



Indigenous Storywork and Literacy in Indigenous Education

August 17, 2026

A presentation of Karen J. Elliott's dissertation

Exploring culturally grounded literacy teaching with
Indigenous students, family, and communities



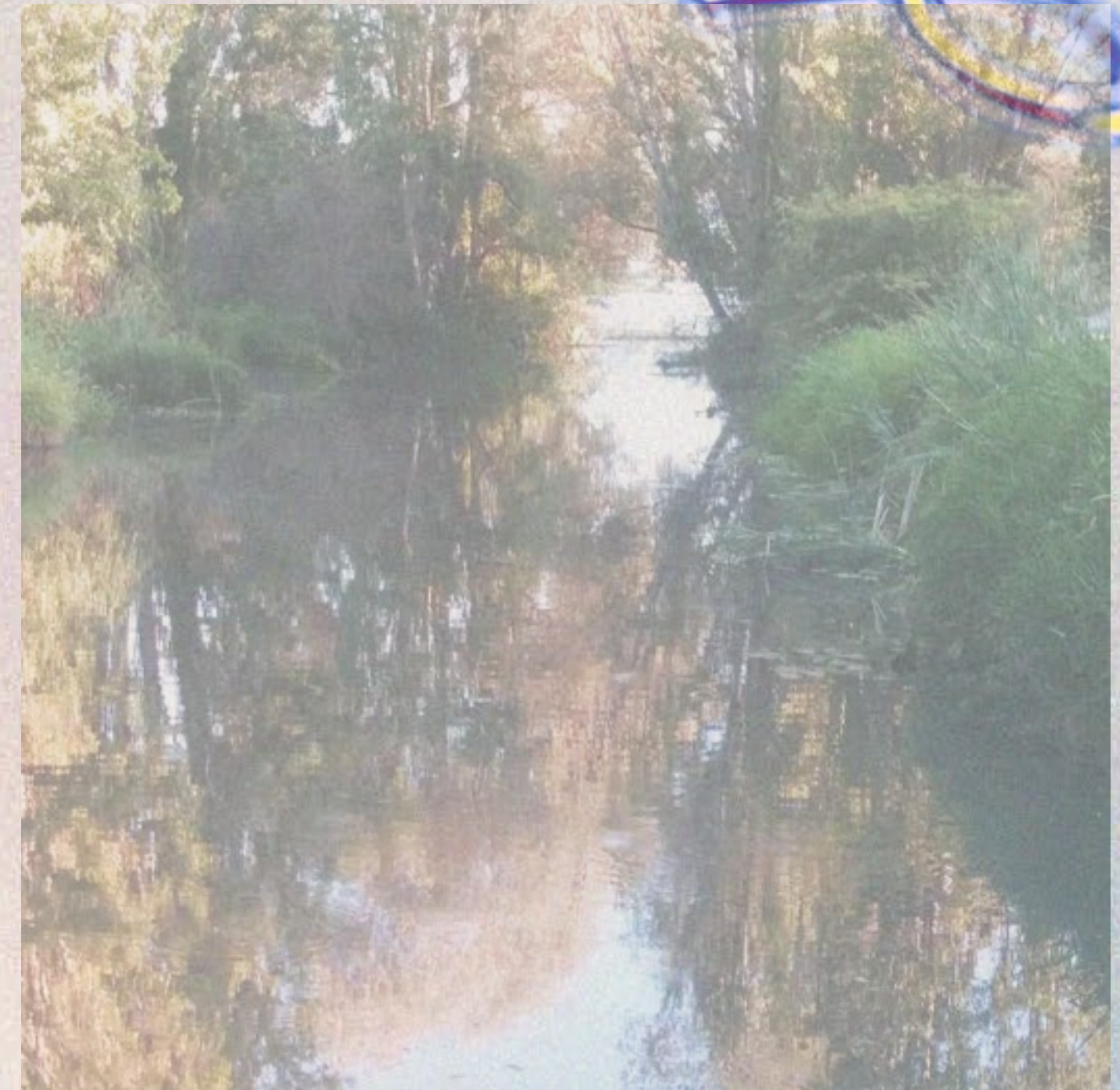
Land Acknowledgment

UW Tacoma: Puyallup People

Muchleshoot Cohort: Muchleshoot People

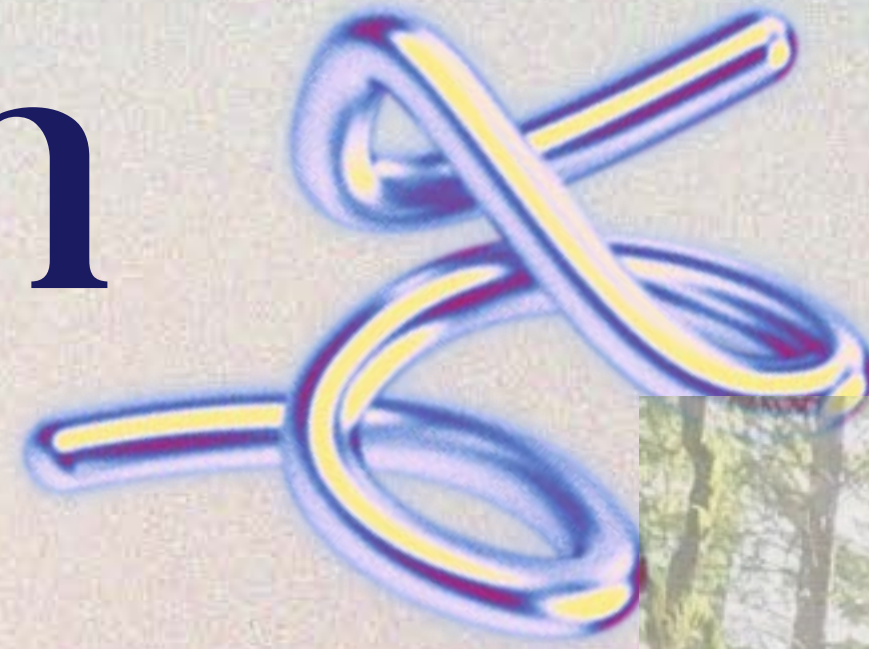
Nisqually Head Start: Nisqually People

I also acknowledge my own tribal nations,
the Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida
Indian Tribes of Alaska



Photograph by Karen Elliott, 2026

Introduction



Karen Elliott — Saxoon

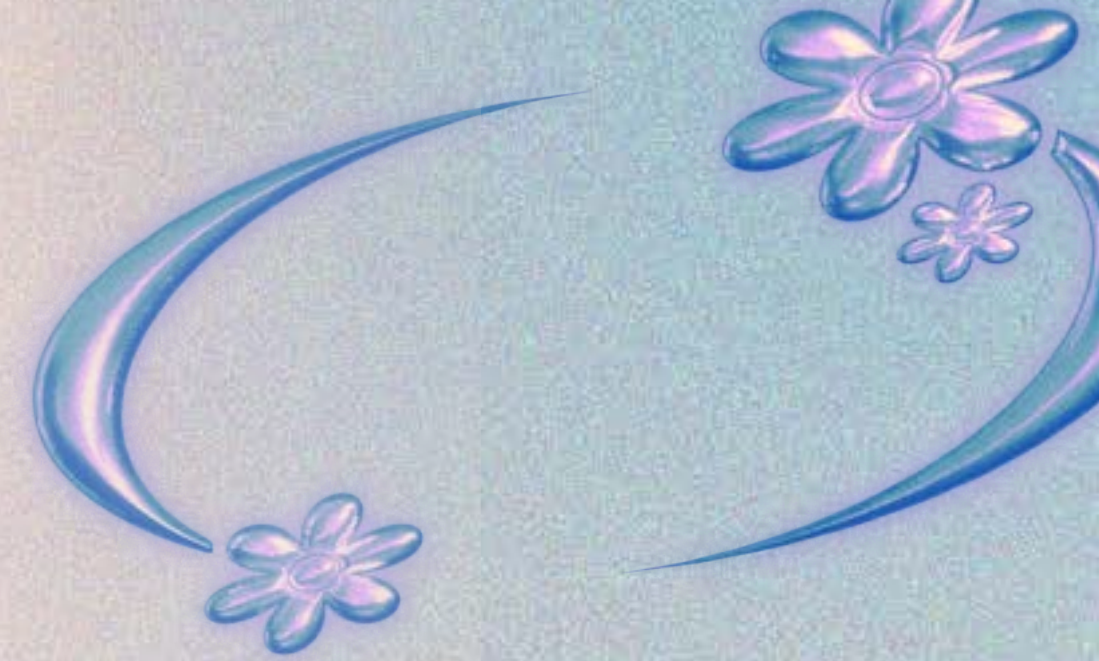
Indigenous Literacy: Storytelling, Language, and Education

- Tlingit and child of Haida people
- Enrolled citizen, Tlingit & Haida Tribes of Alaska
- Unkitawa Academic Advisor
- Title VI Indian Education Specialist
- Early Head Start Family Services Coordinator
- B.A. American Indian Studies, University of Washington, 2020
- M.Ed. Education Policy, University of Washington, 2021
- Ed.D. Indigenous-Centered Educational Leadership



Committee Review:

I did not walk this journey alone



**MICHELLE
MONTGOMERY, PHD**

Haliwa Saponi/Eastern Band Cherokee



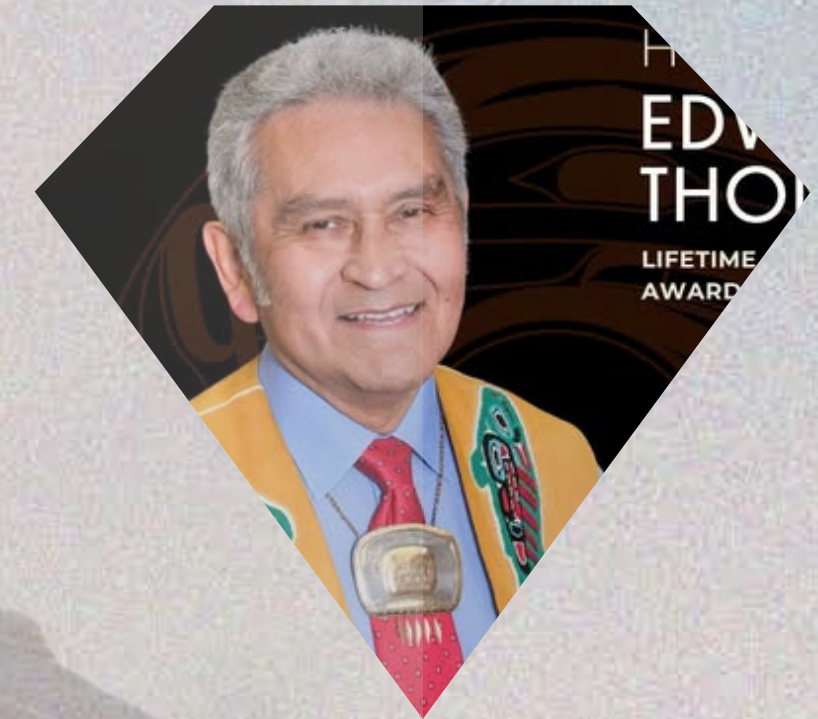
**DAWN HARDISON-
STEVENS, PHD**

**Omushkeg Cree-Metis, Ojibway,
Cowlitz, Steilacoom**



DIAN MIILLION, PHD

Tanana Athabascan



**EDWARD THOMAS,
HONORARY DOCTOR**

**Raven Moiety of the Tlingit tribe,
Sukteeneidí (Dog Salmon) Clan**

I did not walk this journey alone

My Family

Fred Lauth Sr. & Marian Lauth — Parents
Carol Lauth Anderson & Fred Lauth Jr. — Siblings
Beth • Reese • Karim • Emad — Children
Juan — Son-in-law
Alonso • Athena — Grandchildren



Photograph by Karen Elliott, 2026



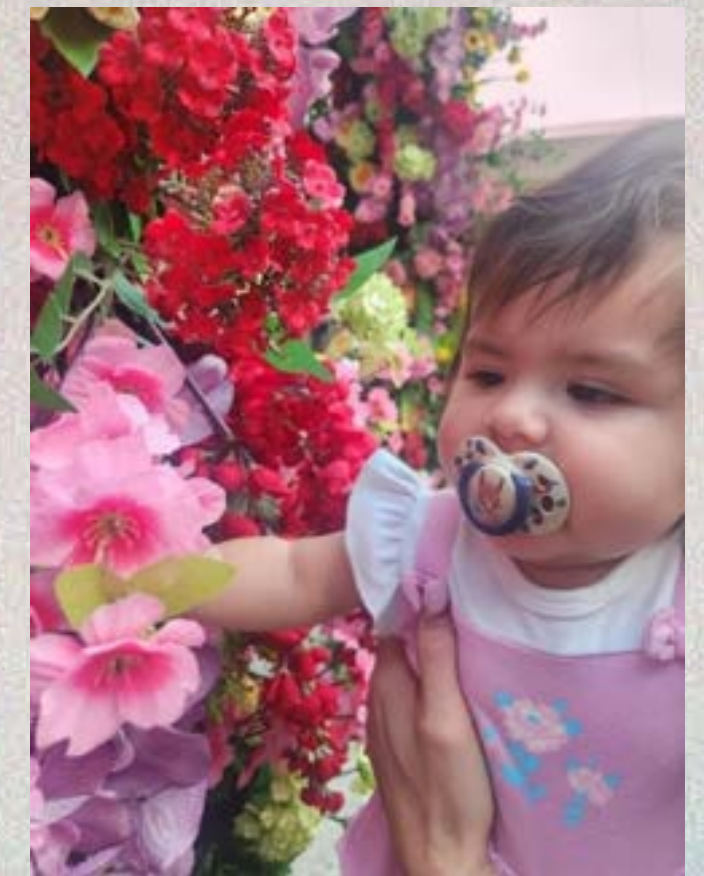
Photograph by Karen Elliott, 2026



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I did not walk this journey alone

My Academic Family
Muckleshoot Collage
UW Tacoma
Muckleshoot Cohort
Professors, mentors & community



I carry their teachings with me.

MY MENTORS • MY ANCESTORS • MY TEACHERS



My Parents

Fred Lauth Sr. • Marian Lauth

My Mentors & Teachers

Norma Jean & Francis Dunne

Sadutes & Jan Peele

Ed and Cathy Thomas



My Ancestors

Esther Shea

Adeline Garcia

Grandma Audry Rowan Peratrobich

náanaa Olive Ross

Why This Study Matters

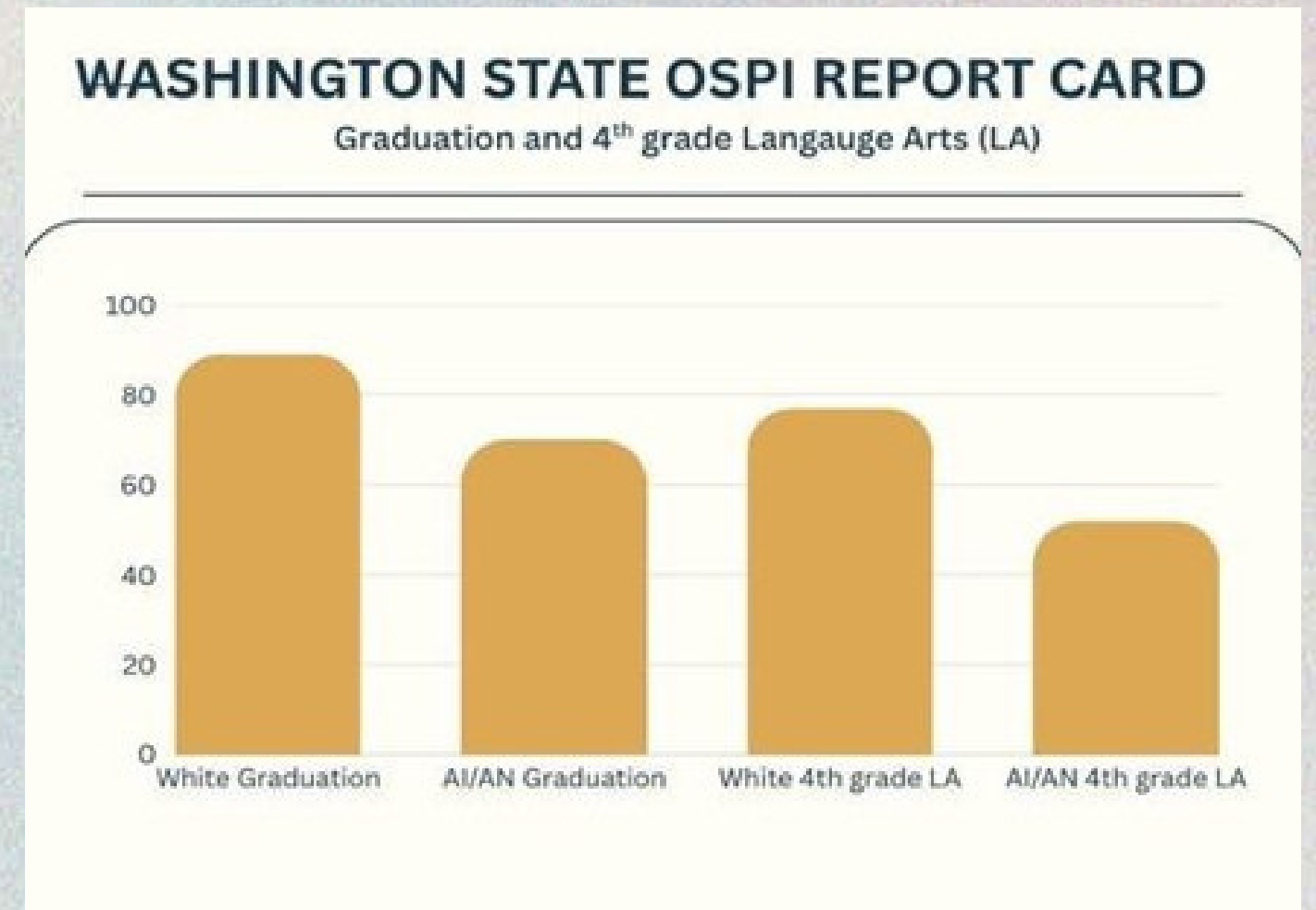
- Indigenous students continue to experience literacy and graduation disparities.
- Western literacy models can overlook Indigenous ways of knowing.
- Storytelling, Indigenous language, land, and relationships are literacy resources.
- Culturally grounded literacy can strengthen academic learning, identity, and belonging.

Statewide Content

Washington 2023–24: American Indian/Alaska Native students had a 69.9% graduation rate compared with 89.1% for White students.

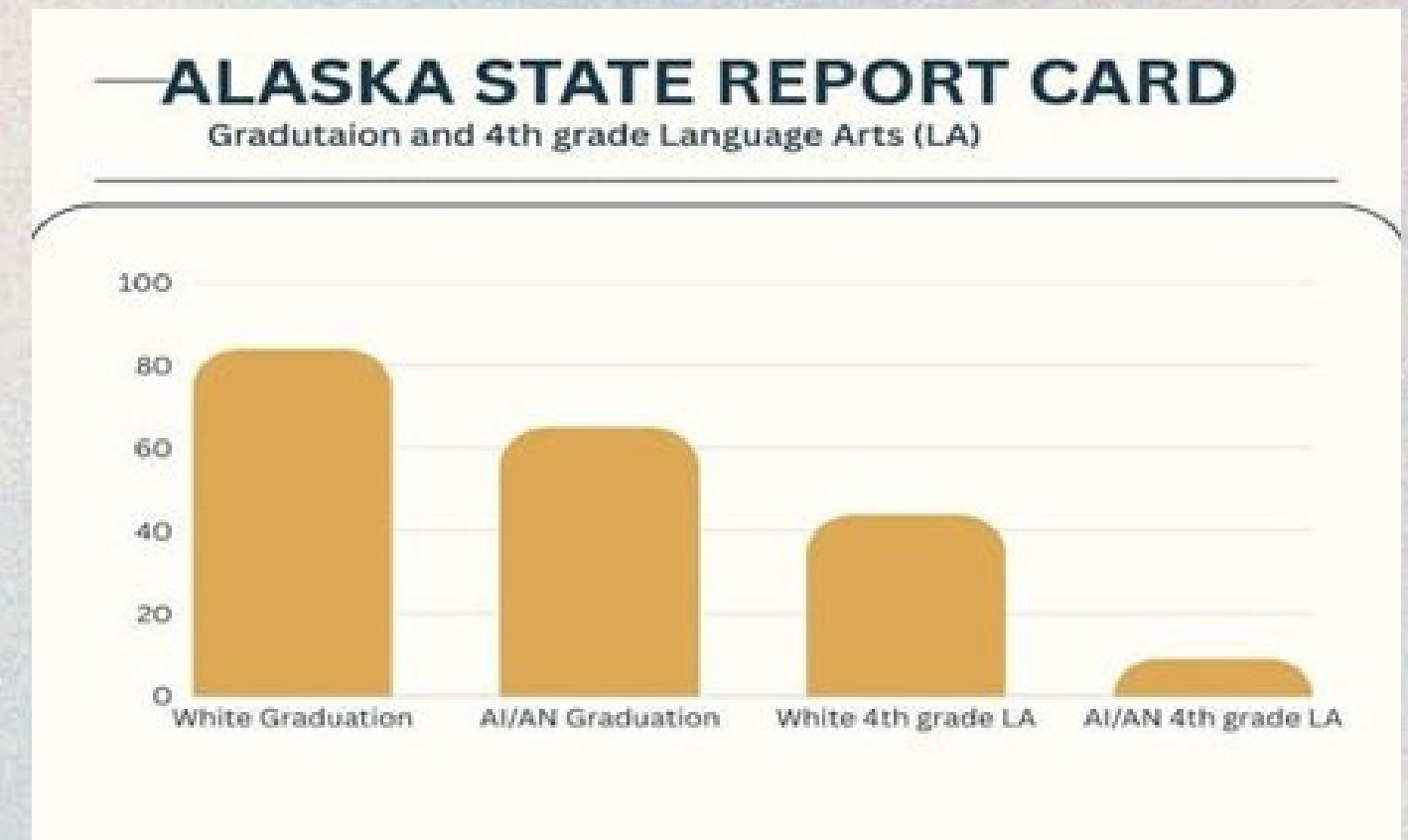
Grade 4 Language Arts proficiency: 52.5% for Native students compared with 77.2% for White students.

These disparities create an urgent need to examine culturally grounded approaches to literacy.



Statewide Content

- 32.95% of Alaska 4th graders were Advanced/Proficient in ELA.
- 67.05% were Approaching Proficient/Needs Support.
- For Alaska Native/American Indian students, only 10.56% were Advanced/Proficient.



Lititure Review

- Land Is Literacy
- Potlatch as Pedagogy
- Language and culture as teaching tools
- History and Boarding School Impact Curriculum
- Teacher Cultural Competency

Archibald (2008)

Absolon (2022)

Brayboy (2018)

Brown (1991)

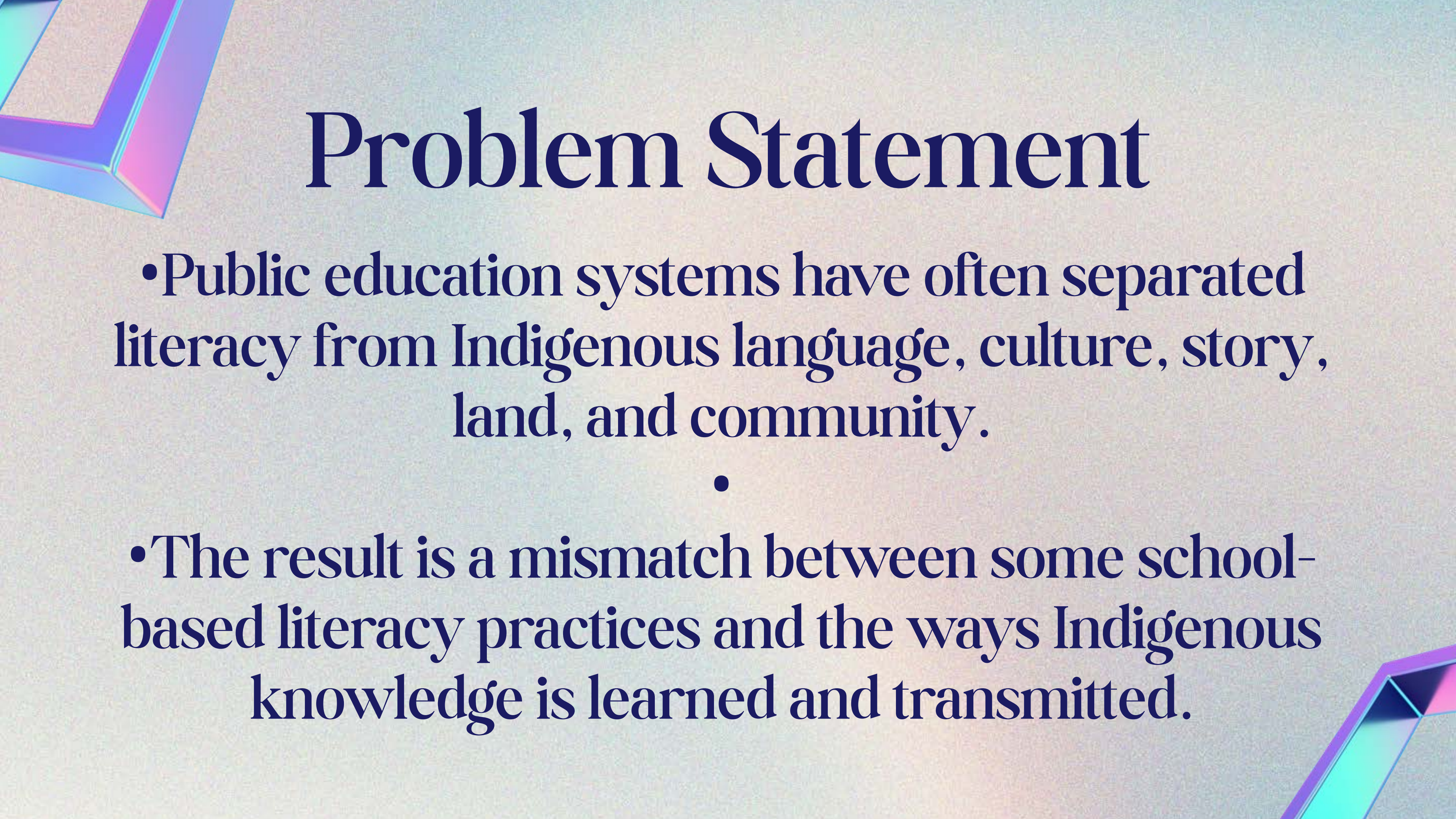
Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer (1987).

Davidson and Davidson (2018)

Reyhner and Eder (2017)

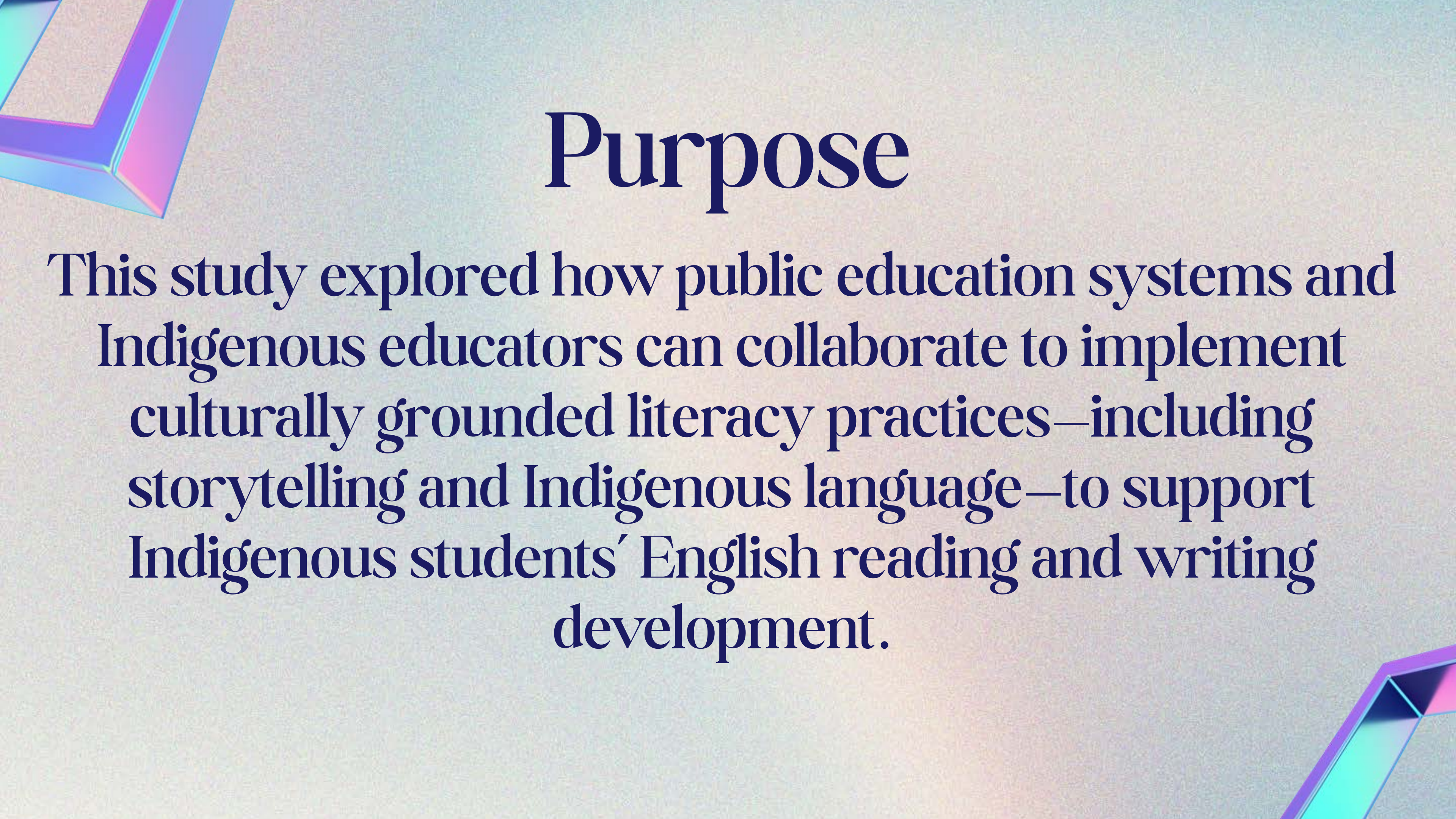
Tuck, E., & McKenzie (2014)

Worl (1998)

The slide features decorative geometric shapes in the corners. The top-left corner has a cluster of overlapping triangles in shades of blue, purple, and pink. The bottom-right corner has a similar cluster of overlapping triangles in shades of blue, purple, and pink. The background is a solid light blue.

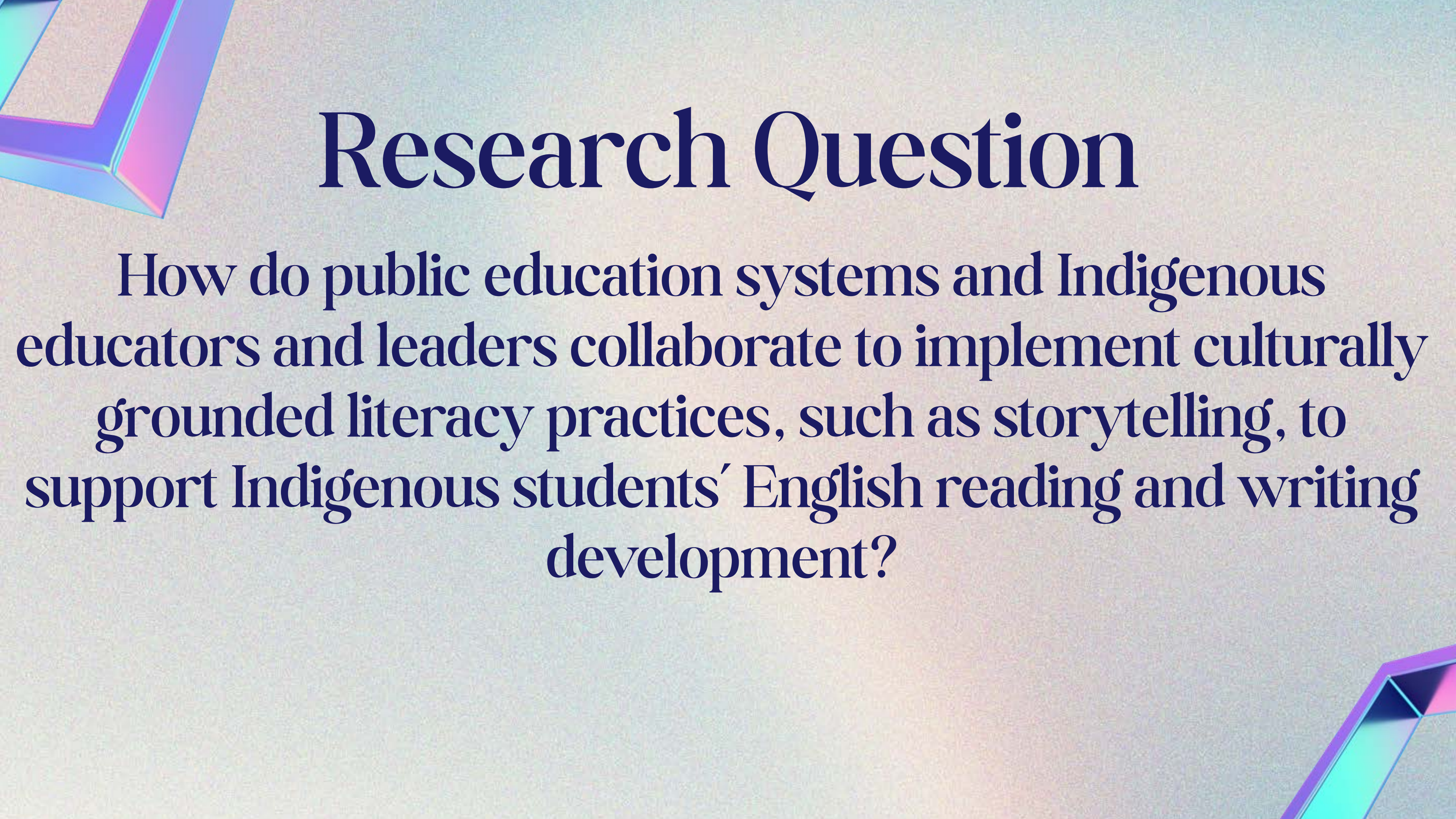
Problem Statement

- Public education systems have often separated literacy from Indigenous language, culture, story, land, and community.
-
- The result is a mismatch between some school-based literacy practices and the ways Indigenous knowledge is learned and transmitted.

The slide features a light blue background with a subtle grid pattern. In the top-left and bottom-right corners, there are decorative geometric shapes composed of overlapping triangles in shades of purple, blue, and pink. The word "Purpose" is centered in a large, dark blue serif font.

Purpose

This study explored how public education systems and Indigenous educators can collaborate to implement culturally grounded literacy practices—including storytelling and Indigenous language—to support Indigenous students' English reading and writing development.

The slide features a light blue background with a subtle grid pattern. In the top-left and bottom-right corners, there are decorative geometric shapes composed of overlapping triangles in shades of blue, purple, and pink. The main title, 'Research Question', is centered at the top in a large, dark blue serif font.

Research Question

How do public education systems and Indigenous educators and leaders collaborate to implement culturally grounded literacy practices, such as storytelling, to support Indigenous students' English reading and writing development?

Conceptual Framework

AT.00W



INDIGENOUS STORYWORK



Relational Accountability • TribalCrit • Two-Eyed Seeing •
Kaandossiwin



Indigenous Language + Story + Land + Culture +
Relationships



Literacy, Identity, Belonging, and Educational Sovereignty

Methodology & Theoretical Framework

Storywork
methodology
(Archibald)

at.oow theoretical
framework (Worl)

Interviews and
classroom
observations

Relational accountability
and the four Rs:
Respect, Relevance,
Reciprocity, Responsibility

Thematic analysis
of participants'
stories and
observations

Data Collection

Primary site:

Nisqually Head Start

- Classroom observations
- Interviews with teachers, parents, and community members
- Tlingit and Haida community leadership perspective

- Observation of storytelling, language, movement, drumming, singing, and culturally connected books
- Transcription, coding, and thematic organization of data

Participants

Participant	Role	Dissertation Pseudonym
Beth	Huckleberry Teacher	Butterfly
Erich	Cedar Teacher	Spruce
Mona	Manager	Copper
Melanie	Family Service	Sage
Janet	Lushootseed Teacher	Sweetgrass
Maya	Parent	Flower
Cheebo	Nisqually Vice Chair	Cedar Rose
Doug	Tlingit Leader	Yiel

Observation Participant	Role	Observation Name
Beth	Teacher	Teacher 1
Erich	Teacher	Teacher 2
Denissa	Librarian	Teacher 3

Key Findings

Theme 1: Relational Teaching

Relationships build literacy.

Key insight: Literacy development is strengthened through relationships and connection

Butterfly – Teacher

“By talking with the children, telling them stories, using flashcards, books, writing- all those kinds of things.”

Flower – Parent

“Teachings are just all around us.”

Key Findings

Theme 2: Ethical Learning

Ethical learning was visible in how children were taught to respect people, stories, cultural materials, and one another.

“While the students like to pretend to be teachers, they need to respect the learning area,” Teacher 2 said

Teacher 2 turned this into a learning opportunity for respect, relationality, responsibility, reciprocity, and interrelatedness.

Key Findings

Theme 3: Indigenous Language

Indigenous language strengthens cultural identity and literacy

Indigenous language was not an “extra”; it was part of literacy.

Sweetgrass – Teacher

“It really helps with cultural identity. It strengthens their cultural identity and their resilience.”

Cedar Rose – Nisqually Vice Chair

“Language is the way that we connect to the ancestors.”

Flower – Parent

“It almost made me tear up when she speaks Lushootseed; it is so powerful and beautiful.”

Key Findings

Theme 4: Storywork

Storytelling is a powerful form of teaching and literacy.
Storywork became a bridge between oral Indigenous literacy and English literacy development.

Cedar Rose

"Stories are meant to help you form who you are as a person."

Flower

"Stories help children understand who they are."

Spruce – Teacher

"Kids get so much from bookless stories."

Sweetgrass

"Owls bring messages... those are the type of teachings that I bring to the kids."

Key Findings

Theme 5: at.ooow

Key insight: Literacy development is strengthened through relationships and connections

Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer (1999) describe at.ooow as “owned or purchased things” (p. 15) and that it encompasses both tangible and intangible aspects of cultural inheritance.

Yéil described at.ooow as “precious objects that our ancestors carried...”

Yéil

“It is not just an item. It is something that carries the power of our ancestors. It bears our history.”

Yéil

“Back in the old days, you could tell a person’s history by their name. Once you know their name, it usually connects to their clan house. If you know the clan house, you know its history, territory, families, and connections.”



Discussion

Across the findings, Indigenous literacy emerged as relational, cultural, ethical, and community-centered.

Storytelling + Language + Relationship + Culture
= Meaningful Literacy Learning

Archibald (2008) coined the term “Storywork” as a legitimate Indigenous method for teaching storytelling. Storytelling carries cultural teachings, values, histories, and relationships, linking knowledge holders and community members who connect Native students to identity and place.



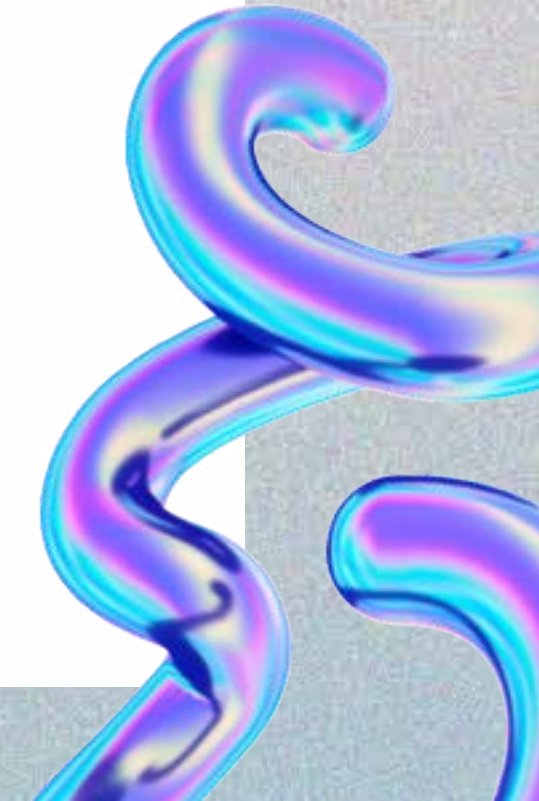


Recommendations

For educators:

- Use storytelling as a bridge
- Integrate Indigenous language
- Build literacy

For schools:

- Tribal partnerships.
 - Invest in Indigenous educator and community leadership.
 - Respect cultural ownership and at.oow.
- 



Implications

Leadership: Indigenous community voices should shape educational decisions.

Practice: Literacy instruction can honor both English academic expectations and Indigenous knowledge systems.

Policy: Schools need structures that support Tribal sovereignty, culturally grounded curriculum, and long-term relationships.

Most importantly: Indigenous students deserve to see themselves, their languages, and their knowledge reflected in literacy learning.





Limitations

- Tlingit, Haida, and Nisqually perspectives.
- Not generalized across Tribal Nations.
- The timeframe limited
- Public school-level privacy and district restrictions.



Future Research

These recommendations will support collaboration with Indigenous leaders and educational institutions by incorporating stories that will support Native learners' English reading and writing development.

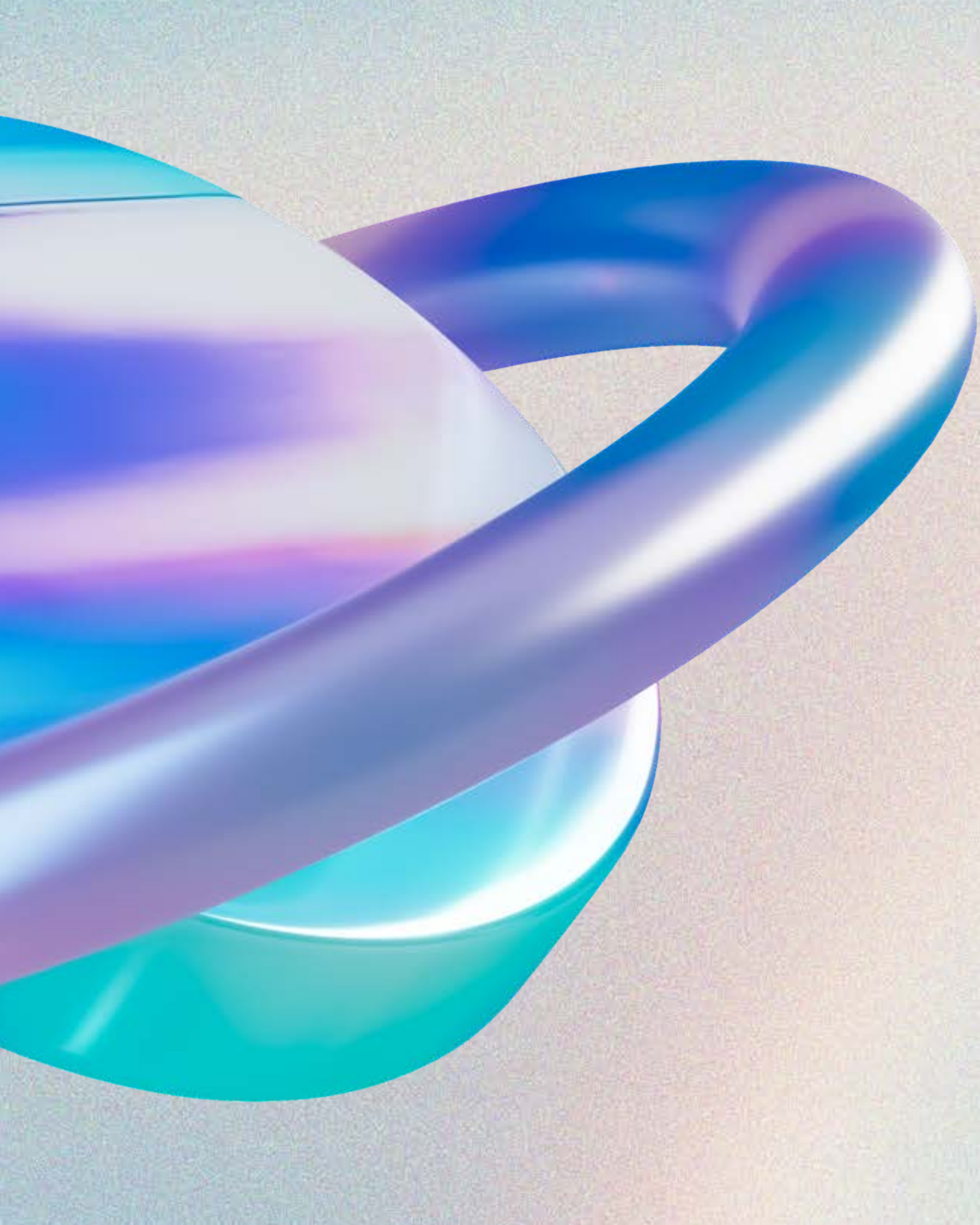


Conclusion

Storytelling is literacy.
Storytelling is identity.
Storytelling is relationship.

Indigenous Storywork creates a pathway for connecting oral tradition, Indigenous language, culture, community, and English literacy development.

The responsibility is not simply to teach Indigenous students—it is to create educational spaces where their knowledge is recognized, respected, and carried forward.



Q&A Session

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Thank You

Gunalchéesh • Háw'aa

Thank you to my ancestors, family, mentors,
committee, Tribal communities, educators, families,
and participants who made this work possible.

Questions & Discussion

