



# Humility. Listen. Respect: Three values underpinning Indigenous (environmental) education sovereignty



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## Abstract

This article looks beneath Indigenous (environmental) education sovereignty to uncover the underpinning values of Humility; Listen; and Respect. These values are invoked by education practices that have existed in the so-called Australia forever and have the potential to change the way we live and interact; restoring health and relationships with Country, each other and more-than-human kin. These are not pretty concepts to “do,” they comprise of deeper axiological ways to “be.” It is imperative Indigenous knowledges are centered when talking about “the environment,” as colonialism continues to cause severe and irreversible damage across the globe. These values encompass a shift toward Indigenous Education Sovereignty, that is, education grounded in Indigenous knowledge, for our grandchildren’s grandchildren.

## Keywords

Indigenous education sovereignty, environmental education, indigenous knowledges, indigenous education, country, indigenous environmental geographies, indigenous values

## Introduction

By “environmental education,” I simply mean learning activities that focus on deepening the relationships between humans and nonhuman neighbors and systems, which include plants, animals, fishes, insects, ecosystems and habitats, ecological flows, and entities such as water or air, and the earth system. Environmental education is nothing new for us...Indigenous peoples have diverse and ancient traditions of how teaching and learning are significant for sustaining critical ecological relationships and supporting resilience in response to seasonal and interannual environmental changes (Whyte 2019, 671).

This article will look beneath Indigenous (environmental) education sovereignty to uncover the

underpinning values of *Humility*; *Listen*; and *Respect*. From an Indigenous perspective, approaching education or research (or life) with these values at the core has the potential to adjust the gross imbalance currently at play. By this I mean, the colonialist, capitalist, exploitative, and extractive (not to mention heteropatriarchal) norms that exist in ‘so-called Australia’ (Day, 2021) and arguably in other settler-colonial states today. By embracing and embedding these values more prominently through education (and

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research) pedagogies and practices, there is potential to restore health and relationships with Country, each other, and more-than-human kin.

As a Gamilaroi woman, I see, hear, and feel these three values every day, coming from Elders and Knowledge Holders, from my babies and family, from warrior scholars all over the globe, and from Ancestors and Country. Country is purposively capitalized as a term which encompasses all living and nonliving entities including animals, trees, sky, spirit, water, wind, Ancestors, and much more. Its use by Indigenous people in so-called Australia is not synonymous with “the environment” (Whitehouse et al. 2016). This paper aims to show the ways *Humility*, *Listen*, and *Respect* can be seen to inform (and be informed by) Indigenous education sovereignty, including the processes (or elements) of education sovereignty; a crucial and urgent imperative (see Bishop 2021a, 2022). Hence, these are not pretty concepts to “do,” they comprise of deeper axiological ways to “be.”

It should be stated upfront that while this article sits within a journal focused on progress in environmental geography, it is interdisciplinary, breaking down arbitrary boundaries across environmental geography, human geography, Indigenous education sovereignty, environmental education, and critical Indigenous studies. It is common for “environmental education” to be interpreted as learning outside, in the bush, and “education” to be learning in the classroom. However, this approach fails to take into account that, from an Indigenous perspective and certainly evident in the opening quote by Potawatomi scholar Kyle Powys Whyte, the environment is all around us, in us, and in our relations with human and more-than-human entities (Whyte 2019). As Nyikina Warrwa scholar Anne Poelina with colleagues (2022, 406) insist, “living in a deep relationship with Country, with non-human kin is a lifelong environmental values and ethics-based educational process.” Therefore, perhaps a reframing of

environmental education is needed to one that is “learning on/from/as Country” in recognition that everywhere we learn, we are learning “on Country,” that we *are* Country.

This reframing of Country has the potential to break down and open up the boundaries of what is considered “the environment.” Thus, it is a shifting toward *Indigenous Education Sovereignty*; education grounded in Indigenous knowledges, on our own terms, in recognition that everywhere is Country. For a long time, literature was dominated by non-Indigenous scholars talking about Indigenous practices based on their observations. However, there is now a plethora of exceptional research written by Indigenous peoples across the world. It is Indigenous scholarship, predominantly from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in so-called Australia, that I will prioritize in this paper (Thunig 2022; Tynan and Bishop 2022).

I also want to note that these are not new ideas; learning on/from/as Country has been occurring in so-called Australia for thousands of generations and is well-covered in the literature (see e.g., Bawaka Country et al. 2015; Coff 2021; Lowe et al. 2021; Spillman et al. 2023; Thorpe, Burgess and Egan 2021). In addition, depending on where you are, there are shifts in language which describe similar Indigenous knowledge practices, including Land education (see McCoy, Tuck and McKenzie 2016); Land-based education (see Wilson et al. 2021); Indigenous environmental education (see Simpson 2002), and Place-based education (see Thornton, Graham and Burgh 2021). And while I have incorporated work by Indigenous scholars outside of Australia where there are resonances across ideas, values, and ways of working, preference has been given to literature which talks about “Country,” as it is referred to in so-called Australia. You might also notice this paper is slightly “unconventional” in its writing style; the tone changes, the font changes and I talk directly to you, the reader. Incorporated in italics throughout are my stories, reflections, recollections, and

ponderings using Indigenous autoethnography as an ethical responsibility to make my work accessible and relatable (Bishop 2021*b*).

## Indigenous Education and Eurocentric Schooling

Environmental education in Australia may be the oldest in the world (Poelina et al. 2022). Indigenous peoples in the country now known as Australia have always been practising education on/from/as Country, very successfully. These systems of educating have sustained complex and ancient knowledges for thousands of generations, involving knowledge-creation practices that transcend time. Despite many challenges over these thousands and thousands and thousands of years, it seems today, our Ancestors have left us the greatest challenge. The brutal force of colonialism justifies the elimination of life as “progress”; involving “large-scale extinctions of entire species” (Theriault et al. 2020, 899) while descending into “an era of potential human extinction” (Tuck and McKenzie 2015, 117). In addition to this, systems of education on, from, and for Country have been replaced. Now, learning primarily occurs in the classroom, where, in so-called Australia, the institution of schooling assumes dominance in the hierarchy of learning (Bishop and Vass 2021) as is seen in the substantial investment of time and money by governments and families. Inherent in this system is the role (human) teachers take on as “the educators,” university-qualified and thus verified (Bishop 2021*a*). The role of Country as teacher is rarely acknowledged in formal schooling.

The purpose of this (formal) schooling is clear—produce compliant and productive citizens/employees (Burgess and Lowe 2022). And, for young people, there is little other choice but to attend. Compulsory schooling in so-called Australia demands Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families send their babies

to the very institutions that have caused so much harm (see Hogarth 2018; Moodie, Maxwell and Rudolph 2019; Nakata 2007). And while there may be options outside of mainstream government schools, including homeschooling, religious-affiliated, and independent schools, there are few that are informed by Indigenous values and knowledges<sup>1</sup>. This means, for many Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal families, our young ones are indoctrinated into thinking in a certain way, within a system which has been built upon, and continues to uphold, a model of white supremacy (Worrell, 2023). This way of learning relies upon books, writing, sitting, tests, quiet, subjects, and discipline/s. It encourages “good” behavior, coercively enforced through rewards and punishments, and has strict rules around what this looks like:

Sit up straight. Be on time. Wait quietly.

Look at me. Stand in line. Pay attention.

Tuck your shirt in. Get back to work. Put your hand up.

Failure to conform is not acceptable, and there are consequences for disobedience. The (cultural) values inherent behind these expectations include, for example:

Meritocracy. Individualism. Respect for authority.

“Good” manners. Hard work. Ambition

Everyday these values and behaviors are performed and reinforced in most schools across Australia including, for example, at the school assembly when students and teachers are told to be upstanding for the national anthem, or every ANZAC Day<sup>2</sup> as poppies are displayed and the blast of the bugle signifies a bowed head and minute silence, or that special assembly in primary school when Easter hats are adorned and fluffy bunnies abound.

But there are other ways of teaching and learning. Nestled in the soil and engrained in the roots of ancient trees, there are education systems that have existed here forever. These systems have been held by Indigenous peoples and Country, protected and buried at times,

but always present. Indigenous (environmental) education and pedagogies are still practiced today, though often informally, emerging on weekends, school holidays, and family gatherings. Glimpses of learning and sharing that build in momentum, exciting the Old People. The following sections will focus on three core values that underpin these practices and pedagogies: *Humility. Listen. Respect.* However, it is important to note that these are not the only values underpinning Indigenous pedagogies and practices and they might not be applicable all the time or to all Indigenous groups across Australia, or more globally. It is not possible (nor desirable) to outline all values pertinent to all Indigenous peoples from all over the globe. The values may shift from Place to Place, depending on where you are, who you are, and who you're with. In following a relational approach (Tynan and Bishop 2022), I have primarily drawn on literature from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars in the so-called Australia, and moved out from there, looking for commonalities in approaches and understandings of Indigenous environmental knowledges across oceans and continents. There are beautiful bodies of work from Indigenous scholars which resonated and overlapped, where Place-based knowledges centered on relationality and custodianship of Country (see e.g., Goodyear-Ka'ōpua 2013; Kimmerer 2013; McCoy, Tuck and McKenzie 2016; Rubis and Theriault 2019; Whyte 2019).

## Humility

*Thanks Ancestor Tree for holding the ground together. For creating life-giving oxygen. Nothing else can do that. Look at the nearest tree you can see. How it holds steady in the strongest winds, the safe place for so many lives. It provides shade, water, food, and stability. Underground root systems connect trees to their kin as they interact with the soil and the organisms beneath. They are alive. They can communicate. They sustain infinite life over their lifetime. What have you seen, Tree?*

*Trees hold vital responsibilities that no other species can perform. We, as humans, are no better, no worse than the magnificent Tree. We are of Country. We are Country. Country is our Mother, our teacher.*

Now all of us living on stolen lands, with/as Country, must listen, look, feel, and understand our place. We must go deeper into the symptoms of imbalance and restore fundamental connections with/as Country in order to set things right (Smith et al. 2021, 166).

In broad terms, environmental education teaches us about nature. It encourages healthy relationships with the environment and promotes understanding of sustainability, human impact, and climate change (Korteweg and Russell 2012). An Indigenous worldview might understand these concepts through an axiology of *Humility*. Humility is the act of being humble, centered, and grounded. Humility encourages relatedness, and only taking what you need, including resources and knowledge. With this perspective, resources are to be shared, and knowledge is not owned or held by one person. Collective resources and knowledge ensures power is held communally, and therefore, comes with responsibility and accountability.

Humility also sees the important role all entities play, human, and more-than-human. It is not only an axiology, a value, humility is also an ontology, a way of being, and a methodology, a way of doing (Yunkaporta and Shillingsworth 2020). It is how we act in relationship with Country, and each other. In this way, humility allows for seeing outside of your (individual, human) self and living in ways that promote interdependency and interconnectedness between all living and nonliving entities (Tynan 2020, 2021). This is also known as balance. Balance is crucial to survival. Balance that is “non-hierarchical, non-dominating, and respectful” (Thornton, Graham and Burgh 2021, 12), within yourself, without ego; balance of self with community; and balance of self with multitudes of ecosystems, in recognition that we as humans

are no better than other species. This mindset of humility enables balance to be achieved.

On Darug Country, custodian Uncle Lex explains *yanama budyari gumada* as a “method of walking, and being, with softness and with care” (Ngurra et al. 2019, 280). He explains “that when we are walking with good spirit we are practising patience, humility, attentiveness and respect” (Ngurra et al. 2019, 280). Similarly, members of the Bawaka Collective, inclusive of Bawaka Country, teach us to stop, think and listen in a “spirit of humility,” in recognition that “humans are not the new gods to make and unmake and save the planet single-handed. Rather, they are in relationship, beings who must respond to, respond with, respond as other more-than-human beings, with the places that after all, do not stand separate from us” (Bawaka Country et al. 2020, 299–300). The connectedness of humans to the environment is echoed by Wiradyuri scholar Sue Green who states that “Aboriginal people do not see the environment and people as being separate” (2018, 140). In writing about caring within a colonized society, Green (2018, 145) asserts “to care for others is to care for all, and that includes land, animals and plants. People are not separate from any other form of life on this planet; we are not just interconnected and dependant for our survival; we are created from the same elements.”

With these teachings in mind, there is humility in what we know and importantly, what we don’t know. Thus, humility grows our relations, deepening understandings of relationality and sharing, and therefore, expanding concepts such as sustainability, human impact, and climate change. We are Country and Country is us (Wilson and Spillman, 2022)<sup>3</sup>. Once grounded in the value of *Humility*, deep listening follows.

## Listen

*It’s windy today. Fierce wind that creeps through your socks and whistles its way into the windows. It’s a little unsettling, so I’m listening. What is the wind saying? Who is it*

*speaking to? Here on Awabakal Country, I’m hunkered over my desk with the heater on and a dressing gown tightly wrapped around my legs. I’m eye-level with the trees as they shake and sway. I’m happy to be inside, looking out to the distant mountains, listening to a garbage bin shudder along the street. There’s a crispy clarity in the air and in my thoughts. The wind can teach us many things if we take the time to listen and learn. To tread slowly. To figure out if you’re on the right track.*

Listening to Country, to Custodians, will help heal Country and ourselves, both the listened-to and the listener, if it moves towards balance (Smith et al. 2021, 165).

Listening can be tricky in a world which values speaking. Many people don’t listen. Many people don’t know *how* to listen. It’s bigger than just concentrating on what people are saying. Listening is a lost skill in a world that values self and ego, contribution and input. Too much talking. It’s hard to see the big picture when you’re just thinking of what to say next. Or cutting people off to falsely finish their sentences. Listening is not just a skill to demonstrate comprehension or politeness, it can be much more. Listening can be part of a value system. It can bring quiet to your mind, your spirit. It can create deep connection with people and more-than-human kin. What does it mean to you to deeply listen?

Deep listening accounts for the unsaid. The unspoken and the silences. It can also tune you into the world around you. Yuin scholar Anthony McKnight (2015, 282) shares that in “Yuin ways of knowing, learning and behaving we must listen to Minga (Mother) speaking to us without voice so that we can see her story through the wisdom of the Elders.” Furthermore, McKnight (2015, 281) points out that “listening and responding to Country is being respectful as Country provides us with everything we need, including knowledge.”

Thus, listening can bring about a clarity of Country and requires time and patience. Distinguished Elder and knowledge holder of the Nauiyu community, Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, offers *Dadirri*<sup>4</sup> as a concept to encourage “cyclical, deep listening, and reflection... Dadirri is the art of being present, being still, connecting with yourself and the environment in such a profound way that it creates space for deep relationships” (Ungunmerr-Baumann et al. 2022, 96). Similarly, Pairebeenne Trawlwoolway woman Lauren Tynan (2020) explains the importance of listening for messages and being attentive to relationships with Country. She describes “*listening* as a social value” (p. 168) whereby “new knowledge production comes from listening to Country, learning from Elders, or .. simply bouts of ancestral remembrance” (Tynan 2020, 164). This is echoed by Karulkiyalu Country and Indigenous scholars (2020) who remind us of the ways that stories connect us. They write “knowledge acquisition occurs through relational processes of giving and receiving that are available to us all if we can slow down, look and listen, and tune in to direct experience in the present moment” (Karulkiyalu Country et al. 2020, 33).

Such understandings of listening are not isolated to Indigenous peoples in so-called Australia. From Hawai’i, scholar Nālani Wilson-Hokowhitu (2021, 124) in describing Mo’okū’auhau (genealogy) as methodology, affirms it is about “listening to and following ancestral guidance in our contemporary lives as academics, activists, artists, and in all the roles that we play.” In this way, listening informs and is informed by past, present, and future all at once. This is listening not only with our ears but also with our heart and spirit. Deep listening provides recognition that we, humans, are not alone in the world and brings about acknowledgment of the intellect and knowledge of other species.

Rather than learning *about*, we should advocate listening and learning *from*—Wind, Rain, Star, Owl, weather events, and more. As members of Yandaarra with Gumbaynggirr Country (2022, 719) attest, “learning to listen is about being more modest. When we open ourselves up to certain things, we open ourselves to invitations in multiple forms.” This includes seeing the world through other perspectives, not just human-centric (Bishop and Tynan 2022; Wright and Tofa 2021). Once able to *Listen* deeply, *Respect* follows.

## Respect

*Sing out. Let the Old People know who you are. Let them know why you’re here. That you come with Respect. That you come to learn. Listen to them Ancestors call back. Maybe through the Birds, maybe through the Wind, maybe in other ways later. This is one way of acknowledging Country; it’s reciprocal too. There’s responsibility in how you come into Country, and accountability to the protocols in Place. It’s about respect. Who are you and where are you from? What are your intentions? Do you come with a good heart?*

It would seem that there are things that humans cannot and should not know. We don’t need to know what starfish know. But we should know they live and experience and think beyond us. We should seek respect and be aware of how our lives are entangled, how we co-become (Bawaka Country et al. 2020, 300).

Respect is a big deal in schools throughout Australia. Most public schools will likely have “Respect” as one of their school rules. Kids are taught that respect is putting your hand up or not talking while the teacher’s talking. I guess that’s what the teachers believe too. In this context, respect could be synonymous with obedience or compliance. It is a response to positional authority and highlights specific (Eurocentric) cultural understandings of what

is considered “good manners.” But from an Indigenous perspective, *Respect* is more than that. As Bama scholar Tyson Yunkaporta and Murrawarri Elder Aunty Doris Shillingsworth (2020, 11) suggest, “the first step of Respect is aligned with values and protocols of introduction, setting the rules and boundaries. This is the work of your spirit, your gut.” In other words, respect is reciprocal, it is about connection and relationality, not just to each other but also to Country. Respect for yourself, respect for Elders, and respect for knowledge and Knowledge Holders.

Green (2018, 139) offers *Yindyamarra*, a concept in Wiradyuri language and culture which means “respect, honour, go slowly, go gently.” However, it is about more than just respect as translated in the English language, it is a way of living. Therefore, while “Yindyamarra is about being respectful of each other and the environment, it is also about how we live within our communities and the world” (Green 2018, 139). Yindyamarra teaches us to “go gently”; being “conscious of the impact that we have on the earth, on each other and also on ourselves” (Green 2018, 140). This is echoed by Wiradyuri scholar Jess Russ-Smith (Green, Russ-Smith and Tynan 2018, 259) who understands Yindyamarra as a “way of being that enhances the wellbeing of self, others and Country”; a concept which means deep respect and reminds us of our responsibility to future generations, and accountability to those who have come before.

Respect can also be thought about in terms of consent; something that is not often considered in regard to schooling. As Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017, 161) recalls, in their experience of the state-run education system, “informed consent was never required. Learning was forced onto me using the threat of emotional and physical violence. In postsecondary education, consent was coercive.” In fact, Simpson (2017, 161) argues, “part of being colonized is engaging in all kinds of processes daily that given a choice, we likely wouldn’t consent

to.” Respect in education then, from an Indigenous perspective, requires seeking consent as part of the learning process.

To embody *Respect* from an Indigenous standpoint has the potential to drastically change the way we live and interact with each other, and Country<sup>5</sup>. Can you see the way these three values are cyclical and inform each other? *Respect* fuels and is followed by *Humility*. Which informs the ability to deeply *Listen*. Which strengthens the way you *Respect*, and so on.

### Shifting Toward Indigenous Education Sovereignty

*We were a long way from home and it was stinkin’ hot. The sticky, wet heat that makes your skin weep and your eyes drowsy. I was one of a dozen adults running a camp for 50 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teenagers and it was day one of their school holidays. Most had arrived that morning, bleary-eyed from the early flights, and chunky in reconnecting. It had been a few months since we had seen each other.*

*Our bags stashed in the shade, we gathered around waiting to meet Elders and Knowledge Holders, to be brought into this Country. We had done this many times before at other Places, on other camps. With no phone service, the young ones soon got tired of playing candy crush, and they lazed about, looking around, though always staying close. We had no way of knowing when the Elders would arrive, only that they were on their way. We eyed off the river, eager for that cool water, and though no words were exchanged, we knew we couldn’t swim yet. We needed to know the protocols first. Where can we go in this Country we are visitors on? Several hours passed.*

*Idle timelessness,*

*full of purpose.*

*We got to locate ourselves,*

*(re)connect.*

*Feel the weight of the sun.*

*Hear the leaves shifting the shade.*

*We greeted the birds.  
And got to know the ants.  
Becoming more aware.*

*Did the Elders gift us this time on purpose to come into Country right way, to Listen with Humility and Respect? To Respect through Humility and Listening? Regardless, we knew the camp wouldn't begin until we'd been welcomed in.*

Waiting time requires reflection, questions, and challenges, of self and others human and non-human within our environment. Living together *as we and not me*, means we consider every living being to be part of the whole environmental living system (Poelina et al. 2022).

*Humility. Listen. Respect.* Three values underpinning Indigenous (environmental) education sovereignty, including the pedagogies and processes, to elevate ancient and new systems of education. The vignette above shows a time when these values were omnipresent. They didn't need to be named, yet they informed our pedagogies, our processes, and our priorities. In the learning that occurred, we weren't learning *about* (values, culture, Country), we were learning *from*. When thinking about Indigenous futurities, more attentiveness toward accountability and obligations outside of a human-centric mindset is crucial.

## Conclusion

For Aboriginal people, the land is *the* great teacher; it not only teaches us how to relate to it, but to each other; it suggests a notion of caring for something outside ourselves, something that is in and of nature and that will exist for all time (Graham 2008, 183).

Indigenous peoples in so-called Australia have been practicing the ancient values *Humility*, *Listen*, and *Respect* forever as a way to learn and live in deep, complex, and multifaceted relationships with human and more-than-human kin. These values are not intended as romantic ideals;

they represent ways of learning and ways of living and have been purposefully juxtaposed against common (colonialist, capitalist, exploitative, and extractive) ways of learning and living in dominant Australian society to demonstrate this. I want to reiterate that these do not represent all the values that are held by different Indigenous communities, and they may not be right for every community, or for every situation. Nor are they necessarily the values to impart to students through teaching and learning. Instead, the values underpin the *why* of Indigenous pedagogies and processes and can provide insight into complex, interconnected thought systems that transcend past, present, and future. These values have implications that span the arbitrary disciplines of geography, education, Indigenous pedagogies, environmental education, and encompass a shift toward Indigenous Education Sovereignty, that is education grounded in Indigenous knowledges, on our own terms, using practices our Ancestors would recognize (Bishop 2021a, 2022). And always with our young ones in mind, including those generations to arrive in the deep future.


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## Notes

1. While few in number relative to the total number of schools across Australia, there are some incredible examples of Indigenous controlled and operated schools, see for example, Gumbaynggirr Giingana Freedom School <https://www.giinganaschool.org.au/>; The Murri School <http://murrishool.qld.edu.au/>; Worawa Aboriginal College <https://www.worawa.vic.edu.au/>; Nawarddeken Academy <https://www.nawarddekenacademy.com/>; Yirrkala School <https://www.facebook.com/yirrkalaschool/>; and Strelley Community School <https://www.strelleycommunityschool.wa.edu.au/>
2. Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) Day is a national holiday in Australia to remember and commemorate the lives of Australians who have been killed in war.
3. See video “Between Stories: TransCultural Conversations for Troubling Times” #2 Country and Culture <https://www.bmwhi.org/blog/2022/2/15/videos-now-available-between-stories-webinars> (Blue Mountains World Heritage Institute, 2022).
4. See video “Dadirri” [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tow2tR\\_ezL8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tow2tR_ezL8) (MiriamRoseFoundation, 2017).
5. See video “First Law in Planetary Health” <https://vimeo.com/519485101/e7dd271cec> (Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council, n.d.).

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