



early risers

Waking up to racial equity
in early childhood.

Discussion Guide

Season 7, Episode 5: [Developing Identity through Immersion: Dakota Language Nest](#), released July 23, 2025

Learning Goal: Learn about ways language can teach and preserve culture and cultivate identities and belonging. Listen to the experiences that shaped early childhood educators' and parents' decisions to promote family heritage and positive identity development through the Dakota language. Reflect on the impact cultural wisdom and teachings have on young children and their families. Identify ways to support the identity development of the children in your care — or your own children. Consider conversations in advance to prepare yourself to talk about historical truths with young children in developmentally appropriate ways.

Suggested Conversation Length: 60 minutes



[Early Risers](#) is a podcast focused on how to talk with young children about race. The podcast invites early childhood experts into conversations about how parents, caregivers and early childhood educators can tackle this big topic with the little ones in their lives.

Background

The Dakota Language Nest is a preschool where children are developing their identity through immersion in Dakota culture, traditions and language. In this episode we spend a day with the children as they practice the traditions of smudging, tobacco harvesting, singing songs and showing respect and gratitude for the natural world's gifts. We speak with lead teacher, Katie Bendickson, about the importance of keeping the language alive, and how the language and traditions are intertwined. We also speak with Nicole Cavender, a Dakota woman whose son attends the language nest: "I wanted to give them what I didn't have and wanted, which wasn't just language, it wasn't just answers to questions, but it's really about belonging, and belonging doesn't happen without community."

Guest Bio

Wóokiye wiŋ | Katie Bendickson spent much of her young life on her mother's reservation, Fond du Lac Reservation in northern Minnesota, before her family moved to her father's reservation at Upper Sioux Community in southwest Minnesota.

Bendickson is Sisseton Wahpeton Dakhóta. She began learning the Dakota language in high school at Yellow Medicine Senior High, but it wasn't until college that the language truly captivated her. It transformed her sense of identity, reshaped her worldview and helped her along her personal healing journey.

Her main teaching enthusiasm is nature-based and play-based learning for young children in the Dakota language medium.

Discussion Questions

- Katie Bendickson is the lead teacher at Dakota Language Nest. She shared that her name is Wóokiye wiŋ and that she is Sisseton Wahpeton Dakhóta from South Dakota. She grew up in Fond du Lac, in northern Minnesota, and the Upper Sioux Community, in southwest Minnesota. The other guest, Nicole Cavender, is a parent of a child that attends the Dakota Language Nest. Cavender is Sisseton Wahpeton Dakhóta from Minneapolis and Pezihutazzizi Otunwe (Yellow Medicine Community in southwest Minnesota). Why are their bios and introductions significant? What is the relationship between Indigenous Peoples, their names and their place names? Why do names matter as it relates to identity development?
- Host Andre Dukes inquired about the traditions Bendickson practiced growing up. She recalled spending a lot of time outside and in nature, in such cultural activities as maple sugar camps, wild ricing, foraging, and family camping trips. Her mother made her regalia for Pow Wows that they attended and participated in. What do you think children learn from these activities? How does it impact their identity development? How might it impact their development if they were unable to experience these activities and traditions?
- Bendickson shares what a day at the Dakota Language Nest looks like. The first few hours are outside as the children move through routines like playtime, breakfast and large group time. Their circle meeting regularly begins with smudging, singing welcome songs, talking about the date and the weather, and closing with the plan for the day or the week (all conducted in the Dakota

language). Playtime and art activities center on nature and incorporate the Dakota language as well. At lunchtime they sing a prayer to show gratitude for food and offer a gift of tobacco. Music and songs are a part of their cultural traditions and help promote language, literacy and cognitive skills. These routines help communicate behavior expectations and develop social-emotional skills. What valuable lessons are found in these various routines? How does it positively impact children's identities and their overall development?

- Bendickson references the Redosier Dogwood or čhaŋšáša (pronounced chah-SHAH-shah) as one of the trees whose leaves are used for smudging. It is one of several plants, including sage, sweetgrass, cedar and tobacco, used in smudging for purification and cleansing. Bendickson describes smudging as a daily cleansing activity and states that the children are taught how to correctly harvest it and prepare it. She mentions that science has "caught up to" the wisdom of using smoke. It has now been proven to kill viruses and bacteria and produce a calming effect through its scent. What other valuable lessons are the children learning? What have you learned about the Dakota just by listening to this segment?
- Bendickson did not grow up learning to speak Dakota, but she did hear it as a child and later learned it in college. Today she and her husband are actively teaching their children Dakota. Dukes points out that Bendickson's own childhood was different than her children's and asked about those cultural differences and intentional goals. She shares that when she was growing up, English was the standard but also believes that today more parents seek to keep the Dakota culture and language alive. In what ways is culture and language intertwined? Why is this kind of language preservation so important at home and within early childhood education settings? Share what you know about why intentional efforts like the ones described must be made to "save the language." In what ways are you preserving traditions and helping children to keep their native language alive?
- Dakota Language Nest parent Nicole Cavender shared that as a Dakota mother, and as someone with a multiethnic and multicultural identity, she really wanted to bring her child into an educational space that she did not have as a child. More importantly, she wanted to learn alongside her sons and husband. What are some of the values and other experiences that influenced her decision to enroll her youngest son at the Dakota Language Nest?
- Cavender named some standards and values she hopes to instill in her children. For her it was more than a cultural pursuit; it was about "belonging." Even if she didn't know exactly what she was looking for at first, she knew it when she felt it. Based on what Cavender shares, as a parent, what does she hope her son will learn about himself? What can we do to help children feel like they belong? How might we pour into "the core of who they are"?
- As Dukes interviews Cavender they unpack some lessons learned about generational impact and what it means to be knowledgeable of history. Cavender shared that when she learned about horrible historical truths, she had to ask an auntie for advice and guidance: "How do I tell my children about this? They can't not know like I did not know." She also wondered "What's a good way to share this with a three-year-old mind?" Her auntie recommended that we share truths with them because "They can handle it." We can hold knowledge, model being truth-tellers, feel those feelings, and cope with them, all with young children. What might we need to do to prepare ourselves to be truth-tellers? How might we plan appropriate ways to communicate and trust children with more difficult topics or harsh realities, and deal with the big emotions that will come with it all?

- According to Bendickson, the Dakota language helps shape the cultural identity of young children—not only because they are learning the language, but because they are learning through it. The language carries teachings about traditions, nature, land stewardship, gift giving, respecting food and caring for all our relatives. In what ways can we integrate these strategies to be more culturally responsive and help cultivate cultural identities and awareness?

Closing the Discussion

As you close the discussion, encourage people to continue talking and learning about historical truths related to race and racism. Identify a goal for developing positive cultural identity in young children. Acknowledge key points and lessons learned during the discussion. Finally, share additional resources available to them including other episodes of Early Risers.

Additional Resources

- University of MN [Child Development Laboratory School](#)
- [Dakota Language Nest](#)
- Truth telling: [Rethinking Thanksgiving: How to speak to young children about historical and racialized trauma](#)
- MN Humanities Center - [Learning from Place: Bdote](#)

General Facilitator Tips

- Read through all the questions first.
- Reiterate the purpose of the discussion is to learn from each other.
- Create an agreement with everyone in the discussion group that helps create a safe, nonjudgmental atmosphere. Acknowledge that talking about race can be difficult.
- Be sensitive to how people identify.
- Be prepared for a response to any remarks that might be offensive. The person saying it may not be aware that it is offensive, so be gentle in pointing it out.

Group Agreements

Ground rules and group agreements are a way to respect safety. Ask members to brainstorm and collectively determine group agreements. Here is some information you can reference:

- [Group agreement information from Seeds for Change](#)
- [Community Agreements tool from Just Lead Washington](#)
- [Sample group agreement from GSAFE](#)

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