

University of Washington Tacoma x
Muckleshoot Tribal College

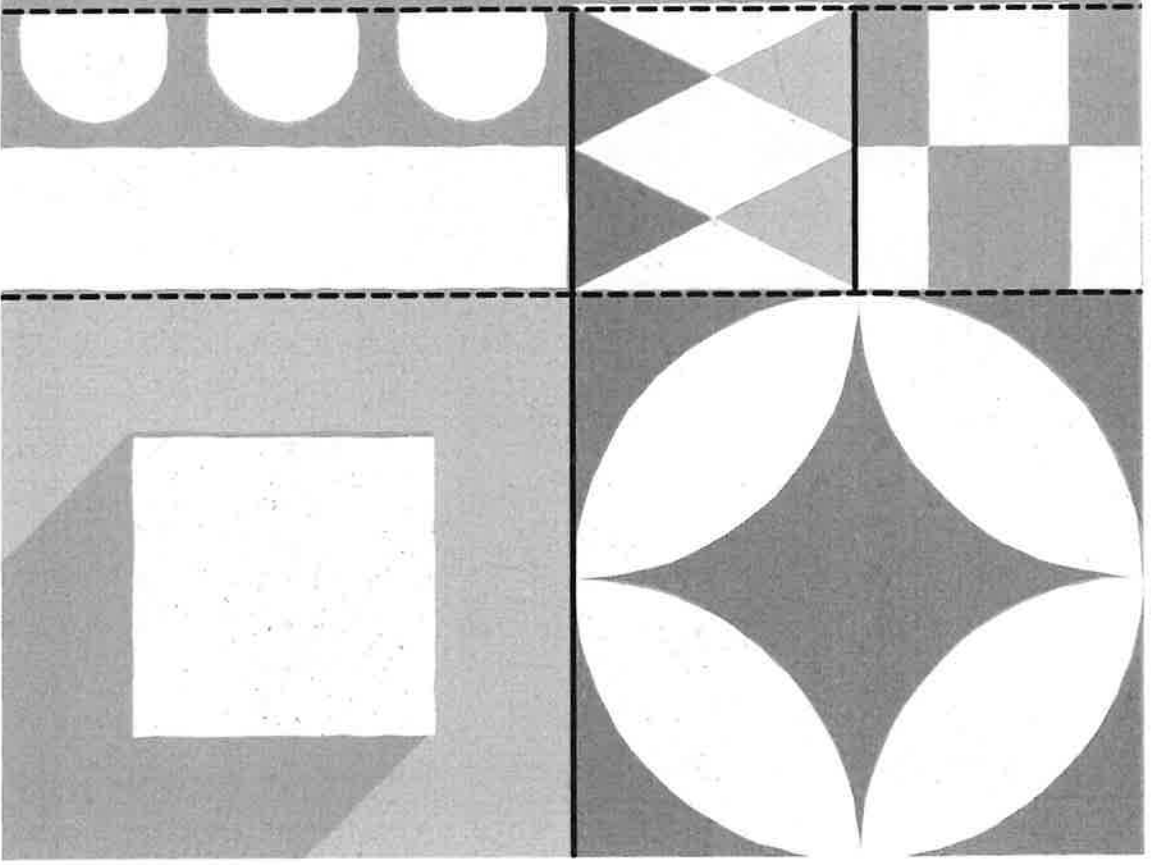
Native American Autism:

**Creating Space for Acceptance, Inclusion, and
Culturally Informed Research, Resources, and
Supports for Children and Their Families**

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School of Education



White, M. (2024). *Fair Selfie*. Personal Collection.



Greetings: Why we are Here

A dissertation in practice submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

- **Committee Co-Chairs:**

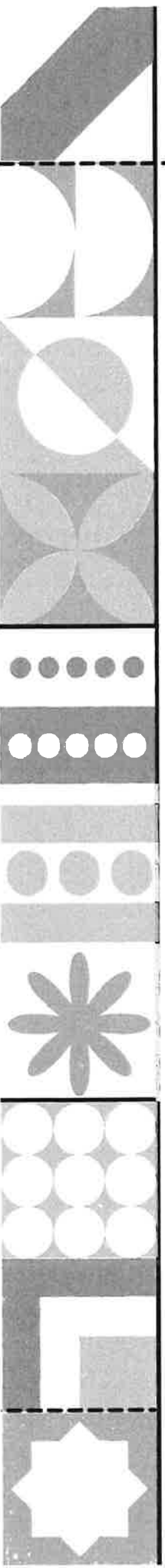
Dr. Dawn Hardison-Stevens, University of Washington

Dr. Michelle Montgomery, University of Washington

- **Committee Member:**

Dr. Denise Bill, Muckleshoot Tribal College

Unknown. (2025). *Family portrait*. Personal collection.



Acknowledgments:

haʔt slexiḷ, Madrienne White tsi dsdaʔ beqelšukabš čed.

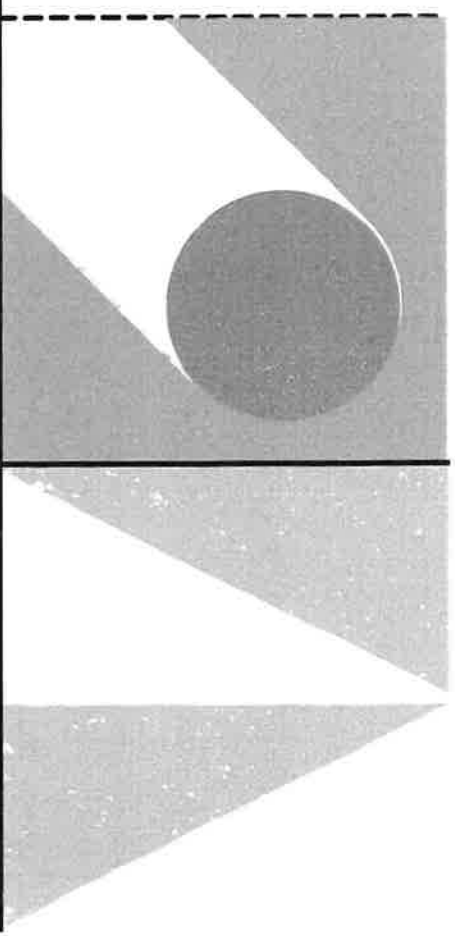
Good day, my name is Madrienne White, and I am a Muckleshoot Tribal member.



White, C. (2024). Duke's Aura. Personal Collection

I walk with my ancestors from both sides of my family as I navigate the academic, professional, personal, and cultural pathways of life. I acknowledge them for their guidance and raise my hands to them for the strength, love, and protection they have provided me. This introduction serves as strands of a braid that represent my positionality and intersectionality as a person, a relative, a mother, an ancestor-in-training, a protector, a professional, a student, and a researcher. I offer this introduction to help establish the foundation and provide context for the thoughts, words, and positions in the text that follows (White, 2024, p. 2).

Chapter One



Introduction

Positionality and Intersectionality

Definitions and Language Use

From an Indigenous Worldview

From an Autistic Worldview

Native American, Indigenous, American Indian/Alaskan

Native (AI/AN), and Tribal

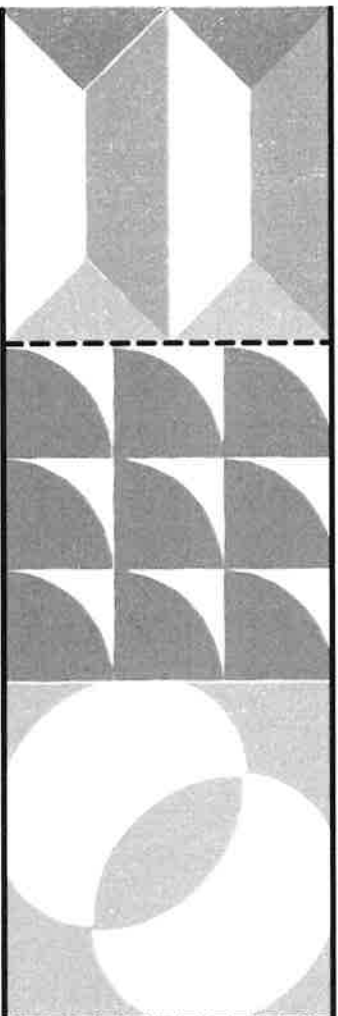
Neurodiversity

Connecting the Writer and the Reader



Unknown. (2018). *Four Generations*. Personal collection.

Problematic Language & Reconciliation



A fundamental incompatibility between
Indigenous and Western worldviews on
Autism begins with language.

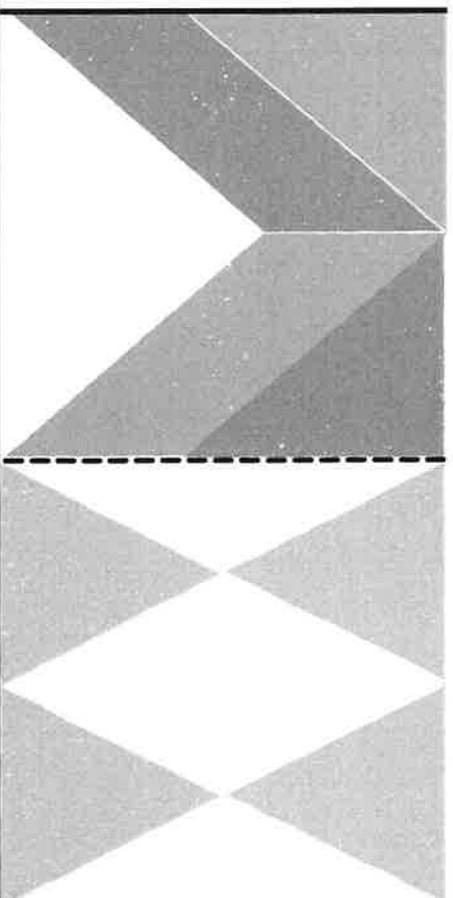


Worldviews on Autism in Society		
Native American/American Indian	VS	Western/ Settler-Colonial
Inclusion - Member of society		Exclusion - Institutionalization
Revered and/or Respected, and protected		Dehumanized and/or pitied and discriminated
Accommodated		Abandoned, Abused & Ignored
Celebrated for elevated consciousness		Taught to mask and "pass" as neurotypical
Acknowledged for strengths and contributions		Silenced and/or omitted from discussions



White, M. (2025). *Indigenous Vs. Western autistic worldviews* [Unpublished]. School of Education. University of Washington Tacoma.

Chapter Two



Literature Review

Rationale

Disability and Race

Tribal Critical Race Theory

Misperceptions and Miseducation

**Settler-Colonial Impacts, Raising Voices,
and What is Next**



Unknown. (2019). *Carrying on our culture and legacies*. Personal collection.

Literature Review and Rational Take-aways

<p>Accept Autism not Problamatize</p> <p>Western worldviews are influenced by settler-colonial values and social constructs that value and respect white abled bodies. Historically, variances of race, abilities, and other social constructs have been dehumanized.</p>	<p>Autistic and POC are claiming space in society, academia, and beyond</p> <p>Brown et al. (2017), Wong (2020), Ward (2025), Bruno et al. (2025)</p>	<p>Disabilities Studies & Tribal CRT</p> <p>Annamma et al. (2012) explored the intersectionality between disabilities, including Autism, and race through a critical analysis of Disability Studies (DS) and Critical Race Theory (CRT).</p> <p>The first tenet of TribalCrit is, "Colonization is endemic to society" (Jones-Brayboy, 2006, p. 429).</p>
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Chapter Three

Theoretical Framework

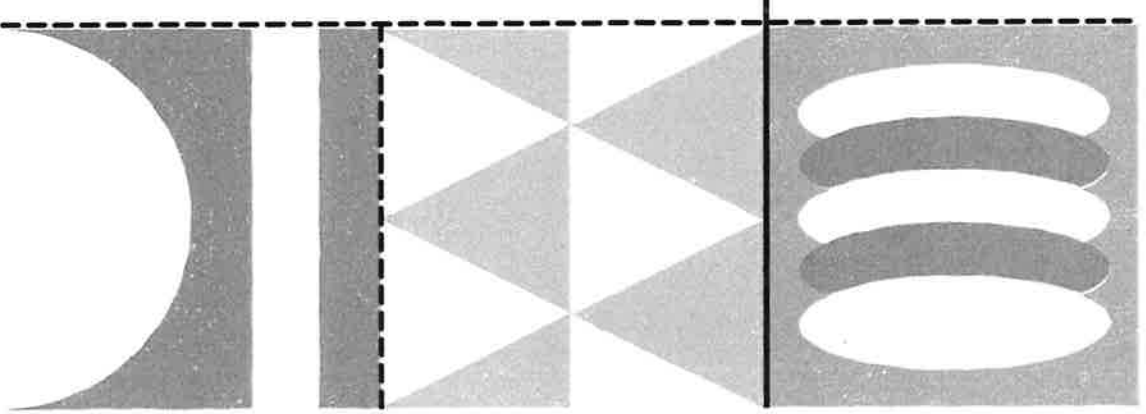
Experiential Interpretation of Indigenous Storywork

Indigenous Research

Methodologies, Interpretations, and Relational Accountability



Fernandez, R., & Villa, T. (2018). *Story of the aye-aye girl* [Mural]. University of Washington.



Theoretical Frameworks

Community-Based Participatory Research

Supported by scholars such as Tuck & McKenzie, CBPR includes a community-based approach to research. To produce information and recommendations that reflect and respect cultural identity, values, and sovereignty.

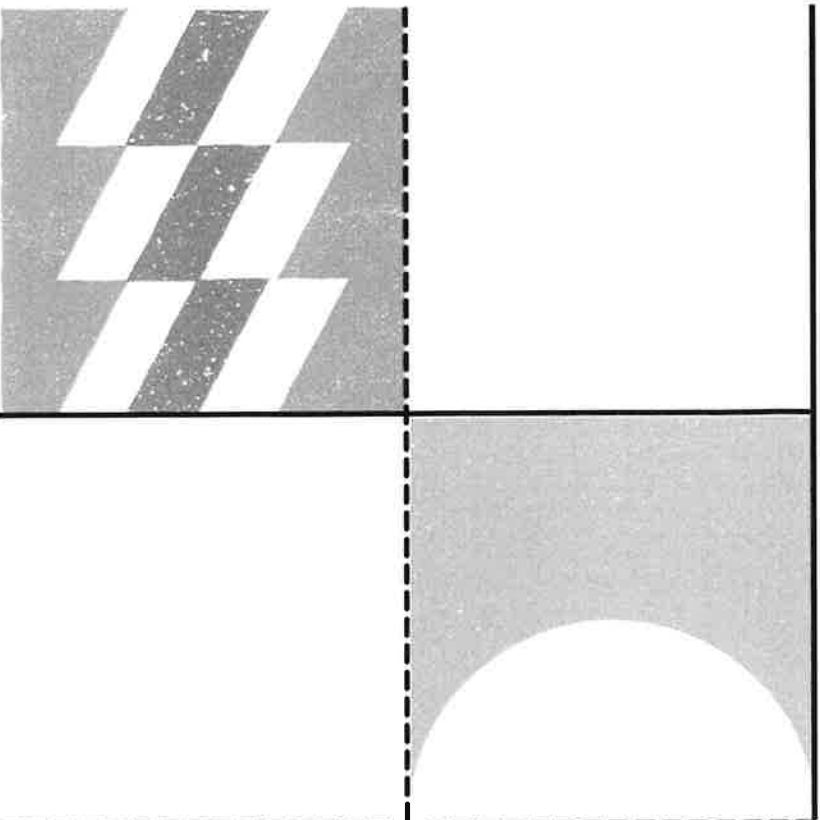
Indigenous Storywork

Archibald (2008) outlined the significance and richness of ISW. Qualifying this process and practice of knowledge transfer within Indigenous communities as a legitimate data collection and sharing tool.

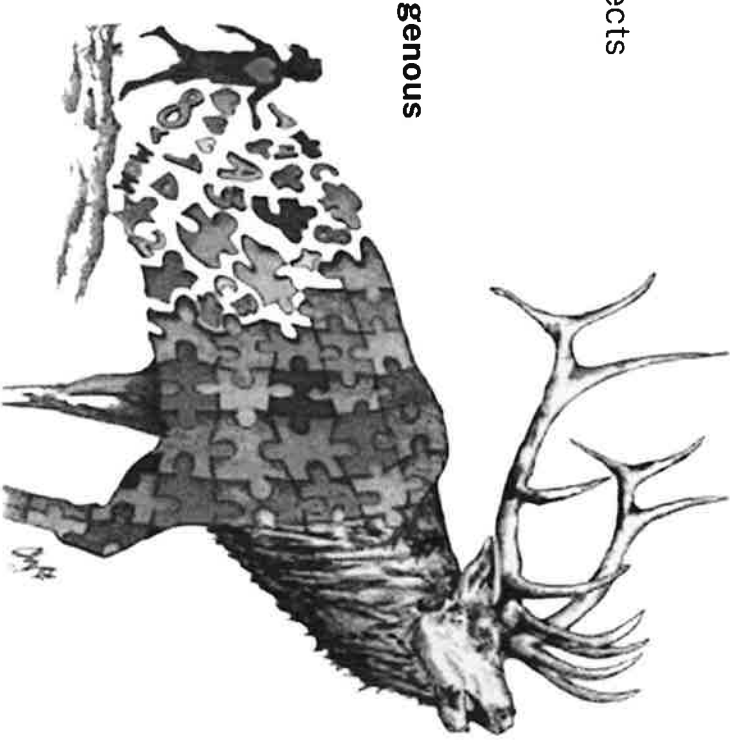
Klickitat Basket Story

Upper Skagit Elder, Vi Hilbert, provides a perfect example of Indigenous storywork in this video: <https://vimeo.com/396538608> It provides a multitude of conveyances of Indigenous worldviews, values, and community relationships. Specifically including what appears to be a disabled child.

Chapter Four



- Study Design**
- Research Methods/Methodology**
- Justification of methods**
- In Practice**
- Participants**
- Protection of Human Subjects**
- Analysis**
- Research Questions**
- Design, Inclusion, and Indigenous**
- Research Realized**



White, C. (2026). *Duke's heart* [Drawing]. Personal Collection

Research Questions & Answers

Q1. Are you enrolled in a Federally Recognized Indian Tribe

Key Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6 out of 7 participants were members of a Federally Recognized Indian Tribe One participant was a descendant.
Tribe	Tribal affiliations: Muckleshoot, Nisqually, & Alaska Native
Timeline	December 2025- April 2026
Notes:	The study included 3 in-person interviews & 4 online interviews.



Q2. Are you the biological parent of an Autistic child?

Key Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 5 out of 7 participants were the biological parents of an Autistic child. 2 of 7 participants were the guardians of an Autistic relative.
Notes:	Participation was opened up to more than just biological parents to allow a wider range of families to participate. This was done to acknowledge realities of tribal family systems, that often include extended family members in a household



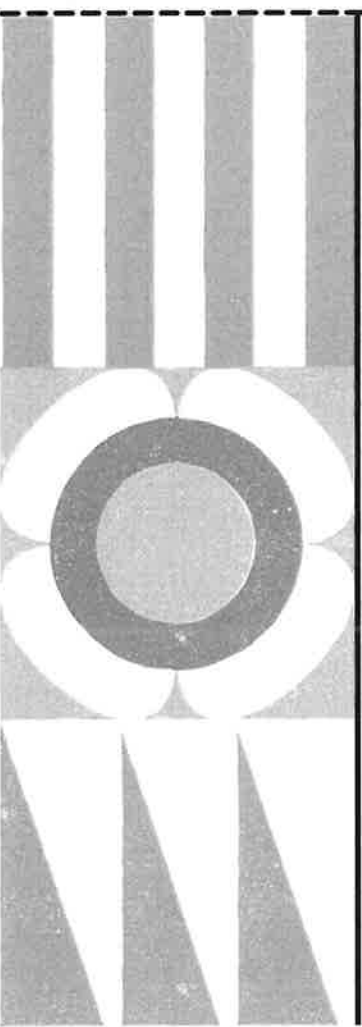
Q3. Has your child received a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Key Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 100% Of participants said yes to this question
Q3- a	Participants were asked the child's age at diagnosis
Q3- b	Participants were asked what the child's current age is
Notes:	Ages ranged from 2-10 years old at time of diagnosis.



Research Question Results

Questions one through four - These questions were asked in order to determine eligibility to participate in the study, to gather qualitative data about the participants, and to determine the Tribal affiliations of participants.



Research Questions & Answers

Q4. Do you have more than one child diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Key Results

- 1 out of 7 participants answered yes to this question. However, an additional parent was in the ASD diagnosis process for a second child.

Gender

Gender of the 2nd ASD diagnosed children were not asked for, but were revealed in interviews as female children.

Notes:

Children diagnosed with ASD from Q3: Male: 6, Female: 1.



Q5. Did you receive Culturally Relevant (CR) or Indigenous-Informed (II) Instruction, materials, education, or engagement at the time of diagnosis and assessment?

Key Results

- 6 out of 7 participants answered "no" to this question.
- One participant said yes and no, they didn't receive CR services/informatic from the doctor conducting the assessment, but the location where the assessment took place was in a CR environment on their reservation.

Notes:

3 Participants expressed negative experiences during the assessment: "We've listened to, we had to work harder." "Process was difficult & intimidating." "I feel disconnected & deficit model language was alienating, denying child's capabilities." Other responses: 1 offered CR suggestions to assessors, 1 didn't expect it, 1 would have preferred CR support to feel more understood, & 1 enjoyed the familiarity of having the assessment done in a place-based location.



Q6. Please take about other experiences and feelings part, the diagnosis stage of ASD, & engagements or interventions such as speech Ed, therapy, IEP meetings, respite, physical, and CR sessions. What were they like, was your Indigenous identity represented? How did they make you feel? Were interventions helpful?

Key Results

- 6 out of 7 participants responded that their Indigenous identity was not represented during ASD engagements.
- 1 out of 7 responded Yes & No. Engagement was place-based by not culturally relevant.

Responses to secondary Qs

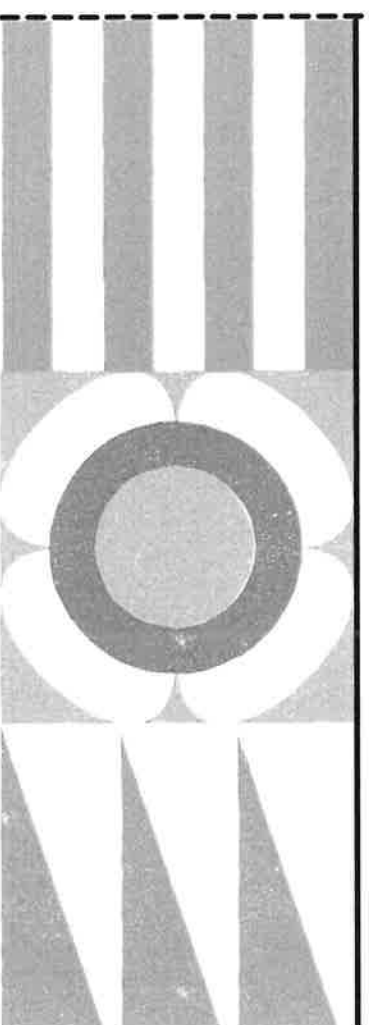
2 Participants said interventions are done their base, 1 felt that interventions were harmful or without ethnics, not N Am... 1 asserched for CR resources on their own, 1 left interventions were unresponsive to CR requests, 1 was upset about the lack of N Am representation, & 1 said it wasn't a high priority, safety & skill development took precedence.



Research Question Results

Questions five and six:

These questions primarily focused on the intervention and engagement experiences of their Autistic children and their families. Themes focused on whether or not they received culturally relevant (CR) or Indigenous-informed (II) engagement or interventions.



Research Questions & Answers

Q7: Currently or in the past, what did education & learning look like for your child? Are there practices or strategies that your child connects with?

Key Results

- 2 of 7 responded that consistency aided in learning, and another 2 of 7 said accommodations are needed before learning can take place.
- 1 respondent that behavioral programs helped learning, 1 said technology supported learning, and 1 said music/movement combined with special interests aided in learning.

Notes:

These were layered answers, with 3 of 7 mentioning sound/music/dancing, and rhythm supporting learning

29% said Consistency & another 29% said accommodations aided in learning

Q8: Has your child's school, medical or therapy clinic, that you know of, offered any parental Autism Informal Assessments or training?

Key Results

- 4 out of 7 participants answered "yes" to this question
- 3 of 7 answered "no" of this question

Notes:

Educational offerings were offered at Tribal Early Learning facilities or Therapy Clinics. It is worth mentioning that each respondent, could only think of one facility offering parent education/training. It was one or the other, not both or even multiple learning opportunities/offerings across intervention facilities.

57% of participants said schools or clinics provided parent education/trainings

Q9: Please share ideas or recommendations for culturally relevant (CR) or Indigenous/Indigenous (I) instruction, activities, education, or employment that you suggest be offered to Black/Hispanic or American Indian/Alaskan Native/Arctic/Alutian & families.

Key Results

- 3 of 7 responded they would like N. Am. centered materials, info, parent education, and culturally grounded support.
- 2 of 7 wanted Indigenous language, songs, books, and culture taught in classrooms
- 1 responded they wanted Indigenous staff & therapists available on tribal lands. 1 said Tribal community engagement at schools was needed, student voices needed & teaching about respectful engagement with disabled students.

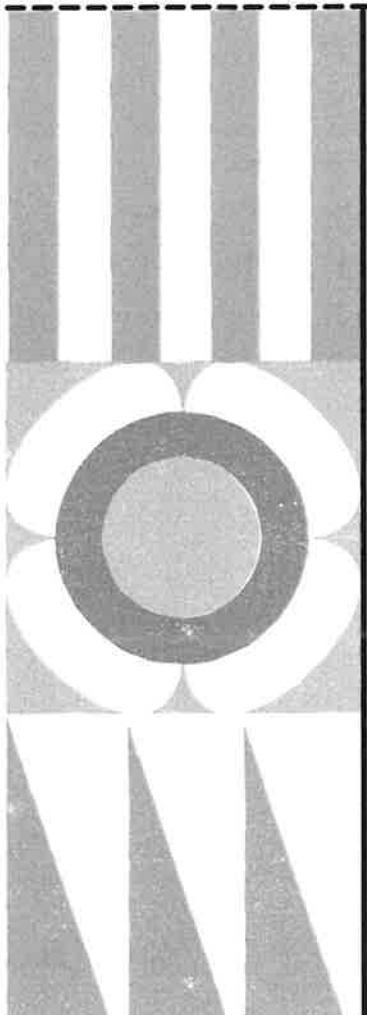
Notes:

These were layered answers, with a heavy emphasis on sharing, understanding, and implementing N. Am. epistemology, ontology, praxis, and pedagogy in learning opportunities & settings

42% provided similar answers, expressing interest in CR materials & education

Research Question Results

Questions seven and eight: These questions focused on the area of education. i.e., what approaches to education worked well with their children. And if they (parent) received any education or training on Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).



Research Questions & Answers

Q10. If these were offered to you, how would you feel receiving Indigenous-Informed (II) instructional materials and engagement?

Key Results

- 5 of 7 responded they would feel appreciative/acknowledged or represented
- 1 responded they would be grateful, and 1 responded they would feel relief & reassurance that their child's needs, culture, and identity were being respected

Notes: These were layover answers, with other feelings being shared: increased trust, confidence, comfort, welcomed, increased understanding, and included

71% said they would feel seen if they received II instructional materials



Q11. As a parent, what would be your response if you discovered your child was receiving Indigenous-Informed (II) & culturally relevant (CR) instruction, materials, engagement, & potentially speech or occupational therapy?

Key Results

- 4 out of 7 participants answered they would feel happy, amazing, or would "Love it"
- 1 answered they would be unsure, 1 said they would feel validated, and 1 said they would feel accepted, supported, prioritized, & less isolated

Notes: Layover responses revealed that parents would be supportive or and would want to be more involved with the engagements. They also expressed that they would feel thankful for the representation. Overall, 6 out of 7 participants responded positively to this question.

57% of participants said they would be happy if they learned their child received CR interventions



Q12. Do you believe that you, your family, and your child might potentially benefit from culturally relevant (CR) and Indigenous-Informed (II) interventions, resources, and education?

Key Results

- 7 of 7 responded that they believed CR interventions would benefit their child and family.

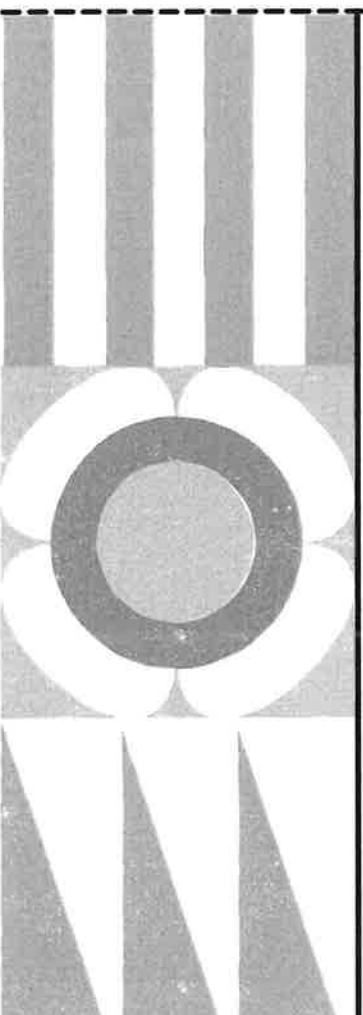
Notes: In addition to the "Yes" answers, participants also said they thought CR interventions would help bring the community closer together, connections were needed for progress, they would feel involved, open, and this would help with building self-esteem and identity-affirmation. Another respondent with concerns that non-native interventions could cause harm by not being culturally informed. And one respondent they would like to see a study of before & after receiving CR interventions, to track/measure outcomes.

100% of respondents said they believed their family would benefit from CR interventions



Research Question Results

Questions nine through sixteen: These questions focused on Parents' thoughts, feelings, and predictions of outcomes regarding receiving and offering (CR) and (II) Autism education, engagement, or training for their children, families, communities, educators and medical professionals/ therapists.



Research Questions & Answers

Q13. Do you have any predictions regarding the outcomes you would expect or anticipate after receiving Indigenous-informed (I) interventions, resource and education?

Key Results

- 4 of 7 responded they believed positive outcomes would follow
- 1 intervention/resource/education
- 3 of 7 said it could/possibly change outcomes

Notes:

Although 3 of 7 said they believed if interventions could impact outcomes, they all believed the children would still benefit from the C, interventions, resource, and education.



Q14. Do you think educators, therapists, medical professionals, family, and community members would benefit from Indigenous-informed (I) Autism resources and tool kits? Do you think this would improve their service to your autistic children & your family?

Key Results

- 7 out of 7 participants answered they believed community, family, and professionals would benefit from I tool kits.

Notes:

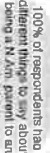
Respondents believe that these resources could bring families closer, address Autism denial and stigma in Indigenous communities, would improve communication, connect people to resources, could increase family engagement, connect adults to culture too, make Autism families feel more understood, and help outsiders understand our people better to improve relationships & challenge stereotypes of N. Am. 1 respondent said community engagement was critical for this work, & would like to see infrastructure to ensure accuracy and respectful representation



Q15. Is there anything you wish to express or share regarding your experience or story as a parent of an autistic child from the Native American/American Indian/Alaska Native/Indigenous community?

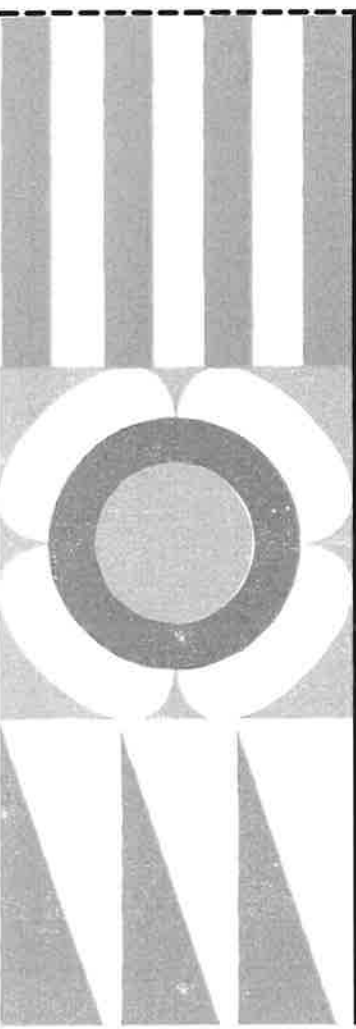
Key Results

Respondent expressed feelings of denial & having to adjust their dreams and expectations as a father, to reality. They realized their child was still competent, but accomplishments looked different. Encourages others to take advantage of support, ask questions, & get help. 1 respondent said the Education system was not designed for N. Am. children to succeed. Autistic or not. Due to having negative experiences with systems, they would like to see Since Time Immemorial curriculum prioritized, legal support for patients, accountability of educators & lawsuits for students, they would also like greater representation overall, greater support for accommodation needs, and more consultation with parents.



Research Question Results

Questions nine through sixteen:
These questions focused on Parents' thoughts, feelings, and predictions of outcomes regarding receiving and offering (CR) and (II) Autism education, engagement, or training for their children, families, communities, educators and medical professionals/ therapists.



Research Questions & Answers

Q15. Continued

Key Results

1 respondent described their initial introduction to Autism as dark. Veiled with deficit -modeled language and negative bias. But they broke through barriers, negative stigma, & sought 11 ways of thinking about and engaging with their child. They are happier with this outlook. 1 said they want N. Am. parents to feel comfortable having an autistic child, it's not bad, it's beautiful, and natural. 1 respondent wants more inclusion for Autism families at cultural ceremonies, events, etc. To represent our community as a whole. 1 respondent said, "It's hard, it's been hard" being a parent of an autistic child. They've felt isolated and judged, especially by white people. 1 respondent said, "Our children need us to advocate for them, because they can't do it for themselves, and we need culturally-grounded services and resources."



Q16. What does decolonized Native American Autism engagement, education, and/or inclusion mean to you?

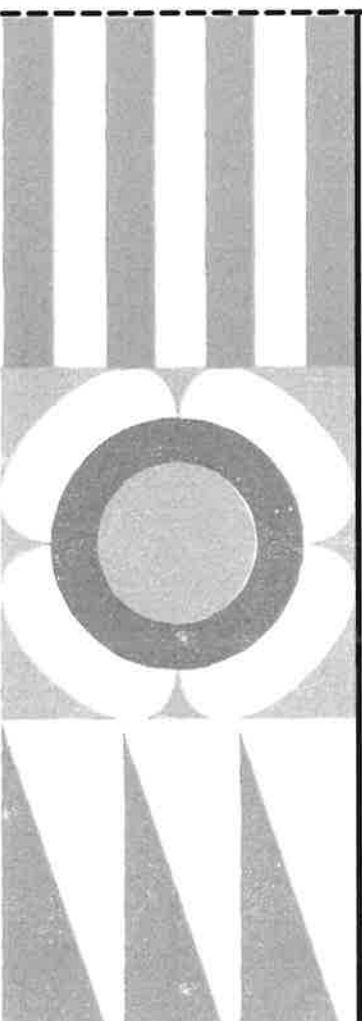
Key Results

2 respondents shared desires for indigenous representation, CR content, and place-based services for autistic children and their families. One of those respondents also mentioned "wrap-around" services that support mind, body, spirit, and place connections. 1 respondent mentioned re-establishing traditions that teach leadership & service, creating networks of support and commitment, and including multi-cultural learning for our mixed-race relatives. 1 respondent would like indigenous Autism resources and books, like "I am Unique" (Sheldon, 2023). They also want to see Autism normalized, especially in cultural spaces, they said. "Our children are connected to our culture," it should be open and inviting. 1 respondent replied they would like children to have the freedom to express themselves without having to hide or obey (like in boarding schools), kids should be taught to self-advocate, and "let children be who they are without having to apologize." 1 respondent said they would like to see more early interventions and resources and activities educating about Autism, to help destigmatize Autism, to celebrate differences, and let people know it's ok to be different. 1 respondent said they would like to see indigenous communities move away from systems that see Autism as something to fix. They want our community to see our children as a whole family, community, and culture. They also expressed the need to stop forcing indigenous children into systems that were never designed for them. They want adapted systems that respect indigenous ways of learning, communicating, and being.

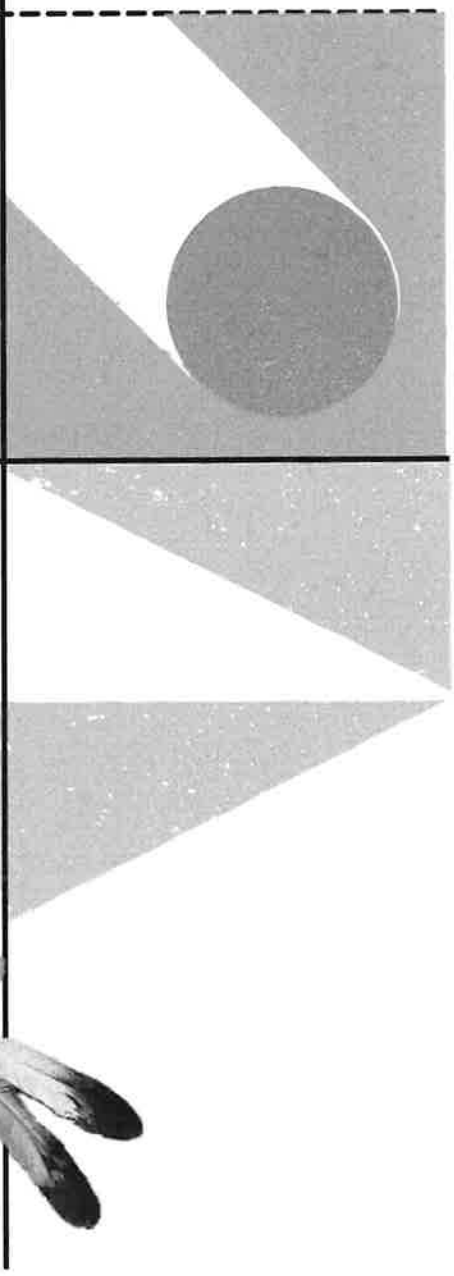


Research Question Results

Questions nine through sixteen:
 These questions focused on Parents' thoughts, feelings, and predictions of outcomes regarding receiving and offering (CR) and (II) Autism education, engagement, or training for their children, families, communities, educators and medical professionals/ therapists.



Chapter Five



Discussion/Implications

The Five R's and How to Honor Them

Data Interpretations

Duke's Autism Acceptance Walk

Further Reading and Recommended Books

Ending with a Story

White, C. (2024). Grass Dancer [Photograph]. Personal collection.

Closing & Recommendations



The First Analysis of Obtained Results

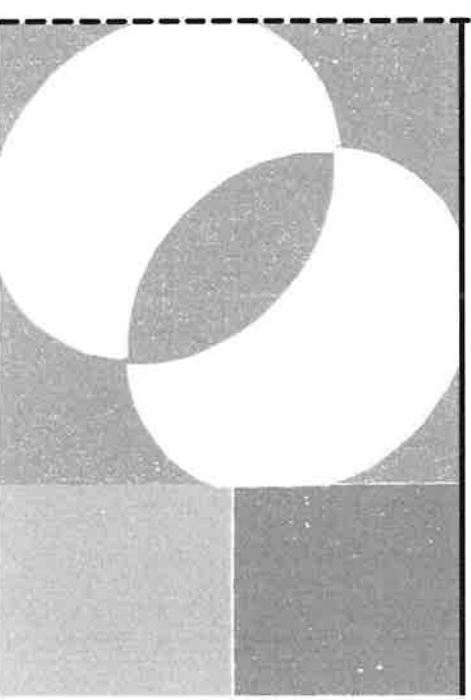
According to the research, there is a deficit of culturally relevant Autism engagement and assessment tools and practices for the Native American/Alaska Native population.

The Second Analysis of Obtained Results

The parents of these Native American Autistic children have creative and respectful ideas about how to incorporate culturally relevant engagement with their children, families, and community, and to incorporate Indigenous-informed books, traditional language lessons, songs, and dances into educational methods, interactions, and interventions.

The Third Analysis of Obtained Results

Features and elements of Culturally-relevant Autism engagement for Native American Autistic communities may include:



Closing Continued

The following chart provides examples of inclusive and identity-affirming engagement with Native American Autistic Communities

Inclusiveness:	Multi-generational, Multi-cultural, Cross-sector engagement, etc.	Everyone was welcome: Family, Elders, Educators, Friends, Caregivers, Leaders, Therapists, Community, etc.
Sensory-Informed:	Fidgets, squishy toys, chewies, Play-Doh, etc.	Items were offered to everyone, and a quiet coloring station was offered as a self-regulation station.
Culturally Relevant:	Songs, prayers, place-based, & design elements.	2025- Prayer song by Colby White Sr. 2026- Feast song by Muckleshoot Canoe Family/ Duke's Aura design by Colby White Sr.
Acceptance:	Neurodiverse or Neurotypical	Activities were designed to be included, respected, seen, loved, and valued by all Neurotypes.
Food & Allergy Considerate:	Food aversions and allergies are common for Autistic relatives?	Considerations were made for dairy, egg, & nut allergies. Soft & crunchy foods were offered. i.e., apple sauce

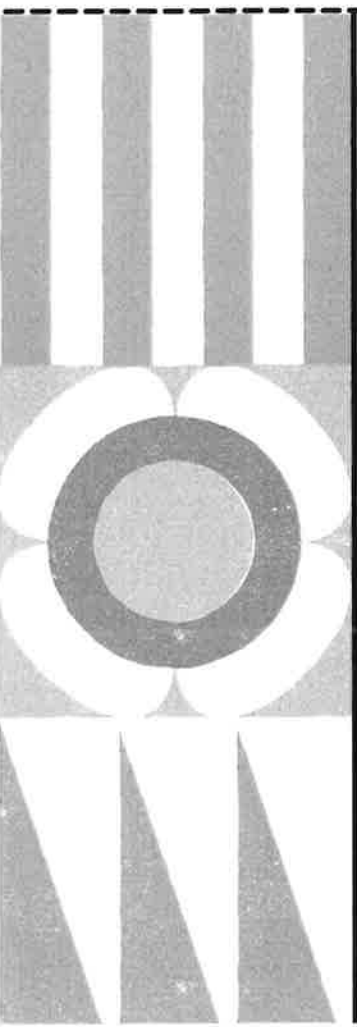
7 out of 7 Participants said they thought their child would benefit from culturally relevant engagement and services

Below are two examples of culturally relevant and identity-affirming literature that exemplify inclusive learning opportunities that honor identity representation.

Sheldon, E. (2023). I am unique. Muckleshoot Language Department.



Lindgren, S. (2023). This is my hair. Muckleshoot Language Department.



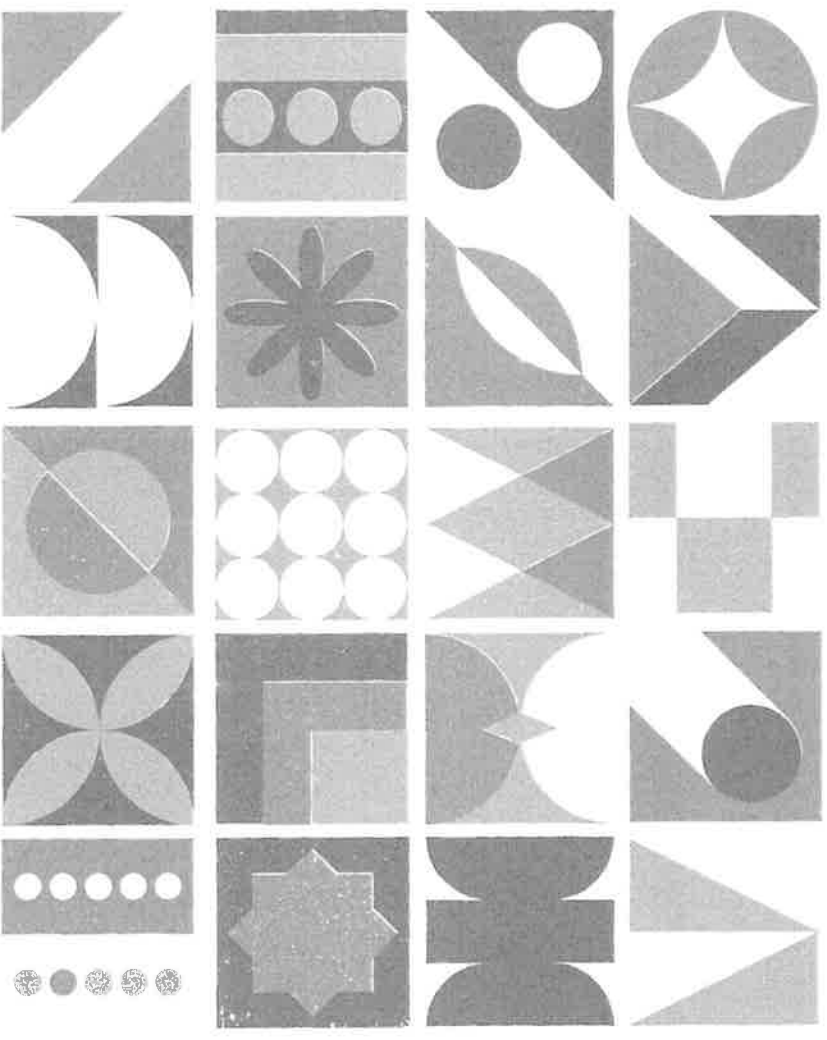
End with a Story

There once was a little Muckleshoot boy from the sqwalac "Huckleberry" village. He was bright, loving, and sometimes silly. He was also Autistic, which meant the pathways in his mind operated differently than those of people who are not Autistic. The people called him Roadrunner because he could run so fast that no one could keep up with him. He was also a shapeshifter; he could be a buffalo, an elk, a shark, a fish, a dog, even an elephant or crocodile. Because Roadrunner was Autistic, he spoke differently from the other children of the village; he moved differently, he thought differently, and he acted differently. Some thought he was too different, and they stayed away from him because he didn't play, talk, or interact like the other children. But some thought he was fun, creative, and energetic, and appreciated his humor, artistic nature, and his unique point of view. As he grew older, he started to become friends with more people, as well as animals, spirits, and places. The people began to see his gifts- generosity, love, imagination, humor, and empathy. People began to learn from the boy who was becoming a young man about understanding, inclusion, kindness, and appreciation of diversity in all of its forms.

The boy helped people become more mindful and caring for their Autistic relatives. He inspired them to open their minds and their hearts to see the impact, the genius, and the medicine of these Autistic relatives.

When everyone started to recognize the value and importance of difference, and began to include and accept their Autistic relatives, the spirits of the Muckleshoot homelands- their ancestors, animal relatives, the natural elements, water, earth, air, and fire, and spiritual beings- were so pleased, they blessed the Muckleshoot people with health and happiness for seven generations. They also blessed the people with unity, strength, enlightenment, and with more Autistic people to learn from, to include, and to love. This made the village and the future generations joyful, respectful, accepting, and strong.

This was the dawn of Autism Acceptance, education, engagement, and inclusion for the Muckleshoot and people of sqwalac village.



Respect and Gratitude

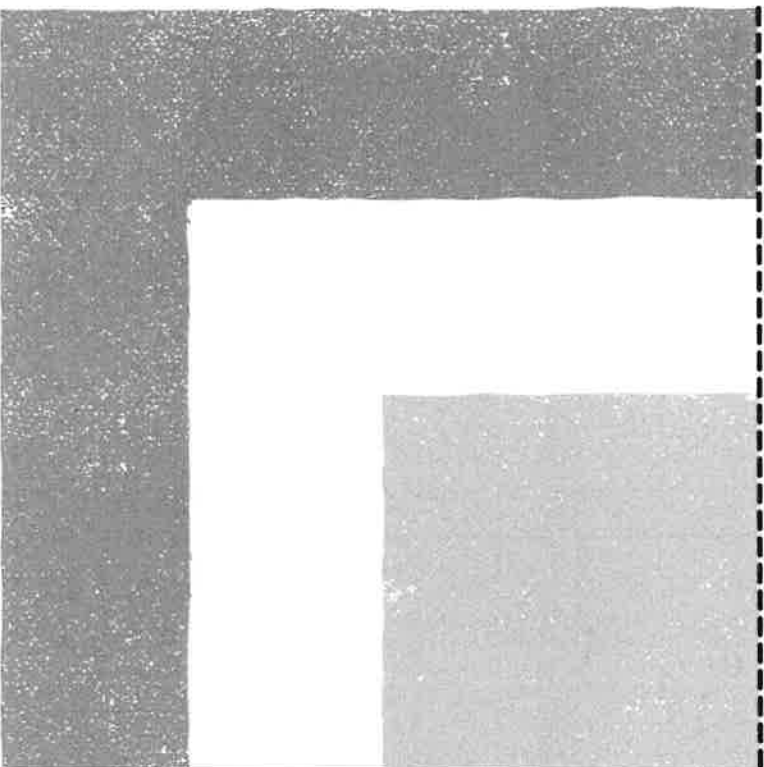
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Thank you for your time and Consideration

Gracias

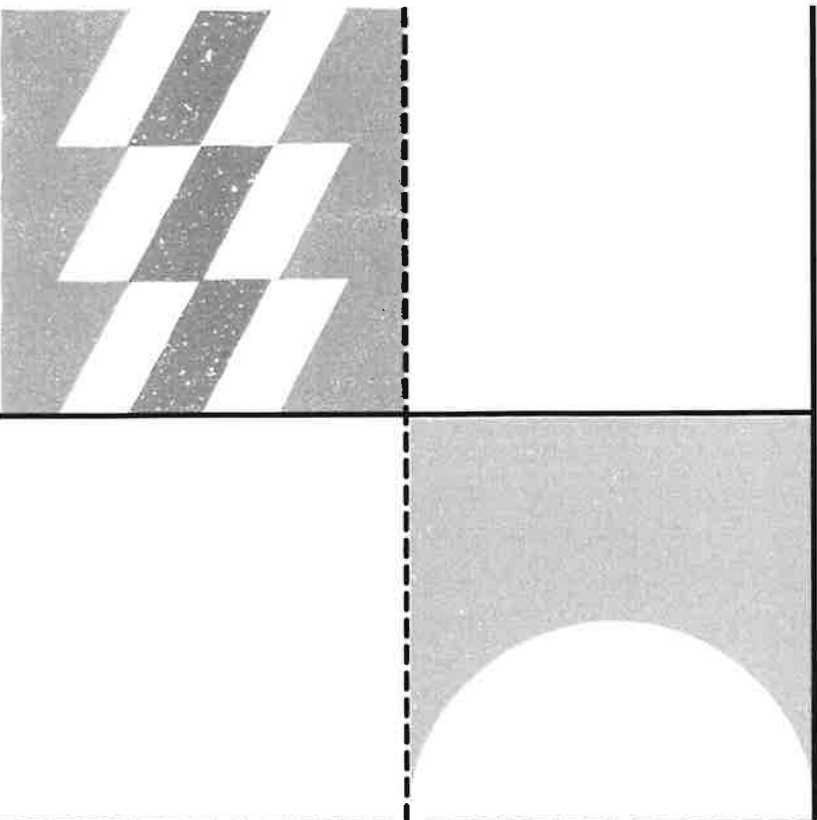
Gracias por su tiempo y su consideración

Thank you



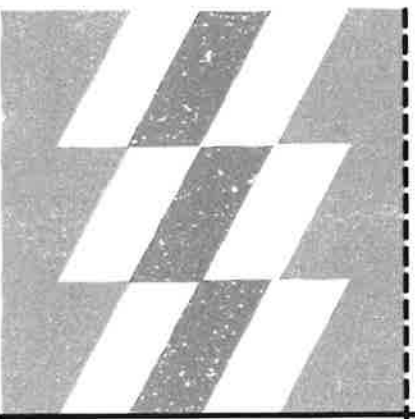
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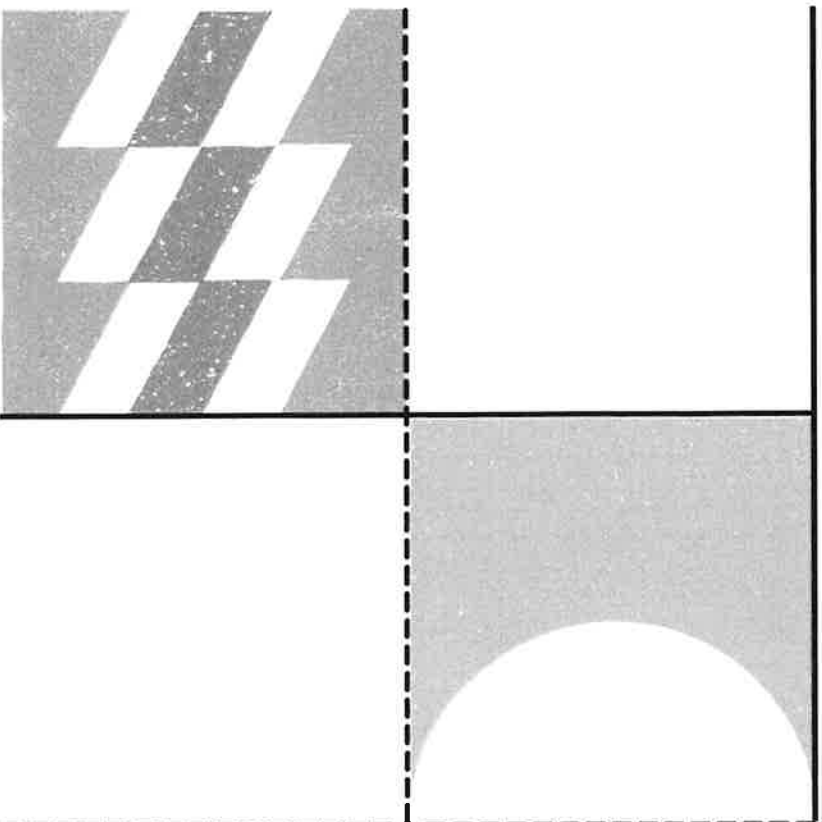
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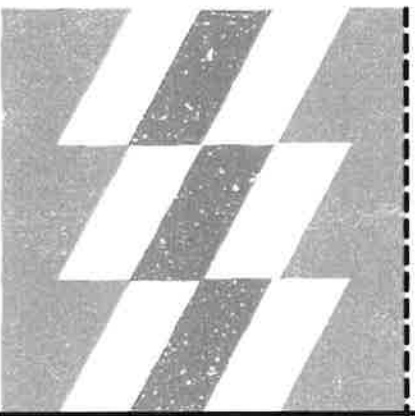
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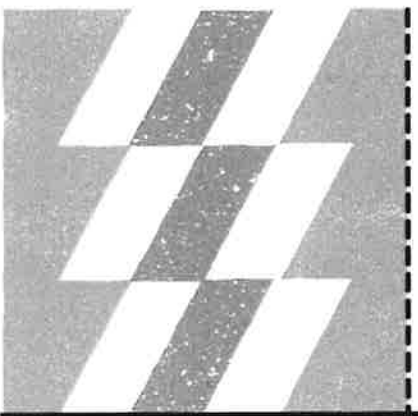
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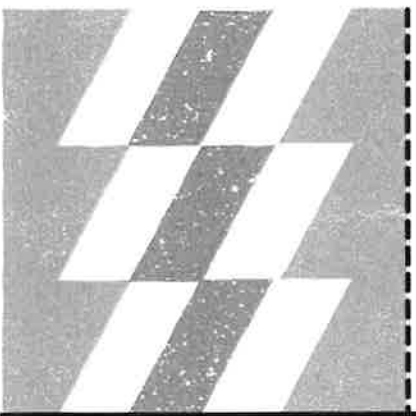
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