

Teaching Social Emotional Learning Culturally
Utilizing the Blessing Way Teachings

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Context

I am currently employed with Indian Wells Elementary School (IWES) which is operated by Holbrook Unified School District (HUSD). IWES is the only school from HUSD located outside of the town of Holbrook, Arizona. The school was opened in 2002, for students to avoid travel into Holbrook, which is a good 45-minute drive. IWES serves pre-k through Sixth grade within the surrounding communities of Indian Wells, Greasewood, White Cone, Dilkon and those living along the Navajo Nation reservation line. Indian Wells falls under the Navajo county within the Navajo Reservation. IWES serves approximately 99.7 % American Indian students; majority being Navajo. Students are bussed in daily ([news.com/education /k12/Arizona](http://news.com/education/k12/Arizona)). Our student count is as follows:

<i>Grades</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
Pre-K	19	16
Kindergarten	27	23
First	23	16
Second	25	15
Third	24	19
Fourth	25	24
Fifth	28	24
Sixth	21	09

The community of Indian Wells is small with approximately 341 community members and a land base of 10.4 square miles according to the Census Reporter.org. The community has its own chapter house ensuring tribal government input and outreach to its members. The community of Indian Wells is rich in cultural diversity with varied ethnicity groups including Anglo, Black, Asian, low-income housing, and multi-employment with the government, local government, state, and private entities. Students attending IWES almost always acquire their six years of education following a transition to Holbrook Junior High after the sixth grade.

I am not a community member of Indian Wells. I do have two sons-in-law that come from the area. My middle daughter and my youngest daughter are married into the community. My father was from Greasewood, Arizona so my connections to the surrounding community are through my paternal side of the family. My father was a medicine man who helped many people all over the Navajo Nation and one of the areas he provided services was in Indian Wells.

I am originally from Wide Ruins, Arizona, which is East of Indian Wells, about 40 miles. My maternal clan is the Water Edge Clan, and born for the Coyote Pass Clan. I attended Wide Ruins Boarding school from Preschool to fifth grade. I enjoyed my education there and learned many

life skills. My love for books also started there with an awesome Navajo librarian who knew what I liked to read and always had my favorite books on hand. My summers were spent herding sheep with my books on my back in my backpack. Time moved slowly back then.

My introduction to counseling began when I was young observing my father conducting his ceremonies. My father was a compassionate person who always helped his fellow man. During his years of learning the Blessingway ceremony, he was introspective, observant, and respectful of the teachings he was learning. As I sat and listened to him, I realized that I would like to do what he does, not exactly, but in some way help people. Little did I know that it would be the counseling profession that would allow me the capabilities of helping my people.

Rationale

In my life, I have always strived to help people as my father did. He was compassionate, caring, very understanding and non-judgmental. He listened to his patients, ascertained their complaints, and gave them advice that helped soothe their ailments. He also performed his chants in the Blessing Way Ceremonies, for their personal Hozho, a state of beauty and balance. The ceremony teaches values of resiliency and strengths with which the patient is blessed. Stories upon stories enmesh the chants bringing the meaning of the songs to life. The old language, most of it gone now, is heard only in these chants. Our way of life is slowly disappearing, and I, for one, want to do something about it.

As I was teaching Social Emotional Learning (SEL) this year, I realized the western teachings of SEL are very similar to our Blessing Way teachings. Our students, currently, have no concept or understanding of their culture including the ceremonies, the stories, and the way of life. This is concerning to me, as our Origin Stories tell us specific ways of life that we must maintain; two of which are our ceremonies and our language. This is important in the Navajo Culture to maintain life as it is. My hope is to introduce the teachings of the Blessing Way skills, such as being kind, be helpful, etc., to reestablish the connections and to ensure continued implementation through SEL as it relates to one another.

“The Bilingual Research Journal in their article, *Maintaining and Renewing Languages* (Reyhner, 1995) says many Indians and some non-Indians see the perpetuation of native languages as vital to their cultural integrity. The reason for this is that in addition to speech, each language carries with it an unspoken network of cultural values. Although these values generally operate on a subliminal level, they are, nonetheless, a major force in the shaping of each person's self-awareness, identity, and interpersonal relationships (Scollon & Scollon, 1981). These values are psychological imperatives that help generate and maintain an individual's level of comfort and self-assurance and, consequently, success in life. In the normal course of events, these values are absorbed along with one's mother tongue in the first years of life. For that reason, cultural values and mother's

tongue are so closely intertwined in public consciousness that they are often, but mistakenly, seen as inseparable. For the majority of young Natives today, culture and language have, in fact, been separated. As a result, most of these young people are trying "to walk in two worlds" with only one language. This is a far more complex and stressful undertaking than the "two worlds" metaphor would suggest (Henze & Vanett, 1993)."

I grew up in the traditional way of life filled with ceremonies, prayers, planting or indigenous agriculture, and cultural education. Our food came from our garden, which everyone had a helping hand-in. Our collaborative efforts including one of us weeding, another for watering and another to ensure wild animals didn't consume our plants. We had our families surrounding us, helping, advising, and showing us the traditional way of life. Gatherings consisted of all my aunts showing up at our house with a dish or two and sharing the food, partaking of the congeniality and enjoying comradery of the day. "It takes a village" is how I lived and grew up. I like to say that I took a piece of advice from all of my elders. We were a big family with 11 children, and many extended cousins, aunts, uncles, grandmas, and grandpas. Life was busy and someone was always teaching some aspect of life's teachings. My mother was a well-known herbalist who knew every kind of plant for medicinal purposes. We used plants to treat cuts and scrapes, to drink for long term kidney health and to treat our animals after castrations. These traditional ways are few and far between today.

As times changed, our students now live mostly within communities where each family is private and they prefer to keep it that way. The teachings, physically and spiritually, have all but disappeared. Many of our people have turned to other unhealthy pursuits which is not our way of life. However, our students at Indian Wells Elementary are curious and ask questions about their culture and language. They genuinely want to learn, and we must make that opportunity available to them.

Topic Summary

I came to IWES in 2021 as a Safety Counselor. It was a new title for me, and I had no idea what the position would entail. As the school year started, I was assigned to my classroom, and I met the students in the ensuing weeks. The curriculum I used was called Second Step and I was teaching Social Emotional Learning. I came into counseling through the mental health sector and teaching was not in my forte. As time went on, I learned to teach, manage a classroom, and learned many other facets of teaching. It was a lesson learned by fire, as they say. My students came from diverse backgrounds with many living with their grandparents, and some with parents temporarily out of town for the work week. The students were curious about the Navajo culture, and they knew aspects of it, naturally being interested to learn more. They expressed that the Navajo language was important to them, and they wanted to learn, but they did not know how to speak Dineh Bizaad (the Navajo language). Occasionally, words they heard from their grandparents were known but not used by them explicitly. According to the students, very few

parents spoke Navajo. Clearly, something was missing making it difficult for them to acculturate. I had an idea as to what it was. As a young native girl, growing up with and among our culture, traditions, and ceremonies, one gets a sense of self, of knowing who you are and where you come from. You learn and adopt beliefs and values that are important to your parents through which you learn the importance of your culture. You grow with it, and it binds you to your faith, language, and understanding of your culture. This binding and knowing, implementing, and understanding the culture is missing from the student's repertoire of their cultural knowledge. Cultural teaching is also about being aware of yourself, your surroundings and thoroughly thinking about one's actions before acting. Everything is done with a purpose and meaning.

“Ten factors in the psychological development aptly named RESPECTFUL (D’Andre & Daniels, 1997; 2001) includes: R -- religious and/or spiritual identity, E -- economic class background, S -- sexual identity, P -- psychological maturity, E -- ethnic/racial identity, C -- chronological/developmental challenges, T -- various forms of trauma and threats to well-being, F -- family background and history, U -- unique physical characteristics, and L -- location of residence and language differences.”

These ten factors are important in recognizing one's identity and most importantly in building cultural identity.

“Individuals personally identify with established religions or hold beliefs about extraordinary experiences that go beyond the boundaries of the strictly objective, empirically perceived world that characterizes Western, modern, psychological thought (D’Andrea & Daniel, 2001). Kelly (1995) notes that the terms *religion and spirituality* are grounded in an affirmation of transcendental experiences that are typically manifested in religious forms that extend beyond the boundaries of the ordinary and tangible. As used in the RESPECTFUL counseling framework, religion and spirituality generally refer to a person's belief in a reality that transcends physical nature and provides individuals with an extraordinary meaning of life in general and human existence in particular.”

This brings to mind an article with which I strongly agree. The article, Native American Rituals and Ceremonies, states that “our ceremonies and rituals have long played a vital and essential role in Native American culture. Spirituality is an integral part of their very being. Often referred to as “religion.” Most Native Americans did not consider their spirituality, ceremonies and rituals as “religion” in the way Christians do. Rather, their beliefs and practices form an integral and seamless part of their very being.” (Legends of the America.com/na-ceremony.)

“The social emotional learning of children is all about developing neural awareness and thoughtful choices (aka: mindfulness). To be able to respond rather than react, children need to cultivate the executive functions of their neocortex (frontal lobe of the brain) as well as the heart-centered intelligence of their midbrain limbic system, which houses

meaning making and memories. Furthermore, “social emotional learning helps children move out of their lower, automatic “reptilian brain” thinking and into higher, rational thinking and regulation, by establishing rules and activities that promote safety – physical, emotional and social – and teach respectful, kind and compassionate ways to think and behave” (Your Therapy Source, 2019).

Culture is a powerful influence, but subtle. As members of a cultural group, we interact with the larger society, and we become aware of different ways of behaving, different expectations; we may gradually change our thinking individually or collectively. Thus, culture is dynamic, constantly changing in response to changing conditions (Tiedt/Tiedt, 1999, p 12).

Many of our students live in communities created by the housing authority or government housing, where rural living, exploration and implementation of culture is absent. Shearing and butchering sheep, herding sheep, looking for medicinal herbs, exploring canyons, digging out yucca root to wash your hair with, learning and talking your native language, and so on and so forth, are all gone. Very few children have been introduced to these practices making it difficult to preserve our culture and easy to lose our culture.

CASEL research states “A developmental perspective to SEL considers how the social and emotional competencies can be expressed and enhanced at different ages from preschool through adulthood.” (www.casel.org, 2023)

“We cannot control everything a youngster is exposed to, but being aware of the power of other influences enables us to counteract negative influences and support positive ones” states Hopson, (1993). This brings me back to my earlier comment on how culture must be lived to learn. It is the same with the SEL competencies. SEL competencies when enhanced with cultured learning will help students understand how culture can be integrated with Western teaching. The Blessing Way teachings are character and resiliency lessons just as SEL is the western teaching. The traditional teachings help us to learn values, good character, and focus on our future.

“NASP Communique’s article, Revealing Culturally Embedded Knowledge in the Practice of School Psychology: A Personal Perspective on the Navajo Way of Life (Tso, Jan/Feb 2010) states that validating children’s cultural knowledge will bring out their inner strengths and skills, which is what we seek as school psychologists. Validation builds confidence in children and allows them to claim self-efficacy and build on diverse paradigms. The opportunity to incorporate intact portions of the primary culture and the preservation of personal cultural identity is vital to an individual’s success (Robinson-Zanartu & Aganza, 2000). This bridges the gap when we are learning new concepts and helps in successful teaching and learning throughout the developmental stages of life.”

How does one teach these basic social skills in school when it should be learned at home, yet the Navajo culture no longer exists in home? A hard question to answer. As I taught SEL, my thoughts surrounded the students' knowledge, or lack thereof, of the culture and how I could implement both SEL teaching and the cultural teachings so they can understand. During culture week, I researched various books, articles and videos to show students some of the cultural concepts. I found a video which connected SEL teaching to the Blessing Way teachings.

The video was called "So' Ba Ahe", the Story of the Stars which was presented by NASA in 2019. The story depicts the Navajo Way of Life using the constellation. Within the Navajo culture, several stars are very important as the Holy people placed them in strategic places in the sky. They are the Big Dipper, Nahookos Bikaii, Cassiopeia, Nahookos Biaadii, and the North Star, Polaris, Nahookos bikq. The Big Dipper represents the male figure in the family, Cassiopeia represents the female figure, and the North Star represents the Fire Place within the home. Each area also represents a cultural activity such as ceremonies, chants and prayers. These ceremonial events happen at various times of the year or seasons. For example, we have ceremonies which are conducted only in the Winter. The stories and games we recite and play only happen in the winter. One of these winter games is the String Game. The string game involves a piece of string played on the fingers with the string arranged to depict various characters. This is only played in the Winter. Only the spider can make webs in various designs. The spider sleeps in the Winter, so we can play her games as she sleeps. The Winter ceremonies include the Fire Dance, and the Yeibechei. Summer games such as the Stick Game, running matches, card games and the Song and Dance are a few examples. Summer ceremonies include sacred Offerings to Mother Earth for healing purposes, when the Earth is soft and pliable. We cannot offer precious stones in the Winter because the ground is frozen as the stones are sacred and they cannot fall into frozen ground and break or crack.

Through these ceremonies, children learn the proper way to do things, and why doing it correctly is important. The performing of rituals including the songs have been laid out in a certain manner or a correct way, since the time of the Diyiin Dineh. The Diyiin Dineh are considered to be the Holy Deities in the Navajo Culture. The ceremonies and songs have a pattern which is sacred and must be followed. As such, the Blessing Way teachings cover various areas of specific skills and teachings to help achieve success in life. Some of these benefits are waking up early to greet the dawn, running daily for physical health, and being respectful of your words, etc. Navajo tradition says our Holy Deities travel across the skies early in the morning, so we have to wake up early to pray to them and to be touched by their blessings. We have to run early in the morning to breath the early morning's pure air so our lungs can be strong, and we can speak with confidence. We run with the Holy Ones who bestow positive thoughts, strength and resilience on us, so we are strong, knowledgeable and capable. We are taught to learn everything we possibly can because we don't know what the future holds, and we might need a skill no matter how trivial. We are taught Hozho, that everyone around us, below us, above us is made in beauty and

the Holy Deities hear everything that we say. This is the reason we don't talk negative about ourselves as we can bring bad tidings upon ourselves unintentionally. With this understanding, in the last two years that I've been teaching SEL, I've been comparing some of the basic teachings from our Blessing Way ceremonies to the SEL concepts. My thought was that maybe this is one way to teach our culture to the students.

A form of the Blessing Way ceremony was performed at the beginning of the fourth world when the Insect People came up from the third world. The encounter with the Diiyiin Dineh or Haashcheeh Dine was not positive and the Diiyiin Dineh were sickened by their smell, their looks and their lack of intelligence. The Haashcheeh Dineh gave the insect people 12 days to clean themselves up and be presentable for a miracle was to be performed. On the morning of the Diiyiin Dineh's return, the Insect people cleansed themselves with yellow and white corn, female and male, respectively. And they watched the miracle of the creation of man and woman aptly named First Man and First Woman. Each had a tremendous job to do, the first of which was important and that was to care for one's self; to be clean, to think for yourself, to do for yourself and make a life and to help the community as a whole. In this way, as the stories were told through the years, the Blessing Way teachings were composed (Zolbrod, 1984).



The most basic of teaching within the Blessing Way concepts are similar to social emotional teachings. For example, the SEL curriculum we use at IWES is Second Step which has four units, with 6 lessons each. The unit topic is Growth Mindset and Goal Setting and the lesson itself is Setting a Good Goal where the objective is to learn how to identify a goal, write the goal

how to make it tangible, to learn the steps of implementing the goal, to identify the timelines, and finally begin working on the goal. The Blessing Way teachings, on the other hand, are written as actions. So, we would have to identify an activity which would assist us in “reaching our goal.” One of the teachings is “Be a careful listener, which is an action associated with setting a good goal especially if one has never set a goal before. One would have to listen to the teacher as they teach about setting a goal. Therefore, we identify “Be a careful Listener” and teach this concept in tandem with the Second Step lesson, Setting a Good Goal.

Another example would be in Unit 2, which covers Emotion Management. The lesson is called The Balanced Brain. The cultural tie-in would be Ada Hozhdilzin, Respect the sacred nature of the self. In Western teaching, this would translate to “be kind” or “taking care of oneself.” Our school motto or Roadrunner Motto is: Be respectful, be kind, be safe and be ready to learn. This lesson would enhance those concepts.

In order to implement the Blessing Way teaching, students will need to understand the concept of Hozho, which is beauty within, around, beneath, behind and above one’s self. To make the cultural connections possible, both western and cultural teaching would be taught in tandem to enhance understanding of both worlds.

Since Daniel Goldman’s book on Emotional Intelligence, research on social and emotional learning has been extensive. An online blog called Your Therapy Source restates his words saying “research shows that social emotional learning does, in fact, enhance children’s academic success while preventing problems such as mental health disorders and violence. Social-emotional competencies empower kids to grow self-aware and confident, to manage difficult emotions and impulses, and to embody empathy, which translates to not only improved behavior but also test scores (Your Therapy Source, 2019).

Teaching SEL and incorporating the Blessing Way phrases will help to teach our culture. Our language and culture are breaking down and with very few fluent native speakers left, it is our job, as educators, to make the needed changes. According to the United Nations, more than half of the world’s languages will become extinct by 2100. It is estimated that one indigenous language dies every week (www.un.org). As a fluent Navajo speaker, this breaks my heart. Our job is to work towards making changes and encouraging our Native students to speak their language.

Student Engagement

I will incorporate the Blessing Way teachings with the social emotional lessons we use at IWES. My goals for the lesson are:

- The students will learn the importance of the Blessingway strategies.
- The students will set their goals on how they will incorporate the strategies.

- The students will practice their strategies on a daily basis.
- The students will learn the Navajo words related to the strategies.

What is the lesson objective:

Students will realize the importance of resilience and grit, and how it is used in their daily lives.

Standards Addressed: The American School Counselors Association Standards

Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success:

- M5. Belief in using abilities to their fullest to achieve high quality results and outcomes.

Self-Management Skills:

- B-SMS 1: Responsibility for self and actions
- B-SMS 6: Ability to identify and overcome barriers
- B-SMS 10: Ability to manage transitions and adapt to changes

Anticipatory Set: The Hook

You will find 3x5 cards on your desk with a question on it. Please take one. I will read the question to you, and I would like for you to answer the question in one to two sentences.

The question is: What is the first thing that comes to mind when you wake up in the morning?

Discussion:

Why is it essential to our wellbeing that we wake up early in the morning? What is the important concept behind this. (Ask for shares)

Materials Needed:

Technology: Pencils, 3x5 cards

Teaching/Instructional Process:

Getting Started: 2 minutes:

Who has heard of the Navajo saying “Taaho Agi Teego teiy?” You might have heard your grandparents say it, your coach, or someone in the community. Taaho Agi Teego teiy means, “it is up to you to make good things happen in your life!”

Let’s share some of your thoughts from your cards.

(Discussion: How does the topic of “it’s up to you” similar to the concept of waking up early in the morning?)

Practice: 12-15 minutes

RESILIENCE

As you wake up in the morning, have any one of you ever thought, Taaho Agi Teego? (Look for hands - translate to English).

The main part of this saying is Taaho, meaning you, it's up to **you**. And our lesson objective today is related to exactly that: your resilience and your grit.

Does anyone know what resilience is: (listen to feedback, take note of them on the board again).

Resilience: is the ability to bounce back after difficult times. It starts with you — Taaho!!

Everyone has hard times. You've all gone through a lot in the past several years:

- with being away from school,
- your friends,
- no socialization or hanging out with friends,
- a huge health pandemic,
- losses of family or extended family members.

Optional for counselor: personal disclosure of a hard time.

(Ask the students)

- What are some hard things you've had to overcome thus far?
- How did you bounce back from those times?
- When do you use resilience?

Discussion on resilience: Used daily. For some of you, as soon as you wake up. You choose how your day will go through your mindset and your actions. You can choose to have a good day or a bad day. For example: you might wake up late, and you have to rush to catch the bus. That means you miss breakfast and you might forget some homework at home. Resilience is how you cope with these situations. Are you going to let it ruin your day, OR are you going to say, what's done is done. I need to move forward!

Resilience is when you choose to move forward despite the rushing and missing homework.

GRIT:

Let's move on to grit.

- Has anyone heard of the word GRIT. I used it earlier.
- Has anyone watched the movie Onward. In that movie, Barley says "from your heart's fire", he means the passion, the fire that burns inside of you that makes you do and overcome hard things.... the grit inside of you.
- It's your courage. The fire that moves you forward and to get things done

Examples of grit are that you

- ★ don't miss assignments,
- ★ you have your teammates back. Michael Jordan, back in high school was cut from his basketball team because he wasn't good enough. He didn't let that stop him.

He went on to become a famous basketball player with a long list of accomplishments. He had grit: perseverance and determination.

Independent Practice:

There are various ways to test your grit.

- You can do grit interviews,
- You can do a dream board,
- You can do a vision board (bucket list)
- You can write your goals.
- You can create a bucket list.

The vision board is what we'll do today. A vision board is something you want to accomplish in the short term. Any time between 6 to 12 months. The papers are in front of you on the table. I want you to fold it into fours. You will use the 4 squares for your visions. Think of what you want to accomplish between now and August.

Check (3 - 5 minutes)

As we come back together, let's share some of your visions from your bucket list.

What was a common theme?

What does a person with grit do?

Closure/Tying it together:

Resilience and grit together make up your Taaho Agi Teego concept. You have to use "your heart's fire" to accomplish your goals. You have to set goals so you can challenge yourself and become who you want to be when you grow up. It is "up to you" or Taaho to accomplish your dreams, to become successful.

Student Assessment

Student learning and lesson objective is important as students relate to the activities implicitly through the set objectives. Each lesson developed for student learning will contain a pre and post assessment which gauges their knowledge on the topic that was taught. At the beginning of the lesson, I will implement a 10-question survey to ascertain their knowledge and awareness on the concept of Taaho agi teego and grit. The pre and post tests are written generally to include every student, whether indigenous or not. The concept of everything you do is up to you and grit applies to all people. I will use a Likert scale in my questioning for the pre-test (Hatch/Hartline, 2022). The Likert scale is an assessment which uses agree, unsure, and disagree questions. It's simple and quick for short lessons. The following questions are examples of those to be implemented.

Questions for the resilience assessment:

	AGREE	NOT SURE	DISAGREE
1. I know what resilience is and how it works.			
2. I have heard of the saying “Ta hoagi teego” (it is up to you) before.			
3. I have gone through hard times and feel I know myself better because of it.			
4. My parent’s values are important to me.			
5. Resilience tests me and the people around me.			
6. I understand what the word “grit” means.			
7. Grit means your “heart’s fire”.			
8. I am determined to have grit in all that I do.			
9 Determination makes successful people.			
9. Grit and Taa ho agiteego work together for success.			

Very few of our students here at IWES understand or speak the Navajo Language. Some of the words they understand are those they hear from their grandparents, never fully interpreted but understood through daily use, hand signals, etc.

Many times, the post assessment will be the same as the pre-assessment which is a valid process. I would like to change the post assessment to a presentation style for the post assessment. The presentation style can be a Power Point presentation, a story, or a story board. This type of presentation will allow for full participation, use of higher order thinking skills, and intentional processing of requested skills, resilience, and grit.

Post assessment requirements:

Students will put together a presentation on Resilience and Grit for the post assessment on this lesson. The following guidelines will be used:

- A. Students will utilize their notes and other research for example, books, articles, and interviews with their parents or elders.

- B. Students may use a PowerPoint Presentation, a storyboard, or a verbal story for their post assessment.
- C. Each student will have up to 5 minutes to present their presentation to the class.

This type of assessment will have more learning value and also a chance to implement the new skills and have a full understanding of it.

Resources

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