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Centering Community, Indigenous Relationships, and Ceremony through an Alaska Native Collaborative Hub to Prevent Suicide and Promote Youth Wellbeing

Jessica Saniguq Ullrich, Evon Taa'ąıı Peter, and Jessica Black

INTRODUCTION

Jùk drin gwınzıı! Uvalallautaq! Good day to you! It is an honor to contribute to this special issue, uplifting Indigenous knowledge, worldview, and experience through tribal community voices and perspectives. The answers to the many challenges we face are indeed within our communities, embedded in our cultural values and teachings, our stories, our languages, our lived experiences and ceremonies. It is these voices that we

[The guest editors arranged the essays to be read progressively. We suggest that readers first read the introduction and then approach these essays in their order. —Ed.]

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must uplift in order to see and understand the challenges, opportunities and dynamics we face in a holistic way, so that we may navigate forward on a healing path.

We are three Indigenous scholars from two Alaska Native Tribal nations, the Gwich'in and Inupiaq. Evon Taa'ąįį Peter is Neets'ąįį Gwich'in from Vashraqįį K'oo (Arctic Village), a research scientist at the Center for Alaska Native Health Research (University of Alaska Fairbanks) and a language warrior. His health work focuses on culturally based healing and wellness. His language work focuses on working with elders to learn and document Gwich'in language and knowledge. Jessica Black is Gwichyaa Gwich'in from Gwichyaa Zhee (Fort Yukon), an Associate Vice Chancellor for rural, community, and Native education at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Dr. Black's research focuses on the intersection of tribal governance and wellbeing for Alaska Native peoples. Dr. Black centers cultural connection and equity in her work and has a vision of Alaska Native people happy, healthy, and continuing to live in close connection to the land and animals.^{1,2,3} Jessica Saniguq Ullrich is Inupiaq and a descendant of Kinjigin (the Native Village of Wales), a Tribal citizen of Nome Eskimo Community, and an Assistant Professor within Washington State University's Institute for Research and Education to Advance Community Health (IREACH) program. Dr. Saniguq's work focuses on the promotion of child and collective wellbeing through relational ways of knowing and being that is based on Indigenous connectedness to family, community, environment, ancestors/future generations, spirit/culture and ourselves.^{4,5}

We wrote this paper as co-authors and in some places, which are clearly noted, we share from personal experience. As Alaska Native scholars, we have many common community, cultural, historical contexts that we share. We are only a few members of a diverse team working on the project and are honored to be entrusted to share some of this project's story that so many have contributed to in many significant ways. As Indigenous scholars working within university systems and academic frameworks, we recognize the privileges and challenges in our positions and walk forward with humility, courage, and commitment to positively give back to the communities that also nurture us. We understand that it is through Indigenous leadership at the community level that we will achieve the visions of health, wellbeing, and prosperity that we have for our peoples. We are all leaders.

INTERCONNECTED RELATIONAL SCHOLARS ENGAGED IN RESEARCH

Many of the research efforts we engage in as Indigenous scholars are attempting to prevent the traumas we were witness to, or that we experienced in our childhoods. We are still healing from these traumas today. Collectively, within our own relationships and relational worlds, we have experienced the negative impacts of suicide, adverse childhood experiences, Elder abuse, intimate partner violence, missing and murdered Indigenous peoples, incarceration, accidental injury and deaths, mental health disorders, substance use disorders, and poor education outcomes. Relational traumas, challenges and wounding must be acknowledged and prevented. The research we engage in must support our own wellbeing as well as the wellbeing of our peoples through ceremonial and transformative processes in real time.

As Indigenous scholars, we seek reconnection with the wisdom of our ancestors who studied and excelled at relational wellbeing for the community. It is our intention through our practice to help our communities live in this way again. We believe Indigenous research needs to strive to embody and exercise in practice a transformative process that helps us to disrupt colonizing systems of oppression, bring an end to the perpetuation of intergenerational trauma, and revitalize sustainable and healthy livelihoods at a communal level. This requires dynamic processes of acknowledgement, awareness building, healing, resistance, and creation to be a part of how we engage in research. These processes require us to grow understanding of our true histories and damaging narratives and values that were forced upon our peoples through colonization and assimilation that continue to affect us. We are coming out of these false belief systems in multiple ways. Research can help us take our power back and know that the solutions to the challenges we face come from within our communities. Our ancestors didn't need a college degree to verify their humble brilliance. Our ancestors knew that everyone had gifts and wisdom to share. As Indigenous scholars walking in two worlds, a colonial world and an Indigenous world, we attempt to level the power dynamics as best we can with love, determination, and a sense of equality for all community members.

As Indigenous scholars, we have directly experienced traumas and challenges within our families and communities that show up in the types of research we do, even if we only focus on prevention, wellness, and strengths. Research is a relational process. Within relationships we witness and listen to people's traumas, sometimes experience our own hurts, and have opportunities for energetic shifts, love, and healing. We acknowledge and recognize how many knowledge bearers (including ourselves) are still on a healing journey. Given this dynamic, the research process intentionally involves preparation, ceremony, self-determination, support, and responsiveness to community guidance and feedback. Our hope is that the energy we bring creates an opportunity to hold space for anything that might come up for anyone involved, including our community members and each other. The process of research is as important as the outcomes. We do our work in a way that promotes healing and wellbeing for a community, not just for an individual.

As researchers, we understand that we are in dynamic and unique relationships with the people with whom and the communities where we conduct our work. We may fulfill roles such as culture bearers, ceremonial or clan leaders, language learners, dance group members, skilled tradespeople, or healers in addition to our roles as researchers and we cannot leave behind or fail to have awareness of these roles we simultaneously hold while in community. We are a part of the whole and therefore cannot extract ourselves from the process we collectively experience in each stage and activity of the work. We acknowledge how our relationships and connections influence who we learn from, and the conclusions we make. This is important to reflect upon when describing research methods because in the past what was considered scientific inquiry was seen as more credible or valid if the researcher was disconnected and analytical rather than relational. Our stance in doing this important work on community level protective factors is that we work on being self-observant and relational as we engage in research planning, data collection, analysis, and re-distributing the knowledge shared with us. Every person involved and what they bring to this work matters.

ALASKA NATIVE COLLABORATIVE HUB FOR RESEARCH ON RESILIENCE

Our project is called the Alaska Native Collaborative Hub for Research on Resilience (ANCHRR); it is federally funded through the National Institute of Mental Health (U19 MH113138; PI's Rasmus, Allen, and Wexler).⁶ Our effort involves a central research project, the Alaska Native Community Resilience Study (ANCRS), and the development of institutional structures and relationships to enhance and sustain tribal capacity to conduct research and use scientific tools to promote and increase Alaska Native youth and community wellbeing. ANCRS is a strength-based study to define and understand community level protective factors — collective influences that shape individual wellbeing across time — in three regions of Alaska encompassing sixty-four Indigenous communities. Throughout the study process, we engage Indigenous leadership at all levels, including oversight annually from Alaska Native leaders, monthly guidance from community members, and bi-monthly engagement from Indigenous academics and allies. The intended outcomes of ANCHRR are to position Alaska Native tribes, tribal organizations, and community members as the guides for culturally responsive research that is aligned with local community priorities to increase resilience and wellbeing among Alaska Native youth and reduce suicide risk. Our approach brings together Indigenous knowledge and research methods that draw attention to the solutions that already exist within communities and shifts the paradigm from a singular focus on individual problems to strengthening cultural, community and systemic level protections. We are interested in better understanding and shining a light on what Alaska Native communities are doing to protect their children and young people and to support their wellbeing so that these collective processes, traditions, resources, ceremonies and opportunities may be strengthened.

Specifically, ANCHRR serves to identify, assess, and disseminate knowledge about strength and resilience that exist in communities within three Alaskan regions, while also facilitating Indigenous knowledge sharing across the state. The goals of ANCHRR are to:

- ♦ Establish a central hub for Alaska that anchors and supports our collective efforts to reduce Alaska Native youth suicide;
- ♦ Utilize scientific tools to recognize and build Alaska Native strengths and protections against suicidal and other co-occurring adverse behaviors through a multilevel model of youth resilience; and
- ♦ Develop and sustain tribal capacity to conduct research and use scientific tools to promote and increase Alaska Native youth and community wellbeing.

Our collaborative work and Indigenous approach emerged out of a determination to help systemically reduce suicide across Alaska, support a statewide network of community culture-bearers, healthcare providers, and leaders to share knowledge with one another and to help guide our research study and practice. Our research builds upon Chandler and Lalonde's seminal work on the study of identity, culture, resilience, and the wellbeing of Indigenous peoples.⁷ While the above goals are still central to our work on this project, we have learned that there are also underlying personal and community-based relational factors that are part of the process of learning and healing

from grief and trauma. Because our research is embedded in Indigenous ways of knowing and being, it is simultaneously an inquiry to learn about the protective factors that exist in communities and to promote protective factors by the way we engage in the research process with community.

We attempt to explain the key elements of doing collaborative, strength-based relational research that begins with building a foundation of trust and respect for the Indigenous wisdom that the communities have always contained. ANCHRR is unique because the leadership has guided the project to support community exchange of ideas, knowledge, successes, and practices, including our research strategy and findings, through annual statewide ANCHRR meetings. This helps to ensure that the knowledge exchanged is collectively analyzed and used to develop and support wellness more expeditiously. This relational process bridges the gap between what is learned through receipt of knowledge and what is given back (in terms of knowledge) to communities at each phase of the research. We believe what we have learned about ANCHRR's relational research processes can shed light on the ways research might take more time and effort upfront but will prove to be more effective at achieving outcomes that prevent ongoing loss and help young people, families and communities live in alignment with their inherent strength. Our goal with this paper is to share stories that illustrate findings from our own relational research that demonstrate how and why relational Community-Based Inquiry makes the process we engage in as important as the outcomes.

COMMUNITY RELATIONAL GUIDANCE IN RESEARCH

Communities within the Northwest, Bering Strait, and Yukon Kuskokwim regions welcomed the research study through pre-established relationships with several leaders on this project. Researchers Jim Allen, Stacy Rasmus, Lisa Wexler, and Evon Taa'iji Peter have worked extensively within the three regions for over a decade, building close relationships at the community and institutional levels. It is very important to note that this foundational relationship-building work was necessary for us to be able to move forward at the pace and way we did with the project. Without a strong foundation of trust, community level understanding about what motivates us as researchers, and demonstrated commitment over many years, the scale and scope of the project would have needed to be reduced. Further, we feel it is important to highlight that two of these researchers are Indigenous and two are non-Indigenous, and all had put in the work to have established and respected relationships at the community level. Invitations to conduct research by Indigenous communities is a recognition that individuals are relationally ready to engage in research that meets the higher ethical and culturally responsive expectations of the communities. These leading researchers were strategic about how the research efforts would be guided to ensure that the work was of, from, and for the community's benefit. They were also intentional about structuring the project to further support indigenizing the academy by centering Indigenous knowledge, world-view, wisdom, and practice into how we conduct research activities within the university.

An Executive Advisory Committee of influential Indigenous leaders from across the state was invited to guide the project. The Executive Advisory Committee advised

that the research be centered on Indigenous values and that the next generation of Indigenous researchers from the regions be centered in the process. A Research Steering Committee was brought together that included community leaders, early career scholars, and graduate students who helped develop the specific research questions that would be asked based on community strengths and protective factors. The Research Steering Committee recommended that the community surveys be administered by Rural Human Services students with relational ties to the regions. Students in the Rural Human Services program are most often from rural communities, and many are already employed as village-based counselors at the local level. During the process, doctoral student members of the Research Steering Committee were invited to become co-investigators and join the Internal Leadership Team to work more closely with the lead researchers on the project for ongoing mentoring opportunities and inclusion on research decisions moving forward. These unique community relational processes help make this project become the best it can be because it brings in multiple voices and perspectives that the researchers are responsive to. Inclusion and responsiveness builds trust, demonstrates respect, levels hierarchies, ensures community benefit, and respects Tribal sovereignty.

Part of the foundation for these strong relationships between communities and researchers has been the intentional inclusion of Indigenous protocol and ceremony that sought local guidance from culture bearers in the communities where we work. Ceremony is guided by spirit, relational and ethical guidelines; it is a prayer that surrounds all involved with a healing energy of acceptance for whatever might come up and for those energies to be handled with care. Listening to and sharing a story can be a ceremony because the ideas shared, lessons learned, and knowledge exchanged can influence a person's way of being in the world. Wilson discusses the importance of research being done in a ceremonial way. Wilson explains:

Something that has become apparent to me is that for Indigenous people, research is a ceremony. In our cultures an integral part of any ceremony is setting the stage properly. When ceremonies take place, everyone who is participating needs to be ready to step beyond the everyday and to accept a raised state of consciousness. You could say that the specific rituals that make up the ceremony are designed to get the participants into a state of mind that will allow for the extraordinary to take place.

Our efforts to engage in Indigenous Community-Based Inquiry included playful gatherings of community members to maintain relational accountability within the research. Next, we share the ceremony embedded within our research through intention-filled gatherings that involved ceremonial activities to raise our state of consciousness and allow for the extraordinary.⁸

CEREMONY AND PROTOCOL

The ANCHRR initiative convened annual meetings of a Collaborative Hub that provided ways for people across the state to share success stories, identify and promote community strengths and build local capacity for research. The Collaborative Hub also

built upon existing social networks, institutions, and infrastructure in Alaska Native communities to better understand how to foster resilience and reduce suicide risk. Annual Collaborative Hub convenings brought together representatives from all areas of Alaska working in suicide prevention and community wellness. The Collaborative Hub convenings went beyond their stated goals both in terms of attendance and scope. The gatherings embodied a sacred space where relationships were built, where tears were shed, and where we as researchers were able to fully engage with community in a meaningful way. This process of ceremonial and community engagement involved shedding the western academic confines and boundaries between researchers and the researched. As Alaska Native peoples we could not help but to fully step into this sacred work, as it closely embodied our lived experiences. Each one of us has been impacted by suicide in deeply personal ways and this motivated our work and engagement in this project. This passion to make a scholarly contribution is for our loved ones, our community that is healing from deeply rooted traumas, and for the wellbeing of our future generations. This work isn't about us and them, it's about we and us.

Another foundational aspect of the project that helps support sacredness is the guidance we receive from a group of highly respected and accomplished Alaska Native leaders who make up the Executive Advisory Committee. These leaders have provided critical guidance throughout the project. From the very launch of our work, they were clear that we needed to slow down and center Indigenous knowledge systems and protocols in the project. This resulted in our team adjusting typical academic institutional practices to ensure that local Alaska Native ceremony and protocol were being honored. For example, at our first Collaborative Hub convening, all of the two-hundred-plus participants entered the meeting space with song, dance, and ceremony. Lower Tanana Dene Elders Anna Frank and Luke Titus led the drummers and singers and participants into the meeting space. The collective group danced into the meeting space, with one's back entering first and then turning to face forward, following the drummers and singers. This entrance song and the way in which it was carried out showed deep respect for the work we were collectively about to engage in; the meaningful work of addressing the epidemic of suicide through a focus on Alaska Native community and cultural strengths. The power of the moment cannot be understated; it was a sacred moment in time, whereby Indigenous knowledge and protocols shaped research in a powerful way and set the tone for future gatherings. Moreover, starting work in this way reminded us that research is ceremony, and we all needed the healing that came with that moment and the work that would follow. Each beat from the drums and the proud Indigenous voices singing carried across the room and across the University of Alaska Fairbanks Wood Center, where the event was taking place. Historically, research with Indigenous peoples globally consisted of extractive work whereby Western knowledge-based scientists were considered the experts, collecting data and building their own careers off of the sacred knowledge collected from Indigenous experts. The overall ANCHRR initiative seeks to remake research relationships so that Indigenous knowledge, practices, and ways of knowing are prioritized. The project is being shaped and engaged in, at all levels, by the same community that will be impacted by the outcomes of the research: Alaska Native communities.

HANDS-ON INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SHARING

Careful considerations were made when populating the agenda for the Collaborative Hubs. The Executive Advisory Committee, Research Steering Committee and Internal Leadership Team developed the agenda or “flow” for each day. We refer to the agenda as a “flow” because it is important to be responsive in real time to what is occurring in the group and community where we are gathered. It may be determined at any given moment that more or less time is needed for a particular activity to move the process forward in the most culturally appropriate and productive way. It is similar to the way our people respond to nature when determining our activities on the land when hunting, fishing, and harvesting. We may have planned to fish on a particular day, but if the fish run arrives early, then that is when we fish.

There is intention with providing opportunities through the three days to process information participants were hearing from keynote speakers and varied panels. In other words, lots of opportunities were built into the Collaborative Hub convenings for dialogue and sharing. Clear purpose was put forth to ensure each selected keynote or panel spoke to the diverse strengths that exist within our communities to prevent suicide and build on existing cultural strengths. The Collaborative Hubs also involved many breakout sessions where one’s table would be given a prompt or question based on the keynote or panel and populate answers from their respective perspectives. Most of the participants attending the Collaborative Hubs were/are behavioral health aides, tribal leaders, cultural leaders, and caretakers in their respective communities. The smaller group breakout sessions allowed participants to openly share what they thought about the presentations, share the work they are engaged in, and offer reflections and build connections with others in attendance. These smaller groups also allowed attendees to be vulnerable with one another, as the sacred space had been established through Indigenous protocols and sharing of the First Alaskans Institute dialogue agreements.⁹ The knowledge and ideas the participants shared were then documented on large post-it paper and hung on the walls.

From these hands-on exercises, the community participants helped to shape research priorities as the ANCHRR leadership team took all the notes from these exercises, compiled them, and utilized them to further develop research questions. This process gave space for researchers and the community members to understand core concepts of community level protective factors more deeply, as the data were being gathered and shared. This activity often spurred thoughts and insights within community leaders about what they are currently doing or what they could do to better support young people’s wellbeing. In a way, research was being done both as a community inquiry, but also as a community-level intervention because it involved both learning and sharing knowledge simultaneously.

UPLIFTING DIVERSE COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES AND INSIGHT

Representing diverse community perspectives has been a critical consideration in all ANCHRR gatherings. As a collective leadership team, we have been engaging in community-based research for decades; thus we knew it was essential to share

diverse perspectives through our Collaborative Hub convenings in strategically selected keynotes and panels. Doing such would help to elevate the critical issues in communities that contribute to suicidality and promote those cultural strengths that serve to prevent suicide and increase wellbeing. The first ANCHRR Collaborative Hub gathering had two young men as keynote speakers, both of whom shared their perspectives growing up in a small community, rooted in culture and yet still experiencing the complexities that colonization has brought forth and impinged upon one's Indigenous identity. One keynote speaker was open about his struggles with his sexual identity and how an Elder recognized that, mentored him, and gave him permission to be who he truly was as a two-spirit person. From that moment on, he was able to step into his sexual identity fully, healing through his cultural practices, and sharing his story with others. The other keynote talked about his own struggles with immense loss, sexual identity, and contemplation of suicide. There was a call from his community to bring traditional singing and dancing back, something that had been put to sleep during colonization. He worked diligently in collaboration with a close friend to reawaken dancing and singing in his village and was able to foster a sense of wellbeing in his community, to heal, and to find reasons for living. During these keynotes, you could hear a pin drop as the more than two hundred participants listened intently and felt the magnitude of the words and experiences the keynotes shared. These keynotes set the stage for the following days to transpire in powerful and relationally-centered ways. Experientially, the keynotes were incredibly moving for us as Indigenous scholars. The experiences the keynotes shared resonated with the stories of our own traumas, healing journeys and threads of hope that we clung to as we embarked on this powerful and collective work of mitigating suicide.

BEING PART OF THE RELATIONAL CHANGE

The second regional Collaborative Hub was held in Sitnasuak (Nome, Alaska), a remote regional hub in the Bering Strait. An Alaska Native doctoral research panel was facilitated by Evon Taa'qii Peter with Jessica Black, Jessica Saniguq Ullrich and additional Alaska Native PhDs and doctoral students as panelists. The panelists discussed what their calling was to pursue a PhD and become involved in research. They shared 'aha' moments that helped them to understand the process and impacts of research and the ways in which research can benefit our communities.

The goal of the panel was to share how research is being transformed to serve our people by our own people, who are helping to drive the research agenda and processes. The history of research in our communities has not always been positive, so it was powerful to uplift Alaska Native scholar voices in this way. This was also significant in recognizing that we had just broken the threshold of 100 Alaska Native people holding a PhD. The panel marked a step in indigenizing the academy and transforming the way research is done in the eyes of our Indigenous communities.

RELATIONAL KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE: SHARED LEARNING AND GROWTH

In addition to inviting keynote speakers to each Collaborative Hub convening, panels of community and tribal members working on issues that advance Indigenous equity, wellbeing, and knowledge perpetuation were also shared. Again, each presentation was carefully chosen with that intent to build knowledge across generations, communities, and participants but also to spark conversation and generate ideas. For example, during the third Collaborative Hub located in Juneau, AK, the community members from the village in Southeast Alaska powerfully shared how they were able to collectively confront the source of suicide that was plaguing their community through the intentional reintegration of cultural activities across generations at a community level. By putting an intentional focus on bringing back cultural practices with youth (e.g., culture camp) which involved the entire community, the community was able to effectively confront suicide and witness the flourishing of their young people. Their approach acted to unite the community around a shared cause in a way that demonstrated deep commitment to the youth through the sharing of cultural knowledge, skills, and healthy relationships with one another, the land, and animals. This reconnection with ancestral knowledge and practices, with one another, and with the natural world helps to provide a strong foundation of positive Indigenous self-identity and connectedness for young people. The intentional and focused efforts made by the community in Southeast Alaska were rooted in sovereignty, culture, and community strengths, which is why the efforts worked. As researchers, we felt the immense gravity of the story from this community; how the loss of a young person leaves a void that cannot be filled, and also how culture is a medicine that helps to heal wounds and give young people a purpose for living. The message from this community was not lost on us; indeed we were on the right track to save young peoples' lives through reconnection with ancestral relational and ecological knowledge that sustains mind, body, spirit, and a collective.

In addition to the powerful stories that were shared in Juneau, the Collaborative Hub attendees were invited to learn about and participate in a Tlingit tradition called *The Dipping Ceremony* by one of the Executive Advisory Committee leaders, La Quen Náay Liz Medicine Crow. La Quen Náay explained where this tradition came from and shared that the Tlingit community members, especially warriors, would walk into the ocean and go as far in as they could go; some people would go in the water part of the way, most people would go until the ocean covered them completely. A prayer or intention would be set before entering the ocean. This ceremony typically was done to cleanse away any spiritual, emotional, or physical impurities. As the Tlingit men and women would come back out of the water, they would express gratitude and use branches from the trees to get the blood flowing strongly throughout their body again. The Dipping Ceremony prepared bodies, minds, and spirits for the work ahead that sustained the community.

I (Jessica Saniguq Ullrich) can vividly recall this experience because of how much it touched my spirit. On February 12, 2020, our Collaborative Hub group was transported by local residents of Juneau to a small beach surrounded by large cedar trees. Somewhere between fifteen to twenty of us shed layers of warm boots and winter jackets, said our prayers, held

hands, or stood close to each other and walked into the cold ocean together. I remember the shock of the freezing water and the short inhalations that I took to continue to walk into the water even though my body's natural response was telling me to stop. As the water reached my neck, I dunked my head and started walking back out. As I exited the water, I cried and cried and cried. I had so much stress and pressure from writing my dissertation, grief of lost loved ones, and heaviness of personal and collective trauma that weighed on my heart. It was an amazing healing experience. I felt light, like the weight of the world was taken off my shoulders. I felt nurtured by the ocean and lands. I felt supported by my community. I received hugs from strong Native women who didn't have to say a word but understood what my tears meant. Some of us cried together. I felt connected to the ancestors of the Tlingit Aani who taught generations about this amazing healing ceremony.

The Dipping Ceremony was a beautiful experience that taught me several important lessons. Surrendering and letting go of control was central to being open to a different and better possibility. Being willing to feel uncomfortable feelings created an opportunity to release emotions and let the ocean take away the heaviness that weighed on my heart. Connecting with a sense of trust showed me that it was possible to feel supported and reciprocate support intuitively. I was in awe.

This whole experience translated lessons over to an understanding of the research as ceremony. Within Indigenous research, we have to surrender and let go of control, step towards discomfort, be okay with holding space for heavy emotions with our community, and trust that we have everything we need to get through it because we are relational and spiritual human beings. I felt truly connected to a beloved community as a descendant, a contributing member, and a researcher. Research can be a conduit for the wellbeing we wish to co-create with our community as we also experience this ceremony within ourselves. This is how I attempt to engage in all aspects of the research that I do now and encourage others to find this sweet spot that is sacred, relational and saturated with knowledge that promotes wellbeing.

The process is as important as the outcomes we seek in our research, and the process could be the most important outcome of any given research project. For ANCHRR we felt it was critical to provide processes to recognize the knowledge and work within our communities and to provide for knowledge sharing and growth for all of us involved in the project.

RESEARCH AS A PROCESS OF LIVING AND BEING *WHO WE ARE AND WHERE WE COME FROM*

Exemplar process outcomes from the ANCHRR initiative include: relational leadership, ceremonial Collaborative Hubs for relational knowledge exchange, direct relational connection with community as Indigenous co-researchers, and affirmation that we can help bring healing to research relationships. It's not enough to think about relationships only between two people. People are also in relationship to a community and to a collective. To engage in research as Indigenous community members and

researchers, we have learned that we must be on a journey of *knowing who we are and where we come from* once again. Many Indigenous Elders have instructed the younger generations to know this important information because it is crucial for reconnecting with our true nature as beautiful, humbly powerful, relational human beings. For too long colonial policies, force, and systemic practices separated us from our lands and assimilated us into believing we are someone we're not.

Knowing who we are and where we come from is both a personal and communal quest at the same time because who we are is a unique spirit that lives and resides within an interconnected collective spirit. Research that can help us *know who we are* and how to be in right relationship again can help address all the social challenges we face and promote individual and collective wellbeing. This Indigenous research approach is worth the time and effort to do, no matter what fear or obstacles are in place. It takes courage, truth, ancestral connection, support from the Earth, dreamtime, openness to change, and faith to face the energies of trauma and come out the other side. As the powerfully spiritual and interconnected beings that we are, it's possible to do this because we are interconnected and interdependent.

The depth and quality of research we've engaged in through ANCHRR was strengthened by our approach and methods of meaningful and authentic partnership with Indigenous knowledge bearers from within our communities. While our focus was on learning about community strengths and protective factors to prevent suicide, the knowledge shared does so much more than that. Community health and wellbeing promotes and supports the health and wellbeing of all. Interconnectedness is the foundation that provides early relational health and helps young community members learn how to be healthy parents and family members. We want the younger generations to learn about our ceremonies and trust that they are never alone because they are supported by the ancestral knowledge that was handed down through the generations in a loving way.

What we are learning from this ANCHRR research project is that primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention is not just a theory or concept, but an Indigenous way of relationally supporting wellbeing. When we prevent suicide, we are also preventing every form of relational trauma and disconnect. The work that we are doing is more than prevention alone. Any relationship, including a research relationship, is an opportunity to help our children, our people, our communities, and our collective be healthy and well. The work on suicide prevention is interconnected with efforts to promote early childhood development because helping parents, families and communities know how to better support children at all developmental levels is how we raise healthy generations across many lifetimes.

LINKING EFFORTS

The authors that shared their knowledge and experience from the *Wiikwedong*, *Keiki Steps*, and *Wicoie Nandagikendan* projects in this special issue are doing phenomenal work with and for community to ensure that our young ones have the healthiest start in life. We see a lot of parallels between our Indigenous Community-Based Inquiry projects. As Indigenous scholars and practitioners we know that our communities have

the ideas, vision, wisdom, values, connections, and solutions that can transform children's personal, interpersonal, and communal life in beautiful ways. We've known these relational strengths have always been present; many just needed to be reawakened. Even though our communities have different questions and research aims, we are ultimately after the same goal. We are getting back to Indigenous ways of knowing and living which address colonial harms, support healthy relational connections, and achieve transmission of ancestral knowledge so that our future generations have what they need to get through all of life's challenges.

Many parts of their stories resonated with our experiences and perspectives. The clear recognition that as we are doing this work, it is critical for us to be consciously engaged in our own healing journeys and wellbeing. And as we grow in our awareness of how organizational practices and systems hinder our wellbeing, we must move to enact systemic change. How we choose to work and live demonstrates what it looks like to be in alignment with our Indigenous values to the next generations.

In the context of the academy and early childhood education, we must implement changes that challenge the status quo, so that we may uplift all aspects of who we are and the knowledge embedded within our communities. We cannot afford to sacrifice our wellbeing or our Indigenous identities in order to succeed within education. We must work to transform the systems, administratively and academically, until they reflect what our people know to sustain a healthy way of being.

These changes are going to take some time; we do not heal from hundreds of years of settler colonialism overnight, especially while it is ongoing. We must recognize that we are in an ultra-marathon; it's okay to slow down, take the time each step requires of us. We must also celebrate our victories, however small they may feel, so that we are reminded of the progress that we are making.

We are all scientists and researchers that have our own strengths, gifts, and skills to contribute as community members. We are reminded how every person on the planet is on a learning journey. Our ability to collaboratively adapt, exist, thrive, and exchange knowledge through stories, teachings, and relationships can change the trajectory of humanity as we know it. Indigenous research can be a healing salve if it's done in a good way, as a ceremony.

It is encouraging and inspiring to see Indigenous community-based authors in this special issue unapologetically integrate their languages into the fabric of the article, acknowledge the Earth because it shapes all of humanity, and utilize metaphor in holistic, relational, and metaphysical ways. All authors were invited to be who they are as Indigenous persons, not just as professional beings. Space was created within the articles to share knowledge in ways beyond quantifiable evidence and facts. Each story has a richness and depth to it that draws in the reader, and taps into spirit and emotion, which is a powerful connection to make. It is from this space that inspiration, motivation, determination, and love can co-create a better life and future for our children, communities, and this beautiful planet.

This depth of holistic, interconnected, interdependent, ecological, Indigenous knowledge provides a key to unlocking effective change and improved outcomes not just for Indigenous people, but for everyone and everything on this planet. We are living in an

important moment in time to do our best to use our gifts to shift this dynamic in our global society. It is time to center wellbeing efforts in our communities in a way that allows our own people to be who they are, to bring all that they carry, to create space for community to ask the questions, and let our people tell their own story. Everyone then needs to listen, learn, and take action accordingly. We are encouraged by all community members and Indigenous scholars that continue to engage in worthwhile research efforts that re-center the sacredness of our children in truthful, holistic, and interconnected ways. Quyana, hą́:ę́, thank you for being with us on this journey, we are all connected.

NOTES

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