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Seasons of Learning: Rural Indigenous Teacher Preparation

Dani O'Brien
Northland College, dobrien@northland.edu

Josh Montgomery
Northland College, jmontgomery@northland.edu

Bezhigogaabawiikwe Hunter
Waadookodaading Ojibwe Language Institute

Niizhoobinesiikwe Howes
Waadookodaading Ojibwe Language Institute

Waasegiizhigookwe Rosie Gonzalez
Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe Community College

See next page for additional authors

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Seasons of Learning: Rural Indigenous Teacher Preparation

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We have no conflicts of interest to disclose. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dani O'Brien, 1411 Ellis Ave. Ashland, WI. 54806. Email: dobrien@northland.edu

Authors

Dani O'Brien, Josh Montgomery, Bezhigogaabawiikwe Hunter, Niizhoobinesiikwe Howes, Waasegiizhigookwe Rosie Gonzalez, Manidoo Makwe Ikwe, and Kevin Zak

Research Article

Seasons of Learning: Rural Indigenous Teacher Preparation

Dani O'Brien
Josh Montgomery
Bezhigogaabawiikwe Hunter
Niizhoobinesiikwe Howes
Waasegiizhigookwe Rosie Gonzalez
Manidoo Makwe Ikwe
Kevin Zak

We, four teachers in Ojibwe or majority-Ojibwe schools and three teachers in teacher preparation at a small ecologically focused liberal arts college, tell stories to reorient ourselves, centering place in ways accessible to our emerging practice. In these narratives, anchored in the seasons, we describe our challenges and successes in adapting education programs to better evoke the lifeways that predominate in our shared part of rural northern Wisconsin immersed in the lands of the Ojibwe. We relied on experiences, both ours and of Ojibwe learners, to illuminate the rhythms of our place and the seasons of learning defined by boreal forest, an inland sea, the sugar bush, and the wild rice harvest, in the hope of better outcomes for Indigenous and non-Indigenous teacher candidates (and their future students) in our evolving program. This narrative work cobbles a frame enabling connection to create rural, fugitive, decolonized teacher preparation that centers respect, reciprocity, and agency.

Biboon/Winter

Dani tells a story: In 2019, I accepted a job as an assistant professor of education and moved from Massachusetts to rural northern Wisconsin. The small liberal arts college is located on the ancestral and present-day lands of the Ojibwe and sits between two tribal communities. Like one often does when moving to a new place and embarking on a new adventure, I told myself a story about what it would be like here and, more specifically, what the public schools would be like. Having learned about Act 31, legislation passed in 1989 "requiring instruction in the history, culture, and tribal sovereignty of the eleven federally-recognized American Indian nations and tribal communities in Wisconsin public school districts," as well as in teacher education programs (Leary, 2018, p. x), I imagined that the local public schools would be reflective of the local tribal communities and more culturally sustaining than the schools I was used to working in Massachusetts. I imagined Ojibwemowin, the language of the Ojibwe, to be integrated into the curriculum. I imagined Ojibwe lifeways would inform the curriculum. I imagined science classes that drew on traditional ecological knowledge and English classes that incorporated Indigenous authors. While I knew these visions were lofty hopes, at a minimum, I imagined that students in our local rural schools would not be taught the inaccurate history and lies I had been taught about the "discovery" of America.

In early November of my first semester, I had the opportunity to observe one of my practicum students at a local elementary school. As I observed, the picture I had painted for myself was quickly disrupted by her telling of a story that was all too familiar. A story of the first Thanksgiving, one almost identical to the one I was taught decades earlier. One that ignores the genocide and harm that settlers perpetuated, one that doesn't name the Wampanoag, one that ignores the daily and seasonal gratitude practices that the Wampanoag engaged in for thousands of years before settlers arrived, one that implies Native people conceded to colonization and one that ignores the fierce resistance of the Wampanoag and other tribes to colonization. On this day, children were coloring packets of the Pilgrims and unnamed and inaccurately dressed Native Americans feasting together at the first thanksgiving. Watching one of my new students deliver this lesson—provided to them by a mentor teacher who was a graduate of the teacher education program in which I was now teaching—was, to say the least, an unsettling moment. I left that day both disheartened and determined. I knew the story I wanted to be true and saw how far we had to go. I saw the potential of

a teacher education program to help write a different story, and I saw how easy it was to be complicit.

Winter feels an appropriate place to begin, as it is especially enamored of us in the Northwoods. It lingers, a redolent chill in the air ensuring we do not forget that just a month ago we lived in a world blanketed in cold and snow. We echo the Ojibwe—winter is a time for stories, for sensemaking and knowledge sharing on languid long nights. In rural northern Wisconsin, surrounded by boreal forest, there is no escape from place. It organizes our daily life in ways folks in rural space will recognize. The authors are all teachers. Four of us are Ojibwe teachers in rural Ojibwe schools who attended Northland College, a small rural environment-centered liberal arts college to obtain our education license. Three of us are White teacher educators on the faculty at Northland College. We share a vision of teacher education, and education more broadly, that better serves and centers Indigenous learners and Indigenous ways of knowing, and we came together in this work to learn from and with each other.

Winter is a time for stories. What follows are stories tied to seasons—vignettes to illustrate the narrative frame we tapped to make sense of how a program like ours, led by non-Indigenous people in the middle of Ojibwe lands, can better help to prepare teachers of all backgrounds to reach diverse students. As such, our stories include those of disappointment, of fugitive pedagogy, of challenges and triumphs, but ultimately serve as a way of freedom dreaming about not just a program we want, but a world.

These stories then, as Hendry et al. (2018) describe, "trouble method" in ways that enable us to challenge colonial methodologies and allow us ambiguity and vulnerability in academic dialogues while centering embodied meaning making. This frame presupposes rhizomatic ecologies—connecting, or "plugging in," as a path to being-becoming (Cajete, 2017; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Eaton & Hendry, 2019). Our hope is that through reconnection we de-fragmentize, and we are guided in this effort by calls to center Indigeneity, respect, and reciprocity through the sensemaking of story (Archibald, 2008; Smith, 2001). In contrast to dominant state-level investigations of rurality, we engage at eye level (Brenner, 2019). Echoing Parton's (2022) work addressing the hidden vitality of rural storytelling, we tell stories as a bridge in both rural and Indigenous place, these shared northern forests, and describe how our teacher preparation program may better serve our students, and their students, through a more nimble, respectful, reciprocal, and responsive design. We root that design in shared space, one that embraces complexity and allows us to rethink our seasons of learning.

Ziigwan/Spring

Spring is a conflicted time in the forests ringing the inland seas. As LaDuke (2008) describes, it is scripted/symbolized by Obana Giizis, the hard-crusted snow moon. Melting during the day, refreezing at night, one can walk on the surface of the snow, until it collapses underneath. It becomes an analog of spring—hope, but with a catch. Spring is also the time of the *izkigamizigan* (sugar bush) and the maple syrup harvest. There is work to be done.

As Niizhoobinesiikwe relates, her K–12 school experience was a nightmare, feeling as though her White teachers hated her. To speak was to risk confrontation, trouble. She learned early on that talking in class equaled suspension. Her school was well resourced; it would have appeared successful. Contained within the message "don't talk" was something more insidious: You are different, not welcome here. Her father was a product of boarding school, but that was past, right? History? She got in trouble for talking, so she determined she would not talk anymore. Silenced.

For Bezhig, the one year she spent outside her Ojibwe immersion school was unmoored. Critically, her teachers could not answer the fundamental curricular question: How am I going to use this learning? Nor could (or would) they pronounce her name. Along with Manidoo and Waasegiizhigookwe, their K–12 experience of schooling had served the potent purpose of learning about the type of teacher they did not want to be.

College provided different lessons and stories. After attending a school with majority-Ojibwe students, when arriving in Montana for college, Manidoo soon discovered that she was not in the majority. After moving back home, juggling young children, varied job responsibilities, and barriers to college prep resources, she was able to find success in the connections and relationships she built with faculty. The realization that one false move or mistake would not result in expulsion was a comfort.

School, like moon-shimmered crusted snow, presents hidden hazards echoing Indigenous education experiences across North America. As current Ojibwe teachers recount, schooling often severed interrelatedness; there were challenges (or erasures) to identity, something lost in translation in culturally responsive pedagogy, and a disconnect

between school and lived world (Cajete, 1999; Kawagley & Barnhardt, 1999; Martin et al., 2017; Oloo & Kiramba, 2022). School as a place transmitted its symbols loudly to students (that knowledge is avariciously contained in books and those who guard them), telegraphing a certain kind of place for certain kinds of students (Jojola, 2004; Mohawk, 2008).

Anyone who has looked on Gast's 1872 painting *American Progress* can see the book she carries as she striates a continent with telegraph lines and railroads is a school primer. Schooling, long a handmaiden of settler colonialism, is deeply shadowed by this legacy (Bang, 2020; Faircloth, 2009). We see the potential of schools in our communities; we also see the dehumanization. Goldtooth (2008) echoes Mills (2007) in imagining an ignorance that fights back. Akin to the steady, deliberate tasks involved with the iskigamizigan and making sweet maple syrup, decolonization calls us to this hard work. Trudell (2008) admonishes that there is no powerlessness; power is always present—we either harness it or watch it misused. Spring is fraught promise, hope with a catch.

Niibin/Summer

"We're the aunties!" and laughter ensues. When the storytelling veers into a recent incident with a student who needed some unsolicited advice, Bezhig reacts with laughter. "I can tell him these things," she says, "even when difficult, or private, because we have this connection, this relationship." They are not just students, and we are not just trying to create a child good at math. Instead, we need them to be good human beings—they are in our community, they ride their bikes across our lawn, I see them in the store, on the street. That school mediates these interactions demonstrates what those of us in rural education have long known: The school is central to the places it serves (Schafft, 2016; Showalter et al., 2017; Tieken, 2014).

It is summer on the shore, and the green has burst uncontrollably forth under a never-ending sun. Following the dense thickets and undergrowth through towering white pine provide an apt analogy for rhizomes, the oft hidden connective paths that enable a forest to thrive. A powerful benefit of both tribal and rural schools is immersion in community and place. Josh compares commonalities: While teaching in a rural New Mexico school, kids popped into my classroom all day, they wandered by my house (and stopped to play catch), I tapped them to watch pets while away. It was all education.

Niizhoobinesiikwe remembers her experience at Northland College. Connection helped her to negotiate outside pressures; she knew she could rely on the great relationships formed with her professors. "You knew who I was and why I was doing it." However, time at Northland College was also circumscribed by schedulization and time constraints. "Pumping through prevented the time to focus on what was important—language," Manidoo recalls as a struggle. While the experience, and the relationships engendered, opened opportunities and new interests, an external pressure existed: get credentialed, get a job. Summer is fleeting, the temptation to take a nap under wind-shuddered boughs tempered by the knowledge that it goes. In a place of short summers, it goes.

Links, connection, plugging in, they lengthen summer. "We're the aunties," we build and sustain relationships as a way of, as Brayboy and Maugham (2009) write, rooting. It marks a deliberative effort at extending the knowledge we find (often proscribed by the state) and re-embedding it (a wriggling fish, hard to grasp) in evolving and growing knowledge systems of survival and service. It is, in short, the vital effort at reintegrating what the West sundered: epistemology, ontology, and axiology—how knowing/being/values are created and influence us—as one unified system of sensemaking in a world. Instead of discrete isolated tools, a connected episteme/onto/axiology creates space to, guided by relatedness and humble questioning, engage in meaning-shaped action (Burkhart, 2004).

Manidoo's school is in the forest, and the forest becomes the classroom. Immersed in place. We argue this idea is a potent conceptualization not just for Indigenous or rural schools, but all schools tackling the complexity of contemporary challenges (Heley & Jones, 2012). Anchored in place and a shared way of living, we and our students can begin doing the hard work of ecological reconnecting to locate a balanced "sacred orientation to place" (Cajete, 2017. p. 559). To ask better, more appropriate questions. To act in the world, we have to see it; to act powerfully we need to see, critically, the systems unbalancing us, that alienate us from each other and our surroundings (McCarty & Brayboy, 2021; RedCorn, 2020).

Even as we built supportive relationships with our college students, we still adhered to the "pump them out" model designed to churn students through the college. We provided support, access to credits, horizon-expanding learning at times, but ultimately,

we struggled under the weight of state requirements in higher education. This recognition marks a point of action for us as we move forward. As summer fades imperceptibly into fall and campus reawakens, we are challenged to heed a new role, one critically in support of Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination (Brayboy, 2021).

Dagwaagin/Fall

Dagwaagin, or fall, is a time of gathering. Historically and today, dagwaagin marks the time when people hunt, trap, and, most importantly, harvest manoomin (wild rice). Manoomin is a spiritual and cultural staple that has sustained the Anishinaabeg for centuries. According to their oral histories, prophecy instructed the Anishinaabeg to leave their lands on the east coast and make their home in "the place where food grows on the water." That food was wild rice, and that place was along what is now called the Great Lakes. The gathering and processing of wild rice is rich with ceremony and celebration. Before the harvest, tobacco is put out, and prayers are offered. After the rice is processed, communities gather to feast and dance.

This sacred grain, which has served the Ojibwe as medicine, nourishment, and income for hundreds of years, has, perhaps unsurprisingly, been commodified and commercialized by a capitalist West. Beginning in the 1950s, scientists began developing strands of wild rice, domesticating it for mass production (and mass profits). Companies like Uncle Ben's, Green Giant, and General Foods, among others, now mass market wild rice, even though it is farmed in California rice paddies and is not, in fact, wild. In addition to destabilizing the Ojibwe wild rice economy, the possibility that the domesticated varieties of rice could contaminate wild rice poses a significant threat to the region's biodiversity (LaDuke, 2008).

The commodification of wild rice, a sacred grain that continues to sustain the Ojibwe, serves for us as an apt metaphor for Act 31. Act 31 was enacted with the hope that the inclusion of history, culture, and tribal sovereignty of the federally recognized tribes would "provide Wisconsin's students with accurate, academically-appropriate information that could also serve as a positive force to combat misunderstanding and social unrest" (Leary, 2018, p. 93). While much can be celebrated about the passage of Act 31 and the hard work of the Indigenous advocates and their non-Indigenous allies who made it possible, as coauthor Niizhoobinesiikwe points out, meeting the requirements of Act 31 does not actually mean you understand and are able to incorporate Indigenous culture. She describes the current teaching of Indigenous histories as limited: "We have Act 31, so all these teachers have to know something about the Indians here, but they are learning about Indians who are living in wigwams or who were at the boat landings during the Walleye wars. They are not learning about what they look like right here, right now. It does not mean you are teaching in solidarity with Indigenous communities."

Like a bag of mass-produced domesticated rice labeled "wild," Act 31 can function as a checklist of topics to cover rather than an approach to education more broadly. It is in this context that a school can meet the requirements of Act 31 and still teach the Thanksgiving myth. It is within this context that schools can meet the requirement of Act 31 while disproportionately punishing and policing Indigenous students.

In the teacher education program in which three of us teach, we also see de-territorialization at play. Part of our growing systems awareness attests to how we participate in the consumption and commodification of everything. Just as Act 31 has promise for a new vision of what education can be, it actually can be used to undermine its own goals, turning it into a check-the-box moment, which makes the goal "other" or separate. Manidoo expressed frustration with the "pump out" check-the-box model.

Fall is time to work—to prepare for the long northern winter. But still, we must carve out time to reflect, to freedom dream. Thus, we prepare to tell new stories with winter's arrival, stories that create rooted place-based rebalancing and animate a "third space," with its diversity of knowledges, revitalization/resistance, centered on sovereignty and agentic self-determination, and anchored—critically—in connections (Brayboy & Maughan, 2009; Castagno, 2012; Castagno et al., 2015; Grande, 2015b; Lees & Vélez, 2019; RedCorn, 2020; Sanford et al., 2012, p. 20). We are directed by Grande (2015a):

> a Red pedagogy is historically grounded in local and tribal narratives, intellectually informed by ancestral ways of knowing, politically centered in issues of sovereignty, and morally inspired by the deep connections among the earth, its beings, and the spirit world. (p. 53)

Owing to our small size and articulated vision, we have the space to create more flexible, agentic, reciprocal, and respectful program as an active counter to dominant colonial narratives.

Biboon/Winter Returns

Bezhig tells a story: So recently, we went ice fishing, and my kids got to spear some fish. We brought it in, and they cleaned it themselves, and we had a lot to do. Just in that. When we are out there, we already have our unit plan, but then what do you get to do with the fish once you bring it back? We got to look at the anatomy of the fish, and one of the kids asked, “How many eggs are in there?” And I said, “Well, that’s a really good question. How are we going to know how many eggs are in there?” He said, “I don’t know, are we gonna count them?” I said, “Yeah, we are going to count them, we are going to count all the eggs!” So we did that, and it sparked another teaching point.

For us, if you are on your moon, you are not allowed to do any of that stuff. So one of my students who is in fifth grade, we had to go through all of that with her. With her grandma, she was not raised that way, so we got to share all our teachings with her on that and with the classroom, too. Now our classroom has to go through certain things when there is someone who is on their period like that. It is a cultural thing, and we do not usually do that down here because it is the elementary school. We had to do that here this year, which opened a whole new can of worms for us because they are not allowed to use certain things, they are not allowed to use certain plates and silverware and chairs, and just things like that. We had to have certain ceremonies. All this stuff was brought up from that one little fishing trip. And it was somebody’s first kill. Usually, around our age, they have already had their first kill, but he had not, so we had to have a first kill ceremony for that person. So that is kind of new for our classroom. It usually takes place around second or third grade, when they first kill something. Say they get their first rabbit, their first fish, their first deer, their first kill, they have to have this whole big, huge ceremony that we do at the school. There are so many teaching points that come out of one little cultural activity that we can turn it around, and we can take those things, and we can meet state standards with all of them if we are just creative enough.

As we return to winter, the time for storytelling, Bezhig offers her story so that it might help us imagine what is possible. In the northwestern corner of Wisconsin, the Waadookodaading Ojibwe Language Institute, a K–8 Ojibwe immersion school, “utilizes the gift of the Ojibwe language as a means through which students and the community can achieve the ultimate goal of Indigenous survival and tribal sovereignty through realization of personal, family, cultural, spiritual, environmental, and educational goals” (n.d.). It is impossible not to be moved by what is happening at Waadookodaading. In each classroom, you will find students and their teachers speaking Ojibwemowin. You will hear students chatting causally, joking with each other, supporting each other, and learning from each other in a language that until recently had less than 1,000 fluent speakers in the whole country and fewer than 25 in the state of Wisconsin (Treuer, 2010). Their teachers guide them, joke with them, keep them on task, and learn with them, and the love and connection between the students and their teachers is palpable. The teachers are, as they explained, the aunties. To hear joy and laughter and learning in a language that was nearly erased is to bear witness to resistance and revival that the English language is not capable of capturing. What Bezhig describes—the weaving of language, place, ceremony, cultural practices, and deep intellectual learning—should serve as a call to action for public schools and teacher education programs across the country. It unsettles notions of accountability and provides an example of fugitive pedagogy for which we all might strive. Rhizomatically rooted in the power of place, it evokes Brayboy and Maughan’s (2009) “Story of the Bean,” where an Indigenous teacher candidate struggles with the siloed nature of traditional science instruction, and RedCorn’s (2020) centered Native Nation, with growing capacities radiating out. Instead of discrete objectification, a rhizome allows the power of place to flow in creative forms through all aspects of education.

For the last several decades, public education has adopted a discourse of accountability as a means of ushering in a variety of neoliberal reforms. In this context, accountability is a top-down process, narrowly defined as formal consequences for schools and/or educators based on student outcomes on standardized tests. While this approach is certainly one way to think about accountability, the teachers at Waadookodaading understand themselves as accountable first to their community. This discrepancy in how accountability is understood is not merely a difference of opinion but rather reflects contrasting knowledge systems and world views (Castagno et al., 2015; Kawagley & Barnhardt, 1999; Lees & Vélez, 2019).

While it is important not to frame Indigenous knowledge systems and Western knowledge systems as a binary, significant differences exist that help us understand contrasting understandings of

accountability. As Brayboy and Maughan (2009) explain, unlike Indigenous knowledge systems, various Western knowledge systems position knowledge as a commodity that can be possessed and controlled, understood, and decontextualized. The underlying assumptions of Western knowledge systems, and the accountability movement specifically, reflect positivist beliefs that knowledge is discrete, separated into distinct disciplines, quantitative, materialist, objective, and testable. Public discourse around education is focused on career and college readiness, suggesting that the purpose of education is the individualistic acquirement of credentials to gain employment and better participate in the economy. While there has been robust pushback against the punitive nature of the accountability movement in K–12 public schools, that pushback has largely not been critical of the Western knowledge systems that drive public schooling in the US (Brayboy, 2021).

While we should be careful not to present Indigenous knowledge systems as a monolith, a focus on the community and an understanding of the interconnectedness of all things are common in various Indigenous knowledge systems. Rather than focusing on individual success, attainment, and credentialing, in Indigenous knowledge systems, the aim of knowledge is the survival, well-being, and health of the community. The acquisition of knowledge comes with a responsibility to share that knowledge. As coauthors Waasegiizhigookwe, Bezhig, and Niizhoobinesiikwe explained, when you learn your language, you have an obligation to teach it to others.

As a Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) school, Waadookodaading is not exempt from state requirements and top-down accountability structures. BIE schools must align their curricula to national standards and take standardized assessments aligned to the Common Core ELA and math standards and the Next Generation Science Standards. Despite these requirements, teachers at Waadookodaading are accountable to their community first, thus engaging in what Givens (2021) has described as “fugitive pedagogy.” While Givens’s work on fugitive pedagogies focuses on the ways Black educators have historically engaged in acts of subversion to resist anti-Black education, the framework of fugitive pedagogies is helpful for understanding the historical and present-day practices of subversion in which Indigenous educators engage. The US has long enacted laws to erase Indigenous language, culture, and knowledge, and yet they have survived, in part because of the fugitive practices and pedagogies of formal and informal educators. When Bezhig shares that she will teach using Ojibwe cultural practices and philosophy and figure out how they meet the standards, she is subverting the expectations of the state, working both with and around the standards to enact a vision of education that centers and sustains her community.

For the three coauthors working in teacher education, Bezhig’s story and her commitment to fugitive pedagogies serve as an invitation to rethink how we are preparing future teachers. We must be committed to supporting and preparing all our students to enact fugitive pedagogies, to work with and around state and federal requirements to serve the collective well-being of the communities in which we live and teach. As neoliberal education reforms narrow the curriculum and right-wing politicians pass draconian laws banning terms, books, and accurate accountings of history, teacher education programs must consider to whom they are accountable.

Winter might also be a time when we reflect on the other stories we could be telling. Perhaps a future exists where the story is about an Ojibwe immersion teacher education program. Perhaps a future exists where the story is about how all students in our educator preparation program take at least one Ojibwe language class. Perhaps the story will be about a partnership that allows our preservice teachers to learn from the educators and students at the Waadookodaading Ojibwe Language Institute. Most importantly, perhaps someday the story will be that teacher education programs are run and taught by Indigenous educators. During a conversation the coauthors had about what changes would be needed to create a teacher education program that centered Indigenous communities, Bezhig summed it up perfectly: “give it to the Indians.” We hope to tell a story where this suggestion is taken seriously. We hope to tell a story where the lessons of the landback movement might help us imagine and move toward a world where the governance and decision-making power over public education and teacher education rests with Indigenous communities. We do not yet know all the other stories that might be possible, but we know the time has come for writing different stories.

Conclusion

We sought to tell stories. Through this emergent narrative, we hoped to trouble method, harness collaborative power, and upend dichotomies related

to rural and Indigenous education through praxis (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Trudell, 2008). We used stories as a way of uncovering these rhizomatic connections and to create new ones, both to participate in and usurp the dominant discourse (Eaton & Hendry, 2019; Graber, 2000). We hope it gives us a line of flight to see things in new ways, to dust off forgotten things and put away those things that are not working. Ultimately, inspired by Brayboy and Chin (2018), we tell stories to critically interrogate our colonial heritage and "re-center purpose and responsibility" (p. 52).

Finally, importantly, we suggest that contrary to a dominant strand of discourse surrounding rural education, these stories point to a counternarrative of the power and promise of rural schooling, both in our program's ability to adapt to meet stated needs of students and in the tales of empowered embodied curriculum. Rural schools, those serving Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, can provide the model for meaningful educative experience. Students thus equipped possess the skills and confidence to navigate a challenging future. When we understand that we are of a place, we construct communities of ecologic connection as the foundation of agentic power, gaining the ability to author change. Schools have the promise to provide the mediating center. A rural model can be implemented anywhere. In the stories above, these schools have become the stewards of the language, keeper of culture—naming ceremonies, first kills—vital places enacting fugitive agentic pedagogies.

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Authors:

Dani O’Brien is an Assistant Professor of Education at Northland College in Ashland, WI. Contact: dobrien@northland.edu

Josh Montgomery is an Assistant Professor of Education at Northland College in Ashland, WI. Contact: jmontgomery@northland.edu

Bezhigogaabawiikwe Hunter is an Ojibwe Language Medium Teacher at the Waadookodaading Ojibwe Language Institute in Hayward, WI. Contact: bezhig.hunter@lcoosk12.org

Niizhoobinesiikwe Howes is a Teacher at the Waadookodaading Ojibwe Language Institute in Hayward, WI. Contact: katie.carlson@lcoosk12.org

Waasegiizhigookwe Rosie Gonzalez is the Ojibwe Language Specialist at the Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe Schools on the Lac Courte Oreilles Reservation in Hayward, WI. Contact: rosie.gonzalez@lcoosk12.org

Manidoo Makwe Ikwe is a 4k Teacher at the Red Cliff Early Childhood Center. Contact: haley.hyde@redcliff-nsn.gov

Kevin Zak is an Associate Professor of Education at Northland College in Ashland, WI. Contact: kzak@northland.edu

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