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A Sweetgrass Method of Bullying Prevention for Native American Youth

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A Sweetgrass Method of Bullying Prevention for Native American Youth

Cover Page Footnote

Biographies Mark Standing Eagle Baez, MA, MS, CSP, LCDC (Mohawk, Pawnee, Coahuiltecan and Mexican descent) is the CEO of Native LIFE (Learning In a FUNDamental Environment), a Certified School Psychologist, Mental Health Specialist and a Licensed Substance Abuse Counselor. He is currently providing consultation work with the Bureau of Indian Education, Tribal agencies across Indian country and he is a National Speaker. Patricia Isaac, Ph.D. is a former high school teacher and a certified School Psychologist in New York and Arizona. She previously interned and practice as a school psychologist on the Navaho Nation. Dr. Isaac is currently a tenure track Assistant Professor in the Teacher Education Program at SUNY Empire State College in East Syracuse, NY.

Introduction

As practitioners, educators, counselors and administrators, we are called to provide services that will include best practices and cultural awareness. With bullying on the rise among students in schools, research demonstrates that race, gender or culture is a common reason for incidents (CDC, 2010; McNeely, 2011; NEA, 2011). Using the Sweetgrass Method as a bullying prevention strategy for Native American youth allows a cultural context to be set as a baseline of how issues are handled. Utilizing the Sweetgrass Method and learning how it serves as an instrument to communicate, collaborate, and continue healthy journeys among Native American communities is an innovative strategy for bullying prevention. For hundreds of years, Native Americans have held sweetgrass, which is an aromatic grass, as sacred. For many Native people, incorporating the burning of sweetgrass is an important spiritual process for purification, protection, strength, and prayer. While sweetgrass smoke rises upward, prayers also rise to the spirit world where the grandfathers and the Creator live. Sweetgrass is also used for healing one's mind, spirit, and body as well as to harmonize energies (Baez, 2011). In addition, sweetgrass is used to cleanse one's heart in order to feel the truth, grow in harmony and balance, compassion, gentleness, and thoughtfulness of others.

The Sweetgrass Method developed out of a previous article written by the first author as a means of fostering collaboration between Native families and the school community. Collaboration and consultation are crucial when working with parents, students and community. Working together for the better good to deliver answers to problems that arise, is good practice. I understand this as the same process as the medicine of the sweetgrass and the example as a braid. Elders in my community describe sweetgrass is used as a means to purify our minds and hearts so that we see and understand the truth. The use of sweetgrass in our ceremonies helps us to grow in harmony and balance. Similar to our roles as school psychologists and educators, I believe we appreciate the value in helping others with clarity and providing a welcoming atmosphere with compassion and gentleness. The Sweetgrass Method encompasses what I described, and how it serves as a means to communicate, collaborate, and continue the success of helping others (Baez, 2010).

Bullying and Native Youth

Some risk factors associated with bullying are attributed to, but not limited to living on a reservation, and can place Native youth at a higher risk level. The youth on reservations face stereotypes and misconceptions of what it means to be a Native American from the main society and inherent historical

bullying by the major culture, generational poverty, generational alcoholism and drug addiction, poor nutrition and diet, substandard and inadequate housing, and family structures that are not intact (Owen, 2011). However, when we look at Native American students and how they treat one another across the reservations, most students are no different and may participate and receive similar bullying behaviors from other Native peers. This was passionately highlighted by 16-year-old Coloradas Mangas (Mescalero Apache) in 2010, who spoke on Capitol Hill about the rising suicide rate of Native youth and constant bullying at school (McNeely, 2011). Some examples of bullying behaviors are teasing, obscene gestures and threatening that occurred in the hallways and school playgrounds. Increasingly, there are reports of bullying towards Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgendered (LGBT) students on reservations. Even though various tribes hold stories and accept roles of two spirited peoples, bullying continues to persist (Baez, 2010).

The curricula on bullying prevention/intervention that are evidence based and that include a school wide approach which resulted in a reduction in bullying behaviors (Olweus, 2004). However, there is not one curriculum or educational training tailored to Native youth that utilize the communities resource such as the traditional practitioner as mean of grounding the soul from values and a way of life that have been woven into the fabric of each tribe. Although, the Sweetgrass method is not an empirical research approach, it is the only method that addresses cultural partnerships with traditional practitioners as important stake holders in addressing “traditionally” how the youth should carry one’s self through in public. This is not proposing that we are against empirically supported analyses. Duran, Fierhammer & Gonzalez (2008) described it brilliantly by stating:

We do believe that just because a counseling approach has gone through the filters of empirical testing does not make a particular helping theory a theory of choice for all, or even most clients whom counselors are called upon to serve. Indeed, the efficacy of many counseling theories is supported by clinical trials and empirical testing. However, if an empirically validated approach to helping is not culturally relevant to clients from different groups, the use of that particular theoretical approach is not likely to be effective or beneficial for those persons (p.293).

For hundreds of years Native American populations have documented their systems of belief on issues such as education, wellness, puberty and even bullying.

“Out of the Indian approach to life there came a great freedom, an intense and absorbing respect for life, enriching faith in a Supreme Power, and principles of truth, honesty, generosity, equity, and brotherhood as a guide to mundane relations,” Luther Standing Bear, Oglala. (First People: Words of Wisdom Index, 2012).

The author (Baez, 2010) contends that these beliefs are grounded in their stories, paintings, songs and ceremonies, nature, birds and animals. These teachings on respect, living in harmony, leadership, taking care of earth mother, and about living life are imbedded in the DNA of Natives. Many Native Americans are dedicated to a prayer life and participate in yearly ceremonies that promote honor, sacrifice, support and wellbeing for today and for the future. Some of our youth are diligent and are filled with strength during our ceremonies. Unfortunately, after the ceremonies, some go back into our schools and begin their same old habits, which may offend people, disrespect others and /or verbally / physically abuse their peers.

Parental and community involvement in the education process of bullying prevention is a critical component of teaching about living in harmony, understanding and respecting life (human kind). Community is stressed for the simple fact that for Native people, it takes a community to raise a child. If parents and communities are invited to the process of addressing bullying and are truly one of the team members to assist in the youth’s behaviors, they are more likely to get involved. The authors of this paper contend that bullying is a manifestation of intergenerational trauma that Native young inflict on each other. Developing awareness is not only a psychological task, but an educational one. Crucial questions come to mind: How do we deliver an intervention that addresses the awareness of historical trauma and one that embraces traditional Native values; and what is the best way to deliver the intervention?

The Education of Native Youth

Education Historian, Joel Spring (2010) contends that American Indians/ Native Americans were educated through a process whereby the dominant group used “cultural genocide” and a long history of educational practices designed to destroy the culture and language of the people. The goal of cultural genocide is to replace a people’s culture with a new culture. Spring defines this as *Deculturalization* (p.8). He further states, “as a result of globalization and imperialism, indigenous peoples have been forced to undergo extreme cultural change, resulting in many becoming socially and psychologically dysfunctional” (p.21).

Duran (2006) describes the impact of systematic and historical unresolved trauma for Native people as a *collective soul wound*.

Although there are diverse manifestations of internalized oppression, there is a common thread that weaves all of them together. The pain and helplessness of internalized oppression continue to plague our relatives despite massive amounts of interventions that have been provided to treat the symptoms of individuals. Eventually, what is needed is a preventative intervention that addresses these issues at the source. Initially, what is required is awareness of the problem. Intervention then can be developed. . . . Internalized oppression is a wound that, like the vampire's bite, becomes embedded as the individual or group is undergoing the abuse or trauma (p. 23).

In consideration of the long and traumatic educational history for American Indians/ Alaska Natives, a key question comes to mind, what is a culturally appropriate practice for educating Native youth?

Cornel Pewewardy (2002), Associate Professor and Director of Native American Studies at Portland State University, reviewed the literature on American Indian/ Alaska Native learning styles. He concluded that the educator can provide instruction and learning opportunities that are compatible with American Indian/Alaska Natives students. Pewewardy approaches learning styles through seven classifications that directly connect to Native culture and way of life that encourages and motivates the student to succeed (p.115). They are:

Field-Dependence/Field Independence- Review of literature supports the argument that field dependence or global processing is a learning style tendency among American Indian/Alaska Native students. Field dependence learners are global and holistic learners. This learner is concerned with life and relationships.

Perceptual Strengths: Visual, Auditory and Kinesthetic- Visual learners learn best when they are able to see the material they are expected to master. When skills are taught by parents or elders generally teach through demonstration. Children are expected to watch, listen and do.

Reflectivity versus Impulsivity- Research indicates that Native America/Alaska Native students tend to reflect. A reflective student does not need immediate closure. Instead, she or he is more open-minded, delaying

decision-making until all evidence is collected before coming to a conclusion or acting in response to a situation.

Classroom Management/ Behavior- Research indicate that American Indian/Alaska Native worldviews and social behaviors are at odds with White values and behaviors. “Often American Indian/Alaska Native children respond more effectively if the teacher gives the student warnings of bad behavior couched in community terms” (Clery & Peacock, 1998).

Tribal Role of the Family/Elders- Research indicates that the family, the elders, and the tribe play an important role in the teaching/learning process as related to the American Indian/Alaska Native. Social acceptance and approval are sought from older members of the family. They are a source of wisdom and serve as teachers of traditions, customs, legends, and myths. Grandparents especially, have symbolic leadership positions in family communities.

Teacher/Pupil Relationships – Findings indicates that the teacher of the American Indian/Alaska Native student plays a tremendous role in teaching and learning process. Unfortunately, many teachers ignore culture and its impact on learning both “content” and “style,” rather than devising methods and techniques through which culturally diverse individualized approach-problem-solving.

Cooperation versus Competition- Research indicates that American Indian/Alaska Native students tend to favor cooperation over competition. They prefer harmony, unity, and a basic oneness.

The seven classifications of approaches to American Indian/Alaska Native learning styles are culturally appropriate lens to deliver the Sweetgrass Method of Bully Prevention. This cultural approach is currently being used, but conclusions and results are inconclusive at the writing of this paper.

Sweetgrass Method of Bullying Prevention

The Sweetgrass Method of Bullying Prevention for Native Youth looks at braiding strands of introspective (looking within self), collaboration with families (reaching out to others) and continuity (providing continued support). What we bring from this is an understanding that we as educators will braid the introspective (self) with collaborative and constant support efforts to form a culturally responsive method of delivery for students and their families (Baez, 2011).

Introspective (self) Strand

The first strand in the braid is Introspection- the work on self. For Native and non-Native staff, it is important to prepare and educate yourself about bullying and strategies. The Introspective-braid will bring understanding, clarity and preparedness on bullying situations, strategies and support. Attending professional staff development on classroom management, bullying, and violence prevention is important when dealing with bullying situations.

If we as educators are prepared in our classroom climate from first day, we will have better success and cooperation from our students. Effective classroom management is also critical, as well-managed classrooms are rated as having a more favorable climate, being safer and more supportive, and having lower rates of bullying (Koth, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2008). Also, if we are more flexible (i.e. working around parents schedule instead of our own) with parents and community when providing education skills training on bullying, a healthier partnership will continue to develop. Nonetheless, before applying strategies and /or coming up with suggestion or activities that are culturally appropriate on bullying, we need to have understanding and be sensitive to Native American students and their ceremonies.

Isaac (2010) describes how professionals working with Native American communities should consider being culturally responsible. The following formulated guidelines are suggested:

It is very important to enter the community in a respectful manner by not bringing your expectations, judgments or making assumptions about the community; quietly observe and wait until you are approached by members in the community (in some communities); ask questions when appropriate; offer a hand when appropriate; understand your purpose for being there; be respectful of their use of spiritual healing; be respectful of sacred places and where ceremonies take place (p. 52).

All of these points, Isaac contends, cannot happen if we are not grounded introspectively. Recognizing one's culture and how it influences one's behavior is necessary, but not sufficient, for working effectively in a multicultural society (Baca & Cervantes, 2004). After professionals become familiar with their culture and its effects in the ways in which they think and behave the foundation for learning about other cultures has been established (Baca & Cervantes, 2004).

The Introspective-braid (Self) is necessary and important for practitioners/teachers to be examples of healthy leaders for students dealing with challenges. As a school psychologists, counselors, social workers and educators it's important to understand how the social and emotional factors play in the decisions our youth make in life. For school psychologists, clinical psychologists, counselors and clinical social workers, identifying unhealthy factors (i.e., gangs, drugs & alcohol) will bring a holistic approach to each child we must work with.

Duran et al (2008) state the term *psychology* itself means the study of the soul. Culturally competent counselors, who are knowledgeable of Native American perspectives of mental health, know that the primary goal of psychological helping is not only to explore issues of relevance to clients' souls, but also to help them find healing and relief from psychopathology or soul suffering (p.289). The Sweetgrass Method encourages the incorporation and consultation with spiritual leaders.

Collaboration Strand

The second strand of the braid is collaborative- the work with others. Partnerships with families and communities are critical when providing bullying prevention/intervention support strategies for school students. Buy-in from the parents and community is essential in order to produce reduction of bullying in your community. Practitioners and educators must work smarter not harder in order to improve healthy relationships with parents and community members. When appropriate, follow through with graduation, naming celebrations, coming of age ceremony or sweet lodge invitations. It's important that you are invited and not offend anyone by showing up without and verbal or written invitation.

The first step in collaboration with Native Americans is to honor the invitation. From there, trust and wellbeing from that family will begin. Trust and respect mean a great deal among Native people. For practitioners and educators, valuing traditions and ceremonies is just as important. Thus, when making suggestions and strategies on bullying prevention for native youth, looking into oral traditions, stories, songs, paintings, nature, etc., is vital to a healthy balance for youth and families when it comes to "living in harmony," walking the "Red Road," or "Walking in Beauty." The collaborating strand is a powerful component in that, when appropriate, consulting with story tellers, Native historians, collaborating with elders and traditional practitioners (medicine men/women) elders is a must. The three reasons why collaborating with the community people is essential: 1). trust and respect of the culture and

ceremony; 2). validating the traditional teachings of morals, leadership, respect and life; and 3). acknowledging the wealth of healing of what works in their community and what doesn't work.

The outcome in addressing bullying on any particular reservation will be a healthy approach when involving the help and support of elders and strategies of medicine men/women (providing key points on how one should act towards one another and their oral traditions on respect and life), educators and community. Developing and implementing effective bullying prevention programs for Native youth depends on the school's effective collaboration with parents and community. The Collaborative-braid is a proactive prevention approach, in which community, parents and school understand each other's perspectives and certainties to better serve the child's behavior in school and community. When all the stakeholders (parents, students, educators, community members-committee) are in place and the brainstorming begins, it is essential to look at other programs that are evidence based and to use those programs as a baseline.

The school and parent committee may begin to carefully develop a curriculum that is tailored for Native Americans specific to their community. An example of this may be school educators collaborate with one another to increase adult supervision, work with support staff, such as school bus drivers, cafeteria staff, who may detect bullying incidents outside the classroom. The Stopbullying.gov goes on to point out the importance in prevention and the Sweetgrass approach looks at this as a catalyst in the area of collaboration; Involve students, parents, teachers, and staff in bullying prevention. Establish a school safety committee and task force with a coordinator whose job it is to plan, implement and evaluate your school's bullying prevention program (Stopbullying.gov, 2012).

Dauphinais, Charley, Robinson-Zañartu, Melroe, & Baas, (2009) describe the importance of grounding self, spiritually, emotionally, clan and affiliation for healing and resiliency. The authors define "traditionally as children are reared and disciplined by extended family members, such as aunts, uncles, and grandparents." This social structure ensures that each family member has a respected role in contributing positive characteristics and personality for a well-rounded and respectful child. Making room for extended family constellations in school meetings is reasonable and helpful (p.1).

Case in point, the collaboration with elders and spiritual leaders is crucial when implementing an approach that deals with choices or values Native youth make. The collaborative strand, as like the other two stands, looks at the strand as “many” (i.e., resources, techniques & strategies) strands for cultural, educational, spiritual and emotional support. The key roles the traditional practitioners play is the guidance, consultation and support needed for the youth choosing to disrespect life by bullying other human beings. When our traditional practitioners partner with the school’s administration and school psychologists/counselors, by addressing issues related to students’ spiritual needs and soul wounds, Duran et al (2008) asserts “counselors are better positioned to foster a greater sense of psychological health, well-being, and psychological liberation among persons in groups that continue to be marginalized and oppressed in contemporary society” (p.289).

Continuous Strand

The third and final stand in the braid is continuous- the work continues to move forward with and for the youth and others. “When we look at braiding our relationships (services) from a school perspective towards our parents and students, it’s a viewpoint of understanding and developing quality efforts for academic achievement for the students we serve” (Baez, 2011). This can be achieved by continuing partnerships with the parents and community. Also, by professional staff development that is culturally appropriate and possibly tailored from the reservation you are working at. Improving your bullying prevention curriculum, providing educational skills training for parents and students will be very helpful. Sweetgrass is flexible and bends in all directions when stepped on. In other words, schools may have many non- Native approaches to bullying, however, institutions would benefit with the understanding of Native students, families and community by incorporating the cultural and ceremonial values into the daily norms or school policy of behavior.

Moreover, it would behoove schools located on reservations to be more flexible and open to holistic approaches to bullying by incorporating ongoing healthy relationships with elders, medicine men/women to provide strategies and suggestions for a possible development of a Native American bullying prevention intervention curriculum. With continued efforts, we can provide holistic strategies to each reservation school one braid at a time.

Conclusion

Bullying does not discriminate; all students in our schools will suffer emotionally, academically, spiritually and physically regardless of race. According to the United Federation of Teachers (2012), bullying negatively

affects the atmosphere of the school and disrupts the learning environment: student achievement suffers, teacher morale declines, adult-student relationships suffer, parent confidence and trust in the school erodes. This can be even more of a challenge for Native Americans due to the long and historic suffering and violence previously endured. The impact is felt across Indian country. This history has resulted in forms of intergenerational trauma that continues to have an adverse impact on the mental health and psychological well-being of many Native persons, contributing too much of the psychopathology that is encountered in Indian country (Duran, 2006; Duran et al, 2008).

As practitioners, educators, counselors, administrators, family, and community members, we have the opportunity to make healthy changes in our schools and an obligation to our youth and the teachings that have been handed down from the ancestors on respecting life. The Sweetgrass Method weaves the parent and community, student and school as the three main team members in the success of reducing bullying behaviors. This method also focuses on buy-in, collaboration, and staff development. The Sweetgrass Method includes a cultural methodology that incorporates traditional values (flexible to tailor to each tribe's traditions), consultation with traditional practitioners, implementing stories, songs and teachings and braiding them into a well-grounded holistic approach to bullying prevention.

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