Xàgots'eèhk'ǫ̀ JOURNAL

Xàgots'eèhk'ǫ̀ Journal , Vol. 1, Issue 1, (Nov. 2022)
https://xagotseehkojournal.com

"It's possible" – Joni Tsatchia's reflections on "Education in the North"

Joni Tsatchia and Sara Komarnisky

ABSTRACT

In this interview, recorded in May 2021, Joni Tsatchia reflects on her educational journey, what led her to attend college and become a teacher, and on what education in the north means to her. In her reflections and recollections, Joni shares the importance of family, culture, and community in her experiences in education and shares ideas about how to ensure a vibrant, Indigenous culturally-centred, and uniquely Northern, mode of education into the future[1].

Snare Lake School, Wekweètì, 1987. Joni Tsatchia is wearing a striped shirt near the middle of the photo. Photo by Tessa Macintosh, NWT Archives/©GNWT. Dept of Public Works and Services/G-1995-001: 4541.

1 *Masì cho to Tom Andrews and Bryany Denning for their comments and feedback on this interview. Tom identified key themes in Joni's narrative that are reflected in the short introductory paragraph.*

Joni Tsatchia: Sì Joni Tsatchia sìyeh, Wekweètì gots'ǫ aht'e eyits'o masì dewho di nitle gha godah gha. My name is Joni Tsatchia, I'm from Wekweètì, and I'm thankful to be interviewed for this publication.

Sara Komarnisky: Can you tell me about your learning journey? All the way back to the beginning, where did you learn and who taught you?

Joni Tsatchia: I went to a school in Wekweètì that was entirely built out of logs. It was a really beautiful school and that's where I started kindergarten. I believe I went to school there right up until it burned down. It was a really good experience because it was in Wekweètì, which is a very small community. It always has been the smallest Tłı̨chǫ community. And so everyone that was working in the school was from the community. Most of the support assistants at the school were people that I normally would see on a daily basis or I knew their kids. The teachers did come from the south most of the time, but you were able to be at school and recognize the parents of your friends. They involved a lot of the Elders from the community, and even the janitor (my grandmother Rosa Fish) was from the community. And then they integrated a lot of land-based teachings. So I was able to see a wolverine being cut up in front of me at one point.

Sara Komarnisky: Wow.

Joni Tsatchia: Yeah, I had the chance to experience that and to observe how to cut it properly step by step, see how they skinned it, and a lot of the traditional knowledge came into it. Like for example, as a female we learned that we shouldn't pass over the animal's blood. The Tłı̨chǫ language at the time was really strong so an Elder could come in and speak Tłı̨chǫ fluently and we were able to understand the Elder. And so those are the kind of experiences I remember from a young age.

Sara Komarnisky: Are there any other notable experiences that stand out for you from your early days of learning?

Joni Tsatchia: The community was really involved in our teaching. Because it was such a small community we were able to learn from the community. It wasn't just the cutting of the wolverine. Sometimes we would have a day where we would go to an Elder's smokehouse and again we were able to see them work on hides in front of us and we were able to learn not just by observing but by doing too. They tell you stories alongside what you are doing. Like working on hides the Elder would tell us how they learned to work on hides from their great grandparents and the stories behind those experiences too. It was rich. And so I really enjoyed that, as well. The support assistants working in the school at the time, they were teaching us in Tłı̨chǫ. Even maybe without them noticing it. Most of the kids understood Tłı̨chǫ fluently back then. And we did a lot of hands-on stuff, even if it was learning about math. They didn't have a lot of resources so the teachers had to be really creative!

Sara Komarnisky: What made you decide to become a teacher?

Joni Tsatchia: Well, from an early age I was always around my extended family. I'm pretty sure a lot of people in Wekweètì will say the same. We grew up in a home where we didn't have rooms, the house was one open space. My mom had her bed on the left side, and granny and grandpa had their bed on the right side and there was usually a table by the window. We all ate at the same time and there was a stove right in the middle to keep the whole place warm. So I was always around my extended family, and not just myself but everybody who lived in Wekweètì at that time, because the community was just starting off. So, it wasn't like, fancy. A lot of times you were working to survive. I remember grandpa and my uncles going for wood and we would be stacking up the wood around the house. For the ladies, like my mom, my granny, they did laundry using their bare hands. They were hauling water just to do dishes or laundry. Everything was work, that's how we grew up. But education-wise I remember going to school and as soon as I would come home and my granny, my grandpa would tell my mom, don't speak English in this home, she learns that at school. She's gonna learn Tłı̨chǫ here. So, I'm gonna speak straight Tłı̨chǫ at home and then I'll learn English at school. I think from there, it was my first teaching. They were teaching me things at a very young age. I would be learning my counting in school and then when I would come home, and my granny would literally sit by the windowsill with me teaching me how to say my numbers in Tłı̨chǫ. I vividly remember that because I learned how to count in Tłı̨chǫ to 100 just by listening to her over and over. So, I think I had been taught by granny and grandpa and everything was a teaching lesson growing up so I feel it's always been there for me, being a teacher. And now I'm teaching Tłı̨chǫ immersion kindergarten.

Sara Komarnisky: I think it honours all of your teachers, your granny and your teachers at the school, for you to step into that role.

Joni Tsatchia: Yeah. As I got older, I decided to go back for a teaching degree. I was 36 or 35 years old, and I had just gotten a job with the government as a government service officer. In that role I was teaching again, in a way. I was teaching people who have lived out on the land their entire life and now they're being told they have to have bank accounts set up so they could have their income deposited. Or they were learning how to navigate applying for employment insurance. People who don't know how to use the computer, don't even know how to pay their bills online, but the system says that you have to have an online bank account. I remember sitting there helping them to navigate that, like, this is how to put in your bank account number, then your password. A lot of them, they weren't able to do it on their own. In those moments people would say, you should go back to school, you're teaching us even as adults. You'd be really good with kids or adults. But that's when it really was like, hey, I'm gonna go back to school.

Sara Komarnisky: Oh wow! And to hear that from people that you're working with, you're really good at this, you've taught me so much, you should keep it going. And so that's what sent you back to school to do the Bachelor of Education degree?

Joni Tsatchia: Yeah. And then translating things to Tłı̨chǫ. There's a lot of big words in English, so I had to break it down for them. Like, don't lose your password. There's not an easy way to explain that to them, but I would find ways. I was really teaching myself or asking my mom or other people, how can I translate this so that they understand it? Because they're not gonna understand fraud, or things like that. You have to find ways to break it down to them. In those moments I was teaching and translating for adults so that's when I decided to apply for school in Fort Smith.

Sara Komarnisky: That's really interesting to hear about your childhood experiences plus as an adult in this job teaching people how to do all these tasks they don't know how to do, plus the language translation, I can see it all kind of come together for you. I'd like to hear about your experiences in the B.Ed. (Bachelor of Education) program.

Joni Tsatchia: First and foremost I want this in the publication: I was really attracted to going into this program because it's offered in the North. It wasn't too far away, I wasn't going down south and losing all my support system. I was an 8 hour drive away from Yellowknife. If my family wanted to see me, I'd be able to connect with them. I was able to come home during the holidays. I love the North and Fort Smith is like a little urban community and the experience there was pretty awesome, I have to say. Because the B.Ed. program really offered a lot of integrated Indigenous knowledge. My major is Indigenous Studies, right? I found I started doing things that I had lost. I started beading there. It was for a project, and we were being graded on it, but I picked up the beads there, and my needle. I wouldn't have done that at home. I also learned how to make a drum. Um, it's not really in our culture that a woman makes a drum. I talked to the guy that was the head of the workshop, and I said, in the Tłı̨chǫ tradition women are not allowed to make drums. But he said it wasn't a regular drum, like a Tłı̨chǫ drum, it wasn't made out of caribou hide. It was actually a Cree drum, and it was made out of a deer hide. So, it was like, okay it's different. It's not really like how we make it, so it's not like I'm breaking my tradition. I'm learning a new tradition. So that's when I learned how to make a drum. I made a baby moss bag there, too. I made a diamond willow stick that could be used as a walking stick or a talking stick. These are things that I've seen in the Tłı̨chǫ region but I found them again there. There were so many workshops and I think that's really important to have those workshops done by local people because you're able to learn from them. All these things were integrated into our studies. Even just the community itself had everything set up for us. There were discounts at the grocery store for students, and free recreation, not just for myself but for all of my kids. So whenever we wanted to go swimming we would just show our student card. I got into yoga there and my partner and I went swimming and to the sauna. We did a lot of that, being healthy and having things open to us.

Sara Komarnisky: Sounds like it was about really connecting to the community too. You started off talking about the little school in Wekweètì and how the community was so much a part of that, I'm kinda hearing it again in Fort Smith. Like connecting to the local culture and people and participating in all kinds of activities.

Joni Tsatchia: And then the students I was able to finish the program with were from Inuvik, somebody from Łutselk'e, somebody from Fort Resolution, Dél̨ı̨nę, so there's a variety of students from different communities. When they created lesson plans, it was based on their culture, so I was learning from all these other northern students too.

Sara Komarnisky: Neat.

Joni Tsatchia: The instructors were really awesome too, they all had great background and a lot of experiences to share. Now that I'm teaching in my own class, I feel like everything they taught me at some point comes back.

Sara Komarnisky: So you completed your degree and you're teaching now. Because the next question I had for you was, what have you been up to since graduation? I wonder if you can share a little bit about that now that you've got your own classroom.

Joni Tsatchia: Well, I was pretty lucky in a sense because I am Tłı̨chǫ and we do have a really good Tłı̨chǫ immersion program here in Behchokǫ̀ and in the outlying communities. When I graduated I still needed to complete my final internship. I had done my first internship in Behchokǫ̀ and I knew the principal. He reached out to me and said we need a Tłı̨chǫ Yatıì (Tłı̨chǫ language) teacher next year, are you willing to teach? I said, well I didn't finish my final internship which is eight weeks without pay. So I said, if you are willing to work with me and get me a mentor, then I can do the internship. They really worked around that. They got me Rosa Mantla, who is Lianne Mantla's mom. And so she became my mentor and teacher pretty much. She was going to help me for those eight weeks on how she's taught Tłı̨chǫ over the years and all her skills. So I did that for eight weeks without pay then right from that I transitioned to working as a Tłı̨chǫ teacher. Even though after eight weeks Rosa was done as my mentor, she wasn't going to be around me anymore day-to-day, she really helped me to be confident in teaching Tłı̨chǫ and just to really have a sense of humour and come out of that box. Even being silly, you know? At the time, I was teaching all grade levels from Kindergarten to grade 6 so with the smaller kids we were using a lot of physical movements, like if I'm teaching how to say "I'm walking" in Tłı̨chǫ, I would actually do it. Like, I would ask them, "What am I doing?" And the kids would be like, "You're walking." I'd say, "In Tłı̨chǫ we say k'eda." There are a lot of different ways, approaches that Rosa taught me. For example with the older kids, they're not going to get up and want to walk with me, because they're at an age when they're hitting their teens, so I had to have a different approach. We had 35-minute blocks of teaching, so literally we would walk in the class and we're teaching just one thing. If I were teaching on family names, for example, with the smaller kids I would have a visual of the granny and grandpa, mom and a dad, and I'd be like, "who's that?" And they would say it in English and I'm like, "no, it's ehtsèe, grandpa. This is grandma, ehtsì." I would go through that for a whole week until they pretty much memorized it. But with the older group, we would make booklets. Because I noticed a lot of them liked to draw or they could bring pictures that we can print out of their family members. They would get into creating their own family booklet, and they would even design the cover. They would draw their mom or their grandma if they wanted to. Or if their grandpa passed, with the permission from their parents, they would share the photo with me, and then I printed it off for them, and then they can make a collage or whatever around it. It was really about trying to navigate all these different ways of teaching in my first year. It was a good experience because I wasn't teaching one class, I was teaching K to grade 6 at 35 minutes per block.

Sara Komarnisky: Wow, all ages, all grades! Kind of fun to try to figure it out, sounds like.

Joni Tsatchia: I did that for a year until the other two Tłı̨chǫ immersion teachers for kindergarten, grade 1, and grade 2 were up for retirement and done teaching. Their names are Josie and Therese. The principal asked me, "Joni can you take on the kindergarten immersion?" I said I didn't mind teaching Tłı̨chǫ because it's 35-minute blocks and I'm not speaking all day, like I'm just teaching them the main words for whatever the theme was. I remember telling the principal, I don't think I can speak it fluently. Not only that, I've been away at school in Fort Smith for four years, where I didn't speak it every day. My partner doesn't speak Tłı̨chǫ fluently, my kids they understand some words, and so I really wasn't speaking it. The only time was when I was visiting my mom and my granny. I was really hesitant in taking it on but they said it's a learning experience and you don't have to worry because a lot of fluent speakers are actually retired or retiring, so

whatever you're doing is going to have to work. Just try to stay within the language. It's been a learning process for me this year, but my students are able to count in Tłı̨chǫ, they're able to say all their colours, we're working on animals now, so they know the main themes. They know their commands like, I want to drink water, I need to go to the washroom. Those are things we've worked on a lot.

Sara Komarnisky: That's wonderful. Sounds like a big challenge to step into that role but now that you're there you can see the kids speaking and it must be so rewarding.

Joni Tsatchia: Yeah and they're at a young age right, like kindergarten and grade 1 and 2 they're just, they're pretty impressionable and it's a good time to try to get them to speak it and to learn how to speak the language.

Sara Komarnisky: Amazing. Well, what does education in the north mean to you? This is shifting gears a little bit, to ask a more conceptual question. But the theme for this issue is education in the north, so I thought to ask – what does that mean to you?

Joni Tsatchia: I know what you mean, but can you break it down? Because education in the north is many things to me. Like is it like integrating land-based education, or are you just saying the location itself?

Sara Komarnisky: I guess I'm asking, what makes education in the north unique, I suppose. What does that mean? How can we talk about education in the north as different from elsewhere and what do you think about that?

Joni Tsatchia: I really think we need to look at it this way. When we look at schooling and the legacy of Residential Schools and the 60's scoop. It all comes back to that for me, because in the past our parents and our great grandparents didn't have a choice. Like they were in the north, but it was straight learning about English and learning about a religion that they didn't know about. Going forward I think that we have a lot of resources, especially with the Tłı̨chǫ Government. We have our own self-government. Which is why we're able to teach Tłı̨chǫ immersion and not remove these kids from their communities. I think we have to go back to that and not forget that legacy because it came with a lot of negative outcomes and impacts to somebody like me who's an intergenerational survivor. You know, I'm part of that. Because of that happening our parents, a lot of them didn't know how to parent us, and it led to many social issues. I think when we look at that, education in the north is what is needed for the northern Indigenous people. Even for the people that are not northern, they need to know where we come from. That the curriculum is based on the north, and includes that legacy too. It's a big part of why it's so important that education in the north continues and that it's integrated. It's pretty unique! Like I was able to do all of those things in Fort Smith and you're not going to see that if you're going down south. Or you might, but it's really up to the schools to integrate it. Whereas here in the north they're constantly doing that. I grew up in Wekweètì, and I see it here in Behchokǫ̀ and Yellowknife, too. I did the social work program there too. I didn't complete that program, but it meant being able to be in Yellowknife and experiencing whatever the community is offering. You're able to go to Ndilo and see a drum dance or a hand game or the snow castle, like all these things are combined wherever you are and there's always history behind it. And every season brings something different. Like there's fishing season and you're able to see people make dry fish and you're seeing it around you all the time. And you're not going to

be able to see that if you leave the north to go to school. And that's why I think education in the north is really important. Even with my kids, my daughter is at Aurora College right now and she loves it because she's close to us and she's still able to come back and practice her traditional roots with us. We do a lot of cookouts, she's able to sit with her family who speak Tłı̨chǫ and it's not like she's far away and I think that is a good experience for any northerner. Because not only are they leaving their isolated community, even Yellowknife for them is big. And then you see a lot of northern-based outdoor stuff, that's so important to integrate too and you're able to do that here because the land is just right here in front of you.

Sara Komarnisky: Yeah. You were talking about being connected to land, culture, way of life, and language wherever you are, having the opportunity to do that in the north in a way that's not possible elsewhere is kinda what I'm hearing from you.

Joni Tsatchia: Yeah.

Sara Komarnisky: That's a beautiful way to encompass what education in the north is like and what it can be, if we keep that vision going.

Joni Tsatchia: Yeah, and like I said, we can't forget the history of it too because a lot of people live with that. Like I know for myself, I've had people who say well I went to residential school and sometimes it's hard to send my kids to school because they still have those triggers of being taken away from their parents. To have somebody like me in the classroom who speaks fluently, and they know that I'm there to teach their kids the language, it's a total shift away from that legacy.

Sara Komarnisky: Totally. For my family too, we moved here from the south and I'm always hopeful that my daughter learns local Indigenous history, language, and participates in cultural activities through her school so that she knows where she is too.

Joni Tsatchia: Oh yeah for sure. I think the north is able to bring that because it's not something that's hidden anymore, it's out there. There's books too. We talked about Residential Schools even with our kids here. Even in kindergarten, there was a book that we read about this little girl being taken and we really talked about it. It was about how our grandmas and grandpas were taken a long time ago. These little kids understood it and they were able to explain it in a way that it's not like that now, but it has happened, right.

Sara Komarnisky: Yeah, absolutely. Is there anything else you might like to share to close, Joni?

Joni Tsatchia: I think the only thing I want to add is that I think it's so important to integrate land-based education. Everything Aurora College does with the students, whether it's taking them out to see Elders, making dry fish, even if it's one or two times, being able to have the school practice the ceremonies. I think that's really important because, for example if they have drum dances they should know why and how that is, why they have drum dances and to be able to bring drummers in and have a ceremonial drum dance or feeding of the fire. So that later the students can really integrate that into their school systems.

Sara Komarnisky: I love that, so you're getting to that space where the students are learning the curriculum

in the western sense but they're learning how to be in the culture of the place, too.

Joni Tsatchia: Yeah because then they can be strong like two people, like the great Chief Jimmy Bruneau had envisioned. Not just here in the Tłı̨chǫ at the school but anywhere. It's possible! Yeah. So that's how I want to close it off. Masì cho, Sara!

Sara Komarnisky: Masì cho to you, Joni! It's great to connect with you again. I love that, it's possible.

Joni Tsatchia *is Tłı̨chǫ, originally from Wekweètì. She is working as a Tłı̨chǫ immersion teacher at Elizabeth Mackenzie Elementary School in Behchokǫ̀. She graduated from Aurora College/University of Saskatchewan in the Bachelor of Education program in 2020.*

Sara Komarnisky *is of Ukrainian settler ancestry and grew up in Alberta. Currently, Sara is Research Chair, Health and Community, at Aurora College and an Adjunct Professor of Anthropology at the University of Alberta. She lives with her husband and two children in Sǫ̀ǫ̀mbak'è (Yellowknife).*