

Interview

In conversation with Kayla Guyett: *Since Time Immemorial* curriculum—tribal language education in Washington state

KAYLA GUYETT AND CHRISTINA MITMA MOMONO

Kayla Guyett, of the Jicarilla Apache Tribe, presented with Dr. Laura Lynn at the WAESOL 2022 Conference on [Since Time Immemorial: Tribal Sovereignty](#) in Washington State. This curriculum was developed in collaboration with the federally recognized Tribes of Washington to teach about tribal history, culture, treaty rights, contemporary tribal and state government institutions and relations, and the contribution of Indian Nations to the state of Washington. The curriculum is required teaching in all Washington state schools (RCW 28A.320.170). Kayla is the Tribal Language Liaison for the Office of Native American Education at the Washington state Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI). She works to implement the curriculum, provides teacher training, and assists in educating others on tribal languages, Tribes, and how communities are guests on indigenous lands. In her position, she also works with Washington state schools and assists with tribal language learning programs.

Christina Mitma Momono, WAESOL's current Past President, was fortunate to interview Kayla and learn more about her role and vital work. Christina Mitma Momono is of the Inca/Quechua peoples of South America and knows the sacredness of indigenous recognition. The following is an excerpt of their recorded conversation.

CMM: How long has *Since Time Immemorial* tribal sovereignty curriculum been implemented or available for use? How was it established?

KG: *Since Time Immemorial* tribal sovereignty curriculum has been available on the website since 2015. However, teaching and understanding tribal sovereignty and perspective has been here since time immemorial, and there have been years and years of work and legislative dedication as Tribes pushed and persuaded it to be in the public schools. We have been pushing really hard to make sure materials are out there. We are making sure it's translated into Spanish right now. Our most recent legislative ask is ensuring that we have a way to track what implementation looks like at the districts. It is important for us to understand the details.

CMM: What is one of your favorite lessons in the *Since Time Immemorial* curriculum?

KG: The Elementary Pathway Lessons. They are a conglomerate; my favorite is the storytelling unit. It really touches on the importance of histories and stories for our

tribal peoples (see Image 1). I love how our students can relate to and learn from those traditions and oral histories. There are many teachings built into them. I love how students are able to see what they want to see in the learning and the teaching and how it affects them.

CMM: Can you tell us about tribal language learning in Washington state?

KG: There has been a history of OSPI supporting tribal languages in the classrooms. It is important to remember that tribal language learning and oral traditions, things that are about tribal sovereignty, or tribal ways, have been happening since time immemorial. We [at OSPI] are just kind of here as a state agency to help that along. We have approximately 34 districts in Washington state who are engaging with and working in tribal language learning at some level. It's really just important to know that tribal language learning in a classroom can't happen without tribal consultation and support from the tribe. We always want to ensure that the tribe approves of the plan for language, we want to support them, and be conscious of giving back to the tribe, assisting the tribes with their



they're teaching, but in this instance, they may be learning the information for the first time. They may be learning about tribal sovereignty and about Washington state's 29 federally recognized Tribes (see Figure 1) for the first time. It is also important to understand that the students and parents may be unfamiliar with this as well; it is likely their first time experiencing this.

Additionally, for tribal language learning—I cannot harp on this enough—it cannot happen without the Tribe. It should not happen without their approval, support, and without collaboration and consultation. Tribal language and culture cannot be separated. Tribal language and culture are sacred. It's not just about making sure they're okay with it, but really walking a fine line of what is appropriate for each partnership.

Image 1: Kayla Guyett, sharing language and culture with students

needs. A lot of our public-school districts partner and work closely with our tribes to offer after-school programs and elementary language learning. Also, there are quite a few credit-earning world language classes at the high school level. Tribal language can meet the world language graduation requirement. Tribal Language Learning is happening throughout Washington state, which is very cool.

CMM: What do you want educators to be mindful of when talking about the Time Immemorial curriculum or tribal language learning education?

KG: One of the things I always want to prepare educators for when they start using the *Since Time Immemorial* curriculum is being transparent about not knowing elements of the curriculum. It is not something we were taught in school. Most of the time, many of us went through a public school system, and tribal sovereignty and tribal history were not talked about or discussed. It was really swept under the rug, or we were given a skewed version of it.

Also, it is important for educators to be open and give themselves grace. This is all new learning. Educators usually go into a classroom and know what

CMM: How many certified tribal educators are there in Washington state? What are the challenges and rewards of being a tribal educator?

KG: There are 1,587 Native educators in Washington state who hold a teaching certification. There are 88 First Peoples certified educators. First Peoples educators are educators that teach tribal language, culture and oral traditions, and they must have tribal approval before they receive this certification from the state. The biggest challenge for tribal language is, we often just don't have enough teachers. I always tell people, I can have an unlimited budget, but I cannot create people to teach. It takes years and dedication to be able to learn and then teach tribal languages.

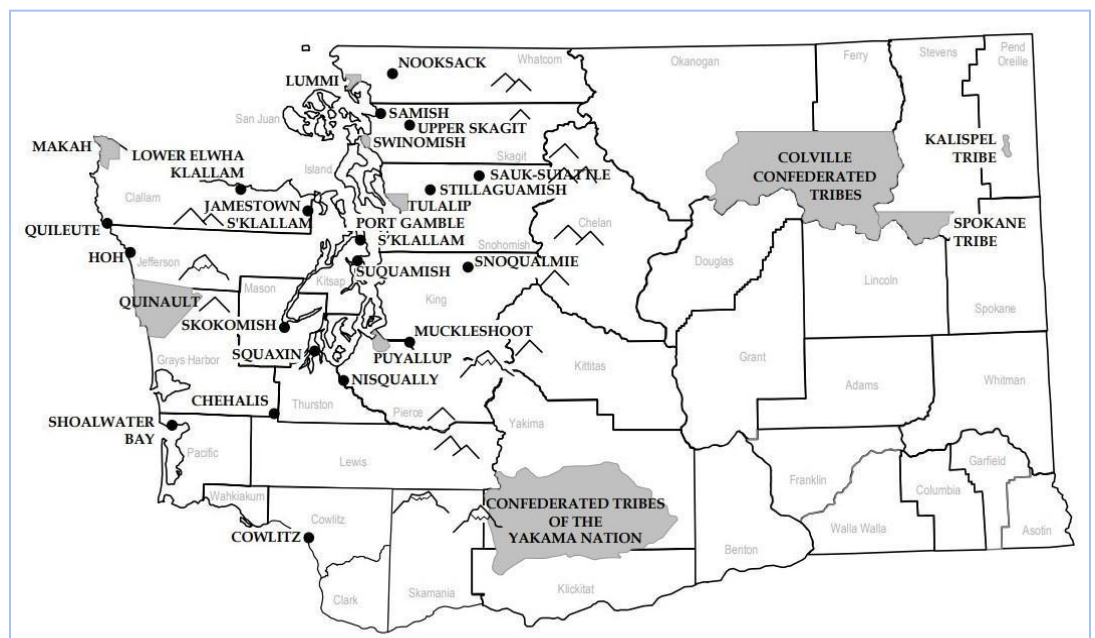


Figure 1: Washington state tribal map from OSPI

One of the biggest challenges that we have is that a lot of these languages were taken, they were removed, stripped away from people. Sometimes languages weren't passed down for fear of retaliation. A lot of tribal languages are currently in this mad dash to make sure that they can keep as many of the resources as current as possible, and record elders. We are trying to make sure that the last fluent speakers of tribal languages' teachings can be preserved. It's a lot to encompass.

I probably won't see this come to fruition in my work lifetime. Our future is likely in the kids who are in fourth and fifth grade right now that can go through the system. They will likely be our future teachers for generations to come, but we will continue to make small steps and build foundations for the work to continue. One of the most fulfilling parts of teaching language and culture is just being able to give back to your community. Our Native students need to be able to see Native teachers in these roles so they know there is a place for them when they leave school.

Another big challenge that we've been working on centers social emotional learning and development and creating space for healing the generational trauma our peoples carry as a result of educational practices. Our students, our parents, our grandparents, our aunties and uncles feel so disconnected from the system that having Native educators and administrators and teachers really helps bring them back into learning. This allows them opportunities to collaborate in our communities. It helps

our Native students and communities succeed together. This is hard work, and the reconnection comes from the hearts of our people, not of the systems. No one does it for the money, that's for sure. Yeah. [She laughs.]

CMM: Would you like to share a case study or highlight a few case studies and their impact?

KG: I have two that I just love to share. One is a legacy program—the partnership between Port Angeles School District and Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe. Lower Elwha Klallam has a strong tribal language program (see Image 2). The very First Peoples educators ever certified came from Lower Elwha. They've been rolling up their sleeves for this. They are a really great example of offering tribal language as a world language credit at the high school. Not only do tribal students take the classes, but other non-tribal students take the class as well. They have a diverse group. The class is open for everyone. The transcending existence of language has done a lot to repair tension between native and non-native communities in this area. When we talk about natural resources, the generation who has learned the tribal language helps to articulate the tribal perspectives—even though the tribal perspectives have been around since time immemorial—it allows for greater understanding. If you're learning language, history and culture go with that, widening depth and cross-cultural competence. Beyond this great accomplishment, the program has also had students graduate through their high school courses and who have now become language teachers. I think there are three students right now who have graduated and have gone into the language program and are now teaching at middle and high schools. So, it's really cool to see the fruition of that, see it come to life.

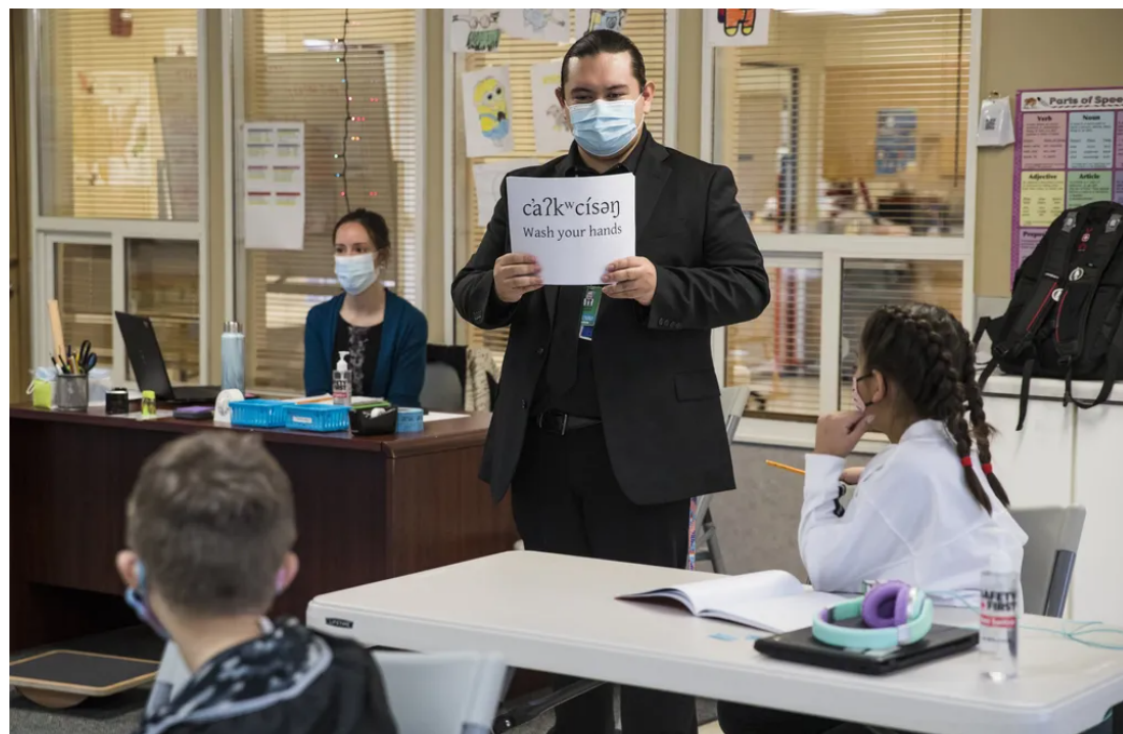


Image 2: Mr. Arakawa teaching the language of the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe; photo by Amanda Snyder / The Seattle Times

Another case study to highlight is between the Snoqualmie Tribe and the Lake Washington School District. We have a large population of Urban Indians here in Washington state, especially around the

Sound. Urban Indians are defined as people who were moved from their lands or Tribes due to different removal or relocation acts imposed on them during different eras throughout American history.

We have a large population in the Seattle area that come from Tribes outside of Washington state. Many are not physically connected to their reservation; many are not able to return to their tribal lands and some have never been there at all. With this in mind, some students have a really hard time grappling with self-identity. Part of this is due to the lack of connection to their land, language, and families. Lake Washington and the Snoqualmie Tribe have done a really good job of bringing in those families, those urban Native youth, and having them lead the learning. The Snoqualmie Tribe approved funds for students to talk about or learn their own language. The program happens in an after-school setting and allows the students to learn and make progress in their own language learning. Students bring in their family and they work together to research and learn their own language. The facilitators from Lake Washington help guide them by presenting words in English that they can look up in their own languages, for a variety of topics such as *greetings, drum making, plants, colors, and emotions*. The students look up the words in their tribal language resources and later share out the language they've learned as a whole group. It can be really scary to learn a new language and all of these kids are totally just embracing their learning.

It's great that it's generational, intergenerational. The kids aren't embarrassed or anxious about sharing the words they've learned, and seeing parents and grandparents also engage is profound. It was really, really fun to go and see the work they've been doing.

CMM: Oh, that's beautiful. I love that those programs exist and are impactful. One more question for you today. Why is it important for people to allow space and time for tribal languages?

KG: I would say it's not just important to allow people to make space, I would say it's essential for people to make

the space and time for tribal languages. Once again, when we think about tribal languages, it's not like we lost these languages. It's not like one day we all woke up and decided not to speak the language. It's not like we suddenly forgot how to speak them. The languages were forcibly taken. They were removed, and people were punished for speaking them. A big stance of mine is that it's my duty, it's what I work for as an educator that space needs to be carved out for tribal languages to exist in our education systems today. Language should be allowed to come back in the very same system where it was torn away. It should be allowed to thrive where we have all this trauma, where English only and English first programs and curriculum were forced upon tribes. It's my job to make sure that everything that we see in English should also be seen in the teachings of tribal language.

A lot of times I like to remind districts that even if you have a tribal language class in your school or an after-school program, it never stays in that classroom or with that group of students. It always starts to seep out into the school community. If done right, it should never alienate any group of people. It was always meant to be sort of community learning because we're all in this together. I always like to remind folks who think or might say "it's not my language", "I don't know my language", or "I don't want to learn the language from here" that we need to expand from these viewpoints and grow. Traditionally, wherever you went, it was your job to learn that language. That was a skill that you had to have to survive. It's really important now that we recognize that we are on the lands of a specific tribe, where they have a specific language. We should be open and engage in this specific language because it really draws that connection and that relationship to the land and its culture and history and people. It just makes so much more sense when we learn the language of the land that we are on.

CMM: Yeah, it's much richer. Great. Thank you. I give with that perspective 100%. Thanks again for sharing your knowledge and for doing all you do.

KG: *haʔł kʷ(i) adsəslabɔbut*—Watch over yourself well.

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