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Restoring an Onkwehonwehnéha ecosystem

Tribal Food Systems Research Fellowship

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Abstract

This is a reflective essay on Akwesasne Freedom School's effort to recreate a community of Onkwehonwehnéha (language and culture of the Original People) knowledge-sharing for healthier and more sustainable ways of living in alignment with the natural world, for the betterment of our people, the environment, and our Haudenosaunee (They Make a House, or the Six Nations) languages.

The Akwesasne Freedom School's work promotes speaking our languages in our natural environment, reinforcing the ceremonial teachings inherent in songs, words, thanksgiving, and stories. The Akwesasne Freedom School intends to build relationships by creating an everyday learning environment that promotes relationship-building between families, plants, and medicines.

Rebuilding healthy Indigenous communities requires reconnecting the people and the earth by utilizing our Indigenous or Original foods, languages, and cultural practices. This reflective essay seeks to validate further the critical relationship between Indigenous people and Indigenous food systems, its impact on learning, and the overall health and wellness of language, environment, and people. It could provide a model or framework for other Indigenous communities to emulate.

Keywords

Indigenous food sovereignty, Indigenous ecological practices, Indigenous permaculture, Iroquois, Haudenosaunee, Indigenous language and culture revitalization, Indigenous language and culture reclamation, Indigenous planting and harvesting, Indigenous pedagogy, language immersion

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Introduction

This paper is a reflective essay on my path to realizing my vision to recreate a community of knowledge with a focus on sharing healthier and more sustainable ways of living in alignment with the natural world for the health of our people, the environment, and our Indigenous languages. My vision originated from my homeschooled Indigenous language and culture–based upbringing. From this perspective, food sovereignty is choosing to work with the forces of the natural world to produce food sustainability. We are responsible for maintaining our reciprocal relationship with our foods, as they are perceived as our younger sisters. We nurture our sisters by doing our best to ensure they have a healthy environment to grow in. This nurturance is done with love and appreciation. We sing and speak our most gentle words to them in our language, as our language was the first language we were given to acknowledge our mutual relationship. Our language is the language our Indigenous plants have heard since our beginning.

This vision has taken me on many journeys, one of which included a journey to Mohawk Territory. The primary focus of this reflection will be my involvement with Akwesasne Freedom School (AFS) and three initiatives I worked on while there. AFS is a Mohawk language immersion school in Akwesasne, New York. The three projects that I will discuss are Ionkwatakia'takéhnhen (Strengthening Ourselves), Sha'oié:ra Taonsetewatakientéhrha'ne' (We are getting to know each other again naturally), and Otsi'náhkwakon.

Journey to Mohawk Territory

I was born to the Onʌyoteʔá·ka (The People of the Standing Stone, or Oneida), who are a part of the Lotinuhsú·ni (They Build a House). Onʌyoteʔá·ka refer to ourselves as Ukwehú·we, which loosely translates to "the original people"; we refer to our language and culture as Ukwehuwehnéha, which can be loosely translated as "The language and culture of the original people." I understand that language and culture cannot be fully considered in isolation. However, in some contexts, within this paper, I will use the term Ukwehuwehnéha to refer to language and culture separately.

The Lotinuhsú·ni are also known as the Haudenosaunee, Six Nations Confederacy, and Iroquois Confederacy, which include the nations of Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora (Parker & Fenton, 1968). Lotinuhsú·ni originally resided throughout what is known today as New York State, Ontario, and Quebec. After the Revolutionary War, many Iroquois communities were displaced from their ancestral lands, which covered much of what is now New York State, to small parcels of land that amounted to less than five percent of their original territory. By the close of the 18th century, numerous social, cultural, political, and economic systems in these communities were heavily disrupted, and many communities found it difficult to adjust to these transformed circumstances (Mt. Pleasant & Burt, 2010). My family line was one of the many radically disrupted and forced to adapt, as we were among the many Oneida families displaced to what is known today as Oneida, Wisconsin. The intentional erasure of Indigenous peoples, plants, and relationships, such as the removal from homelands and waterways, is rooted in settler colonialism (Corntassel & Hardbarger, 2019). My family's dream of revitalizing Ukwehuwehnéha began with my grandmother, was passed down to my mother, and continued with me.

Like many Oneida families, our language has not been spoken as a first language in three generations. Despite being unable to speak our language fluently, my parents consciously raised me as a Ukwehú·we, teaching me about growing and harvesting our traditional foods and participating in ceremonies. I am the first generation in my family line to return to our homelands to live in what is known today as the state of New York. My daughters and I have carried on the dreams of my family line to learn Ukwehuwehnéha. Unfortunately, in my home community, there are no Oneida language immersion schools that have been successful in creating new fluent speakers. However, having been so far removed from our confederacy, I concluded that moving my family back to our Lotinuhsú·ni homelands was critical to advance our Ukwehuwehnéha learning.

Onkwehonwehnéha is the Mohawk cognate, with the same linguistic derivation as the Oneida word Ukwehuwehnéha. Moving forward in this

paper, I will use Onkwehonwehnéha to communicate concepts discussed relative to this project as it focuses on Onkwehonwehnéha. The only difference between Onkwehonwehnéha and Ukwehuwehnéha is the orthography spelling, which depicts the language that is being spoken about: Onkwehonwehnéha refers to "the language and culture of the original (Mohawk) people," and Ukwehuwehnéha refers to "the language and culture of the original (Oneida) people."

My family chose to learn Onkwehonwehnéha for three reasons:

1. Of all the Lotinuhsú·ni languages, Ukwehuwehnéha is the closest language related to Onkwehonwehnéha.
2. Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) communities currently have the most significant population of first language speakers in the confederacy.
3. Kanien'kehá:ka communities are also known for their success in creating second-language speakers through their well-established immersion programs for all ages.

Institutionalizing Ukwehuwehnéha and Onkwehonwehnéha

I have had many goals and dreams for my language throughout my language-learning journey. They have extended from attempting to raise my children as speakers to establishing a language nest, to dreams of developing an adult immersion program and developing community initiatives for advanced second language learners. Despite the positive impacts of these efforts, something was missing. This became the most evident while attending a two-year adult language immersion program. This program required sitting in the same class for over 30 hours a week. This was the first time since my third-grade public school experience that I spent that much time inside a facility. Furthermore, due to the United States and Canadian border crossing our territories, I could not legally reside in the community where I attended the immersion program. For over a year, I made a nearly 70-mile (113-km) commute from a neighboring territory daily to complete the program. Although I was thankful to be afforded the experience, I had never been more disconnected from my culture and the earth.

One day, for class, we attended a tree-planting event in the community. I recall feeling so good that day. I specifically remember being able to acquire the lessons and words that day quickly, and the stories and vocabulary stick with me to this day. This experience positively affected the remainder of my language immersion journey. Since then, I have realized that a relationship with the natural world has been missing in immersion spaces, which provides the sustenance necessary for our survival as Ukwehú·we and, therefore, Ukwehuwehnéha. With this realization, I envision Ukwehú·we working together to recreate authentic relationships with *all* of creation to continue Ukwehuwehnéha.

After completing the language immersion program, I wanted to do something to offset my carbon footprint from traveling to and from the program every day. I also wanted to give back to the people and the land that supported me in fulfilling my family's dream of learning our language. This ignited the idea to give back by planting Indigenous trees for the wellness of the land and all they contribute to our environment, people, and everyday culture. Trees are essential to our sustainability and sovereignty, as our people use wood to make our houses, fire, traditional tools, and sacred items, cook our foods, create ash to hull our Indigenous corn, use bark and roots as medicine, and consume nuts for food. Since learning Onkwehonwehnéha, I have worked in various immersion programs, which have helped me maintain Onkwehonwehnéha and ground myself in learning and teaching land-based activities such as growing Indigenous foods, planting and harvesting medicinal plants, tanning hides, and making dug-out canoes.

Introduction and Literature Review

> *Everything has changed. Nevertheless, if nature is sacred, it would be our mind to change it back to make it the way it was when it was supportive of life on the earth. To make the food the way it was, to make the water the way it was, to make the air the way it was, to make our bodies and everything on the planet the way it was, the way nature made it to be.* (Mohawk & Barreiro, 2010, p. 276)

The Indigenous way of life was once centered around our responsibility to live in a relationship with the natural world. Since the Indigenous way of life has been disrupted, so has the natural world. The revitalization of Indigenous knowledge through language and culture is deeply interconnected in environmental restoration, with each aspect enriching the other. Long before "education" and "knowledge" were shaped by the Western perspective, Indigenous people everywhere had their cultural practice for knowledge transmission, often through songs, ceremonies, oral storytelling, and in spiritual and physical relation with the natural environment (Garcia & Shirley, 2012, p. 77). Songs, ceremonies, and stories are oral learning and teaching methods for Indigenous people. They come from observations of the natural world and their spiritual, mental, and physical needs. Stories that pass through the generations orally tell of lessons learned by their ancestors and serve as essential reminders of the significance of their long-established collective knowledge about their cultural value.

Like many Indigenous people, Onkwehonwehnéha values center on the natural environment that sustains them, such as the Three Sisters (corn, beans, and squash), who are considered the leaders of the foods. As Mt. Pleasant & Burt (2010) state, "Multiple scholars report that the Three Sisters are deeply rooted in Iroquois ceremonial life and are featured prominently in oral traditions" (Fenton et al., 1978; Lewandowski, 1987; Morgan, 1962; Parker, 1968, as cited in Mt. Pleasant & Burt, 2010, p. 74). Knowledge transference often happens in cultivating and harvesting, and knowledge assessment is frequently made during ceremonial practices, of songs and storytelling.

Most of my homeschool education after the third grade focused on knowledge transference through harvesting, ceremonial practices, songs, and the stories from our cultural teachings. Some key areas that have influenced my perspective today might be consolidated into what some may relate to as a literature review. For this literature review, I have organized it in a way that also reflects my perspective. I focus on the following topics: The colonization of our educational processes, creating a speaking environment, a natural learning environment for ceremonial speech, recreating relationships with the environment, and creating an environment for healthy learning.

Colonization of Our Educational Processes

Settler-colonialism has operated, in part, by using Western educational institutions to erode Indigenous intellectual growth through cultural assimilation and the brutal disconnection of Indigenous peoples from their sources of knowledge and strength: the land (Wildcat et al., 2014). Due to colonization, there are no longer monolingual Onkwehonwehnéha environments for second-language speakers to be immersed in. Like many second-language learners of Onkwehonwehnéha, I understand that linguistics has significantly contributed to understanding our morphologically complex language. According to Briggs-Cloud (2020), "Critical grammatical analysis of language, especially morphological and etymological analyses, reveals how our ancestors perceived the world around them before the colonial disruption of spiritual evolutionary processes within their respective geographic residential spaces" (p. 275). If done cautiously and with intention, Western knowledge can help Indigenous people piece together the knowledge embedded in our language and culture. However, to support our intellectual development, we need to bring our communities back to the land and always look first to Onkwehón:we collective knowledge, then to other Indigenous knowledge, then carefully consider if non-Indigenous support, knowledge, and technologies are necessary.

To understand formal language, such as ceremonial practices, one must first gain experience through repetitive observation and participation in the culture. Studying formal language and its structure can help us better understand our ancestors' unique cultural and spatial perspectives. The relationships formed through this shared experience can cultivate language use and richer comprehension of the ties to the land and water (Corntassel & Hardbarger, 2019). When individuals engage with the water and land, this activity strengthens community and familial bonds and enhances connections with the language.

Grammatical analysis of the language provides insight and awareness into how our ancestors once

perceived the world and provides glimpses into how these perceptions took shape in the lived culture of their daily lives. Through these insights, an effort can be made to rebuild our culture through simple everyday actions. These everyday actions are sustainable ways to ensure the continuation of Onkwehonwehnéha. Sustainable gathering practices are essential to ensure that future growth is not hindered. Cultivating Indigenous foods comes with both responsibility and advantages. Sharing, cooking, and enjoying a meal together creates a chance for community bonding (Corntassel & Hardbarger, 2019). Everyday acts of working together to sustain ourselves are sustainable opportunities to rebuild Onkwehonwehnéha. Activists often try to overturn the language hierarchy by advocating for the minority language in areas currently controlled by the majority language (Romaine, 2006). However, by re-centering our Indigenous foods daily through hands-on, culturally based language learning opportunities, such as planting, harvesting, cooking, and eating, we exercise our sovereignty and promote the wellness of our people, language, and culture.

With inherently Indigenous methods and technologies, Indigenous peoples have continuously acclimatized to the ever-changing environment and world, utilizing formal and informal strategies to fulfill their environmental responsibilities. This is apparent in the many Indigenous efforts to address climate change (Corntassel & Hardbarger, 2019, p. 113). Reinvigorating Indigenous plants and food systems is crucial in restoring relationships within the community, family, and homeland (Corntassel & Hardbarger, 2019). Occasionally, Western methods and/or technologies can help us achieve our primary goal. However, simple everyday actions are most important for sustaining an Onkwehonwehnéha ecosystem.

Creating a Speaking Environment

Rethinking how we organize ourselves and focusing on creating closer relationships with the land allows the opportunity to develop deeper connections inherent in our Indigenous knowledge system embedded within Onkwehonwehnéha. Learning spaces should be considered a sacred environment for engagement with curriculum and pedagogy supported by Indigenous knowledge systems (Garcia & Shirley, 2012, p. 77). Creating my family's first Three Sisters' garden in my first year of homeschooling facilitated my relationship with our Three Sisters and the purpose of the harvest ceremonial practices. Language domains emerge with meaning and relationship when learning is done in natural environments.

Language can be broken into two categories: low language (informal speech, such as everyday chitchat) and high language (formal speech, such as ceremonial speech). Adults often use low language when speaking to children, and children also use it when speaking among themselves (Ferguson, 1959, p. 239). The low language children learn is considered the "natural" or "normal" way to acquire language. Children may overhear the high language, but knowing the high language is only accomplished through formal education (Ferguson, 1959, p. 239). Providing an ecocentric learning space for our children to learn allows Onkwehonwehnéha low language (informal speech) to develop naturally. Allowing low language development that occurs freely outdoors in nature allows indoor learning to focus more on high-level language education, such as ceremonial language.

Natural Learning Environment for Ceremonial Speech

Within Onkwehonwehnéha, ceremonial speech is a form of high language that uses metaphors, euphemisms, and embedded meaning within words (Mithun, 2001). This requires an understanding of the culture and context to reveal the importance of the vocabulary. Conversely, language must be understood to comprehend the ceremony's importance fully. Circumlocution and repetition are extremely important in Onkwehonwehnéha, as the ceremony's purpose is to ensure the continuation of the natural cycle and pass teachings to future generations.

Formal ceremonial speeches are characterized by their repetitive elements, intricate organization, and consistent features that serve as a memory aid to help the speaker articulate long passages (Mithun, 2001). Ceremonial language is one of the most critical registers of Onkwehonwehnéha because it reflects the Onkwehonwehnéha perspec-

tive based on observations of the natural world. When I was homeschooled, I remember hearing the elders classify everyday language as the more straightforward and ceremonial as more complex. In hindsight, I realized the first-language speakers of that time did not know our ceremonial teachings very well, as many attended boarding schools, were forbidden to practice our traditional culture, and/or were brought up as Christians.

Re-creating Relationships with Environment

In Onkwehonwehnéha, the Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwen (the words that come before all else, also known as the thanksgiving address) is among the most highly prioritized practices. The Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwen is a formal oratory practice that follows a ceremonial speech style that begins by thanking all living organisms and elements on earth and in the sky. Elements of nature are seen as relatives and acknowledged as familial relationships. This is apparent when analyzing the transitive pronominal prefixes used to describe our relationship with elements of nature, such as iethi'nisténha tsi ionhontsiá:te' (our mother the earth), iethihsothó:kon ratiwè:ras (our grandfathers the thunder beings), ehtshitewahtsì:'a enkiehkehnéhkha karáhkwa' (our elder brother the sun), and iethihsótha ahsonthenhnékha karáhkwa' (our grandmother the moon). The elements within the Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwen commonly begin with the people and continue with the earth, water, fish, berries, grasses, medicines (perennial plants), foods (the Three Sisters: corn, beans, and squash), animals, trees, birds, thunders, winds, sun, moon, stars, the four messengers, and our creator. The Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwen is recited to gather our minds before all events and recited once more before going our separate ways. Every entity in the universe deserves to feel valued. Although children are taught each element individually, it is said that expert orators can interconnect the elements, poetically demonstrating their understanding of the interconnectedness of our universe. Plant life depends on soil and air; it is also understood that our words can promote their health and happiness. Therefore, the people of nature converse with the plants, urging them to persist in their way (Mohawk & Barreiro, 2010). Through the practice of Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwen, we demonstrate our value of bringing our minds together to restore and maintain our kinship with each other and the natural world.

Environment for Healthy Learning

Imparting our knowledge to individuals of all ages goes beyond the lessons taught. We need our bodies to be healthy to ensure a lifetime of learning and sharing, and we need connected minds to continue Onkwehonwehnéha. These teachings can influence various aspects of life that Native American communities encounter regularly, such as significantly higher rates of chronic health issues and challenges related to food access (House & Webster, 2021). We have endured due to the meticulous efforts of Native farmers who have safeguarded our seeds and traditional planting knowledge for thousands of years. However, these farmers are vanishing, taking with them the rich tradition of human connection to nature. Numerous varieties of corn, beans, squash, and other crops from Native gardens are also fading away (Mohawk, 1999). The first step in retaining this agricultural knowledge is ensuring that families have access to the land and Indigenous seeds.

Access to land and Indigenous foods is critical to the livelihood of Onkwehonwehnéha knowledge, language, and intellect. Given the current state of our communities, it takes years of planning and efforts to create an environment where our people can thrive. Every effort counts and every person has a role in rebuilding a community of speakers. Re-education is needed to learn how to grow and harvest according to Indigenous practices (House & Webster, 2021). Movements around food sovereignty have highlighted the importance of having access to healthy and culturally appropriate foods, such as Indigenous foods grown from heirloom seeds, wild game, fish, and edible perennials.

Akwesasne Freedom School: Projects to Restore an Onkwehonwehnéha Ecosystem

The following section outlines three initiatives focused on restoring an Onkwehonwehnéha ecosystem, which I had the chance to participate in while working with AFS: Ionkwatakia'takéhnhen

(We are strengthening ourselves), Sha'oié:ra Taonsetewatakientéhrha'ne' (We are getting to know each other again naturally), and Otsi'náhkwakon (In the nest).

Ionkwatakia'takéhnhen (We are strengthening Ourselves)

The AFS is a Mohawk-language immersion school providing a space for learners from infancy to the eighth grade. According to White (2015), "In 1979, an unprecedented effort to revitalize the Mohawk culture and language began with the establishment of the community-based Akwesasne Freedom School, which would, in time, become a Mohawk language immersion school" (p. 5). Using the Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwen as the core of the AFS curriculum, education occurs in outdoor settings, allowing students to engage with the elements of nature (White, 2015). AFS continuously works to expand and adjust to the needs of the community.

AFS promotes the importance of speaking our languages in our natural environment and reinforces ceremonial knowledge and cultural practices. Being in a relationship with the land strengthens our understanding, which helps us better relate to the ceremonial and cultural teachings embedded within ceremonial songs, ceremonial language, culturally based stories, and the cultural practice of giving thanks. In contrast to typical public schools, a significant portion of the educational activities at the AFS occur outside in nature. These activities may include harvesting medicinal plants or traditional gardens (White, 2015). AFS seeks to reconnect with the earth through food, language, and cultural practices to promote a healthy community. AFS also seeks to validate further Indigenous knowledge and the benefits of land-based relationship-building through an Onkwehonwehnéha medium.

AFS has been and intends to continue further research to answer the question, "What are the benefits of learning Onkwehonwehnéha (original people, [Mohawk] language, and culture) in a land-based environment?" This project aims to contribute to research on the benefits of Indigenous food sovereignty and language immersion education. Recently, AFS has undergone a significant restructuring that intends to build relationships by recreating an environment that promotes daily relationship-building between families, plants, and medicines. AFS seeks to recreate a knowledge-sharing community for healthier and more sustainable ways of living in alignment with the natural world for the betterment of our people, the environment, and our language. An essential aspect of AFS's restructuring is the effort to renew and sustain the cultural values on which the school was founded.

Not long after the AFS occupied its current school location, hazardous polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) were detected in a cove on the St. Lawrence River at Raquette Point, New York, right beside the school (White, 2015). In 1983, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) officially categorized the site as a Superfund site. Regardless of the environmental contamination mentioned earlier, the AFS has operated from its current site since 1980 (White, 2015). In the spring of 2023, AFS broke ground for its long-awaited new school. It has taken AFS years of advocating and fundraising to reclaim a healthy and safe natural environment to learn, teach, and be Onkwehonwehnéha. For the first time, AFS students will have on-site access to healthy soil to plant in, wooded areas, and wetlands to forage and explore. While AFS has not yet fully secured the funding to complete the project, teachers and families look forward to all there is to learn within this space. AFS has begun transitioning to the new site by working to restore the environment to its intended state.

The new school site will serve as a domain where we can rebuild a land-based community of speakers. This project mimics nature, ensuring our children receive a more natural Onkwehonwehnéha living and learning experience. Repetition within ceremonial speech represents the value of repetition in the natural cycle. The students are taught Onkwehonwehnéha following the natural cycle of seasons. Activities related to the seasons are done yearly, and students continue to expand their knowledge by taking on increasing responsibility in the activity and ceremonial protocol. For example, during the planting season, students are taught the high language when learning traditional stories, songs, and vocabulary leading up to the planting season. When natural signs remind us that it is time to plant, students formally participate in a

ceremony to show their gratitude for our seeds and plant life. Students then participate in preparing the land and using the traditional protocol for planting the seeds. Students also learn math and science by planting and nurturing the seeds. Lessons related to planting climatically lead into ceremonial celebrations to acknowledge the green bean, then green corn, and finally harvest and the end of the seasons. Students learn new responsibilities each year to contribute to planting, harvesting, and participating in the ceremonial celebrations. Ideally, at the end of each season, students will have learned something to add to their rendition of the Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwen.

AFS recognizes how Onkwehonwehnéha has become a "school language." For example, in recent years, ceremonial language has been memorized and spoken within ceremonial contexts, yet few understand its metaphoric meaning. AFS's goal is to provide a natural, land-based learning experience so that children can apply their knowledge of the elements to their formal education on ceremonial Onkwehonwehnéha.

This formal education begins with a relationship to the land and all things from nature; despite being intentionally destroyed, relationships and knowledge-sharing have always been a part of Onkwehonwehnéha society. We are fortunate to have remnants of Onkwehonwehnéha within our collective knowledge and Indigenous ecological practices, which could improve our environmental impact.

AFS recognizes the immediate need to continue providing opportunities for traditional food education and improving how we have been seed-saving, growing, harvesting, and consuming our Indigenous foods. AFS is currently renovating the new school site to provide more space for educational opportunities around growing and harvesting Indigenous foods. For the first time, AFS will have appropriate classroom space for canning and processing foods, a butchering shop, and food and meal storage. AFS will also have temperature-controlled rooms for seed storage and appropriate seed-cleaning equipment. In addition, AFS will also have its very own automotive and shop classes.

The Akwesasne Seed Hub (ASH) is an organization that plans to help meet the school's goal of growing and harvesting enough Indigenous foods on-site to provide a year-round hot lunch program for the school's population. ASH is a community initiative to support the AFS and the Akwesasne community by providing a learning and production center emphasizing language and culture. ASH seeks to enhance an understanding of farming, harvesting, cooking, and food preservation by instructing in sustainable methods and fostering a stronger bond with our land and culture for future generations. ASH is located 151 acres (61 hectares) at the new AFS site. It is a community-driven project run by community members since 2020.

Growing, harvesting, and consuming Indigenous foods is critical to providing the proper nutrients students need to learn and thrive within our communities. To recreate our natural learning environment and provide for the school's population, AFS recognizes that we must use modern knowledge, resources, and tools that align with Onkwehonwehnéha values to help us achieve our goals. AFS maintains adaptability by recognizing the need for support, knowledge, and technologies from both the extended community and outside the community to restore Onkwehonwehnéha relationships and environments.

AFS family and staff work together to decide when outside support is needed and to what extent. We must ensure that outside support does not harm our practices and values as Onkwehón:we (Original [Mohawk] people). AFS used heavy machinery to clear the site of invasive plants and brush at the new school. However, many Indigenous and non-Indigenous earth workers have donated their time and resources by providing and planting Indigenous medicinal plants and trees. The everyday actions, continuous work, and intentional actions for the future ensure that our collective existence here on earth continues. An action that might seem as small as removing invasive plant species from Indigenous land can significantly contribute to revitalizing Indigenous food systems, which encompass all the community ties to land, water, and the plant and animal species that have supported Indigenous peoples for countless generations, as well as the connections to the land.

This project aims to unite our minds and

rebuild our relationships here. The AFS needs all the support it can get, from Indigenous people to non-Indigenous people, Onkwehonwehnéha speakers and nonspeakers alike, to teach various skills and knowledge related to Onkwehonwehnéha.

AFS intends to uphold its vision of educating children within the parameters of Onkwehonwehnéha. A common mistake that many Indigenous education systems make is separating the language and culture from the land. AFS promotes the use of Onkwehonwehnéha in domains where our language has thrived and survived since the beginning of time.

Sha'oié:ra Taonsetewatakientéhrha'ne' (We are getting to know each other again naturally)

In 2022, three ongoing issues were identified by parents and teachers at the AFS. The most pressing issue was the reciting of the Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwen. This culturally significant register has become a memorized speech, and children do not fully understand its concepts. Children were being taught the protocol and value of the Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwen. However, because they are learning the Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwen in the form of a memorized speech, the Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwen is no longer an individualized poetic expression. Many children and adults do not have the awareness gained by lived experience in nature to understand what it means to be genuinely thankful. The second issue was the inadequate use of Onkwehonwehnéha in the schoolyard, a domain that shapes our children and reinforces their learning. The third issue was the lack of family support in providing language and reinforcing values being taught in the classroom.

Friends of Akwesasne Freedom School (FOAFS)[1] is a nonprofit organization that supports the AFS's efforts and secures funding from private and public foundations to help support the AFS's increasing budget. FOAFS staff began to intentionally design our schoolyard to recreate a natural domain for our students to participate in the growing, caring for, harvesting, and year-round observation of Indigenous plants to promote relationship-building to restore meaning in Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwen. During the summer of 2022, Rob Greenfield and Earth Minded Landscapes offered a giveaway on Instagram for a Permaculture Design Certification with Era Keyes. I was awarded the scholarship and traveled from upstate New York to Asheville, North Carolina, four times throughout the summer. I designed the AFS site as my final project for my Permaculture Design Certification (PDC). Permaculture is a form of agriculture based on Indigenous knowledge for growing and harvesting food that follows natural arrangements found in natural systems (Morel, 2019). Since Haudenosaunee farmers did not plow or scrape the soil, there remained a higher level of organic matter that likely provided higher yields of corn than Euromerican farming methods (Mt. Pleasant & Burt, 2010). Therefore, permaculture is more aligned with AFS values: In environments that are less mechanized and industrialized, polycultures offer clear benefits compared to monocultures due to more effective utilization of scarce resources, greater ecosystem stability, and minimized risk (Innis, 1997; Mt. Pleasant, 2006; Vandermeer, 1989; Willey, 1979, as cited in Mt. Pleasant & Burt, 2010). With new allies, mentors, and support, I learned many new skills that I could use to help achieve our dream of rebuilding our communities. During the spring of 2023, we began planning to implement the permaculture design for the AFS site.

In the early spring of 2023, a group of Onkwehonwehnéha speakers and I set out to Hudson Valley to receive 100 plants and bare-root trees donated by Root to Heaven,[2] an organization established in late 2020 that aims to collaboratively plant one million Indigenous plants over the next five years. We understood that as a part of this project, we would speak aóskon Onkwehonwehnéha (entirely the original language) in the presence of our plants and trees. Despite often speaking Onkwehonwehnéha among the four of us who collected the plants, communicating during the 6-hour drive was a challenging and unique experience. Maintaining aóskon Onkwehonwehnéha is psycho-

[1] https://www.foafs.org
[2] https://www.roottoheaven.com

logically and cognitively draining. I had begun to get comfortable about a quarter of the way into the drive, which quickly brought on fatigue around the fourth hour. Attempting to remain in the language was an eye-opening experience for me. I pushed myself to stay true to my efforts in the hope that they would be taken seriously by others just the same. The group of Onkwehonwehnéha speakers I traveled with provided excellent support, and I was thankful to be in their presence, creating new domains for Onkwehonwehnéha.

During the next week, we arranged for groups of students from AFS and the local Adult Mohawk Immersion class to come help plant the trees. To facilitate these groups, I had to learn new vocabulary in advance, such as the names of the trees and plants and the vocabulary necessary for describing how to find the contour lines across the land. I felt unprepared and incapable as I stumbled through, trying to express new knowledge with new vocabulary. Teachers and students were understanding and supportive, providing me with the specialized vocabulary needed, examples of how to direct the children, and correcting grammar when necessary.

The next task was to build fencing to protect the plants, mulch the base of the trees, and plant cover crops between plants. While working the land, the people are encouraged to speak aóskon Onkwehonwehnéha. With the support of our first language speakers and allies with knowledge and resources, AFS was able to rebuild relationships in Onkwehonwehnéha with the natural world. The students planted 50 Orà:se (elderberry trees) and over 500,000 cover crop seeds (alfalfa, peas, red clover, white clover, and wheat) coated in mycelium while singing traditional seed songs. Coating cover crop seeds in mycelium effectively enhances soil health and contributes to environmental sustainability and crop productivity. The following spring, families of the schoolchildren were required to participate in planting over 2,000 Indigenous fruit and medicinal trees, and we planted 30,000 cover crop seeds on soil exposed due to construction. This was important as we worked to protect and build our soil for future gardens and Indigenous plants. This experience helped students, families, and teachers bond with our food by investing their time, physical effort, and mental effort into being mindful of what was said in front of the plants, hoping that they would one day sustain us.

Parental and familial participation is an ongoing challenge; However, families were required to participate in the tree planting, but not all attended, and some children were not dressed appropriately for the weather. As a result, some staff had concerns about the children planting in the rain, and the event was cut short. To transition our families back into a relationship with the natural world, we recognize the need for the appropriate outdoor gear and equipment, and more importantly, as adults, we must challenge our learned fears and beliefs and demonstrate our values by sacrificing our comfort to be more immersed with nature. AFS is working to transition families into the school by restructuring the language nest "Otsi'náhkwakon" (In the nest).

Otsi'náhkwakon

During the second year of a restructuring of the AFS, the AFS Language Nest was one of the significant changes implemented through Ionkwatakia'takéhnhen and Sha'oié:ra Taonsetewatakientéhrha'ne'. Otsi'náhkwakon was restructured to restore Onkwehonwehnéha familial relationships between generations and the natural world.

In the fall of 2023, the AFS Language Nest was renamed Otsi'náhkwakon. Otsi'náhkwakon is a full-time, two-year, intensive adult language immersion program that allows children to learn alongside their caregivers. Otsi'náhkwakon works to provide an Onkwehonwehnéha medium to strengthen the family's language proficiency through interactive family-to-child language learning and land-based parent language lessons on the morphology of Onkwehonwehnéha.

The overall objective of this project is to rebuild multigenerational speaking relationships between children, AFS families, first-language speakers, second-language speakers, nonspeakers with cultural knowledge, community programs and schools, and allies throughout and beyond Rotinonhsión:ni (People of the Longhouse) communities. Otsi'náhkwakon is also an opportunity to strengthen the school's foundation and overall succession planning by preparing future students, parents, and teachers of Onkwehonwehnéha speakers.

The outcome of Otsi'náhkwakon is increased parent and guardian language use. Parents are the first teachers, and by offering new parents the opportunity to learn along with their babies, we are creating an environment that supports and encourages ongoing language development. The indicator for this will be oral proficiency interview (OPI) testing for parents at the beginning and end of each year.

Before 2022, the Language Nest operated more like a Kanien'kéha (Mohawk language) daycare with some incorporation of cultural practices, such as the Ohén:ton Karihwátehkwen (the thanksgiving address) at the start and end of each day, and some education in the cycle of ceremonies. At the beginning of the 2022 school year, the Language Nest was restructured to involve parents and their infants and toddlers so that land-based language learning took place as a family unit and became a family practice. At that time, the program took place twice a week with activity days a couple of times a month. Partway through the winter of 2022, the language nest hired an Elder and first-language speaker who has raised another generation of first-language speakers in her own family and has become an invaluable resource to the Nest, as second-language speakers and learners have access to a first-language speaker during school hours.

In 2022, the nest initiated a one-year pilot program to introduce multigenerational language transference in a formal learning environment and gain insight into the school and community's needs. Applications were created, and a call-out was issued to the community for caregivers with children ages 0–6 years who were willing to commit to 4 days a week, from 9 am to 3 pm, to Otsi'náhkwakon. Otsi'náhkwakon follows the AFS calendar, beginning in early August and ending in late June, with five-week sessions and a one-week break in between. Due to a lack of funding, participants of Otsi'náhkwakon are not funded for being present. Despite not being funded, participants are still expected to be present and are allowed only 10 consecutive absences.

In 2023, the first two-year cohort began, consisting of seven families. At that time Otsi'náhkwakon was also open to first-language speakers and second-language learners from the outside community to drop in. Daily lessons begin with smudging, a ceremonial practice of cleansing ourselves and our surroundings by burning medicinal plants. During sit-down circle time, we gather our minds by reciting the Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwen and end circle time by reviewing the phonetic sound chart and singing. Lessons integrating food, cooking, and eating terms happen during snack time and lunch. Teacher aids lead an outdoor lesson and free play while parents are taught a morphology lesson. During the children's afternoon nap, caregivers continue their grammar, morphology, and conversational language lessons.

The cohort Otsi'náhkwakon staff included a language Nest manager, a first language mentor, a morphologist, and two child-care assistants. Staff began by creating a curriculum calendar to implement with the incoming and continuing group of parent-students and their babies; the calendar will include cultural, land-based, and age-appropriate lessons and activities that follow the Cycle of Ceremonies. The language Nest manager and mentor work closely with the morphologist to build a comprehensive educational curriculum so that parents are building their knowledge in an Onkwehonwehnéha medium that is relevant to their lives, such as words for the home, commands and responses for parents and children, and upcoming ceremonial terms. Participants are required to document words in a digital lexicon. Otsi'náhkwakon also follows a morphology-based curriculum provided by Á:se Tsi Tewá:ton, a local two-year adult immersion program. This collaboration also includes sharing activities and teaching methods and connecting speakers and learners in nature.

Throughout the first year, Otsi'náhkwakon faced many challenges. One major obstacle was student dropouts due to insufficient funding. Of the six adult students who began at the start of the year, only two adults and three children (along with a teacher's child and the class mentor's grandchild) remained throughout the year. One of the two adult students gave birth to her third baby at the end of the first year and quickly returned for the second year. After completing nine curriculum units in the first year, the two adult students increased their proficiency by two levels. After the first year in the Nest, the eldest child could recite

the Ohèn:ton Karihwatéhkwen and understand and speak well enough to move into the school.

In 2024, Otsi'náhkwakon took in six additional adult students, nine nursery-aged children, and 21 students (including both first—and second-year students) within the Nest. The most significant change in the second-year program was an increased effort to spend time outdoors. Otsi'náhkwakon began introducing year-round outdoor hammock napping for babies and toddlers to build a trusting relationship with nature and promote overall wellness. Otsi'náhkwakon also removed all the tables and chairs from the classroom and increased contact hours to 30 hours per week.

To solidify the second-year students' morphological understanding and increase their confidence and proficiency, second-year students must teach the first nine units to the year-one adult students. Encouraging learners to take on the role of teaching promotes shared communal responsibility. These efforts were made intentionally so our children will have better support systems by creating a solid foundation for family and home language. Additionally, children who enter the school with a basic understanding of the language have an easier time adjusting to daily school life than those who come into AFS having never heard the language and/or spending much time outdoors. Parents who attend the program will strengthen their Onkwehonwehnéha skills enough to enter the school as parents or even Teacher Apprentices and Teachers after two years.

Moving forward, this will be a multiyear project that will involve a network of communities to accomplish recreating the natural environment of the new school site: "We all have to have as a goal that we should see nature restored" (John Mohawk, as quoted in Mohawk & Barreiro, 2010, p. 276). In this space, students and teachers can build relationships throughout the year as they harvest, eat, play, heal, and learn. We anticipate that providing our families an opportunity to restore our natural environment will reinforce their formal education and improve their likelihood of using Onkwehonwehnéha to show their respect for their environment. This will contribute to our community's mental, spiritual, and physical wellness.

Conclusion

Bringing together a community of people who value Indigenous ecological knowledge is directly linked to revitalizing Indigenous language and culturally based epistemology. Revitalizing natural and more sustainable ways of living in alignment with the earth allows for bettering our people, the environment, and our language. Indigenous communities interested in revitalizing Indigenous food systems, languages, and culture are inherently interested in revitalizing Indigenous epistemology. Indigenous people can use the school day or workday by working together to recreate a natural learning environment. Indigenous education for Indigenous people should go beyond the confined walls of Western educational institutions (Garcia & Shirley, 2012). Garcia and Shirley (2012) promote the perspective of Indigenous schools being sacred places where Indigenous knowledge is respected and viewed as an opportunity to revitalize Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies in a contemporary setting. They state that traditional Indigenous wisdom would shape and determine our understanding of ourselves and our communities concerning the complexities of Western education in schools (Garcia & Shirley, 2012). However, while working on these projects, I realized that recreating a natural learning environment within the confines of a school is difficult as it continuously threatens deeply imposed and embedded beliefs around education.

To indigenize Western systems requires accountability for parents, teachers, administration, funders, and policymakers to continuously reflect, challenge, and change their habits and beliefs. I believe AFS will continue to put forth effort in rebuilding our environment to align with Onkwehòn:we values. This reflective essay shares the story of how one community of Indigenous people is working together to reverse the effects of genocide.

To rebuild healthy Indigenous communities, we must challenge ourselves to reconnect people and the earth by cultivating our traditional foods, speaking our Indigenous languages, and practicing our traditional ceremonies to express our gratitude. AFS is committed to continuously growing this project through everyday actions toward building

Onkwehonwehnéha relationships in the natural environment. While working at AFS, my vision has broadened with the realization that limiting ourselves through factions that divide our people, such as nationhood, communities, dialectical differences, religious beliefs, and imposed social structures, such as Western institutional structures, is not sustainable. This experience has reminded me of the importance of promoting familial roles and responsibilities to rebuild the community. To heal our language, land, and people, I must commit to a lifetime of learning that encourages myself and others to work together as families to support our holistic health and wellness.

We must also continue to nourish our familial relationships with creation, beginning with our Indigenous nurturing of our medicinal plants, protecting our Indigenous seeds, and learning skills to care for each other and our environment. One of the biggest challenges of this project was accepting that not everyone shares this vision, and some may not be ready to fully commit to the challenges of participating in an Onkwehonwehnéha environment. The burnout I experienced while working on this project is teaching me the importance of prioritizing my energy and shifting my focus from proposing systemic change to focusing on setting an example for how families can make conscious everyday efforts to improve their relationships with each other and the natural world. Amid the exhaustion, my vision to fully experience and share the beauty of our ancestral knowledge by living in a relationship with our universe has been strengthened. 

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