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**Authors**

LaRose, Cheryl

Denomie, Lisa

Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative

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# Niwiidosendimin (We Walk with Each Other)

*Cheryl LaRose, Lisa Denomie, and Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative*

*Throughout this reading, you will see and read the Ojibwe word Wiikwedong, which we use as our collaborative name. Wiikwedong in the Ojibwe Language means “on the Bay” in which we reside, near the shores of Gichigami (Lake Superior) region.*

## WAABANONG—ZIIGWAN (EAST—SPRING)

*The sun is gleaming over Gichigami; its rays are dancing over the water like hands drawing us in. As we enter a new day in the eastern direction, the birds sing their song of prayer. We start the day toward the East as our sacred medicine wheel—source of our power and guide through our days and our lives—starts its teachings in the Waabanong (East). We offer our asemaa (tobacco) with Thanksgiving; we start the day in a good way.*

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*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.]*

CHERYL L. LAROSE was former chair of the Early Childhood Education Department at Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa Community College in L'Anse, Michigan, and former program officer for the Early Childhood Education Program at the American Indian College Fund. She is currently the project coordinator for Wiikwedong Early Childhood Collaborative. LISA M. DENOMIE is the current program director for the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community Pre-Primary Early Childhood Education Program in Baraga, Michigan. She is a tribal member of KBIC, secretary and member of the KBIC Cultural Committee, and leadership team member of the Wiikwedong Early Childhood Collaborative. The WIIKWEDONG EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT COLLABORATIVE is a group of early childhood education leaders from four intertribal early childhood programs serving the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community of Upper Michigan. The founding members of the collaborative serve as the primary researchers, implementing inquiry findings across their respective programs and teacher professional development initiatives.

Our Community-Based Inquiry story is guided by the medicine wheel and the four directions. The basis of our story is organized by these essential directions. Throughout the telling of our story, we make reference to our natural surroundings and use metaphors that emerged as we reflected on how and what to share about our collective journey in implementing our Community-Based Inquiry project. We are a group of five practitioners who have a passion to strengthen our work for higher-quality early learning and care programs. Our community work targets children, families, and early childhood educators with the guidance to heal, thrive and grow. We are the Wiikwedong (*on the bay*) Early Childhood Development Collaborative!

We chose to embark on this Community-Based Inquiry journey to investigate questions as practitioner-researchers, anticipating the discoveries along the way. We are looking at ways to improve our work by implementing inquiry from within our community.

We see ourselves and our work as a collaborative reflected in the natural phenomena, characteristics, and movement of the creeks. We started out like the five unique creeks that merge into the five-mile Falls River in L'Anse, Michigan, which are the Ogemaw, Burns, Taylor, Denomie, and Roubillard. These five creeks then enter Gichigami, the largest, cleanest, deepest, purest, and coldest of the five Great Lakes. Like these five individual creeks, each of us holds a special gift to share, and our gifts have made our collaboration successful. But we weren't always a collaborative. For many years, we, and the programs we direct operated separately, in "silos." As a result, our Ojibwe language and our culture suffered.

*Each creek is of high-quality within its own boundaries, yet movement between and among the creeks is stagnant. On damp wet days among the fog, the creeks are territorial of their knowledge, wisdom, and gifts. Upon the mist of warm, sunny days, the winds fill the air with the understanding of a clear vision for change. In those moments, each confined creek seeps water through minute cracks. The drips and slow trickles of movement open the waterway of building relationships of trust, commitment, and collaboration.*

In this section we introduce the members of Wiikwedong Early Childhood Development Collaborative (Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative) who are the researchers conducting the Community-Based Inquiry.

Our story begins with Ogemaw Creek. The point of origin of Ogemaw Creek is a green, murky swamp. It enters Falls River from the West; the other four creeks enter from the East. Teachings reveal that the swamp is the origin of medicine. The ground is fertile from the huge variety of birds whose droppings leave fertilizer in the swamp for growth and healing. On a narrow, less beaten path surrounded by our ancestors, our senses are activated by the beauty of nature that envelops us. Ogemaw Creek has a strong and steady flow as it meanders to the calmness before dropping into the waterfall edge. One can hear the water slipping down the falls in the distance. The whisper of the water cascading down the rocks is the beginning of our journey as the Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative.

A leader and mentor, Cheryl LaRose, who initially brought our team together, is reflected in Ogemaw (meaning “Chief,” “Leader,” or “Boss” in the Ojibwe language) Creek. The sound and beauty of the creek is absorbed and reflected by the “audience” of the surrounding nature. Cheryl trusts the “audience” to absorb and reflect on the experience and teachings she shares. Her work as a mentor comes from her master’s degree in early childhood education (ECE) with a focus on mentoring high-quality teachers and professionals in the early childhood field. Though the Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative was formed in December of 2020 through a phone conversation with Tarajeau Yazzie-Mintz, co-founder of First Light Education Project, the idea of addressing silos and developing purposeful collaboration among our programs started many, many years before in incoherent but incessant babbling among the creeks, articulating hopes of revitalizing the Ojibwe language and culture. The phone call was the catalyst needed to change the incoherent, incessant babbling to a coherent passionate conversation and created a once-in-a-lifetime partnership with the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative (IELC).<sup>1</sup>

Burns Creek is inconspicuous among its natural surroundings and awareness of its existence is by word of mouth. It is the first and most southern creek on the east side of the Falls River. The creek shares its water with the terrain of marsh grass, cattails, and low cranberry bushes and is outlined by the coniferous and deciduous trees highlighting the creek’s growth on the horizon before entering the river. The creek is calm, thoughtful, and intentional as it is engulfed by nature.

Burns Creek is a reflection of Kim Swanson, the program director of Migiizinsag (Little Eagles). Migiizinsag is located on the Keweenaw Bay Reservation and is partnered with Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa Community College. Her program serves Native American preschool children. Like Burns Creek, Kim is inconspicuous in our community. The community is aware of her and Migiizinsag mostly through word of mouth. She shares her knowledge with Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa Community College students, colleagues, and children and their families, which is highlighted through the high-quality family engagement and child development outcomes in her program. It is these types of strong relationships and connections that build the foundation for our Community-Based Inquiry. Ogemaw and Burns creeks had some coherent and passionate connection for many years and knew Ogemaw’s strong leadership could turn a common vision into something that was needed in our tribal early childhood community. Kim knew the creeks were a strong experienced group of women and felt they were ready to break down some barriers. She stated, “We have all worked alone for years and I thought that this team could help build some connections. I know a successful team working together can accomplish more than what I could do individually.” Kim was the first creek to join as allies with Cheryl entering the flow of the Falls River and the work of the Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative.

Taylor Creek exemplifies uniqueness. It is the second of the four creeks entering the Falls River from the eastern direction. The arched ripples of sand, at the bottom of the creek, appear like fins on a fish. With many clusters of rock and a “fork in the creek” formed from a branch and a large log making a bridge that dams up one side of the creek, it is sensed that the fish have many obstacles to overcome in their travel down the creek. When the creek reaches the river, the fish gives the impression of embarking on a

new journey with its fins dissipating into a smooth bed of sand as it transitions into the river. Lisa Denomie's reflection is a mirror image of Taylor Creek as she travels on her newest journey, the third member to join the Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative.

Lisa is a tribal member of the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community and director of the Pre-Primary Education Program on the reservation. She serves Native American children and families from six weeks of age until they enter kindergarten. She has met many obstacles—"clusters of rock"—along the way that have changed the course of her travel in life many times as she has found her way to the Ojibwe language and culture. She has had to make conscious choices when meeting the forks in the waterway. Dams have blocked her way, but she has been able to break through those barriers: "With a passion in my heart for the betterment of our children and a vision to incorporate language and culture into early childhood, I decided to see what this journey entailed." Like Taylor Creek, she has discovered a new journey ahead. Barriers have dissipated into a flow of amazing transitions, accompanied by opportunities provided within the continuous movement forward. Taylor Creek joins Ogemaw and Burns entering the flow of the Falls River and the work of the Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative.

Denomie Creek is the third of the four creeks to enter the Falls River from the eastern direction, with a crystal-clear vision of the smooth and solid sandy bottom left from the constant flow of the water cascading down small sporadic rock ledges. Calculated footprints of foam gather in clusters along the bank's edge while imprinting bubbles that connect with each other as they let off bursts of energy into the air. Terri Swartz, not unlike Denomie Creek, is solid and grounded in her footprints. Her wide array of footprints showcases her walk of life as a Keweenaw Bay Indian Community tribal member and a Three Fires Midewiwin Anishnaabekwe (Grand Medicine Society Woman). She was a former Keweenaw Bay Indian Community Council member, former president of the education board, former powwow committee chairperson, and currently the chairperson of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) Inter-Tribal Keweenaw Bay Indian Community Head Start and Early Head Start director.

Her program serves children zero to five years of age. She is in constant flow with her teachers and coordinators, and she is the one they come to when they are cascading down classroom and life's rock ledges. When an event needs to be planned, teachers and the community will gather in clusters because of her organizational skills, positive energy, and excitement that rises to the surface and fills the air: "I want all of the children to have the same opportunities. [And I want] to elaborate on the cultural teachings that I was gifted to do." Like the solid, sand bottom of Denomie Creek, Terri is integral as an ally with Ogemaw, Burns, and Taylor Creek and we could feel her energy when she entered the Falls River and the work of the Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative.

Roubillard Creek is the last body of water that humbly flows into the Falls River before reaching the welcoming water of the Gichigami, from the eastern direction. The creek is a hidden gem among the lush green foliage that wraps its branches and stems to secretly hide its beauty as it gurgles along the shallow banks. The creek feeds the river with an abundance of rich nutrients that is an aspect of its surroundings. The creek is reflected in Heather Wood, who is a hidden gem among the walls of the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community Health System.

The many services and programs offered at Keweenaw Bay Indian Community Health System camouflage the beauty, hard work, and dedication she brings as the health promotions coordinator/maternal child health coordinator at Keweenaw Bay Indian Community Health System; as a mentor to the home visitors, children and families; and as a leader in the community:

I hesitantly joined Wiikwedong when I received the invitation. I was concerned I wouldn't be able to commit the time it deserved, and that I wasn't a good fit because the programs I coordinate are different from everyone else's. I thought, my programs are so different, am I sure I can provide what they are looking for? I decided to join Wiikwedong because I truly believed in what they were trying to accomplish. I knew the objective being set would be an asset to our programs and benefit the families we work with in our community. My goal was collaboration between programs and giving input from a non-center-based perspective. The team welcomed me and my viewpoint. The work we've been able to accomplish has made me see how important this journey has been.

In the same way that Roubillard Creek enters the flow of the Falls River to join with Ogemaw, Burns, Taylor, and Denomie, Heather enters Wiikwedong and is welcomed with open arms as she brings the resources, close attention to detail, experience, and humble leadership as an ally to our Wiikwedong ECD Team.

## ZHAAWANONG—NIIIBIN: (SOUTH—SUMMER)

*As we enter the southern direction of our journey, the summer winds fill us with warmth as we place the giizhik (cedar) in our shoes to bring goodness our way, niwiidosendimin (as we walk together). Like an incurable romantic, the winds blow the clouds across the orchid and blue skies. The smell in the air, wind, and clouds intersect with the earth's most intimate alterations. Animikiig (Thunderbirds) actively remind us, through the thunder, lightning and warm rains, of their invisible force. As we listen to them, asemaa is offered. Anishinaabeg (Indigenous people) have a special protective relationship with Animikiig the most powerful spiritual being of Anishinaabeg cosmology. Animikiig reveal self through stories, give us information, good news, good tidings and gifts, all things needed to reveal our work, through our story.*

Eddie Benton-Banai is a knowledge keeper who spent his life connecting American Indians with their spirituality and promoting sovereignty. He was the grand chief or spiritual leader, of the Three Fires Midewiwin Lodge. He is the author of *The Mishomis Book—The Voice of the Ojibway*, a guide for all people, especially the Ojibwe Anishinaabeg and youth. He wrote about the original man and ma'iingan (Wolf), "What shall happen to one of you will also happen to each other! Each of you will be feared, respected, and misunderstood." This teaching is important for us, for both had their land taken from them, both have been hunted for their hair, and both have been pushed near destruction. Just as ma'iingan have survived, we too have survived

by emerging to lead the way back to natural living, respect for our Mother Earth and revitalizing our Ojibwe language and culture.

The members of Wiikwedong, these five creeks, are the backbone of early childhood education in our tribal community with the passion and the protection of the aroma from giizhik (*Cedar*). The Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative did not always exist! The four early childhood programs worked with high embankments around them and dams between them for many years, building barriers stick by stick, stone by stone, branch by branch. We practiced rigid and somewhat simplistic ways of thinking. The tribal programs struggled to see beyond their established ways of doing things. Working independently, it was difficult to have the capacity and flexibility across the program embankments to move toward mino-bimaadiziwin (*live a good life*) for the children and families.

With fewer people to share the teachings, language, and ceremonies, it was crucial that collaborative work across programs began. Teaching will vary throughout our communities, but the common thread is revitalization. Support is needed for one another to spread the sacred way of living to our children, families, and community. Over the course of the Community-Based Inquiry there were those of us doing the work, and there were those witnessing the change unfolding. Within our context, the landscape and natural elements joined our work, offering reflection, inspiration, and purpose. From our Indigenous landscape and skies, our Indigenous knowledge systems and persons witnessed our work.

Clouds in our region are an ever-present part of the sky: providing and watching in the same way our community is there providing, watching, nurturing, and honoring the growth and development of the Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative. The first two community groups to provide and watch were the Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa Community College and the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community Tribal Council. As they watched over the Collaborative, there was a sense of responsibility to the community. Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative began negotiating locally from within and engaging the community in our work. Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa Community College and the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community Tribal Council started visioning with us.

*The cumulus clouds floated across the sky like white billowy balls of cotton. They watched in awe at the beauty and nature of the five creeks' self-reliance on their surroundings and honored their liberation into unpaddled waters. They could envision the five creeks' movement together educating the children's families and community and the practitioners of the Ojibwe people's way of life across the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community.*

Initially, there was silence, no questions or shared ideas among the five creeks, and then slow realization of shared purpose, connection, and direction came to the forefront. The realization emerged that the high embankments and dam mentality had hurt their vision for their Ojibwe Early Childhood Programs and deterred long-term success from occurring. The five creeks agreed to begin working together; as the creeks merged and flowed together, the clouds could hear the dripping, trickling, then babbling amongst them. It was a beautiful sound. The college, the tribal council, and the clouds heard about the first meeting with Tarajeen Yazzie-Mintz through the Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative talking within the community about their working together.

*The cirrus clouds whirled across the widening sky like “curls of hair,” witnessing and beholding the creeks as they began to emulsify into the Falls River. Peering across the embankment of the creeks, the clouds could foresee that opportunities to improve capabilities would be difficult and thought-provoking. The clouds’ curls loosened and tightened watching the creeks create a vision of how to seize these opportunities.*

The Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative began to see past the embankment and into bigger waters. Ideas and visions began to appear. There were rumblings of Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa Community College supporting the Collaborative as a fiscal sponsor for our project. Discussions took place among the Collaborative to get letters of support from the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community Tribal Council and Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa Community College. Gradually, the five creeks started listening, talking, seeing, trusting, and building relationships. The clouds were able to see the creeks; the creeks’ embankments began to shorten, and the dams began to leak; this empowered the creeks to continue to take on this beautiful work.

Each creek entered the water in their own unique style. Lisa and Terri immersed their toes and soles of their feet in the sand, envisioning the Ojibwe language, culture, and surroundings; Heather and Kim dangled their bare feet entering new territory of the unknown, yet comfortable in risk taking together; and Cheryl meditated to feel the environment, individual space, community, and far beyond. After each meeting with the five collaborative team members with guidance from Tarajeau, the Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative’s vision became more defined and clear.

*The stratus clouds blanket the horizon with a broad widespread weave. The blanket of clouds intimately embraces the emotions of the creeks nurturing them as their thoughts and ideas emerge, defining the details of Wiikwedong’s Inquiry Project. The transition from five creeks to one river was not easy, but as our vision and plan came to fruition, the dam crumbled, releasing a steady flow of water into the Falls River.*

When approached by the Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative, both the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community Tribal Council and Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa Community College agreed to write letters to support the work in helping children and families heal, thrive, and grow in our early childhood programs. Not only did Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa Community College agree with a letter of support, but the Board of Regents agreed to have Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa Community College be our fiscal sponsor. With this, the limitless thoughts and ideas for serving children, families, and the community to help us heal, thrive, and grow came with a passion from our varied experience in early childhood profession. The Collaborative’s thoughts and ideas were exuberant and promising.

*The clouds embraced the evolving ideas and plans empowering the creeks to continue their steady flow into the Falls River.*

This initial participation of Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa Community College and the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community Tribal Council was enough support for the Wiikweong ECD Collaborative to reach a different feeling as their Community-Based Inquiry project unfolded. When the creeks reached the river, there was power in the



movement and strength in the flow. There was an awareness of the power of the water that the clouds could see, the power of the Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative!

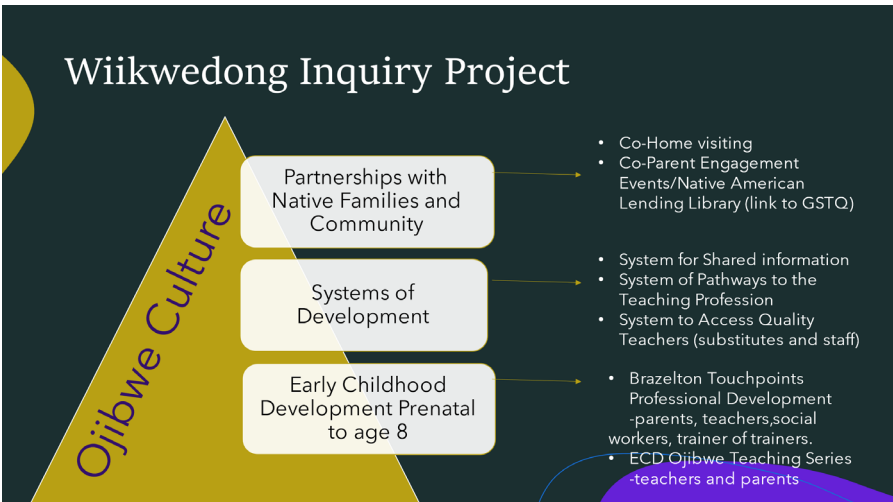
It was time to build a framework for our work. The process was time-consuming, deliberate, thought-provoking, individual soul searching, and invigorating with a focus on prioritization. We used the framework model to prioritize our research and inquiry efforts. The Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative Inquiry Project framework hence became a reality that now provides us with a five-year model to support our collective research efforts based on the Community-Based Inquiry question: *What are the ways in which systems and services need to align for our children, families, and community to help heal, thrive, and grow?* This framework assisted us in recognizing different strands of work, allowing us to tailor our approach to answer our inquiry question and be more intentional and strategic about our inquiry projects. For example, our project focus strands were (see Wiikwedong Inquiry Project image below):

- Partnerships with Native families and community with a focus on building an Ojibwa Lending Library
- Systems of development with a focus on systems for shared information
- Early childhood development prenatal with a focus on Brazelton Touchpoints Professional Development and creating an Ojibwe Teaching Series

The next phase of our work and project focus strands are:

- Partnerships with Native families and community with a focus on co-home visiting and parent engagement events
- Systems of development with a focus on systems of pathways to the teaching professions
- Early childhood development prenatal with a focus on Brazelton Touchpoints Professional Development and creating an Ojibwe Teaching Series

We have become one river working together toward our common vision in finding the ways in which systems and services need to align for our children, families, and community to help heal, thrive, and grow.



## NINGABII'ANONG—DAGWAAGIN (WEST-AUTUMN)

*As we enter the western direction the scent of autumn is thick and lingering in the air. Four sticks of bashkodejiibik (sage) are gathered, harvested, and placed in our bundle; activities begin with a cleansing to guide our journey with a clear mind. The sun is reflecting from the river's mouth as the rippling waves of Wiikwedong dance their way to the shore, glistening like diamonds scattered across the water. Our ancestors are elated. The diamonds have been released. They dance atop the waters with satisfaction, rejoicing the beginning of the revitalization.*

*The river's mouth is where a river flows into a larger body of water, as the Falls River flows into Wiikwedong. At the mouth of the Falls River, heavy gray-green and brown-copper sediment can be seen deposited on the mouth's floor due to the slowing of the current, reducing the carrying capacity of the water. The change in the flow conditions causes the river to drop the heavy, colorful schema of sediment, which accumulates and thickens into a nutrient rich mire. As the nutrient rich mire edges its way into the tall grasses and moss at the edge of the mouth's banks, four strands of knowledge implant themselves into the fine roots of the grasses, imprinting dendrite-like pathways with deposits in the blackened soil.*

The Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative focused on four strands of knowledge. The four strands of knowledge are: 1) leadership through informed practice, 2) cultivating engagement across programs, 3) community engagement, and 4) systems of development. The development of our work across strands is similar to the process of brain development, with information and knowledge flowing back and forth across far-reaching dendrites. Dendrites are short, narrow, highly branched structures present on the end of a neuron. They increase the surface area available for receiving incoming information and are key parts of the process of relaying electrical signals to the brain. We see the strands of knowledge of our inquiry project as dendrites—structures that facilitate the exchange of knowledge, creating pathways that branch out into the community to stimulate enthusiasm for learning.

The Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative identified three pathways, “dendrites” facilitating our collective knowledge: *a pathway to professional development, a pathway to the Ojibwa Lending Library, and a pathway to the Ojibwe Teaching Series.* The pathways were identified as ways to develop and strengthen culturally relevant knowledge and high-quality programming through collaboratively shared multi-faceted activities and experiences. When walking these dendrite-like pathways consistently, over and over again, the branches of inquiry will strengthen and broaden, thus the stronger and more embedded our collective knowledge will become in the daily lives of our teachers, children, families, and communities.

### *Pathway to Professional Development*

Bashkodejiibik (sage) represents wisdom, intelligence and experience while focusing on positive energy as we follow the pathway of professional development. The pathway

to professional development is long and full of guideposts pointing us in the right direction to address our community's early learning needs. In our Ojibwe culture, the bashkodejiibik sticks will prepare us for ceremonies and teachings. It will release what is troubling the mind, remove negative energy and guide us with clear minds. Four bashkodejiibik sticks guided the Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative on the pathway to professional development.

The first bashkodejiibik stick pointed us toward collaborative cultural teachings coming from within the community of Keweenaw Bay. These collaborators include the Ojibwa Community Library, two knowledge keepers and members of our Cultural Advisory Committee, the Tribal Natural Resource Department, the Tribal Health Department, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission, Mitch Factor, a speaker and trainer funded by Inter-Tribal Head Start, and two members of the Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative.

The second bashkodejiibik stick guided us to cultural engagement through Brazelton Touchpoints training. Through this training, eighteen teachers and practitioners across our four program sites learned to stimulate and strengthen their intrinsic capacity as individuals to build and sustain collaborative relationships with and among families, their children, and each other. In addition, four of our teacher-practitioners are now trainers for Brazelton Touchpoints, which only strengthens and broadens the knowledge within our community.

The third bashkodejiibik stick guided cultivated engagement through Keweenaw Bay Indian Community Health System. Keweenaw Bay Indian Community Health System (Heather Wood) successfully aligned professional development across programs through virtual training, family, and community workshops by simply inviting the other three programs to the trainings the program was currently providing. These trainings include "Tobacco: Commercial vs Traditional" and "Naloxone and Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome & Working w/Drug Exposed Children."

Lastly, the fourth bashkodejiibik stick was the guidance from First Light Education Project. First Light Education Project provided the Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative with monthly opportunities of research inquiry topics, and relevant workshops to guide our work. This work highlighted and focused on community engagement and systems of development.

Through these professional development experiences, the Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative and the community set a new precedent and expectation in building a shared commitment and confidence to learn and incorporate shared cultural knowledge in our work with early learners and families.

These efforts were enacted in a two-day Culture Camp, a key step on the pathway to professional development, hosted by the Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative. Four of our tribal early childhood programs were invited; the interest generated within the community for the Culture Camp led to a request from an additional tribal early childhood program to participate. Approximately fifty early childhood practitioners participated and thereby gained access to culturally relevant teachings from the Ojibwe

Teaching Series and our Ojibwe community. The teachings were intentional, inclusive, and extensive, and they provided a foundation for practitioners.

### *Pathway to the Ojibwa Lending Library*

The Ojibwa Lending Library was envisioned by the Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative as a common space for ECD teachers to have cultural resources and provide a local “hub” to share Ojibwe resources to assist in cultivating knowledge and engagement across programs. This pathway required much more information and inquiry, with questions ranging from who would be using the Ojibwa Lending Library to where it would be located. As leaders of the Wiikwedong team, we had many unanswered questions to our main inquiry: *What would be the major benefits of implementing a Native American resource center for the Tribal Early Childhood Programs?*

We decided to create and conduct a survey. To create a survey, the members of the Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative had to build on their leadership and informed practice skills. We turned to the fourth bashkodejiibik stick—First Light Education Project—to guide us in the IELC for a research inquiry session on the topic of building a survey that would link directly back to answering our inquiry question. Once we learned the components of a strong survey, we held two follow-up workshops. The first workshop was on how to design the survey. The second workshop explored how to read and analyze the survey data. The results of the survey told us a beautiful story and provided enlightening knowledge about cultivating engagement across our programs. For example, surprisingly, the results of the survey indicated that 33 percent of teachers in the community interact with preschool children (aged four to six) and 77 percent interact with children prenatal through three years of age; this was the opposite of what we had thought prior to administering the survey. Now we were getting somewhere, particularly in the knowledge strand of leadership through informed practice.

The original vision of the Ojibwa Lending Library was that of a mobile unit that would take the resources to the programs on a weekly basis. Funding and logistics were an issue. That did not stop us. The Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative enacted the strand of community engagement by reaching out to the Ojibwa Community Library. The Ojibwa Community Library agreed to collaborate with us to create a section of their library dedicated to providing high-quality, culturally relevant resources for our teacher-early childhood practitioners. Resources were purchased and shared from the four programs for the Ojibwa Lending Library based on criteria from Dr. Debbie Reese, survey results, and accessibility. The librarian at the Ojibwa Community Library presented information, content, online access, and registration to use the library for the fifty teachers at our Cultural Camp.

Interestingly, the hypothesis guiding our inquiry question turned out to be very different from what our team had expected, but from those differences have arisen new questions and opportunities for implementation and holistic collaboration. Our original hypothesis was that the teachers would go to the Ojibwa Lending Library to prepare weekly lesson plans and gather resources for their programs or centers.

We planned a small focus group with the librarian and Wiikwedong team leaders to discuss aspects of the Ojibwa Lending Library after implementing the plan and process. However, the survey data indicated that teachers were not utilizing the Ojibwa Lending Library as expected; from the inquiry and discussion, different opportunities and beautiful ideas rose to the surface that were a “better fit” for our new landforms and ecosystem:

- The librarian is scheduling visits to the early childhood programs to read to the children
- The home visiting early childhood practitioners are scheduling parent circles at the library with parents and their children
- Center-based early childhood practitioners are planning family engagement events at the library with children and their families
- Wiikwedong ECE Collaborative Team knowledge sharers are invited to do workshops at the Ojibwa Community Library for the community
- The Ojibwa Lending Library is not a stand-alone but is integrated into the library

Our Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative Team has appreciated the Community-Based Inquiry; it has been an astonishing process. We learned to listen to the answers to the questions, hear the voices of the community, open our minds to the possibilities, and be willing to embrace change. As leaders, we came to recognize that the Ojibwa Lending Library was not a failed idea but a success in that it brought us closer to *mino-bimaadiziwin* for our children, families, and early childhood practitioners in our community by enriching their lives with more capacity and hands-on Ojibwe language, literacy, and resources.

### *Pathway to the Ojibwe Teaching Series*

The pathway to the Ojibwe Teaching Series was designed to improve the quality of teacher-early childhood practitioner engagement by including Ojibwe teaching and content in teaching practices and sharing teaching within the community. Strong voices from the community and knowledge keepers were needed to pave this pathway. In the past, funding to enhance the quality of each program by revitalizing the Ojibwe language and culture had trickled in and out, but typically the focus on the Ojibwe language and culture fell to the wayside. Collectively, through this inquiry project, the Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative was able to say, “No! Not this time.” Together, we decided our partnership’s primary focus *must* be on the Ojibwe language and culture as part of the everyday lives of children, families, and teachers-early childhood practitioners. It was time to find our knowledge keepers, the traditional keepers of the Ojibwe language and cultural teachings that exist within our community today.

This pathway was the most difficult to build. The Collaborative originally asked eight knowledge keepers to join the revitalization efforts to provide services to help our children and families heal, thrive, and grow. Four of the eight knowledge keepers chose to be members of our Ojibwe Cultural Advisory Committee. They are strong and committed in a variety of ways. They guide and assist in the writings of the teaching series, present teachings to our children in the classrooms, present teachings

at the Grandmother Moon Ceremonies, Water Walks, and the Culture Camp; and prepare food for events and the Culture Camp.

The Ojibwe Teaching Series is a work in progress. There are two components to the series: “The Early Childhood Programs” and “Our Community.”

### *The Early Childhood Programs*

Our intent is to provide early childhood teachers with the traditional tools Anishinaabeg use to fulfill their lifeway of the four aspects of wellbeing: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. This would provide our community with a greater and deeper perspective of our traditional lifeways and culture of honoring one’s relationship with all of nature. Our life revolves around the greatest circle of all: time. Time has a continuous flow like water and continually grows like trees. The medicine wheel helps us to live our life within the circle; all of our power comes to us from the sacred wheel. Indigenous people all around the world refer to the medicine wheel as the “Circle of Life/Time.” It symbolizes all of Time, Life, Growth, Regeneration—everything from the beginning to the end, from life to death. As long as the wheel remains balanced, our people will flourish.

The four directions of the medicine wheel represent all living spirits: the seasons, the winds, the animals, the plants. Teachings begin in the Waabanong (East) and continue clockwise. In our Ojibwe Teaching Series, it is our vision to introduce the medicine wheel into the early childhood classrooms as a teaching tool. This tool can be used within each program’s daily routine. The day will begin in the eastern direction as children arrive and continue around the Medicine Wheel to the northern direction, once all the children have departed. The teachers will use the Medicine Wheel tool to represent and illustrate the daily routine. We see this as nourishing our youngest minds and teaching staff with the beginnings of the Ojibwe language and culture as a way of life.

### *Our Community*

The community component guides us to honor our Ojibwe culture from preparation to experience. The audience is the community as a whole and its individual participants. Nookomis (*Grandmother*) is honored through a monthly personal connection or a ceremony, done by a conductor-teacher-leader. Honoring Nookomis Giizis (*Grandmother Moon*) is done monthly when the dibik giizis (*night sun*) is full. During the traditional ceremony, ikwewag (*women*) connect with Nookomis Giizis (*Grandmother Moon*) and life-giving nibi (*water*), honoring and seeking guidance. It may be to ask for guidance and help for children and others, it may be for moon time (*menstrual cycle*), it may be for guidance in everyday life. When the dibik giizis is full, a Nookomis Giizis (*Grandmother Moon*) ceremony or a personal connection can be made. We honor her, as she influences all life that is connected by nibi. We committed to monthly ceremonies for one year at a variety of locations within our Ojibwe community with members attending from Keweenaw Bay Ojibwa Community College, the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community Tribal Council, the Wiikwedong ECD

Cultural Committee members, tribal members, our program children and mothers. Community knowledge keepers, members of our cultural advisory committee, and others taught the teachings at the ceremony. At times, up to thirty-five participants attended a ceremony.

The Keweenaw Bay Ojibwe Nibi Walks are based in Ojibwe Ceremonial Nibi Teachings. The reason we walk is to honor all nibi and to speak to the nibi spirits so that there will be healthy rivers and lakes for our ancestors in the generations to come. Nibi is Life! Our community currently has two Nibi Walks every year: the Annual Pauline Knapp-Spruce Nibi Walk and the People of the Heart Nibi Walk. The first Nibi Walk was initiated by Rodney Loonsfoot and Jessica Koski and continued by Terri Swartz and Pauline Knapp-Spruce. It is now called The Annual Pauline Knapp-Spruce Nibi Walk in memory of Pauline. It is a seventeen-mile walk from 1st Sand Beach at Pequaming to Sand Point Lighthouse. The People of the Heart Nibi Walk is a ninety-mile walk from Copper Harbor Lighthouse to Sand Point Lighthouse. The People of the Heart is an inclusive educational organization and nonresidential community committed to inspiring love and gratitude for life, Planet Earth, and all species. When we walk, this is a time for *anami'aa* (prayer) or *nagamonan* (songs) for nibi. We do this for our nibi to become pure and clean and to continuously flow. This year we held our first annual Children's Water Walk on the shores of Keweenaw Bay. Over 150 families (fathers, mothers, aunts, uncles, grandmothers, grandfathers) came, along with attendees from five tribal programs and one nontribal program. The tribal council closed their meeting early to participate and join us at the water walk for the children.

### *Reflecting on the Community-Based Inquiry Process*

The Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative was growing and expanding into our community in a subtle way. A calmness could be felt in the cool refreshing water surrounding us. A slight movement of the water caused defined lines to be etched like waves scalloping to connect one after the other in the sand held at the bottom of the mouth of Wiikwedong. One could see that the ecosystem had shifted. Through this process of change, the five creeks were able to share their experience and expertise of their work with each other and the community. As the creeks gradually amalgamated into one—creeks-to-river, river-to-the-mouth, the-mouth-to-Gichigami—the earth, land, sky, and water could feel our desire to strengthen our work together and the work of our programs. The mouth of the river embraced the journey we chose to embark on in our efforts to investigate the question: *What are the ways in which systems and services need to align for our children, families, and community to help heal, thrive, and grow?*

The Falls River could have entered the mouth of the Wiikwedong in a variety of ways, but this community inquiry was intentionally designed and influenced by the question, causing the Falls River to plunge below the surface, digging deeper into the inquiry, into the community, and into our own knowledge. We foresee the discovery of new ways to improve our work and our research. The cycle of our journey from the creeks to the river to the mouth to Gichigami parallels how we engage in the cycle of research inquiry. We intentionally engaged in the cycle of research from the first

steps of inquiry and visioning through planning and implementation (data collection, analysis, documentation of findings, and application of conclusions), and yet to come are the reflection and fine-tuning of the subsequent inquiry cycles.

This journey from the creeks to the mouth of Wiikwedong is our process of examining our own practices in order to develop stronger teaching, care, and learning opportunities for Ojibwe children and families. By implementing the Ojibwa Lending Library and Ojibwe Teaching Series, the lessons we have learned along the way can inform current decision-making, strengthen our culture, take down embankments, and align systems, especially Ojibwe early learning care systems. Our project is embedded in its natural surroundings, and we engaged in a natural systemic inquiry process. We have honored our tribal knowledge and cultural protocols throughout this process. It is a repetitive process of study, analysis, and meaning that is contextualized within our own Ojibwe community. Each time we travel this repetitive process, landforms and the ecosystem shift and change. We can feel it.

### GIIWEDINONG—BIBOON (NORTH-WINTER)

*The air is cold coming from the northern direction; it is our time to rest and reflect. A faint and fragrant smell of dried blades of wiingashk (sweetgrass) wafts above the frozen beach sand and snow dusted by the mouth at the opening to Gichigami. The blade hairs of the wiingashk teach us to be gentle, loving, kind to each other as we do our work.*

As our story unfolded, we shared the inquiry related to the major components of a rich Ojibwe Teaching Series and positive impacts it had on our early childhood practitioners. We shared the inquiry about the major benefits and new opportunities of implementing an Ojibwa Lending Library. We shared the inquiry of the way we aligned cultural knowledge and services that touched children and families to help us heal, thrive, and grow. It is the teachings from the braiding of wiingashk that captures the support of our work.

It takes twenty-one strands of wiingashk to make a braid. The first seven strands represent the seven generations before us. We are obligated to share and teach their ways; this is the way we heal. The second set of seven strands represents the seven Grandfather teachings: mino-bimaadiziwin this is the way we thrive. The third set of seven strands represents the seven generations in front of us. Our children, grandchildren, those who have not yet been born—we must teach them the wisdom and knowledge we carry from our ancestors; this is the way we grow.

This inquiry and story could only be told because the Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative is an eclectic and diverse group of strong women leaders of programs that meet the individual needs of the families in our community. When we talk about taking down silos or “embankments,” we are not referring to making our programs consistent or the same, but rather sharing knowledge and collaborating to create something greater for the community. Our story is about respecting diversity and learning from our differences to strengthen us as a “community of Ojibwe Early Childhood Practitioners and a community of Ojibwe programs.” Taking down the silos is our



children having equitable opportunities, children and families living and identifying with the Ojibwe culture, and aligning services to help us to heal, thrive, and grow.

The collaborative's work was challenging, and it was demanding to create communication that was clear and reciprocal between and among our team members. An understanding of leadership styles, leadership knowledge, and ways of sharing had to be built. It became critical to know that honesty wasn't hurtful, integrity wasn't stubbornness but a bridge to open-mindedness, and that change was not immediate but a shift over time. All of these lessons contributed to our success in this Community-Based Inquiry project.

*With our bandolier bag (Native American shoulder bag) filled with resources and materials to support the continuation of language and culture for the Wiikwedong Collaborative, we make our way to the shores of Gichigami. There, a fire is lit with an offering of medicines. As a peace pipe is passed to each team member, we each elaborate on the work we've done, the commitments we've made, and the success we've accomplished through diligent work.*

*As the sun sets on top of the waters an image appears. The more the sun sets, the more the image takes shape. The first formation is that of a head, then the upper body, and, lastly, the lower half. The glistening reflection awakens our vision to that of a Jingle Dress dancer. Slow movement of the waters entices the cones on the dress to come to life. The image stands tall and proud. With style and grace, the dance on the water truly is a rarity to capture. Mesmerized with such a gift, our attention is brought back to reality from the blindness of the light. Asemaa is offered to the waters in gratitude and appreciation. The Jingle Dress Dance is a prayer dance in relation to the vision of healing. Jingle Dress dancers represent healing, pride, spiritual wellness, and celebration. The Power of Woman Dance to heal the community! That glimpse of our Ancestors dancing across the waters provides the encouragement needed for the healing work that we, as the Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative, thrive to grow upon. Aho! (Yes! Agree! Amen!)*

## NOTES

1. The Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative (IELC) is a national institute developed in partnership between First Light Education Project, Brazelton Touchpoints Project, and the IELC partners.