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INTERVIEW

Language, Land, and Identity: A Conversation with Vanessa Anthony-Stevens on Transforming Bi/Multilingual Education in Indigenous Communities

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Abstract

As globalization and colonial legacies continue to impact multilingual practices, the actionable need for bi/multilingual education has become increasingly critical (Chew et al., 2019; Wang, 2023). This conversation explores the complexities and dynamics in Indigenous language revitalization through an in-depth interview with Dr. Vanessa Anthony-Stevens, a dedicated educator and researcher operating at the intersection of language, identity, and power in Indigenous educational contexts. Inspired by her teaching, research, and diverse community-driven experiences, Dr. Anthony-Stevens addresses the transformative potential of multilingual education and emphasizes the significance of reimagining multilingualism to honor Indigenous knowledge (Smith, 2021; Smith et al., 2018). Through her reflections on her lived experiences and engagement with innovative projects, she illustrates the challenges, possibilities, and opportunities for flourishing bi/multilingual immersion and acquisition. Ultimately, our dialogue challenges "language status that is colonial, imperial, and oppressive," and invites families, teachers, researchers, and policymakers to collaborate in bringing multilingualism to pedagogies and policy. This interview was conducted in person in Dr. Anthony-Stevens' office at the University of Idaho.

Keywords

multilingual; indigenous languages; land; revitalization; teachers

Jue: Good afternoon, Dr. Anthony-Stevens. Thank you so much for accepting this interview invitation and agreeing to share your experiences and perspectives on bi/multilingual education in Indigenous communities[1]. My wish for this conversation is that it inspires us to deconstruct colonial and oppressive conventions for multilingual education in Indigenous schools and reimagine multilingualism in American schools and across the world. To start, could you please tell us more about you, your research context, and your research emphasis?

Vanessa: I work at the University of Idaho, a state land grant institution in Idaho. My research, I would say, has largely focused on the western parts of the United States and

[1] Before our conversation began, we took a walk through a hallway and several rooms that showcased a variety of Indigenous visual art, artifacts, posters, bilingual books, and photographs. This art-based (Leavy, 2020) and multisensory walking experience (Powell, 2017) not only enhanced our in-depth interaction but also served as a warm-up for our subsequent interview. It enriched our mutual understanding of Indigenous language education by immersing us in a textured and engaging environment.

Mexico. A lot of the work I do involves exploring colonial and Indigenous contact zones in the Americas, and enactments of Indigeneity, particularly thinking about the intersection between land, family, institution, sovereignty, and political power. My research interests broadly study the intersections of language, identity, and power in the construction of education and educational opportunity. How are we influenced by structures like schools and in what ways? How do Indigenous students see themselves as learners? In what ways are Indigenous students given access to their language, or cultural practices to imagine possibilities for future selves? More specifically, I am often looking at the ways that institutions of power constrict and/or oppress certain kinds of multilingual identities and not others. My work has been inspired by my lived experiences, years of being a teacher in urban and rural community settings, and years as a classroom teacher in K-12 schools serving speakers of non-dominant language varieties.

Jue: Thank you. What factors ultimately contributed to your dedication to your current research on the intersections of identity, multilingualism, place, and coloniality in contexts of schools and teacher education? What motivated you to engage in these research areas?

Vanessa: Watching the world around me makes it clear that power and colonial oppression are very much alive. I am motivated by imagining what could be different. For example, what would an environment that helps people thrive in their languages be like? My husband is an Indigenous man who has a big Apache family. I am a mother. I have Apache children. I wonder, what kinds of schools do my children need to thrive as Apache people? What kinds of teachers do my children need? To do that work I find it important to ask myself, as an educator, how do we look at one another and put ourselves in each other's shoes? As a teacher of multilingual children, I try to imagine, what would a teacher *need* to be able to honor multilingualism? What would a teacher need to be supported to have greater creativity and allow for linguistic expression in her classroom?

In the work I do, I am always asking myself, if I am working with brilliant, beautiful children who speak many languages, what do I do to be useful to them? How do I help support them with all of these resources we have, these institutions, all this technology? How do we bring people, ideas, and places together to see what is needed here and allow for those conversations grounded in multilingualism to happen? The colonial world wanted extraction, domination, and oppression. I feel like it is very exciting to think about what we might do differently today in an anti-colonial space, but also to recognize the patterns we have inherited through colonial oppression.

Jue: What were some of the thoughts and ideas you had as you established and developed the local IKEEP[2] and CIRCLES[3] programs? How have these thoughts developed into your current goals as you worked through Indigenous language revitalization and bi/multilingual education?

Vanessa: One thing that is very clear to me is that Indigenous people are vibrant, abundant, imperfect, brilliant, and contradictory, like many other humans. I always question how it is possible that we can come to places like the university and have this idea that there is one type of Indigenous person in the US or world. When I was in Arizona, I had the opportunity to work in a beautiful school. It was a charter school founded in collaboration with the Tohono O'odham Nation. The school had a bicultural and bilingual mission. It was focused on grounding young people in the language and culture of the Tohono O'odham community. This focus framed school as a place where young people acquire not just one singular cultural expectation, but an Indigenous community-minded expectation for purposeful living as well. For many non-dominant communities, multilingualism is a desire. My dissertation work focused on negotiating bicultural and bilingual education opportunities at that school, and its unjust closing due to narrow definitions of school achievement (Anthony-Stevens, 2013).

I worked with Native teachers who had gone through programs designed to promote Indigenous teacher certification in Arizona. After that, I went on to work with Indigenous teachers from Mexico. I had the privilege of working with large, diverse groups of teachers, teachers who were abundantly vibrant people speaking many languages. I understood that if you change the terms of engagement around schooling, and if the center of gravity is Indigenous mindsets driving what is needed in education, the conversation would look different than if it is the whitestream institution saying, "*come assimilate, we will tell you how it needs to be*", and different than if it is one or two Native people and a sea of white people. I learned that if you want to generate knowledge that honors the needs of Indigenous communities in schools, there are whole complex knowledge systems that Indigenous people are thinking about and engaged in. There is so much that schooling can do differently, but it would be very hard to do that work without a critical mass of Indigenous thinkers. So as someone who had access to power in education such as myself, I started to invest in thinking about creating these little generative spaces in higher education where people can come

[2] Indigenous Knowledge for Effective Education Program (IKEEP) at the University of Idaho.

[3] Cultivating Indigenous Research Communities for Leadership in Education and STEM (CIRCLES) at the University of Idaho.

together, and share ideas, such as creating materials in their own languages and dialects (Figure 1). My Indigenous colleagues are much more knowledgeable about what change should look like than administrative leaders assume.

Figure 1. Bilingual Books and Visual Riddles Made by Indigenous Teachers from Mexico to Teach Elementary Students

So, my goals have been to really nurture those spaces. For example, our IKEEP program adopts a community-centered approach to teaching and learning that models how we thrive as humans and families (Figure 2). We support Indigenous people through teacher and administrator credentials, and we hope our IKEEP scholars grow, and that they will bring back new members to the conversation who continue to grow the program. Being a part of IKEEP is a long-term engagement, it is intergenerational, and it involves many, many people. It has to embrace space for diversity, of course, because there is not just one way to be a Native teacher. We try to leave behind the colonial ways of thinking and develop a tolerance of the actual diversity of and among our children, which makes people in power uncomfortable. These days I am having mixed thoughts about how much schools will ever

really change, but I am hopeful that Indigenous people who are committed to perpetuating their community's identity and futures will create different schools. There will be, just as there are, new schoolhouses that look different. Maybe they will not even be houses, the future of schooling will be shaped differently.

Figure 2. A Poster Illustrating IKEEP Students and the IKEEP Vision and Pathways

Jue: I have witnessed so many Native American scholars thrive in the IKEEP and CIRCLES programs. How did your understanding of empowering Indigenous languages transform as you progressed? Are there any projects with scholars that informed these transformations?

Vanessa: One of our CIRCLES scholars, Marissa Spang, was awarded a grant for using immersive virtual reality (I-VR) to teach and learn the Cheyenne language in a land-based virtual learning environment using high-context activities, such as harvesting, and local

waterways or plants knowledge. The project has the potential to contribute to the field of educational research and revitalizing endangered Indigenous languages but is engaged on local terms. Jessica Matsaw, an IKEEP alumni, is now a curriculum developer for a language immersion school, Chief Tahgee Charter School, which is a charter school that is commissioned by the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes. She is participating in creating bilingual and bicultural curriculum with teachers. These Indigenous scholars' work inspired me to go back to some of the foundational premises: you respect that people want to be members of their communities, with people who respect who they are, who believe that their knowledge systems matter, and who are thinking about how to perpetuate their languages for future generations of learners. The scholars' relationship with building these communities is an iterative process. They are approaching research or teaching in ways that respond to their community's needs. As this work goes on, you grow it, share it, make mistakes, learn from it, and then you bring it back and you keep showing each other what is possible. It is a kind of spiral process of learning that I am involved in as well.

We have many IKEEP scholars who have gone through our program and have come back to work on graduate degrees or have moved into different leadership roles. That tells me that these Indigenous scholars are doing something important and that IKEEP is not just a teaching credential. Part of our programming has involved focusing on Indigenous language work. We invest in opportunities where people can be invited into language work in ways they may have previously felt excluded from. There are so many ways colonial institutions like schools have made Indigenous language learners feel alienated from their language. They are told not to speak it, or that it is too hard to learn. It can be a huge identity weight to try to reclaim a language that has been marginalized. There are lots of different ways that people can think about language. There is a whole additional layer to reclaiming space in schools for teaching with and through Indigenous languages.

Jue: Did you encounter any challenges or anxieties while working with people in your research, your community-driven engagements, or other experiences? If so, in what ways?

Vanessa: Always! There is symbolic and material violence occurring in schools that are denying multilingualism or denying Native kids the opportunity to thrive. And I am a white woman of European settler ancestry. Because of that, I have never been able to justify doing research that is just to learn about settler colonial impacts on people or to document its phenomenon. A critical question that I always ask myself is 'What is needed here' and 'What is needed now'. I do not get to answer that question alone, I have spent time thinking and

writing about this for other academics (Anthony-Stevens, 2017). Since I am not an Indigenous person, I am not the one who should define what Indigenous children need. I am not a tribal citizen, nor a person bearing the brunt of these unjust policies or ideologies. Settlers should not be the ones driving the direction of Indigenous education, but they need to participate. It always has to be collaborative, which means that you have to work with people who have different identities and skill sets. So frequently the people who are most knowledgeable about what is needed for an Indigenous community are not academics or credentialed teachers.

Hence, changing the dynamics of who decides how to do language documentation and analysis is a central question. There is a lot of work that I have done in the realm of language education, in the practice of promoting, supporting, and encouraging teachers to develop their multilingual muscles. But I do not necessarily publish or lead with that narrative in my work. So, what does that work look like for me? That might mean I am the principal investigator of a grant that resources capacity-building centered around Indigenous people and their languages. Or it might mean organizing a gathering of like-minded people who work for tribal governments, or serve Tribal communities, and we gather for a conference to think and create together. The products that come out of those events are *their* products. They are not for academic journals or the academy.

A recent book that I am co-editing about multilingual Indigenous education is going to come out in April 2025. The book, to be published by Multilingual Matters, features chapters that are written by authors who are not expected to be academics and who wrote in their preferred first language, which for about half of our authors was not English. Though the publisher wants all final manuscripts in English, the process of bringing these ideas to print has been multilingual. Because the book is about Indigenous language reclamation practices in critical times, we invited authors who are *doing* the work, not the people who are talking about the work in the academy. The authors are not necessarily people who write academically all the time, and we believe that is an important contribution to the field. But the process of ushering all of those manuscripts to completion has been really time consuming. It produces anxiety, because the way that a lot of research work happens in our institutions, or through funding agencies, does not account for Indigenous calendars and timelines. It does not account for the pressures that people might feel, or our other obligations. We also live on a continent controlled by capitalism, where systems create and maintain poverty and exclusion from health care, clean environments, and so on. So, asking

somebody to write about the amazing work they do takes time away from their work, their families, and sometimes local urgencies such as community obligations. My research is interested in asking questions in context with communities, which means being accountable to Indigenous people by saying this: we do not move forward with research unless it feels like the right thing to do.

If research is taking away from other things that are more important, we cannot justify the energy needed to document and disseminate. But I feel like part of my job is to think with community partners about the power of research and how research can be a tool for self-determination and an intervention to address local urgencies. I am always thinking about negotiating. Living in inequities is always anxiety-producing. Good research requires trust.

Jue: That is very thought-provoking. I wonder, how do you envision the future for bi/multilingual education in Indigenous communities? What are the next steps for teachers, educators, and the native scholars they work with?

Vanessa: We are seeing the emergence of amazing schools across this nation. In the United States, we are in a critical moment where there is an increased number of federal resources being dedicated to Indigenous language immersion and revitalization. There are some really amazing people doing language work. I am expecting that we are going to see more language immersion schools. What I believe is going to happen with Native education in the next twenty years is twofold: the institutional part, that more teachers have opportunities to get officially credentialed to teach their Native language or be aware of their Native language, and to engage in redefining what school is. There is also a parallel movement where Indigenous educators and allies are going to build different schools and invest in different forms of Indigenous education, like community-driven or land-based education. That direction makes me really excited because I think that outside of contemporary school buildings, multilingualism will flourish.

Schools are not designed to allow Indigenous languages flexibility the way that we need because schools separate children from the land and their family members. You can bring a language like Apache, or Nez Perce, or Shoshone into the school, but language needs more than the schoolhouse to flourish. Language needs the environment. Language needs the air. Language needs a lot of the texture of where it comes from, which is with the land. I am increasingly thinking about that. I had heard some of my Apache in-laws and my husband talking about language and people, such as “the Apache language lives with the land.” You

cannot take the language away from the land, and the land responds to the language which knows her intimately. The language can travel, but it is part of the land. The language is in the land, meaning it has a home. That is a whole different way of thinking about language, and it is not the way the English language has evolved as a human-centric assemblage that masks context. English and Apache are fundamentally different in the way they currently relate to the world (Figure 3). I am interested to see what happens as more people are speaking about language-land relationships. Contemporary concerns for Indigenous languages also coincide with the climate crisis. Our climate is changing so drastically, and Indigenous homelands are being compromised by capitalism's extractive nature. More and more people are witnessing dramatic local changes and that is speaking to Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike. As people become more conscious of the need for diversity, linguistic and biological, it would be helpful if schools can be the place where Indigenous languages could be held with respect and people could think together about how to enact the changes necessary for planetary wellbeing.

Figure 3. Picture of Vanessa's Daughter, Hazel, Building her Traditional House, *gowa*, during her Coming-of-Age Ceremony

Jue: This is why I would acknowledge the significant contribution of the IKEEP program and how the program supports Native teachers and scholars to teach their languages in Indigenous schools.

Vanessa: Our goal is to include more dedication to language teaching, and that programs like IKEEP could be a place that we embrace, not exclude, multilingualism. The power of IKEEP

graduates is that they are people who transform things, but they may or may not do their best work within the boundaries of contemporary schooling. There is much more we need to do as a higher education program to support Indigenous multilingualism. As mentioned earlier, I do not believe schools are designed to value Indigenous ways of living. Accordingly, it is very hard for a language to thrive in an environment that does not actually value the people, the land, and their worldviews. Educator preparation needs collaboration with the family, the community, and even the media. Everybody should be involved because we are using language all the time to paint our worlds.

Jue: Indeed, language matters, multilingualism matters, and culture matters. Before we wrap up this interview, I am wondering if there are any pedagogical strategies and practical implications that you would recommend for Indigenous language reclamation practices. What can teacher educators do to support this work? In what ways might teachers be supported in their efforts to bring multilingualism to teaching, pedagogies, and policy?

Vanessa: Pedagogically, we have to be a lot more flexible about language. We have to see language as breathing, right? And if you see language as breathing, you are going to allow for a lot more ways of using language interactively. We will have to take a step back from the rigidity of grammar-only, or language purity ideologies. In order to do that, we have to know and be in a relationship with language as dynamic and linked to context. It is challenging to teach teachers who have no sense of multilingualism or have not been asked to support multilingualism. We have to change the way we prepare teachers. For example, we have to put language diversity at the center of understanding human learning. I do not believe that we can do this work without building people's greater consciousness about language acquisition, sociolinguistics, language varieties, and translanguaging. We also need people who are multilingual to teach, and that is fantastic, right? We need to encourage multilingual people to use their full capacities in teaching and we have to recruit them into teaching. I believe we should help teachers understand linguistic transfer, like translanguaging, or how a student can express herself in one language or variety and can use their "power language" to translate the meaning of their expression into another language.

There are places all over the world where multilingualism is normal. However, the impacts of hegemony and hierarchy marginalize one language over another. Go to West Africa and you can meet people who speak four different languages for different reasons; go to Europe and meet people who speak four different languages. People in Europe are rewarded for speaking those languages because one of those languages might be French or

English, which are high-status languages. People in West Africa are not rewarded in schools for speaking multiple Indigenous languages, for example. Instead, children are told they need to learn French or English. The real problems with language use are colonial ideologies and continued imperial oppression. In society today, we must reclaim the understanding that multilingualism is normal, and that language transformation is normal. The world needs linguistic varieties to be sustained.

In addition, teachers who are multilingual need to get paid more. I have a couple of examples, and I know that there are other examples in the world. You go to Mexico or a place in the United States where you have Indigenous language teachers who are certified in their Indigenous language. However, they often get paid less than a teacher who is certified in general education ('general' meaning Western colonial content areas, English/Spanish, mathematics, etc.). If you are getting paid like a paraprofessional, even though you have an important skill, you are forced to persist in teaching because you love it so much. But you are not actually recognized or highly valued, nor supported to grow your craft. If we want to nurture a multilingual society, we have to invest—monetarily—in multilingualism and we have to reward it in our institutions. The state and federal governments will be slow to change, as the minority languages we are talking about are not currently considered high-status languages. But I think Tribes and teachers can play a big role in moving the needles. When a Tribal Nation invests in language education for children it is very powerful.

I try to imagine what kinds of conditions would be needed for a young person to want to learn a minority language and to flourish in that language. As we were talking, I was thinking about my own family's history and also about language loss. My ancestors spoke languages that were not necessarily minority languages, but they left their languages, nonetheless. In my household, although my grandfather was a first-language Polish speaker, I never heard him speak a word of Polish to us or his children. My dad grew up with his grandmother who was not proficient in English, but due to the language ideologies that told them Polish was not helpful and English was valued, we assimilated to Anglo norms.

It meant something to me to know there were other ways to describe the world. As a child, I knew there were reasons why people stopped speaking their language. I knew that those were complicated scenarios. In the case of my family, they did feel speaking Polish invited discrimination. How do you grapple with that? What would have happened if my grandpa had kept speaking Polish? Would he have prospered and been as economically successful as he was (e.g. white collar)? We can look back and say probably not. He made

some choices about his identity influenced by economic and social class opportunities. We cannot blame people for doing that, but we can understand that social conditions influence who we might be and become.

Jue: What might we do to make this play out differently? This is highly contextual, reflexive, and relevant to the hierarchies in society. Your story is thought-provoking, and this topic is heavy because there are so many negotiations that we need to strive for. So far it seems like there is a long way to go and we need cooperation and collaboration to support multilingualism. Do you have any parting thoughts to share with us?

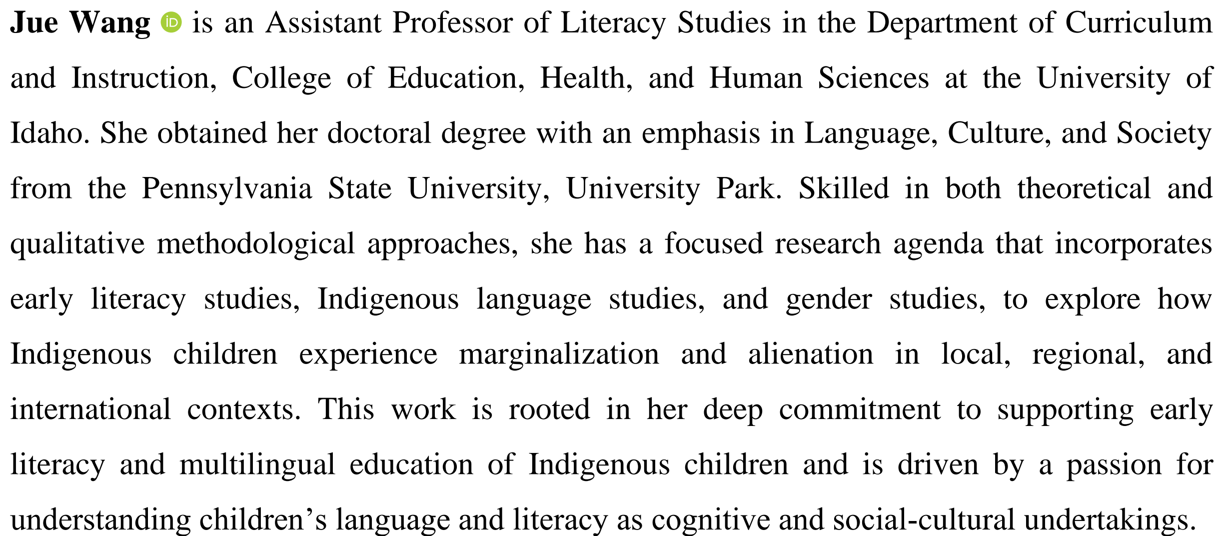
Vanessa: When my kids were little, we lived in a multilingual environment. The kids were always around people who spoke different languages, so they had an awareness of linguistic diversity related to place and identity. One day we went to Target in Tucson and there was a car there that had snow on the roof of it. Arizona has lots of mountains. It was winter and this person could have come from 3,000 feet higher in elevation. Carmen, my daughter, saw the car and said, "I wonder what language that person speaks." For her, geographic and land differences were markers of linguistic and cultural differences.

I have another memory of when I came to Idaho for a job interview. We had never been to Idaho. I called my young daughters from the hotel to recount my day, and they wanted to know what it was like up there. I said, "It's different." We had seen a well-known movie in Indian Country called *Smoke Signals*, which was shot up in the Coeur d'Alene Tribal area. I said, "It's like that movie *Smoke Signals*." But then they asked, "What do they speak up there?" I said, "They speak English." Carmen then asked, "What kind of English?" I laughed and said it does sound different from our English. I think of those little girls and how it was normal for them to understand that people were going to speak differently in different places. They were always very curious about it. They seemed to know there were so many varieties that make up how communities interact. If you travel over land, you are going to travel through these linguistic diversities. I want a world where those girls can continue to explore these important nuances. Unfortunately, that is not the way schooling operates right now and that is not the way our institutions work. As teachers, educators, and researchers, we all can do something to challenge linguistic hegemony.

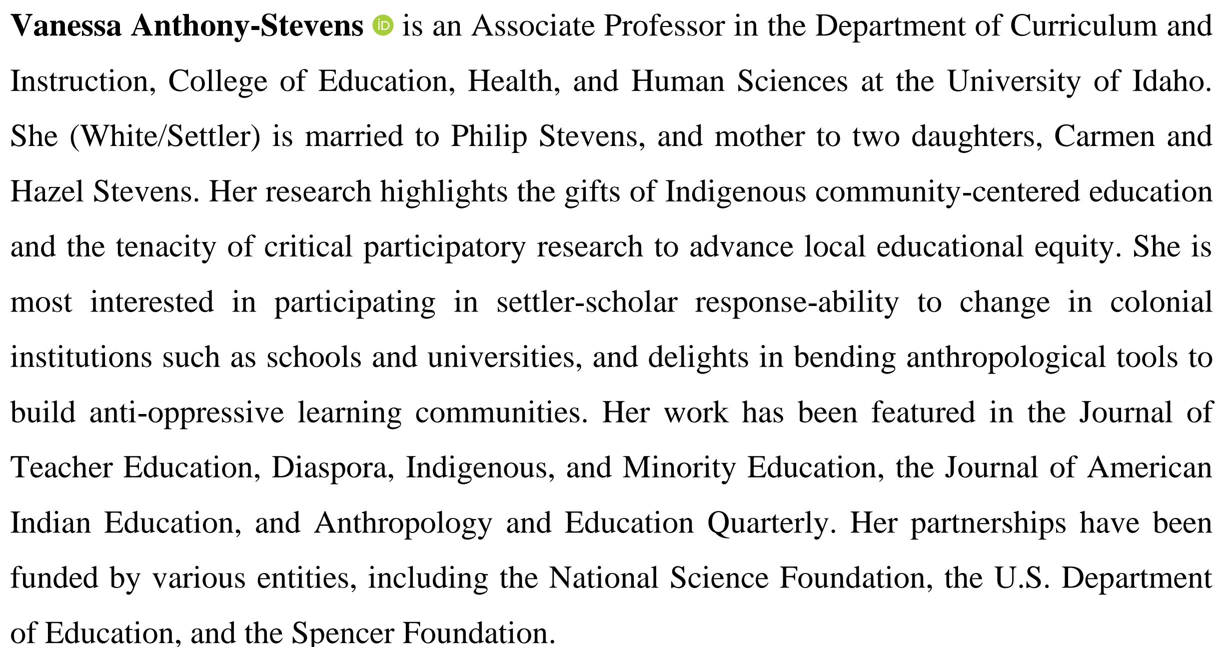
Jue: I am truly grateful to have you in this interview. Thank you so much for your time. This conversation was very inspirational and meaningful.

Vanessa: Thank you for asking me these beautiful questions.

THE AUTHORS



Jue Wang is an Assistant Professor of Literacy Studies in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences at the University of Idaho. She obtained her doctoral degree with an emphasis in Language, Culture, and Society from the Pennsylvania State University, University Park. Skilled in both theoretical and qualitative methodological approaches, she has a focused research agenda that incorporates early literacy studies, Indigenous language studies, and gender studies, to explore how Indigenous children experience marginalization and alienation in local, regional, and international contexts. This work is rooted in her deep commitment to supporting early literacy and multilingual education of Indigenous children and is driven by a passion for understanding children's language and literacy as cognitive and social-cultural undertakings.



Vanessa Anthony-Stevens is an Associate Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences at the University of Idaho. She (White/Settler) is married to Philip Stevens, and mother to two daughters, Carmen and Hazel Stevens. Her research highlights the gifts of Indigenous community-centered education and the tenacity of critical participatory research to advance local educational equity. She is most interested in participating in settler-scholar response-ability to change in colonial institutions such as schools and universities, and delights in bending anthropological tools to build anti-oppressive learning communities. Her work has been featured in the Journal of Teacher Education, Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education, the Journal of American Indian Education, and Anthropology and Education Quarterly. Her partnerships have been funded by various entities, including the National Science Foundation, the U.S. Department of Education, and the Spencer Foundation.

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