environment, economics, and political sovereignty, we miss an opportunity to maximize our efforts. Indigenous thought sustains indigenous environments and traditional economies. If culture gets out of balance, so will our ability to maintain environments, our traditional foods, etc.

It’s not that we have had little Native culture in our programming. From its beginnings in the kitchens of the three founders of the school back in the 1970s, Indian Community School has valued indigenous ways. But as it has grown over the years to a K-8 school for 366 tribally-

enrolled or descended students situated on a 178-acre parcel of land in an environmentally friendly building, ICS has made an increasing commitment to Native culture being part of everything we do.

Our current structure (occupied in 2007) was intentionally designed by a team, including an Oneida Nation architect, to enable native teaching and culturally based experiences. Sprawling windows, vaulted ceilings, and all-natural building materials important to the Tribes of Wisconsin bring the natural world in and afford all inside ongoing opportunities to be mindful or and make connections with Mother Earth.

In the fall of 2015, the ICS Board of Directors formally committed to culture being not just a part of school programming, or an isolated class, but being *the* heart of the school. They hired a consultant with many years of experience in indigenous education and specialized in community-based curriculum and program development. Together they agreed to develop their curriculum only after listening to a broad sampling of native voices in the state of Wisconsin.

This gained them powerful insights such as that from Mole Lake Tribal Chair, Chris McGeshick,

What should be in our schools should come from the elders. We also do things by the seasons. You have to learn about those different activities in different seasons. But that product that you're generating through all of those seasons, helps you through that storytelling season. So if you do what you need to do, if you do the work you're going to be there during that cold season listening to the stories, learning from those stories because you participated and you did your job. So you need to have that location where people can gather and not feel pressured to be an overachiever or be looked at as an underachiever.

Ojibwe elder and tribal attorney Richard Ackley suggested,

Paying attention is actually a skill that is an integral part of native tradition. To be a good hunter, you had to be very aware of your environment. You had to see what was really happening, what had changed. You weren't just reading what a book told you should be happening or doing what a curriculum said you should be doing. You pay attention to the child and you see what he or she is ready for.... Could students move through a curriculum at various rates, in their own ways? Our journeys through life all begin in the same way and will all end the same, but the paths we follow will vary considerably. Are there ways that personal sovereignty can be built in and, perhaps, even encouraged?

We called this first phase "Listening to Tribal Voices" and had hoped to hear from at least 100 Native people across the state. Amazingly, at the end of nine months of talking circles, informal lunches, and individual interviews, we had listened to more than 800 tribal voices. Professor Anton Treuer (March 2017), Ojibwe, commented about such investigations: "In spite of 500 pretty rough years, Anishinaabeg have shown remarkable resilience and adaptability. But when does code-switching to make it in the rest of the world simply become assimilation? How much can a people change and still be the same people, recognizable to their ancestors? By taking a deeper look at the cultural tools still in our hands and the language that gives them life, let's explore what indigenous healing can really do for each of us as individuals and collectively as a people." Because of the commitment of time and resources by the ICS Board and staff, the cultural tools, powerful tools, and guiding principles remain with us today and will continue into the future.

The “Listening to Tribal Voices” questions were purposefully kept open-ended so as not to lead responses:

1. Why is it important for Native students to learn about their language and culture?
2. What should Native students know and/or be able to do by the end of eighth grade?
3. How can we help students learn those things?

Each session was recorded. A representative from the school’s administration attended sessions to demonstrate the school’s strong commitment and sincere interest. A board member or two attended often as well. The project consultant and coordinator facilitated every session.

ICS interviewers listened to students at the school. They listened to parents and grandparents in the Milwaukee community. But they also traveled to all of the tribal communities throughout the entire state. They listened to traditional teachers and leaders. They listened to professional Native educators. The project coordinator didn’t begin to organize the material or begin working on curriculum until the listening process was completed and all responses were transcribed.

Most of those responding said that Native language was a priority. “The culture is in the language,” said Joe Chosa, an Ojibwe elder in Lac du Flambeau. Other responses were unique. In fact, one exciting and promising idea came up only once. A tribal education worker in Red Cliff offered the idea of teaching history backwards to “get students hooked.” He suggested starting with issues that involved family members. ““That’s my uncle,’ they’ll say. ‘Or that was my grandfather.’” Because of the personal connection, students will want to go back and find out about the treaties that allowed the Gurnoe decision, for example, to be made. Then they will dig deeper to find out how and why the treaty-making process began.

With so many diverging ideas, all of the data were initially reviewed, “for the purpose of identifying patterns and themes within the material” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010, p. 108). The following themes emerged: Language, Living in a Good Way, Stories, Tribal Connections, Connections to Mother Earth, Tribal Government, Treaties, Indian Law and Policy, and Sovereignty. We literally cut each interview apart and stakeholders were invited to place discrete items into the themes where they seemed to fit most. Groups included the ICS board, faculty, students, and the Native Community in the Milwaukee area. Much discussion accompanied this process and we kept revising until we had reached consensus.

Themes were labeled as “strands” of curricular framework. In alignment with the backward design approach of curriculum development, overarching expected outcomes of each strand were identified beginning with eighth grade and working downward to K4 (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). At ICS, all students take one of three Native languages (Menominee, Ojibwe, or Oneida), so the Native language and culture teachers were the first contributors to outcome review and development. After revisions of the teachers, student and staff input was gathered, modifications were made. This was a time-consuming process, but it helped us eliminate repetition and be more concise and clear. We kept the number of outcomes for each strand manageable- four to seven. Only after all of this input did we bring the outcomes to the board for approval. Mostly, because of the collaborative process, the board unanimously approved what had become known as the “Our Ways” curriculum.

Dr. Mark Powless, ICS’s Our Ways Director and community member, offered the “Our Ways” name for a program being built concurrently with the curriculum. An Oneida phrase, *tsi niyukwalihot*[^], reflects the collaborative and extensive processes by which the curriculum was developed as well as the cultural approach to supporting that curriculum through active

engagement with cultural practices, teachings, and people. This program includes extensive print and media resources as well as materials like baskets, medicines, and drums. Additionally, the Our Ways Director and Culture Coordinator lead and support Our Ways curricular activities and culture in general. The center of Our Ways is a beautiful room, housing those resources, providing space for cultural meetings, events, teachings, and meals. When you walk into the Our Ways room, you immediately realize its purpose is to build resilience, to heal, and to provide an alternative to the colonization often sensed within a contemporary school setting.

We then built the scope and sequence for our curriculum by meeting with each grade level teaching team individually. The project coordinator talked with teachers about what activities they were already doing to reach the outcomes for each strand of the curriculum. We went back to the interviews seeking other suggested activities, which were assigned to appropriate grade levels. We tried to keep in mind that “learning is maximized when valid and reliable knowledge is combined with authentic experience” (Brazouski, 2015, p. 250). We also wanted to ensure fidelity as well as accuracy of the translation of key findings. We agreed that our scope and sequence provides one way to reach the Our Ways outcomes, but if teachers had other ideas that better suited the needs of their students, they should feel free to use them. Though teachers are expected to support students’ work toward the established outcomes, the specific scope and sequence is suggested, not mandated.

The underlying organizational culture was being leveraged as a professional learning community where all members of the school and community contributed equally and collectively to the task at hand (DuFour et. All, 1998, 2008). Following the individual team meetings and after modifications were made, the faculty gathered and reviewed the entire scope and sequence in small mixed grade groups. Each group took one strand of the curriculum and carefully

discussed grade level appropriateness, cultural accuracy, and relevance to reaching the outcomes. Final edits were incorporated into the curriculum as it was posted online for all faculty to access and print if they wished.

The 2017-18 school year is a field testing year. We are encouraging teachers to keep notes about what activities are helpful, and which activities should be revised or replaced. The project coordinator is conducting extensive formative evaluations of the program and perceptions. The curriculum is accessible online and Tribal Voices learning links to collective video and audio files of tribal elders and traditional teachers have been added. For example, the “food sovereignty” link in the curriculum takes the reader to an Ojibwe elder in Lac du Flambeau talking about what that means and why it is important in efforts to decolonize.

We are introducing one strand of the curriculum each month, but teachers do not need to use the curriculum sequentially or in a prescribed manner. We are encouraging teachers to integrate the Our Ways curriculum with the academic curriculum and to use outcomes and their supporting activities any time they connect well with math, or science, or art, or literacy. We have made a conscious decision not to wait until every aspect of the curriculum has been developed and included in a written document. We were strongly urged to take this course of action by one of our elder Oneida tribal voices: “We have to share what we know. We can’t keep waiting until we have it perfect.”

Culture is not a curriculum, especially not a written curriculum, and we have waited too long to embrace that idea. While we have waited to have the perfect curriculum, one with no errors or incomplete information, or one that pleases everyone, we have missed opportunities to help young Ojibwe, Oneida, Potawatomi, or Ho Chunk identify with their cultures, their heritages, their histories, their tribal Nations’ accomplishments and contributions. Our

curriculum is not definitive. It is a living document which provides support for us as we work to develop resilience in our students and to decolonize our thinking and our approach. It is not, nor ever will be, definitive or without error, but it is a tool to help us reach our goal of seeing that culture is the heart of our school. We are working hard to make it the best tool we can. We hope it will never be finished.

We are also working hard not to stifle the good work that teachers have already been doing. One of our fourth grade teachers, Jacob Jones, has been keeping a school garden with fourth grade students and others for more than ten years. They grow the “Three Sisters”: corn, bean, and squash. They grow ode’iminan (strawberries) and many other plants, including traditional asema (tobacco). They have been learning the traditional way to offer asema before planting and harvesting. The work they are doing satisfies objectives in the Connections to Mother Earth strand of the Our Ways curriculum:

- Participate in and describe the process of raising traditional foods and medicines.
- Explain the processes, traditional protocols, and ceremonies that are important to remember in traditional harvest of animals, plants, medicines, and construction materials.
- Articulate what it means to be connected to Mother Earth and why that is important to cultural identity, living in a good way, and tribal sovereignty.

They also help to meet objectives in the Living in a Good Way strand:

- Identify and explain traditional aspects of living in a good way.
- Describe important spiritual traditions of their cultural group(s), e.g., naming ceremonies, the green corn ceremony.

- Explain their role as Native persons in larger society and describe how they will carry out their responsibilities.

This fall, Jacob attended a conference on food sovereignty at the Oneida Nation and learned many strategies to incorporate with ICS students in the school garden. We have also since planted fifty sugar maple trees so that, when the time is right, students will be able to learn about tapping the trees and harvesting sap to make maple syrup and maple sugar.

Clearly, this project has taken time to implement, but we made a commitment to being collaborative throughout and accepted that as a condition of the project. As Chief Dan George of the Tsleil-Waututh nation said, “Can we talk of integration until there is integration of hearts and minds? Unless you have this, you only have physical presence, and the walls between us are as high as the mountain range.” In our continuing efforts to decolonize, we also heeded the words of Freire (1968), “The oppressors do not favor promoting the community as a whole, but rather selected leaders” (p. #). We consciously chose to pay attention to the community as a whole. If culture is truly to be the heart of our school, we believe that we need to work in a cultural way. That includes taking the time necessary for everyone in our circle to have voice, and not only must we listen, but we must also respect and consider each voice. “Leaders who do not act dialogically, but insist on imposing their decisions, do not organize the people –they manipulate them. They do not liberate, nor are they liberated: they oppress” (Freire, 2015). We have made a commitment to listening and to working collaboratively. If our goal is de-colonize and to strengthen culture as the heart of our school, we can do nothing less.

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