

**Having a Transparent Box Like Our Ancestors:
Teaching Our Children to Use Ancestral Tools to Grow**

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Context

I am employed at Salt River Pima Maricopa Indian Community Early Childhood Education Center. ECEC is a Head Start and CCDF-funded Tribal Childcare Center. We have children enrolled from 6 weeks to 5 years of age. We offer culture and language programs in both the O'odham and Piipaash languages to all children. All of our children are Native. The majority of our Children are either O'odham or Piipaash. I teach in the Bear classroom. Our children are 3 to 5 years old.

The Salt River Pima Maricopa Indian Community is located between Mesa and Scottsdale in the Phoenix area, covering 52,600 acres and comprising over 10,800 enrolled members (SRPMIC, 2025). Although the reservation is situated in large cities, it is also surrounded by a nature reserve that is part of the reservation. The beautiful desert life can be seen as you drive in. The Hasan sits against Red Mountain and welcomes you into the reservation. If you have the morning shift, despite the urban environment surrounding the area, you may see the s-dock kaviyo grazing, a gas chasing his food, or a momma kakaichu and her babies crossing the road. As you enter the area where the ki are, you can see the newer areas that have developed over recent years, such as VA2 and Dobson Heights, and older areas that continue to remain the same, such as VA1 and Lehi. In the residential area, you can also find all three schools, the police and fire stations, and Two Waters – where all government offices can be found.

Fifteen years ago, my husband and I moved to AZ with no jobs, and we were terrified of what the future held for us. I was told about this small reservation hiring teachers. I applied. In accepting the position, I gained a second family. I found a community of people who were open and accepting. Many of my new friends were willing to help me learn more about my tribe as I learned about the Salt River. Although I am not a tribal member, I have a lifelong bond with the Salt River Tribe, and I cherish the people who allow me to teach their children.

The lessons I plan to teach will be scheduled in unison with our Cultural Specialist, Ryan. The 1st lesson, painting with what we can find, can be done at the beginning of the year. Ryan teaches "Soam Judam, Soam Judam" in August, and the children will learn the colors. That will help with my painting lesson. By August, the Baidaj harvest will have already occurred (it typically happens in July). But it can be talked about. Jonathan, a speaker from the tribe, will come in and help the children learn about the celebration.

When my Imafo was growing up, he was taught to hide the fact that he was a Choctaw. His own father beat him regularly, hoping to beat those genes out of him. He left home at the age of 12 to find something better. Things weren't always easy. He kept his mother's lessons close to his heart, but he kept them trapped inside until he had grandchildren. He would tell us the "secrets" that came from Grandma Lily. We were always told that the stories stayed in the house, and if anyone asked us, we were white. It was safer that way. He would say, "Leave our people in Oklahoma. To survive here, we have to do what everyone else does." My mother always told me she promised Imafo she would not find the tribe. Even when I reached the age to start bothering her about it, she would say, "This is how he thinks he is keeping us safe." My mother grew up watching her dad struggle with who he was. Although Imafo could legally vote in New Mexico, that wasn't the case everywhere they lived, and it wasn't the case back home.

My mother grew up watching her mom worry, each time Imafo voted, that someone would ask too many questions. She also watched firsthand what it looked like when someone had a problem with Natives. By that time, her grandfather was elderly, but every time he came around, he made sure to let them know that the "Indian" in them made them weak and worthless. I spent my childhood knowing I belonged to something bigger, knowing I was Choctaw, but unable to share that with anyone. The fear my family held, due to the negative things they had experienced, prevented them from letting us kids explore who we really were.

The children I work with live in the Salt River Pima Maricopa Indian Community and are a part of their community every day. Many of these children cannot tell me if they are O'odham or Piipaash. The children in our center are very westernized. They come in, play on the phone, and go home to watch Paw Patrol. I want the children in my class to be proud of who they are. I never want them to have to hold back or be afraid like I was. I want them to understand their ancestors and not have to wait till they are adults like I did. If I can spark that excitement in the Preschool classroom, I can help them start exploring their own heritage.

Rationale

Mohib Elahi discusses our being in a box. When children are born, the box is transparent. As they experience more things, the box fills in with their idea of how the world should be (Elahi, 2021). Over time, that box becomes permanent. It can make looking outside the box difficult, especially if we feel safe in our filled-in box. I imagine our ancestors kept the transparency of their box. They were able to look out at a world full of danger and problems to resolve and explore the possibilities before them. Over time, the transparent box around our children has filled in earlier than in the past. Schools expect them to have the "right" answer. Video games cannot be won without the correct click.

Even friendships can be lost with the wrong words. Our children learn to stay in the safety of their box and what they know. In recent years, businesses have begun to complain that college graduates lack creative thinking (Krgoswami, 2023). The problem starts as young as our Early Childhood classrooms. The children who can only use white paper or who only build a house with blocks have already started to fill in their boxes. To think like their ancestors, their world must be opened up in a way that feels safe to the children. Allowing them to paint with whatever they want will be exciting to the children who still have transparent boxes. It will be scary for the children who have started to fill in their boxes and believe that they can only paint with a paintbrush.

To explain how their ancestors created Art, I researched their history. Not just of Salt River but of other tribes as well. When you look at Art, you can see the environment reflected in it. Choctaw dolls are made from corn husks, Navajo rugs are made from wool, and Apache baskets are made from willow and devil's claws. All things were in their box, but at one point, someone had to step out of their box and say, "Let's see if this works." Ned BlackHawk discusses Navajo trading with the settlers. They created beautiful baskets from the materials around them. The sad reality was, "They came from a time of extreme hardship. These objects were crafted with the

intent of trying to find subsidies to obtain clothing or food for one's children," (Blackhawk, 2018, 1:18). They had to have a transparent box to use everything they could find and think outside the box to survive. Artwork changes, and time progresses as well. Early Hohokam art was characterized by the use of shells and obsidian. When examining newer Hohokam and O'odham art, these items are often missing (Baymen, 2008). When they were no longer available, they had to look through their transparent box to find something else to take their place.

The children in my class will not need to survive, but I want to create the same transparent box with the painting activity. For some children, there will be a desperate feeling inside them when I say there is no paintbrush. For the children who have a box filled in, they will feel something that can be compared to what the Navajo families felt when making the baskets. Although it is not a true crisis, to a 4-year-old mind, it can feel like it. While other children will be like the first Choctaw, making a doll and saying, "Let's see if this works." Their transparent box will help them. As both children work through items that work and those that do not, they will begin to understand how their Ancestors selected tools.

When my Imafo left home, he took the knowledge he was given, but the world was not like home. There were many times along the way he had to depend on his transparent box and think outside of it to survive. When he first left home, it was during the Depression, and he rode the trains looking for work. That led him to New Mexico, where he would eventually settle down and build his home and ranch. With very little to his name, he used what he could find and trade for to build his dream. People marveled at the Boxcar he used for hay storage and the repaired widow's shed that made his tack house. With both, he imagined something grander using someone's trash and his transparent box.

Our ancestors needed a transparent box for basic needs, for survival, for everyday living. They also needed a transparent box for celebration and cheer. All the sister tribes – Salt River, Gila River, Tohono O'odham, and Ak-Chin - celebrate the tradition of the Baidaj Vo:honi (Manuel, 2019). In the time of the ancestors, the tribes would gather to harvest. They used the spine from a fallen Saguaro to knock the fruit out. After rewarding themselves with the delicious treat they had prepared for the celebration, they packed the rest to take home. "What they couldn't eat, they turned into jam, dry paste, flour, cooking oil, drinks, syrup, vinegar, and wine," (Malloy, 2020, p. 3). The gatherings are smaller today but continue as the sister tribes participate in this annual celebration.

The children will need to have a transparent box or be able to look outside the box to get their baidaj. We will talk to the class about how their tribe has harvested the baidaj for generations. After listening, the children will understand what needs to be done to get the baidaj down, and the children will be ready to be engineers. We will create something long and strong enough to be our kui:pud from what we find inside and outside the classroom. When we place a ball in the tree on Playground 3, each child or team will use the kui:pud they have made to harvest their baidaj. We are not able to eat our harvest, but we will celebrate by eating baidaj that another O'odham has prepared.

Instructional Guide

Our children live in a world where all the things they might need to know fill in their box before they start school, and the ability to keep their box transparent leaves earlier and earlier. To think like their ancestors, to keep a transparent box, they need direction to be able to do this. Perry James discusses how our children need to learn the ancestral ways due to the current state of the world. He talks about what happens when the money runs out. He states, “Money isn’t everything; we need to go back to this, and our children need to be ready,” (James, lecture, 2025). He discussed, in his presentation, teaching his son traditional Navajo ways. Many of our children come to school at ECEC in hopes of learning from their teachers. Their parents know we teach culture, but they have not learned it themselves.

The first lesson we will talk about our ancestors and how they explored their environment to find what they needed to complete a task. We will discuss making art with the items we have seen. Laura Martin discusses creating art from nature. “The real quest is for you to look at nature in a new way. What is even better is that you’ll look at the world around you in a different way,” (Martin, 2003, p. 4).

Ron Carlos was a Piipaash Paddle Pottery teacher at Salt River. He used traditional methods to make his pots. He describes the process of looking for clay. Even the process of finding clay needs a transparent box. Notice how many questions are in this statement. Notice how many times he will have to look outside his box to get the clay before he starts making anything. “Whenever we’re getting ready to make pottery, we must collect our materials, and that calls for us to go out to the mountain or wherever the clay is. Taking our tools, buckets, and picks, wherever it’s at, we have to get to it,” (Heard Museum, 2016, 2:34). Ron has to think outside the box to find the location, figure out how to get there, and retrieve the clay. As you watch the video, you see them using the tools they brought, but there are times when they also look for rocks and use their hands because they work better.

Ron’s transparent box is how the children will need to approach their kui:pud. While Ron was looking for clay, we were looking for materials to harvest our fruit. Gregory Cajete agrees with this when he says, “Native people have traditionally applied practical experimentation at all times to find effective ways to live,” (Cajete, 2000, p. 67). This experiment is a concept we will have to teach the children. Now we must find the best materials. We will go on a field trip around the classroom and playground and use our vupui to find what we can use to make our Kui:pud. Then, we will review the pictures to add to our list of materials. This is the part where we will see how transparent their box is. Using mathematical concepts of measurement, we can determine the best materials to make it long enough. Are they able to think of new ideas when one does not work?

Debbie Hoyer discusses the integration of STEM and Aboriginal teaching. She discusses teaching STEM concepts one day and the culture the next. (Hoyer, 2023) For the O’odham baidaj fruit celebration, these concepts go together. We can discuss the meaning of each part. The children need to know that Hasan is sacred. He was once a person, and the celebration is giving thanks. If we were joining a celebration, the stick from a dead Hasan is a gift to help us

with our task. The song we will learn is one that gives thanks for the fruit and asks for the rain. We need to learn to make them so that we can pass the knowledge on to others. Once we know, it is our job to share with our families.

These lessons will take place for two weeks:

Week 1: Art with what you can find

Monday – Introduce the Topic in Large Group

Web – What do we know about tools?

Put out Books (leave out all week)

Tuesday – Reading books

Soam Judam Soam Judam

What do we know about tools?

Wednesday – Planned random items at the art table with discussion –

What else can you use? How did that work/not work?

Thursday – Children search for their art materials

Further discussion

Week 2: Kui:pud

Monday – Introduce the topic in the Large Group

Introducing O’odham words for Baidaj Harvest

Start learning the song (all week)

Tuesday – Speaker: Jon Curry?

Add to web – What do we want to know about tools?

Wednesday – How to measure materials?

Build our kui:pud

Friday- Baidaj Harvest and Celebration

Teaching Strategies and CRAIS will both be used to assess the children’s skills during these activities:

Teaching Plan

My Judum Class will be exploring how their ancestors utilize the world around them to make tools. They will use problem-solving skills first to paint a picture with only the tools they find and then to build a kui:pud to harvest their fruit.

The Standards I will use are the Arizona Early Learning Standards (AELS) and the Culturally Responsive Assessment of Indigenous Schooling Tool (CRAIS)

-Approaches to Learning

*AELS: Strand 2: Concept 1: Attentiveness

*AELS: Strand 2: Concept 2: Persistence

*AELS: Strand 5: Concept 1: Reasoning

*AELS: Strand 5: Concept 2: Problem-Solving (AELS, 2018, pp 40-47)

- *CRAIS: 7. Students are encouraged to exercise self-determination and agency (Castagno, et al, 2021, pp 3)
- Social Emotional Development
 - *AELS: Strand 2: Concept 2: Social Interactions (AELS, 2018, pp 24)
 - *CRAIS: 17. Relationships within the classroom are strong (Castagno et al, 2021, pp 5)
- Language and Literacy
 - *AELS: Strand 1: Concept 1: Receptive Language Understanding
 - *AELS: Concept 2: Expressive Language and Communication Skills (AELS, 2018, pp 65-67)
 - *CRAIS: 22. Local Indigenous language(s) are integrated (Castagno et al, 2021, pp 22)
- Mathematics
 - *AELS: Strand 3: Concept 3: Measures (AELS, 2018, pp 128)
- Science
 - *AELS: Strand 1: Concept 2: Investigation (AELS, 2018, 132)

My students will use Approaches to Learning to create their artwork and their kui:pud. The way a child solves a problem, uses their imagination, and can stick to a task is important at this age and throughout their life.

The children will also need to help each other when their problem-solving skills are limiting them in a particular area they are working on. Together, a tribe can create great things. The same is true of a classroom.

Science is another standard that goes with Approaches to Learning. It also goes with Social Interactions. The children will need to act like detectives to find the materials for their art and their kui:pud. Searching out the right materials will take persistence and problem-solving. They may need to ask their classmates to help.

We will learn new O'odham words with each lesson. The children will practice reciting them while working on their projects.

We will talk about the length of their kui:pud. The children will need to find objects in the room to measure as they construct their models.

Preschoolers need a variety of lessons to learn a new skill. Each week, we will use a variety of teaching methods to help the children understand the concept.

- *Discuss in Large Group
- *Web
- *Hands-on Practice in Small Group
- *Reading Time – Children's books on the topic that also remain in the Library
- *Speakers on the topic
- *O'odham Songs
- *Visuals

The Assessment that will be used for each standard is:

***Approaches to Learning**

- Teaching Strategies: 11a Attends and Engages
- Teaching Strategies: 11b Persists
- Teaching Strategies: 11c Problem Solving
- Teaching Strategies: 11d Shows Curiosity and Motivation
- CRAIS: 7. Students are encouraged to exercise self-determination and agency

***Social Emotional**

- Teaching Strategies: 3b Solves Social Problems
- CRAIS: 17. Relationships within the classroom are strong

***Language**

- Teaching Strategies: 8a Comprehends Language
- Teaching Strategies: 8b Uses an expanding expressive vocabulary
- CRAIS: 22. Local Indigenous language(s) are integrated

***Mathematics**

- Teaching Strategies: 22a Measure Objects

***Science**

- Teaching Strategies: 24 Uses scientific inquiry skills

Lesson Description: By the end of this lesson, the children will understand how their ancestors used the items around them to make tools and complete their tasks. The children will be looking outside their box to find the right tool for the picture they want to paint. The children will be able to tell you the O’odham word for the colors they used in their painting.

• Topic: Art with What You Can Find

• Standards:

- o AELS Approaches to Learning: Strand 2: Concept 1: Attentiveness
- o AELS Approaches to Learning: Strand 2: Concept 2: Persistence
- o AELS Approaches to Learning: Strand 5: Concept 1: Reasoning
- o CRAIS: 7
- o AELS Social Emotional Development: Strand 2: Concept 2
- o CRAIS 17:
- o AELS Language and Literacy: Strand 1: Concept 1
- o AELS Language and Literacy: Strand 1: Concept 2
- o CRAIS 22
- o AELS Science: Strand 1: Concept 2

• Objective(s): The children should be able to name one color in O’odham, sustain interest in working on their project, and show ways of solving the problem of how to make their project.

- Introduction:
 - o Materials:
 - #Large paper
 - #Books
 - o Procedure:
 - The week before*
 - # Mr. Ryan will have read *Soam Judam, Soam Judam*, to introduce us to the colors in O’odham
 - Day of*
 - # Discussion about finding materials to do a job.
 - # Show the children artwork that is produced by means other than a paintbrush.
 - #Place books in the library about artwork not made with paint brushes
- Activity 1: Making a Web
 - o Materials:
 - #Large paper
 - o Procedure:
 - #Ask the children, “What do you know about tools?”
 - # Follow-up Questions to continue the discussion
 - ^What is a tool?
 - ^What do tools do?
 - ^Where have you seen tools?
 - "Who uses tools?
 - ^What are tools made of?
 - ^When do you use a tool?
 - ^How do you use a tool?
 - ^Why do you use a tool?
 - #Write their answers on the Web to hang in the Large Circle area

• **Assessment: Art with What you can find**
Activity 1

Teaching Strategies: 11a Attends and Engages

The student pays attention to sights and sounds	Sustains interest in working on a task, especially when adults offer suggestions, questions, and comments	Sustains work on age-appropriate, interesting tasks; can ignore most distractions and interruptions

Teaching Strategies: 24 Uses scientific inquiry skills - Who, What, When, Where, Why

No Evidence	Emerging	Meets Expectations

- Activity 2: Planned materials on the table
 - o Materials:
 - #Materials to paint with
 - #Paint
 - #Paper or other medium, the children request
 - o Procedure:
 - #Place 20 different objects on the table
 - #Have the children pick an object to paint with
 - #They may choose a spot and paint
 - #While painting, we will discuss the colors in O'odham

• **Assessment: Art with What you can find**
Activity 2

Teaching Strategies: 8a Comprehends Language in O'odham

Shows an interest in the speech of others	Identifies familiar colors, and objects when prompted

Teaching Strategies: 11b Persists

Repeats actions to obtain similar results	Practices an activity many times until successful

- Conclusion: Children find materials to paint with
 - o Materials:
 - #Paint
 - #Paper or other medium the children request
 - #Objects in the room
 - o Procedure:
 - #The children will find an object in the classroom or ask a teacher to take them outside
 - #They may choose a spot and paint
 - #While painting, we will discuss the colors in O'odham

• **Assessment: Art with What you can find**
Conclusion

Teaching Strategies: 9a Uses an expanding expressive vocabulary in O'odham

Vocalizes and gestures to communicate	Names the colors, and objects

Teaching Strategies: 3b Solves Social Problems

Expresses feelings during a conflict	The student seeks adult help to resolve social problems	The student suggests solutions to social problems

Lesson Description:

- Topic: Kui:pud – The children will be learning the importance of giving thanks. The song Mr. Curry will help us learn will be about being thankful, and then we will discuss how to give thanks during the harvest. When the children measure the items for their kui:pud they will be learning the skills their ancestors used to make their own tools.

- Standards:

- o AELS Approaches to Learning: Strand 5: Concept 1
- o CRAIS: 7
- o CRAIS 17:
- o AELS Language and Literacy: Strand 1: Concept 1
- o AELS Language and Literacy: Strand 1: Concept 2
- o CRAIS 22
- o AELS Mathematics: Strand 3: Concept 3
- o AELS Science: Strand 1: Concept 2

- Objective(s): The children will measure the materials they need to make a kui:pud and harvest their “fruit”

- Introduction:

- o Materials:

- #Books
 - #Picture of baidaj and kui:pud
 - #Recording of the O’odham song about being thankful

- o Procedure:

- Throughout the entire lesson:*

- #Teachers will use baidaj and kui:pud and encourage children to do the same

- That Day:*

- # We will discuss Baidaj Harvest.
 - # We will look at pictures of baidaj and kui:pud
 - #We will listen to the song. After this, we will play the song during the day and practice it every morning.
 - #Place books in the library about baidaj and the harvest

- Activity 1: Making a Web

- o Materials:

- #Tools Web

- o Procedure:

- #Ask the children, “What have you learned about tools?”
 - # Follow-up Questions to continue the discussion
 - ^What tools do we use in the classroom?

^What tools do you use at home?

^What tools do animals use?

^How can we make a tool?

^When do we need tools?

^Why do we need tools?

^Where would we get the supplies to build our tools?

#Write their answers on the web to hang in the Large Circle area

• **Assessment: Kui:pud**
Activity 1

Teaching Strategies: 11a Attends and Engages

The student pays attention to sights and sounds	Sustains interest in working on a task, especially when adults offer suggestions, questions, and comments	Sustains work on age-appropriate, interesting tasks; can ignore most distractions and interruptions

Teaching Strategies: 24 Uses scientific inquiry skills - Who, What, When, Where, Why

No Evidence	Emerging	Meets Expectations

- Activity 2: How to measure

- o Materials:

- #String

- #Items from the classroom to measure with

- #Items from the classroom to build with

- o Procedure:

- #Using a string, the teacher will demonstrate how to measure a table.

- #The children will practice, with a string, measuring items in the classroom.

- #The children will measure Mrs. Sam's Kui:pud and take the string with them to determine how long their kui:pud needs to be.

- #The children will pick up their materials to build a kui:pud.

- #The children will build their kui:pud, measure it, and compare the size to Mrs. Sam's

• **Assessment: Kui:pud**
Activity 2

Teaching Strategies: 8a Comprehends Language in O'odham

Shows an interest in the speech of others	Identifies familiar colors, and objects when prompted

Teaching Strategies: 22a Measure Objects

The student makes simple comparisons between two objects	The student compares and orders a small set of objects as appropriate according to size, length	Uses multiples of the same unit to measure; uses numbers to compare

• Conclusion: Baidaj Harvest

o Materials:

#Balls

#The Children's Kui:pud

#Baidaj Syrup

o Procedure:

#Teachers will place the balls in the bushes on Playground 3

#Each child will use their kui:pud to harvest the "baidaj"

#When all the fruit has been harvested, we will celebrate with Baidaj Syrup!

• **Assessment: Kui:pud**
Conclusion

Teaching Strategies: 9a Uses an expanding expressive vocabulary in O’odham

Vocalizes and gestures to communicate	The student names the colors, and objects

Teaching Strategies: 11c Problem Solving

Observes and imitates how other people solve problems	Solves problems without having to try every possibility	Thinks through problems, considering several possibilities and analyzing results

• **Assessment: To be completed by Teacher Mentor**

Teacher Mentor _____

Classroom _____ Date _____

Activity _____

CRAIS: 7. Students are encouraged to exercise self-determination and agency

-3 High degree of opposite	-2 Medium degree of opposite	-1 Low degree of opposite	0 Zero	1 Low	2 Medium	3 High

CRAIS: 17. Relationships within the classroom are strong

-3 High degree of opposite	-2 Medium degree of opposite	-1 Low degree of opposite	0 Zero	1 Low	2 Medium	3 High

CRAIS: 22. Local Indigenous language(s) is integrated

-3 High degree of opposite	-2 Medium degree of opposite	-1 Low degree of opposite	0 Zero	1 Low	2 Medium	3 High

Glossary of O'odham Words

Baidaj	Cactus Fruit
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Gasó	Fox
Hasan	Saguaro Cactus
Judum	Bear
Kakaichu	Quail
Ki	House
Kui:pud	Stick for Harvesting Cactus Fruit
S'i:bhaimaki	Purple
Scedagi	Green
Scuk	Black
S-dojk Kaviyo	Wild Horses
Soam	Yellow, Orange, Gold and Brown
Stoa	White
Svegi	Red
Vupui	Eyes

Glossary of Choctaw Words

Imafo	Grandfather
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