Leading with Purpose: A Professional Learning Guide for Culturally Responsive Leadership in Arizona Schools

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Context

Sophia is a proud mother of three, raised on the Navajo reservation in Tuba City, Arizona. She earned her bachelor's degree in Elementary Education and a master's degree in educational leadership from Northern Arizona University. She has 18 years of educational experience, 11 years dedicated to teaching in elementary school and 7 years to serving as an elementary school principal on the Navajo reservation. Within this capacity, her focus was on elevating student achievement by providing leadership opportunities and resources for educators and students.

Sophia's mission in life has always been to teach, support, and create opportunities for others, her journey began with her first students, her children. Her sight eventually broadened to the children who represented the adversities of those living in poverty, abuse, and neglect on the reservation – challenges she also experienced. As a teacher, she aimed to give her students hope and to help them see their potential. When she stepped into her principal role, her intentions were to inspire and support teachers so they could share the same compassion and understanding to students dealing with trauma and help them rediscover a love for learning.

Now, leaning into her second year in her role as the Professional Learning Coordinator at the Office of Indian Education at the Arizona Department of Education, her mission has expanded even further. She supports teachers and educators across the state, working together to improve student success in over 2,300 public and charter schools in Arizona. Her role has not only given her an opportunity to work specifically with the Native population across the state but has also been given a remarkable opportunity to work side by side with selected principals through ADE's School Improvement Unit.

Her mission in creating the Leadership Practice Guide is not only to equip school and district leaders with the tools and a mindset needed to lead effectively in Indigenous and multicultural contexts across Arizona, but to also empower them to carry it out with confidence and compassion. Her vision is to build leadership capacity that honors cultural identity, promotes student success, and strengthens community partnerships across the state.

Rationale

As the Professional Learning Coordinator with the Office of Indian Education at the Arizona Department of Education, my primary responsibility is to support all public and charter schools across the state, who serve Native American students, more effectively. Our office currently offers surface level culturally responsive presentations. The extent necessary to truly shift mindsets, inform leadership practices, and foster systemic change remains to be seen.

These challenges are apparent by the stark educational disparities faced by American Indian or Alaska Natives. According to the Arizona Department of Education – Accountability & Research 2024 Data, only 17% of Native Americans achieved a passing score in English Language Arts (ELA) and just 13% in Math, both are the lowest of all subgroups. Chronic Absenteeism for American Indian or Alaska Natives leads all subgroups at 36% and 4-Year Graduation Rate for Cohort 2024 is at 68.4%, the lowest among all demographic groups. These

statistics are not merely numbers, they are indicators of a deeper, systemic issue that cannot be addressed through conventional educational strategies alone.

It is critical to emphasize that these outcomes do not reflect the intelligence, capability, or potential of Native American students. Instead, they are indicative of the historical and intergenerational trauma that Native communities endured for centuries. To understand the present challenges, we must first understand the past. This includes acknowledgement of forced removal from traditional lands, the confinement to reservations, and the devasting impact of federal assimilation policies.

As educators and leaders, we must recognize that trauma-informed practices are not optional when working with Native students, they are essential. We must go beyond acknowledging individual student experiences, instead moving further into the impact it has on Native communities. This means reflecting on your school practices in cultural responsiveness, by using the CRAIS Tool.

The Leadership Practice Guide I am developing will center on historical and current trauma as its foundational lens. It will serve as a resource for school and district leaders to deepen their understanding of Native American history, identity, and resilience. The guide will explore topics such as epigenetics and historical trauma and a reflection of your school's practices in supporting the success of Native American students.

Ultimately, the goal is to move beyond performative to transformative leadership. This will require courage, humility, and your willingness to confront uncomfortable truths. It will also require a commitment to continuous learning through Native communities and tribal experts.

Topic Summary

The foundation of understanding historical trauma is to understand epigenetics. To explain epigenetics, we must step back to look at genes and DNA. Genes are tiny parts of DNA that act like instructions for how our bodies look and work. DNA is a long, twisted molecule (called a double helix) found in our cells. It holds all the information needed to grow and live. This information is packed into structures called chromosomes—humans have 46 of them, with half coming from each parent.

Although every cell has the same DNA, not all genes are active all the time. Cells turn certain genes on or off depending on things like age, environment, or health. This process is called gene regulation.

Sometimes, life experiences—like diet, stress, or illness—can cause long-term changes in how genes are used. These changes do not change the genes themselves but can still be passed down to children. These are called epigenetic markers.

Simply put, life experiences of our parents and grandparents may be passed down through epigenetic markers. So, when we look at the various life experiences through multiple

generations, these epigenetic markers may still be present in our genes, experiences that our ancestors have endured, such as social change and cultural destruction wrought by historical trauma-based policies designed to "kill the Indian to save the man" (Walters et al., 2011).

Click on the infographic below to see the easy-to-read explanation of Epigenetics: How the experiences of previous generations can affect who we are:

Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart defines historical trauma as the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations, including the lifespan, which comes from massive group trauma and the historical trauma response (HTR) has been conceptualized as a constellation of features associated with a reaction to massive group trauma. Historical unresolved grief, a component of this response is the profound unsettled bereavement resulting from devastating losses, compounded by the prohibition and interruption of Indigenous burial practices and ceremonies (Brave Heart et al., 2011).

A few considerations is dependent on the affected Indigenous peoples, such as the perceived loss from different tribes. A few startling examples of genocidal events in U.S. History, specifically targeting Native American People – not just trauma, but actions that meet the criteria of genocide as defined by the United Nations: "the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group" (United Nations, 1948).

1. Mass Killings & Population Collapse During Colonization (1492-1900s)
    a. Introduction to foreign diseases such as smallpox, measles, and influenza.
    b. Systematic massacres by militias, settlers, and soldiers (e.g. Mystic Massacre 1637, Sand Creek 1864, Wounded Knee 1890) (Madley, 2015)
    c. State-sponsored body-part bounties, rewards were officially paid for Native Americans' heads and scalps (Madley, 2015)

Genocidal Intent: Elimination of Indigenous presence to enable settlement and land seizure.

2. Indian Removal Act & Forced Death Marches (1830s-1850s)
    a. Authorized removal of entire tribal nations from their homelands to militarize prison camps and foreign land. (Madley, 2015)
    b. Trail of Tears (Cherokee, Muskogee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Seminole) – thousands died from exposure, starvation and disease. (Madley, 2015)

c. Similar removals occurred across the US. (e.g. The Navajo Long Walk, 1864)

Genocidal intent. Clear policy goal: Remove all Indians east of the Mississippi to make land available for white settlement.

3. Boarding School Era and Cultural Genocide (1870s-1970s)
    a. Federal mandate: "Kill the Indian, Save the Man" – Cultural and identity erasure as official policy.
    b. Over 400+ federal and church-run schools – children were taken by force, renamed, beaten for speaking native languages, indoctrinated, starved, experimented on, and buried in unmarked graves. (Newland & US Bureau of Indian Affairs, 2022)
    c. US Interior Report (2022) confirms over 500 child deaths so far (likely thousands). (Newland & US Bureau of Indian Affairs, 2022)

Genocidal intent: destruction of culture, language, family, and tribal continuity.

4. The Allotment and Land Seizure Program (Daws Act 1887)
    a. Broke up 138 million acres of tribal land into private plots → 90 million acres stolen by settlers, corporations and the government (Madley, 2015)
    b. Once land base and food systems were destroyed, Native starvation and dependency increased.

Genocidal intent: Destroy Tribal Sovereignty through forced assimilation and land dispossession.

5. Sterilization of Native Women (1960s-1970s)
    a. US Indian Health Services sterilized an estimated 25% to 40% of Native women of childbearing age without consent or full medical explanation (Lawrence, 2000).
    b. Congressional investigations in 1976 confirmed widespread forced sterilization. Including minors as young as 11 years old (Lawrence, 2000).

Genocidal intent: Preventing Native births = direct violation under Article II(d) of the UN Genocide Convention.

Massive group trauma could be seen as the historical trauma response (HTR) from a historical traumatic event. Two examples of traumatic events could stem from loss through relocation from ancestral lands and children being forced to attend boarding schools. As colonizers have increased, so did the demand for land, pushing eastern tribes west, breaking treaties previously promising Indigenous people land they could live on, only to be revoked. With the pressures of trying to control Indigenous peoples, the government leaned into the more vulnerable population, the children. Children were ripped from their families, their livelihood, to be taken to foreign land and forced to become something they did not know. Through sickness, abuse, and attempted escapes, too many children lost their lives. Lives that were lost were striped from proper burial practices and ceremonies.

Although every tribal community experienced their own trauma, every tribal community has mourned their loss, together they constitute a history of sustained cultural disruption and destruction directed at AI/AN tribal communities (Walters et al., 2011).

In addition to the genocidal events above, all Arizona tribes have had their own experience with the U.S. Government assimilation. Here are a few examples of historical traumas experienced by Arizona Federally Recognized Tribes:

1. The Long Walk of the Dine People (Navajo) (Iverson, 2002)

Forced removal of Dine People to Bosque Redondo by the ideal of General Edward R.S. Canby, he was convinced that by placing Dine People on reservations, the federal government would at least have a chance to impose its will on them. Governor and Commander of New Mexico Territory, James Carleton gave the task to Christopher "Kit" Carson to head the campaign of force removal of over 9,000 Dine people who marched 450 miles, hundreds died from exposure, starvation, disease, and violence.

2. Apache Wars & Forced Removal (U.S. Department of the Interior)

After decades of resistance to U.S. military occupation, many Apache, including Geronimo's band, were forcibly imprisoned and relocated to Florida and Alabama, thousands of miles from their homelands in Arizona. Survivors were later sent to Oklahoma. They were prisoners of war for 27 years.

3. Pima & Maricopa Famine Caused by Diverted Water (Schumacher, 2010).

The Akimel O'odham (Pima) and the Piipaash (Maricopa) experienced starvation and economic collapse when upstream settlers and mining companies diverted the Gila River, cutting off the tribes' water supply. This turned formerly thriving agricultural tribes into government dependent communities. These tribes were abundant with the food they grew and the water they had, they were very helpful to their neighbors and travelers.

4. Hualapai Forced March to La Paz Reservation (*Hualapai Indian Tribe of the Hualapai Indian Reservation, Arizona*, 2021)

The Hualapai tribe were forcibly relocated 150 miles to the Colorado River Indian Reservation in Parker, Arizona. Many died of disease and hunger. After one year, the reservation was abandoned and the tribe returned to their homeland.

5. Hopi Children Taken by Force for Schooling (Blakemore, 2017)

The US military arrested Hopi parents who resisted sending their children to boarding schools. In 1894,19 Hopi men were imprisoned at Alcatraz for refusing to give up their children. It remains unclear how many Hopis died at Alcatraz.

6. Camp Grant Massacre (T*he Camp Grant Massacre*, 2024)

A coalition of settlers, Mexican Americans and Tohono O'odham villagers attacked a sleeping Apache camp near present-day Tucson, killing more than 140 people – mostly women and children. Lack of value placed on Apache lives led to the acquittal of all defendants.

Understanding the historical traumas, genocide, the intergenerational effects through epigenetics, is not to dwell on the past, it is honoring truth. Native American communities are not defined by what was done to them, but by the strength with which they survived. Effective leadership requires learning the stories that shaped the land we work on and students we serve. When we lead with historical awareness, we create school environments where Native students are not expected to "overcome," but are affirmed, supported, and understood. To understand Native

students is to understand the generations before them, what they endured, what they protected, and what they dreamed for their descendants. When we lead with this understanding, we shift from systems of harm to systems of healing.

Implementation Plan

The Culturally Responsive Assessment of Indigenous Schooling (CRAIS) tool was created to assess culturally responsive principles in schools serving Indigenous students. The CRAIS tool does not provide guidance on the appropriate integration of western academic curricular standards; rather, the tool's focus is to address core principles that are crucial for making schooling culturally responsive for Indigenous students (Joseph et al., 2024).

When we look at the tool itself, the purpose is to assess the degree to which the core principles of culturally responsive schooling are present in schools serving high numbers of Indigenous students (Castagno et al., 2021). Through this, the goal will be to introduce the CRAIS Tool to school leaders. This will help school leaders reflect on their current practices using the CRAIS tool. This moves leaders from "awareness" to structural change, addressing Zaretta Hammond's "Culturally Responsive Teaching & The Brain." Hammond's call for shifting from surface culture to deep culture practices (Hammond, 2015). It supports building "learning partnerships" rather than compliance-based leadership. Hammond's culture tree depicts the three levels of culture: surface, shallow, and deep. By deepening your relationship with students, learning their culture, creates the learning partnerships that revolutionizes a child's learning experiences.

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