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at Lach Klan School with Gitxaala Nation

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# Land, Language, and Food Literacy

*Co-Creating a Curriculum at*

*Lach Klan School with Gitxaala Nation*

Ada P. Smith

**Abstract:** Food is and has always been more than a source of physical nourishment for Gitxaala Nation; it is a way of life, a source of pride, and integral to community wellness. Like First Nations across Canada, Gitxaala continues to experience the lasting effects of colonization, impeding community access to traditional territories and relationships supporting hunting, gathering, fishing, cultivation, and trading of Indigenous foods. The profound dietary shift as a result of colonization has contributed to disproportionately high rates of food insecurity, diet-related health issues, and barriers to the transmission of cultural knowledge around Gitxaala foods. Food sovereignty has emerged as a movement and framework for Indigenous peoples in Canada that emphasizes strengthening traditional food practices, food sharing, and trading networks in order to support community health and well-being. For Indigenous peoples of Canada, food sovereignty is also about the right to feeding and teaching children about foodways rooted in community knowledge, stories, memories, and wisdoms. This research explores how the Gitxaala community garden and the summer reading program at Lach Klan School can be leveraged as a platform for learning—or “food literacy”—toward achieving the broader goals of food security and food sovereignty. Through hands-on learning activities that integrate local, Indigenous language and knowledge, this research suggests that food literacy activities have the potential to contribute to the goals of food sovereignty in Lach Klan by better equipping students to define, demand, and make decisions that shape what their food system looks like now and into the future.

**Keywords:** Food sovereignty, Indigenous food sovereignty, food literacy, decolonization, Indigenous knowledge

## Introduction

Schools have been powerful places of colonization that have contributed and continue to contribute to the undermining of Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing, especially around food, land, and language. From the 1930s to 1970s, residential schools actively deployed curriculum directed toward the eradication of language and traditional cultural practices. Learning was focused on replacing Indigenous knowledges and ontologies with versions of Christianity and modernity (Marker 2015). In British Columbia the history of residential schools was a key part of what scholars have called “cognitive imperialism” (Battiste 2000) and “culinary imperialism” (Kelm 1999), affecting the continuity and well-being of Indigenous knowledges, foodways, and the health of communities and peoples. As Indigenous education scholar Michael Marker writes:

In Canada and the US, residential schooling was deployed to replace the Aboriginal child’s actual identity, language, and connection to the land with a shadow personality that would serve the interests of mainstream economic and cultural goals toward colonial dominance. The results of this dark experiment continue to plague both Aboriginal and dominant societies. (Marker 2004, 103)

While the most recent curricula in BC schools aim at “decolonizing” curricula with improved goals and representation, a number of tensions remain. Now, creating a more context-specific and culturally meaningful curriculum is an important piece in addressing larger goals of decolonizing and indigenizing education. Specifically, food systems education is important in light of concerns around loss of food systems knowledge, food security and sovereignty, and sustainability.

Today many Indigenous communities, “in evaluating the assortment of difficult choices and dilemmas about education and economic development, now take the view that over the long term the loss of local knowledge and patterns of moral reciprocity essential to traditional communities will become more significant to the world’s ecological well-being” (Bowers et al. 2000, 193). As a result, food literacy and land education programs have gained momentum as pathways to achieve goals of improving curriculum to address some of today’s most pressing issues of

sustainability and food sovereignty while also aiming to make curricular content more culturally meaningful and relevant.

This research seeks to describe and share the co-creation of food literacy resources rooted in Gitxaala culture, language, land, and community that could help acknowledge and expand the positioning of Indigenous knowledge alongside “Western” definitions of literacy and promote well-being among Gitxaala youth. I explore how the Gitxaala community garden and the summer reading program at Lach Klan School were leveraged to provide a platform for learning, or for food literacy, that can support broader goals of food security and food sovereignty. This project is an example of a specific, local action that addresses global concerns around how Indigenous food sovereignty can be “operationalized” in practice, how Indigenous knowledge is used in food systems education, and the role and relationship of education or food literacy to achieving the goals of food sovereignty.

### Food Literacy: Concept and Context

Food literacy is a relatively new term and concept that has been used as a “guiding template” of sorts for academics and practitioners, such as myself, whose work is located at the nexus of education and advocacy. Food literacy, as Cullen and colleagues have defined it, is “the ability of an individual to understand food in a way that they develop a positive relationship with it, including food skills and practices across the lifespan in order to navigate, engage, and participate within a complex food system. It’s the ability to make decisions to support the achievement of personal health and a sustainable food system considering environmental, social, economic, cultural, and political components” (Cullen et al. 2015, 143).

In developing scholarly discourse, food literacy has been recognized as a mechanism for individual and social change to support the goals of food sovereignty. As Cullen and colleagues posit, food literacy encompasses more than a person being “educated” about food; it aims to “empower people to engage in society and influence their local food systems” and “bridges the individually focused learning outcomes of food skills education with the more emancipatory and collective ideals of community food security” (Cullen et al. 2015, 143).

Food literacy as an avenue to create a deeper level of food system engagement has been controversial. One major criticism is that food literacy programs may be too heavily focused on individual behavior change at the expense of overlooking the structural constraints and avenues of change for greater food system sustainability (Kimura 2011; Sumner 2015). Moreover, in this context it should be recognized that the term *food literacy* may be problematic, with roots in the Western term *literacy*, which has historically negated Indigenous language and ways of knowing. Now there is opportunity to redefine what these terms mean in process and practice.

As Cullen and co-workers (2015) highlight, food literacy and literacy cannot be separated from their environmental or social context. This research and the programming it supports aim to provide an example of how the theoretical concept of food literacy can be mobilized at Lach Klan School in Gitxaʼała; a context where it is a priority to celebrate intercultural competence, multilingualism, and culturally relevant knowledge, skills, and relationships with food.

## Gitxaʼała: People and Place

Gitxaʼała have lived on the northwestern coast of North America without interruption for millennia. Gitxaʼała people, also known as Git lax mʼoon, or “people of the saltwater,” have long inhabited their *laxyuup* (territory), stretching from Tsibassa’s oolichan grounds on the Nass River south through Prince Rupert, encompassing much of the mouth of the Skeena River and south to Aristabel Island (Menzies 2016). The long-established tribal structure, *ayaawk* (laws), and *Sm̓algyax* language of Gitxaʼała people have remained important aspects of what makes Gitxaʼała people *Gitxaʼała* in the face of the changing social, political, and geographical landscapes over the course of history in the place they call home.

Today there are 1,900 members of Gitxaʼała Nation and around 400–450 individuals live year-round in the village of Lach Klan (also referred to as Kitkatla), which is situated approximately 45 kilometers southwest of Prince Rupert on what is known today as Dolphin Island on British Columbia’s northern coastline. While Lach Klan has been occupied by Gitxaʼała people throughout their history, it became an especially important gathering place after foreign diseases brought by Europeans in the

late eighteenth century led to a significant population collapse (Menzies 2016). The village is a twenty-five-minute float plane ride from Prince Rupert (where the nearest supermarket and hospital are located) or can be accessed via a two-and-a-half-hour, twice-weekly ferry or boat ride. During the 1880s the Canadian government designated Lach Klan as one of twenty-one Gitxaala “reserves,” and due to its geographic location isolated from any Euro-Canadian center, Gitxaala Nation is classified by the Canadian government as a “remote Indigenous community” and thus accesses initiatives aimed at these populations (Government of Canada 2011).

Gitxaala Nation’s geographic location, coupled with the effects of colonization, has impacted Gitxaala residents’ ability to access healthy foods and generated community-wide food insecurity (Anderson 2016). Gitxaala are first and foremost people of the saltwater, whose relationship with the sea and the sustenance that it provides is of utmost importance to Gitxaala culture, community, and livelihoods. This is evident in the current focus of community targets to protect marine resources (*Diduuls: A Good Life*, n.d.; Menzies 2016). While plant food cultivation has taken a secondary role in the Gitxaala food system, both historically and to this day, increasing access to healthy foods other than marine food resources is also a community priority (*Diduuls: A Good Life*, n.d.). However, the transportation costs associated with getting imported fresh foods (such as cultivated fruits and vegetables) to Gitxaala’s remote location make eating fresh produce prohibitively expensive and scarce for the community, where 75–85 percent rely on social assistance (Anderson 2016). And while some of the healthiest foods are “traditional” foods located in the waters right around Lach Klan, these foods have been made less accessible by colonial policy as well as the adverse economic conditions with which Gitxaala Nation lives (Anderson 2007; Lutz 2008). Food insecurity and a shift in Gitxaala residents’ diet over the twentieth century from mostly “traditional” food to predominantly non-traditional food has contributed to disproportionately high rates of type 2 diabetes and other diet-related illness (Anderson 2007).

Despite the lasting legacy of colonization, Gitxaala foodways, language, and traditions remain strong, and continuing to strengthen them is a top priority for the Gitxaala community. Gitxaala has fluent Sm’algyax speakers and the language is an ongoing part of education in Lach Klan. Feasts, drumming, dancing, and the transmission of *ayaawx*

(laws) continue to play an important role in the community, and food harvesting, hunting, and traditional processing and preparation make up a substantial part of Gitxaala diets. It is imperative that programs, policies, and people intending to support the Gitxaala community not only recognize but also build upon and celebrate the knowledge and practices already within community that support wellness.

### The Gitxaala Community Garden: A Shared Space for Land-Based Learning

For Gitxaala Nation, developing a community garden program and a “Food of Our Own” traditional food workshop program have been priorities for many years and currently form part of a larger community wellness plan. The community garden evolved out of efforts that began in 2007 to support individuals who were interested in having household garden beds. This project was initiated by Merle Bolton, the social development officer in the community at the time (Baloy 2007). The project grew out of desire to encourage knowledge sharing around the many aspects of gardening (planting, transplanting, seasonality, etc.) and was highly social from the beginning (Baloy 2007).

Funding from both the Produce Availability Initiative (2009–11) and the Remote First Nations Food Systems Project (2012–14), governmental initiatives run by British Columbia’s Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Health, helped support the development of the Gitxaala community garden that exists today. These initiatives were intended to be collaborative efforts to support First Nations communities in revitalizing their own food systems. The Remote First Nations Food Systems Project was led by the Heart and Stroke Foundation in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Agriculture and funded by the Provincial Health Services Authority of BC. Fifteen First Nations communities were involved in this project, including Gitxaala Nation’s *Kitkatla First Nation Community Agri-Food Plan* (Kumar 2014). Out of this initiative, Gitxaala formulated a “Community Agri-Food Plan” to outline the current status of food in the community and goals for the immediate and long-term future. From this plan, the vision for the community garden program was developed along with a program called Food of Our Own. The goal of the Food of Our Own program was to support and celebrate traditional food harvesting, preparation,

and preservation through workshops where knowledge sharing and skill building could take place. Together, the benefits of these programs are intended to be multifaceted, from improving access to healthy, fresh, and affordable food, especially for pregnant women and Elders, to providing opportunities for youth and interested community members to grow their own food. The garden program in conjunction with Food of Our Own programming explicitly aims to address food security and food literacy and ultimately reclaim food sovereignty for Gitxaala Nation (Kumar 2014). Funding for the gardening program resumed in 2017. The Heart and Stroke Foundation, under the auspices of the First Nations Health Authority, started “developing a comprehensive strategy that includes heart disease research, food access, etc. This shift includes guaranteed funding that will augment programs such as the Gitxaala Home and Community Care program’s work on chronic diseases such as diabetes” (Ignas 2018).

Today Gitxaala’s community garden consists of raised beds, a large greenhouse, a seed-starting house, and a tool shed. The vision incorporates aspects of permaculture design, a model that promotes holistic thinking around the concepts of “earth care, people care and fair share” (Ignas 2018). Community members can “adopt” a raised bed to care for and plant their own seeds, or they can choose to help care for “community beds.” The construction of the greenhouse in 2016 was a major community effort, requiring hundreds of hours of community volunteer labor, reflecting the strengths of the community to reach their goal of increasing local food production. The Gitxaala community has tried to grow a range of vegetables and herbs with donated and purchased seeds, but the community has had the most success with just a few crops, including strawberries, kale, potatoes, lettuce, and hearty herbs such as mint. In 2016 the green bean, pea, and onion crop yields also demonstrated that these vegetables are viable for the growing conditions, and tomato plants grow well in the greenhouse (Ignas 2018). These are very different than traditional crops, which included foods such as wild crabapple and berries (Menzies 2016). The North Coast climate with relatively cool temperatures, lots of rain, and limited sunlight, has been a determining factor for the success of the garden. Dolphin Island does not have much topsoil, so buying and barging in enough soil for the raised beds has proven to be another key element in the success of garden crops.



The Gitxaʼa community garden program is a vehicle toward wellness that extends beyond the physical nourishment that garden foods provide. For Gitxaʼa, “wellness implies wholeness”—it implies that physical, mental, and spiritual needs are met among individuals and the entire community (*Diduuls: A Good Life*, n.d.). Well-being for Gitxaʼa stems from the concept of *Sayt Goolm Goot*, translated in English as “Of One Heart,” an approach to health that prioritizes community relations and entails a sense of solidarity among individuals. These relationships position food as more than a commodity, but rather as medicine, as a powerful source of community knowledge, story, and ceremony, and as a pathway for connecting community. A central goal of the community garden is to provide a safe learning and sharing space for community members of all ages, with a strong emphasis on engaging youth. In an effort to harness the educational potential of the garden and increase its reach to more youth, partnering with students and teachers in the Lach Klan summer reading program during the period of this work was a natural fit.

Establishing community garden programs in First Nations communities, like Gitxaʼa, has great potential in addressing the multifaceted challenges of poor diets and health outcomes, food insecurity, and the transformation of Indigenous knowledge around the cultivation and consumption of traditional foods. However, it is important that more attention is given to understanding the challenges and opportunities of these programs as they manifest in specific, local contexts. Recovery from the complex issues associated with the transformation of traditional plant food use and foodways will require efforts that are as much aimed at healing physically (from diabetes and other diet-related illness) as they are about healing, ultimately, from colonialism, and re-empowering communities to create their own just and sustainable food systems.

## Research Methodology: Reflections and Reflexivity

This research began as a conversation. In the spring before my summer fieldwork was to take place, an exploratory research trip to Lach Klan was arranged where the objective was to talk to community members about what they envisioned for the garden project and other food-related programs for the summer season and where they might want

support. Through meetings I had with Cindy Ignas, director of the Gitxaala Health Centre, and community members involved in the garden project in years past, it became clear that engaging youth in the garden and food-related activities was a priority for the Gitxaala community. This research project builds upon more than two decades of collaborative research projects between Gitxaala Nation and the University of British Columbia that have actively engaged Gitxaala community members and UBC students in community-oriented research. It is through these established relationships that channels of communication were opened up to me.

The conversational approach I took from the beginning centers Indigenous knowledge traditions and methods of gathering information that follow spiritual, communal, and holistic principles (Kovach 2010; see also Dwyer 1982 for an early anthropologist's example from Morocco). By choosing a conversational approach I am attempting to locate my method in a way that respects Gitxaala sensibilities while acknowledging my subject location as a settler researcher. The research conversations are dialogical, reflective, and relational. They position the researcher as both participant and observer.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes, "The intellectual project of decolonizing has to set out ways to proceed through a colonizing world. It needs radical compassion that reaches out, that seeks collaboration, and that is open to possibilities that can only be imagined as other things fall into place" (Smith 1999, xii). As a settler researcher, my approach has been to attempt to subsume my sense of entitlement and privilege through quiet listening and conversation in a way that respects the decolonial program Smith describes.

It is from this perspective that I set up my intention to practice "decolonizing research" that centers on collaboration and reciprocity, or the obligation to be actively supporting a community vision in return for the opportunity to engage in learning myself—where both the research process and outcome aimed to support Gitxaala's effort toward cultivating a community garden program that will provide a more sustainable mode of food production for the community while offering fun learning opportunities for youth. During my fieldwork in July and August 2017 I worked with Gitxaala Health Services staff and teachers at Lach Klan School (K–12, specifically with grades 1–3) to bring community garden and food literacy activities into the summer reading program and school

curriculum. The main objective of the reading program is to reduce the loss of reading and handwriting skills over the summer, otherwise known as the “summer slide,” among students aged four to seven years. While the emphasis of the program is on improving literacy in its most basic definition (i.e., the ability to read and write), given the tandem educational goals in Gitxaala to teach children about healthy food and traditional foodways, incorporating garden and food-related activities was an attempt to expand the definition of literacy to include food literacy in this context.

Gardens offer a space where students can engage in experiential learning about a range of topics from plant growth to life cycles. During the months of July and August I worked with Lach Klan School teachers and community members to facilitate the engagement of students in the growing, processing, harvesting, and preparation of food procured from the garden and greenhouse as a way to complement curricular activities while working toward achieving Gitxaala Nation’s goal of engaging youth in food-related activities (Kumar 2014).

### **Case Study: Developing Decolonized Food Literacy Resources and Activities at Lach Klan School**

Our approach to the design of curricular resources at Lach Klan School was founded on the philosophy that curriculum development needs to be created and designed for the unique context and circumstances of students and teachers. Orlowski and Menzies (2004) draw upon the work of American educator Catherine Cornbleth (1990):

Curriculum is contextually shaped. The relevant context is both structural and sociocultural. Sociocultural refers to the environment beyond the education system/structural context. The sociocultural context includes demographic, social, political, and economic conditions, traditions, and ideologies . . . that actually or potentially influence curriculum. (Cornbleth 1990)

We favor the philosophy ascribed to Orlowski and Menzies (2004) and other researchers and practitioners in the field of decolonizing education who highlight the importance of integrating local knowledge into curricular resources in order to make them more context-relevant (Butler 2004; Ignas 2004; Orlowski and Menzies 2004).

While Lach Klan School follows the provincial standard curriculum, it is a Band-administered school, meaning that Gitxaala has more direct control over the school and hiring practices. The current principal, Elmer Moody, is encouraging the development of locally relevant teaching materials that will assist students in achieving provincial standards from a Gitxaala perspective. The resources created for this research aim to reflect the educational goals both at Lach Klan School and among the broader Gitxaala community. By integrating Sm'algyax into otherwise English-only resources and by engaging students in learning around Gitxaala foods and “healthy” food, these resources aim to improve curriculum by making it more locally relevant while also raising students’ academic performance and contributing to greater wellness. In this way, our approach is aligned with that of other scholars in the field who posit that linking research with community educational needs can serve multiple interests and produce beneficial outcomes for all (Butler 2004; Ignas 2004). Curricular resources in this project were intended to serve multiple uses relevant to community needs and as a contribution to academic theory.

## Land

At Lach Klan School, our approach to developing food literacy activities aimed to mobilize recent scholarly discourse around land education that suggests it has the potential to develop in alignment with Indigenous pedagogies, to center indigeneity, and to confront educational forms of settler colonialism (Tuck et al. 2014). In land education, the concept of land refers to land, water, air, and subterranean earth and attends to long relationships and the pedagogies and knowledges that have emerged from those relationships. Land can be in both urban and “remote” settings and can also refer not just to the materiality of land but also to its “spiritual, emotional, and intellectual aspects” (Tuck et al. 2014).

Land education is uniquely suited to developing curriculum that is place-specific, just as the relationships of Indigenous peoples to land and place are diverse:

Every cultural group established their relations to [their place] over time. Whether that place is in the desert, a mountain valley, or along a seashore, it is in the context of natural community, and through that understanding they established an educational process that was prac-

tical, ultimately ecological, and spiritual. In this way they sought and found their life. (Cajete 1994, 113, as cited in Lowan 2009, 47, in Tuck et al. 2014)

Some scholars engaging with the concept of land education make important distinctions around how this approach deviates from pedagogy of place, or place-based education. Drawing upon the work of Styres and colleagues (2013), a pedagogy of *Land* (capitalized and italicized in their work to emphasize the complexity of the concept) goes beyond simply focusing on local contexts and issues; it recognizes the specific relationships Indigenous peoples have had to their lands since time immemorial and honors *Land* as a fundamental living being. Styres and co-workers (2013) describe how in their approach to land education, “the use of the word *place* always includes an explicit awareness of *Land* on which place exists.”

In Lach Klan, land education involves curriculum that takes place not only within garden boundaries but also walking along the seashore and moving through the forest and brambles. Gitxaała are Git lax m̓oon, or people of the saltwater. The importance of Gitxaała’s relationship with the sea, past, present, and future, is apparent in community voices, writing, and art. Maintaining a strong connection to land and water through educational opportunities, via knowledge sharing, and by increasing access to resources that would allow community members to engage in activities that connect people with land and sea has a prominent place in Gitxaała’s community wellness plan:

Our connection to the land and water is at the very heart of Gitxaała culture. It is the essence of how we have provided for ourselves in a sustainable way for thousands of years. . . . For our youth, having a strong connection to the land and sea will provide them with the ultimate connection to our culture and will provide them with pride and understanding. (*Diduuls: A Good Life*, n.d.)

Relational pedagogies of land are not new (see Simpson 2014, “Land as Pedagogy”). Recent trends in land-based learning only reflect an improvement on the status quo—an evolution rather than a revolution in the educational system today—that harnesses knowledge and ways of knowing that have existed for centuries. It is also important to recognize that although land education may be a step in the right direction toward

decolonization, it too must attend to its embedded issues of colonialism and Indigenous rights and sovereignty (Tuck et al. 2014).

## Language

For Indigenous peoples, land-based learning necessitates pedagogy that integrates the use of Indigenous language. Thus our approach to curricular design attends to widespread consensus among researchers and educators around the need for multilingual education policy and practice toward “recognizing, reclaiming, and revitalizing competences based in historically outlawed and formerly unsupported bilingual and bicultural development” (Atleo and Fitznor 2010). Pedagogy that constructively responds to Indigenous language loss has been found to be closely related to Indigenous students’ academic success (Atleo and Fitznor 2010). Moreover, Atleo and Fitznor found that for Indigenous learners, the ability to communicate both within and across ethno-cultural communities is related significantly to their experience of well-being, both subjectively and objectively defined.

For Indigenous students, learning language and having meaningful cultural experiences early in life provides a foundation for lifelong personal development and formal educational achievement despite continued adverse conditions (Atleo and Fitznor 2010; Cummins 1991 and 1994; Hornberger 2009). This points to important reasons for building upon ongoing efforts to revitalize heritage languages to produce multilingual competence in schooling. Lach Klan School is part of School District 52, which has one of the most progressive Aboriginal Education programs in British Columbia and is the only district in Canada that teaches an Indigenous language to all students. Thus our approach to developing food literacy curriculum aimed to work toward the tandem goals of Sm’algyax language and English language learning and competence at Lach Klan School.

## Description of Food Literacy Activities

The summer reading program at Lach Klan School provided a unique opportunity to develop curricular materials that link the pressing issues of personal health, environmental sustainability, and Indigenous knowledge with experiential, land-based learning to support the educational

needs of Gitxaala students. The goal of this research was to benefit all participants—community, teachers, and researcher alike. Given the specific needs and experiences of First Nations communities, it is especially critical that knowledge stays in communities in ways that leave tangible results and benefits. Ultimately, the lesson plans we designed are aimed at simultaneously meeting and exceeding the current resources and objectives of the summer reading program at Lach Klan School and are an attempt to improve upon the tacit Eurocentrism of the current curriculum. It was our intention that the curricular materials that we have developed would have a lasting positive impact.

The initial resources and activities were designed in consultation with educators and teaching assistants at Lach Klan School, as well as from the University of British Columbia, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Additionally, members of the Gitxaala Band Council were involved in discussions of the objectives of the resources created before, during, and after the summer reading program.

While I was in Lach Klan I was working primarily with grade K–1 teacher Keri Taylor and her teaching assistants, Pam Tolmie and Nina Tolmie, as well as with two student helpers, Arlene (age 16) and Isaiah (age 14), and 12–20 students between the ages of 5 and 7 years. My role was to integrate garden and food-related activities 2–4 times a week. My role in the garden was overseen by Cindy, the director of the Gitxaala Health Centre and Community Garden Project, and I was working in collaboration Myrna, the principal caretaker of the garden, to coordinate and organize activities for the students.

In this research I illustrate some of the challenges and positive opportunities that emerged out of developing three food literacy resources with teachers and community members over the course of the five-week summer program: (1) hands-on garden and Gitxaala food activities; (2) Gitxaala foods handwriting and reading worksheets in English and Sm'algayax; and (3) a Gitxaala Summer Foods book in English and Sm'algayax.

The lessons were piloted during the months of June, July, and August of 2017. It is our hope that the careful consideration we put into the design of the lessons will allow them to be used in future summer reading programs and in language and literacy units at Lach Klan School throughout the academic year.

## 1. Hands-On Garden and Gitxaala Food Activities

The objective of the hands-on learning activities was to offer the students an opportunity to play and learn about food and the land outside the classroom. Given the desire of the Gitxaala community to engage students both in the community garden project and in activities around Gitxaala foods and food traditions, the goal was to develop a curriculum that honored both of these desires, and thus both Western and Indigenous foodways, in tandem. By encouraging Indigenous language use alongside English, sharing stories about the land, and involving students in community-initiated, experiential activities, the aim was that the reading program would act as a pathway to strengthen relationships to food and the land in Lach Klan. We walked with the students from the school to the garden twice every week (about 400 meters) for a total of ten lessons over the course of the Reading Program period. The activities included:

*Garden Introduction: Walk, Listen & Learn*

*Seaweed (fucus//paatsah) Harvest*

*Planting Seeds*

*Transplanting Strawberries*

*Weeding*

*Mint Harvest/Tea-Making*

*A Day Indoors: Strawberry Smoothie Celebration & Garden Stakes*

*Spruce Tree Storytime*

*Potato Planting*

*Jarring Salmon*

## 2. Gitxaala Foods Handwriting and Reading Worksheets in English and Sm'algyax

Initial weeks of rain in Lach Klan made us uncertain of the opportunity of being in the garden more than twice a week, if that. From this concern emerged the idea to find activities that would develop the reading and handwriting competencies for K–3 learners, but that focused on words and stories around healthy and local foods and land. After an initial search using the online resources we knew of, we found very few ac-



tivities that were relevant to the North Coast or could be adapted to the Sm'algyax language and that would reflect important nature and land words and concepts in Lach Klan. While our search was not extensive and there are undoubtedly better resources we did not find or have access to that would integrate locally relevant material, this basic search gave us insight into what kinds of teaching resources are commonly found online. In hindsight, with better preparation, we could have accessed some of the more locally relevant resources that have been developed (through the Aboriginal Education library of School District 52, for example); but in the moment we did not have access to these and felt pressed for preparation time.

The letter and word tracing activities we found were limited to using words and pictures already in the database, which reflected conventional, Western agrarian life-ways; for example, "A is for Apple," and "B is for Banana," "I is for Ice Cream," and image searches of "medicine," "seaweed" and "fish" for coloring (working on fine motor skills) that displayed pharmaceutical bottles, tropical oceanscapes, and goldfish. Worksheets focused on gardening and farming were limited to Euro-western representations of agriculture. By searching in the databases that were "go-to's" for Keri (and apparently others) for finding worksheets on all topics from math to reading, we came up with an activity that included images representing what appeared to be a white settler farmer in overalls, holding a pitchfork, who was sowing seeds for foods such as peas, corn, apples, and, inaccurately, bananas, into the ground.

While our search was limited to open-access online resources, these tools are commonly used, amplifying how irrelevant and hollow the "stories" told through academic lessons can be for Indigenous students. Julie Cruikshank's work on educational ethnohistory illuminates how often stories from the past serve as moral narratives that are placed in the present moment. In this case, the narrative of the "farmer" or "gardener" as a Euro-western individual planting foods that don't grow in Gitxaala territory reinforces the "us" and "them" divide, where growing food appears to be something that takes place elsewhere. Cruickshank's work highlights how "non-transportable native knowledge is; it resides in actual places on the landscape rather than in abstract domains" (Marker 2000). The generalized representation of gardening and food in the educational resources we were finding revealed the implicit value of transportability or a "one-size-fits-all" approach to learning that is not only irrelevant

in given contexts but can serve to undermine place-based, Indigenous knowledges.

Since we were unable to find or generate resources using images and words in the existing databases that would be relevant to Gitxaʼa students while attending to the same learning objectives in reading and writing, I endeavored to create resources “by hand” that would serve both needs. I worked with Keri and Pam to identify food- and land-related words that were seasonally, locally, and culturally relevant and that could be written in both English and Smʼalgyax. These words would serve as templates for handwriting exercises where students trace the word and rewrite it below. The list of words and worksheet examples follow:

seeds—nawaʼna

roots—huust

leaves—ʼyens

plant—waʼnaa

strawberry—maguul

lettuce—ʼyensm kʼamksiwah

carrots—galat

potatoes—sgusiit

seaweed (fucus, used to fertilize garden beds)—pʼaatsah

bull kelp—moox

salmon (general term)—hoon

medicine (such as devils club or spruce pitch)—xaldawxk

sun—gyemgm dziivs

rain—waas

soil—yuup

summer—suunt

salmonberries—makʼooxs

berry basket—gok

berry territory—ʼnaxmaay

blueberry—smʼmaay

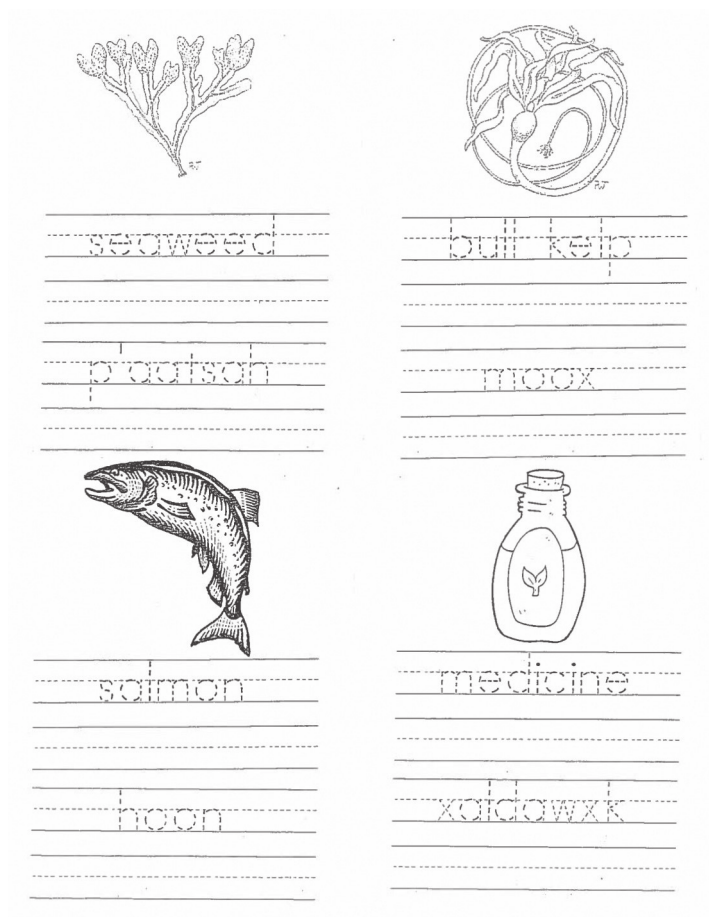


Fig. 1. Sample, Gitxaala Foods Handwriting and Reading Worksheet

### 3. Gitxaala Summer Foods Book in English and Sm'algyax

A central goal of the food literacy resources and activities we developed was to build a positive and celebratory relationship with Gitxaala foods, land, and culture. Given that the educational context for these resources was the summer reading program, it seemed appropriate to create a Gitxaala Summer Foods Children's Book that would celebrate the survival and revival of Gitxaala language and knowledge around foods of importance. The intention was that this book would be fun and aesthet-

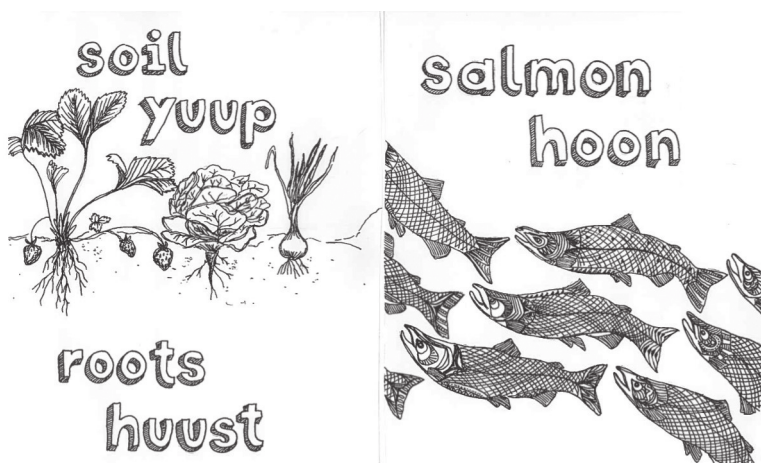


Fig. 2. Sample Book Page: Soil/Yuup, Roots/Huust, Salmon/Hoon



Fig. 3. Sample Book Pages: Seeds/Nawa'na, Leaves/'Yens

ically beautiful—the kind of book a child might want to page through over and over just to look at the illustrations.

The book is a simple word book for children aged four to seven years that includes a series of food and land words in both English and Sm'algyax with pen-and-ink illustrations. Although original printed copies of the book were made for teachers and students, the book also

exists in pdf format so that educators or parents who have the file can print the document on legal size paper and fold it to create their own copy. The book is not a comprehensive compilation of relevant words but is rather simple and short. As in children's books such as *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* or *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* by author Eric Carle, there is little text as the book is aimed at very young readers. More important than the text is the dialogue that parent or teacher and child have as they are reading; the questions, stories, and conversation that the words and images provoke. In addition, after seeing a copy, students are asked to color in the black and white illustrations—another way for them to spend time enjoying the pages (while also working on dexterity and fine motor skills).

### Discussion: Rooting Indigenous Knowledges into Food Literacy Education in Gitxaala

The process of integrating Indigenous knowledges into food literacy education is one that is continuous, ongoing, and contextual, and the desired outcomes are no doubt diverse and unique to particular contexts and places. Combining the Lach Klan summer reading program and Gitxaala community garden program offers a unique opportunity to root Indigenous knowledges into the educational curriculum while also engaging community members, especially youth, in food-related activities that support community wellness goals. Four key insights emerged that suggest food literacy activities in Gitxaala might be strengthened by: (1) harnessing local knowledge of “own foods”; (2) accessing stable funding for critical garden materials and to support garden coordinators; (3) increasing flexibility in lesson plans and scheduling to accommodate place-based and culturally relevant activities; and (4) supporting language and cultural training for educators.

#### Harnessing Local Knowledge of “Own Foods”

First, the rich knowledge of Gitxaala's “own foods” in the community presents a great opportunity to incorporate more culturally meaningful curriculum into food literacy activities both in Lach Klan School and in the garden program itself. In Gitxaala there are many community members actively engaged in and seeking to cultivate, harvest, hunt, and fish

for “own foods”—or food resources that Gitxaala maintain, harvest, preserve, exchange, prepare, and consume themselves. For Gitxaala Nation, producing their own food is important for maintaining Gitxaala food and cultural security. Gitxaala’s “own foods, like one’s own family, are building blocks of identity” (Anderson 2016).

In Gitxaala, the consumption of own foods is understood to contribute not only to an individual’s physical health, but to the health of one’s identity *as Gitxaala*, and thereby to the community’s health (all three being inseparable in the traditional Gitxaala holistic view of health). (Anderson 2016)

Studies have demonstrated that simply focusing on the presence or absence of “healthy” foods is an outdated approach to studying community food security (Short et al. 2007). Rather, further attention must be given to foods people come to “demand” and use (how and why), what markets (formal or informal) already exist in a community to provide culturally acceptable foods at relatively low prices, and who will benefit from any interventions considered (Short et al. 2007).

Currently, there is opportunity for the garden program to harness and mobilize local knowledge of Gitxaala foods (Baloy 2007). In interviews conducted in 2007 by researcher Natalie Baloy, community members shared rich knowledge and memories of plant cultivation. One community member spoke about planting potatoes on Bonilla Arm, an island southwest of Lach Klan, where the soil is more suitable for growing. *P’aatsah*, a type of seaweed, was used to fertilize the soil where the potatoes were planted. Roe on kelp was also rinsed and used as a fertilizer. When it was time to harvest, they would bring home fifty-pound sacks of potatoes, ready to be stored and eaten. On islands throughout Gitxaala’s *laxyuup* (territory), berries were planted and cultivated and clam gardens and other mariculture were tended. In interviews conducted by Baloy (2007), Gitxaala community members talked about their attempts and failures at growing food such as carrots and cabbage in Lach Klan. The only foods one family grew in Lach Klan were blackcurrants and rhubarbs—growing all other foods where the soil was better (Baloy 2007).

This knowledge of what foods grow best given the climate and soil in various parts of Gitxaala’s *laxyuup* is rich information that could be used to inform Gitxaala’s garden program today. Given that food production,

harvesting, and hunting of “own foods” already exists in a strong way in community, it is worth considering how the community garden can continue to support existing food production and harvesting. Harnessing existing knowledge of the cultivation of plant foods in Lach Klan to inform the design of the garden program today may also promote a more abundant harvest of foods that are better suited to the land and climate while growing foods that are more connected to Gitxaala culture and identity.

## Stable Funding

Second, out of this research emerged an awareness of the ongoing challenges of community participation and the reliance on continued funding to maintain infrastructure and buy materials (such as soil and seeds) for the garden program. From the beginning, the Gitxaala community garden has relied on funding and the local capacity for volunteerism to deliver on its objectives from year to year. Research on community food security projects suggests that “best practices” do not use strategies based on charity because of its potential to “depoliticize hunger and poverty” and divide participants into “the donor and the recipient; the powerful and the powerless; the independent and the dependent; the altruistic and the grateful; the competent and the inadequate” (Welsh and MacRae 1998). Consistent with this research, reliance on ongoing and inadequate funding has been a challenge to the success of the garden, but it could be leveraged to support the goals of increasing participation and bolstering partnerships to engage more community members in garden activities.

The Gitxaala community garden program, which began as a project supported through major grant funding, currently lacks stable funding to purchase critical materials such as seeds and soil. Because the garden is located in Lach Klan, an area historically not used for gardening due to the lack of fertile ground, the garden will continue to depend upon soil that is barged in or excavated from elsewhere on the island. Today, and into the foreseeable future, purchasing supplies depends on the ability to secure stable funding.

Participation in garden programs is often contingent upon having a paid coordinator to ensure that core work in the garden is carried out. While Myrna was the paid coordinator during my field research, she explained that she can’t do it all: there is a lot of work involved with gar-



dening! While it is a romantic image to tend to seedlings and harvest strawberries, gardening on large scale requires a substantial amount of time and physical effort on a consistent basis.

To address this challenge, leveraging funding to hire a program coordinator emerged as a possible solution to support the ongoing partnership with Lach Klan School as well as other programming that could bring more people together in the garden, increasing the exchange of ideas, conversation, and knowledge around food.

### Operating on Nature's Time: Flexibility in Scheduling for Food Literacy

Third, attempting to integrate hands-on, outdoor-oriented food activities into the existing structure of the reading program illuminated the need for more flexibility in scheduling for food literacy activities that revolve around seasonality, weather, and the activities of Gitxaala food harvesters and producers. Over the course of the summer, it became clear that flexible scheduling is necessary to integrate food literacy activities into the educational curriculum at Lach Klan, especially with regard to traditional food harvesting outside the garden space. The reading program, which took place from 9:00 a.m. to noon, Monday through Thursday, posed barriers to pursuing food-related activities in Lach Klan when it made intuitive sense based on "Nature's time" and the readiness of the community to share skills and knowledge.

The five-week-long summer reading program was not long enough for the students to witness their seeds grow until they were ready to harvest. Many of the seeds, if cared for, would grow into fully fledged plants by late August or early September, when the program was no longer running. Currently teachers from Lach Klan School don't typically take their classes to the community garden during the academic term starting in September, and the students in the summer program are in different grades with different teachers who may or may not want to utilize the garden for teaching activities. There are many opportunities for children to engage in garden activities outside the school day, but despite efforts to communicate clearly about activities such as planting and harvesting, engaging youth has been a challenge.

In addition to navigating the challenges around scheduling, we were faced with the issue of where our "classroom" would and could be on



food literacy days. Given the importance of “being in place” to learning about land and food, we realized that food literacy education in Gitxaala could mean moving beyond the garden to engage the students in both culturally and seasonally relevant activities. Some of the activities we wanted to include were berry picking, medicine harvesting, and plant and wildlife identification walks. Almost immediately we realized these activities would be hard to “schedule in,” given that we were uncertain how much time they would take to complete.

Integrating hands-on learning around Gitxaala foods necessitates a shift in highly structured and organized lesson plans to allow for more emergent and flexible scheduling. While this may require a shift in the typical curriculum, there is opportunity for educators to allow for more flexibility in lesson planning “on the ground” on a day-to-basis. Although teachers have material that must be covered, benchmarks to achieve, and time allocated to various activities, educators also have a reasonable amount of discretion regarding how they use their time. Thus the wide range of possibilities for teachers to integrate activities such as berry harvesting, medicine making, and jarring salmon with lessons in science, health, language, and cultural curriculum throughout the school year may need to stem from a transformation in mindset and an openness to accommodating “Nature’s time.”

### Supporting Language and Cultural Training for Educators

Finally, from this work emerged the need to provide support for educators at Lach Klan School on how to integrate Indigenous knowledge appropriately into the curriculum. At Lach Klan School there is a small teaching staff of twelve to fifteen full-time teachers. The demographic of the teaching staff is predominantly non-Indigenous, relatively young, inexperienced, and looking for a short-term position, which poses challenges around integrating food literacy activities that draw upon local Indigenous knowledge.

During the summer when this project took place, it became clear that knowing how and where to access materials, resources, and activities around Gitxaala foodways, language, and land is not always a straightforward process. First, developing hands-on, land-based activities requires building trusting relationships with knowledge holders, which takes time and is an ongoing process. Thus the limited duration for

which teachers often stay at Lach Klan School poses challenges to developing and maintaining relationships required to build a food literacy curriculum. In addition, it became clear that it would take time to develop a nuanced understanding about what information was acceptable for teachers (including myself in a teaching role) to learn and share and what could not be integrated into food literacy activities. For example, over the course of the summer we discussed the idea of taking the students berry picking. One of the teaching assistants, from Gitxaala, suggested that we look for the native blueberries, which were harder to find than salmonberries and were a unique and celebrated berry in *laxyuup* Gitxaala. However, in our attempt to figure out who might know where the berries were, we discovered that community members were protective of this information. Despite agreeing that it was a good idea for the kids to be able to recognize the blueberry plant and go harvesting, people were concerned that sharing the knowledge would lead to over-harvesting of these choice berries. On the other hand, introducing Sm'algayax language into the garden and food activities was celebrated and encouraged. When asking community members for translations or verification of translations found using the online Sm'algayax-English dictionary, people were eager to share what they know and also eager to learn.

For new and non-Indigenous educators navigating the terrain of integrating community knowledge into the curriculum at Lach Klan School is not a straightforward process and can be uncomfortable at times. However, engaging in the process is essential for educators in Lach Klan to be active agents in decolonizing education, pushing education to be more relevant and achieve higher pedagogical expectations. Engaging with Indigenous knowledge forces educators to question what knowledge is important and why. It begs educators to rethink the purpose of education from place-based and context-specific viewpoints.

The challenge of addressing the clashing worldviews of Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators and learners is not unique to Gitxaala and has been a struggle in education in British Columbia (and around the globe) for decades. In 1967 UBC anthropologist Harry Hawthorn published the second of two influential reports that brought to attention the social and educational conditions of Indigenous people in British Columbia, emphasizing a need for more cross-cultural teacher training (Marker 2015). At Lach Klan, supporting teachers through more language

and cultural training would equip them with an understanding of the importance of integrating the Sm'algayax language and food-related activities into the curriculum to promote learning and wellness in Gitxaala. Research has found that, whether intentionally or not, individuals from dominant cultural backgrounds unfortunately continue to dismiss the importance of Indigenous knowledges. Tuck and colleagues assert that “the ongoing colonization of land and people [is] in fact embedded within educators’ and researchers’ practices and understandings of (environmental) education around the globe” (Tuck et al. 2014). Not only could training provide a better understanding of the importance of food, land, and language for Gitxaala, but over time, tangible teaching resources for integrating local, land-based pedagogies could be compiled to support educators in Lach Klan. This could include resources that already exist—such as the educational materials by the *Forests and Oceans for the Future* (2018) research group at UBC, developed and designed for use by North Coast communities in British Columbia—as well as the development of new resources from year to year. Newly developed resources might utilize elements of Alannah Young’s “Cedar Pedagogy” (Young 2015) and include: (1) a list of resources available about Gitxaala culture and stories; (2) examples of materials and information that may fit simultaneously into classroom and land-based learning; (3) identification of appropriate ways to develop relationships with resource people and ways in which to build relationships with Indigenous knowledge holders following local protocol; and (4) a discussion on how these pedagogies could have a pivotal role in strengthening (Gitxaala) people’s holistic health.

By providing training, resources, and materials highlighting the ongoing importance of food, land, and sea for Gitxaala people and how this connection can be strengthened through educational opportunities, educators would be better equipped to integrate food literacy activities in their classrooms. Not only could this training help teachers reach their own highest pedagogical potential, but the curriculum that is developed can play a pivotal role in enhancing learning and strengthening wellness for students at Lach Klan School.

## Food Literacy: From Knowledge to Action

There are various perspectives around what food literacy means, how it is carried out, and what the broader implications are for learners and

the food system as a whole. Beyond the immediate goals of these resources to improve literacy for Gitxaala students, the ultimate goal of food literacy activities is to build knowledge that can then be utilized in everyday decisions around food that will support food sovereignty goals. However, as Widener and Karides (2014) posit, “knowing one’s food is a *first step* in food literacy.” Being able to name and identify a variety of edible berries that grow in *laxyuup* Gitxaala and knowing how to catch, smoke, and prepare salmon is one thing; but understanding the nutritional benefits of these “own foods,” being able to evaluate critically their environmental, economic, and health implications when compared to imported packaged and processed goods (salmon vs. steak or berries vs. candy), and then choosing to make a decision to eat what optimizes your health, the health of the environment, and the social, cultural, and economic health of your family and community is another.

In order to understand how learners might go from *knowing* to *utilizing* information in a meaningful way, we might consider a framework for achieving “health” literacy, which we can extend to include food literacy, developed by Velardo (2015) that argues for the importance of achieving literacy at the functional, interactive, and critical levels (Velardo 2015). Functional food literacy is a basic understanding and ability to access information about how food can affect personal and planetary well-being, whereas interactive food literacy is a person’s ability to act on that information. Lastly, critical food literacy is the ability to engage critically with and evaluate the implications of actions taken to address food system issues from a household to a global scale.

Some scholars would consider this more complete and critical understanding of the food system “food system literacy” (Widener and Karides 2014). Widener and Karides argue that the absence of food *system* literacy is a social problem that prevents conversations and engagement with more complex issues—such as structural inequities, injustices, and links of food to sustainability—that are important, if not essential, components of achieving food sovereignty. Thus they suggest that food literacy in its most basic definition is simply not enough. From their study, Widener and Karides (2014) found that the informational exchanges that happen between consumers and small-scale producers who have a shared interest in good-tasting, healthy food may start a conversation, but that these conversations lack important topics such as justice and sustainability, which could be addressed by more food system literacy. Their

argument is not for the development of more food knowledge, but for “the acquisition and utilization of food system literacy for a more just, secure, participatory, and inclusive future, which requires knowing the many interconnected parts of the food chain, long before and long after the point of consumption” (Widener and Karides 2014, 675). Along the same lines, *food citizenship*, or “the practice of engaging in food-related behaviours that support, rather than threaten, the development of a democratic, socially and economically just, and environmentally sustainable food system” (Wilkins 2005), has developed as a concept that suggests we need a population that is *food systems literate* because that is how we are able to translate knowledge into action and make decisions as a food citizen.

Moreover, even with food system literacy, it should be recognized that community knowledge, awareness, and action are still vulnerable to political forces. These challenges may not be able to be overcome in some circumstances by the activities of the food or education community. Even in a community that is engaged in food literacy efforts with the support of public education, there are larger forces such as political interests and the grasp of corporate food marketing that continue to undermine community goals and actions.

While food literacy certainly is not a “silver bullet” for remedying the myriad challenges of the food system on any scale—and how to employ these educational efforts remains unclear—this deliberation, I argue, is what might act as a catalyst to increase engagement with topics such as the structural constraints around food access. As we begin to imagine what food literacy looks like in Lach Klan, Velardo’s (2015) tripartite model could be used to map the development of food literacy competencies beyond the accumulation of basic food knowledge into the future.

## Conclusion

Food plays a vital role in Gitxaʼa community wellness; nourishing individuals in mind, body, and spirit, strengthening connections in community, and reinforcing relationships to land and sea. This research focuses on Gitxaʼa Nation’s goal to strengthen relationships and connections with their own foodways and explores the efficacy of the community garden and Lach Klan summer reading program as a pathway to achieve this goal.

Despite the legacy of colonialism, First Nations have demonstrated an amazing resilience. Communities like Gitxaala have maintained longstanding connections to culturally meaningful foods. Just the same, the colonial settler state has worked hard to undermine community self-sufficiency and well-being. While there is no one solution to address these compounding challenges, institutions—such as health clinics and schools—play a central role in shaping understandings of health and one’s relationship to food. There is a growing realization that institutional programs and interventions that aim to support a communities’ self-determination and their enhanced food sovereignty must be context-specific. They must take into account local capacity, knowledges, wisdoms, and practices around food. At the same time, recent scholarly discourse suggests that educating youth in all aspects of their food system (i.e., food literacy) can contribute not only to transforming their own food habits but also to the emergence of a new generation that is engaged and equipped with knowledge and skills to address issues of food security, sovereignty, and sustainability in their community.

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