

Practice Guide: Mindfulness in Educational Leadership Influenced by Hozho

Crystal Becenti

Dine Institute for Navajo Nation Educators (DINE)

2025

Context

Ya'aht'eeh, currently, I hold a role called behavioral health program specialist in Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools on the Navajo Nation. This role involves assisting BIE Bureau Operated School and Tribally Controlled schools with technical assistance support and professional development related to wellness, behavioral health, and crisis needs. While serving this role for four years, it has brought to my attention how important Hózhó is present when reflecting on self, others, and within a school system. Not a day goes by when I do not think about how to preserve balance and pray for our schools, educators, and students to maintain balance within their spirit, mental, physical, and emotional state. When called to assist schools, educators, and students, a comprehensive lens will be held to evaluate, assess, and reflect of service delivery. The purpose of this practice guide is to increase the understanding of mindfulness in educational leadership while emphasizing the wellness concept of Hózhó. This practice guide will focus on self-awareness when utilizing mindfulness strategies while incorporating Hózhó. Hózhó and mindfulness will be defined to clearly understand how self-awareness benefits an educational leader in a fast pace, high- stress, and constant changing educational environment. Mindfulness opens a pathway to greater insight and awareness (Guajardo, 2020).

The Dine (Navajo) Hózhó Wellness Philosophy means to contribute to the balance of a whole-person/whole-systems wellbeing and resilience. Kahn-John and Koithan (2015) describe Hózhó philosophy as emphasizing humans can be self-empowered through responsible thought, speech, and behavior. Likewise, Hózhó acknowledges that humans can self-destruct by thinking, speaking, and behaving irresponsibly. As such, the Hózhó philosophy offers key elements of the moral and behavioral conduct necessary for a long healthy life, placing an emphasis on the importance of maintaining relationships by “developing pride of one's body, mind, soul, spirit and honoring all life (Jackson, James, Attakai, & Begay, 2004). This effort of describing and honoring the respect of Hózhó is complex, as it encompasses both a way of living and a state of being (Kahn-John and Koithan, 2015). Hózhó is significant to the Dine people and to continue honoring, revitalizing, and sharing this sacred Dine philosophy teaching, this practice guide's intent is to honor the concept of Hózhó when practicing how to be self-aware in an educational leadership role.

Rationale

When working with indigenous populations, there is much intergenerational trauma held with pain and loss, however, there is resilience and growth as well. One who serves a leadership role in an educational capacity serving indigenous students need to be mindful of intergenerational trauma, recognizing the beauty of culture and language in schools and honoring all factors to the health of the school. When one holds a leadership role with these factors in mind, one's wellness through self-awareness must be reflected. In the Dine philosophy, Hózhó is described as beauty and balance. Recognizing the importance of balance in selves models the importance of balance among others whether staff and students; once this is recognized, modeled, and practiced, balance is present and recognized among self and themselves. Honoring their presence through daily check ins and respecting the balance of spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional connection is culturally sensitive, which reflect the Hózhó concept. Creating the safe space and

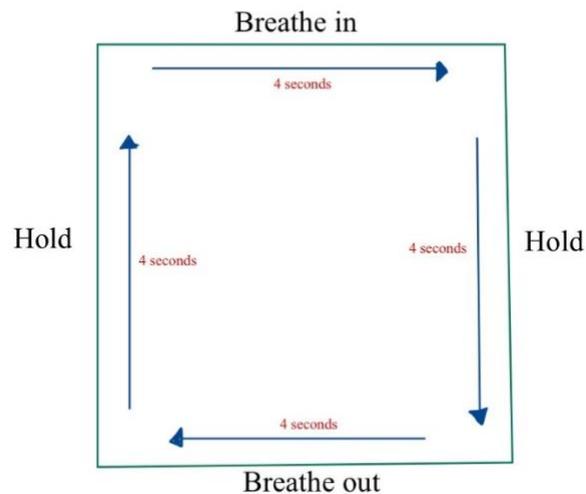
dedicating time to the students through grounding mindfulness activities honors the self, environment, others, and community.

Staff Engagement

In this curriculum, the person serving in a leadership capacity would practice these following mindfulness strategies to balance and strengthens one's self-awareness. These strategies are recommended to be practiced with intention to create safe space, honor self, increase breathing during uncalming moments, and reset self to balance. During moments of change often, which take place in a school capacity, we do not focus on our breathing or selves much and these strategies will assist in focusing in maintaining a holistic balance while serving a leadership role.

This practice guide focuses on self-awareness as a strategy which can be shown in the following ways:

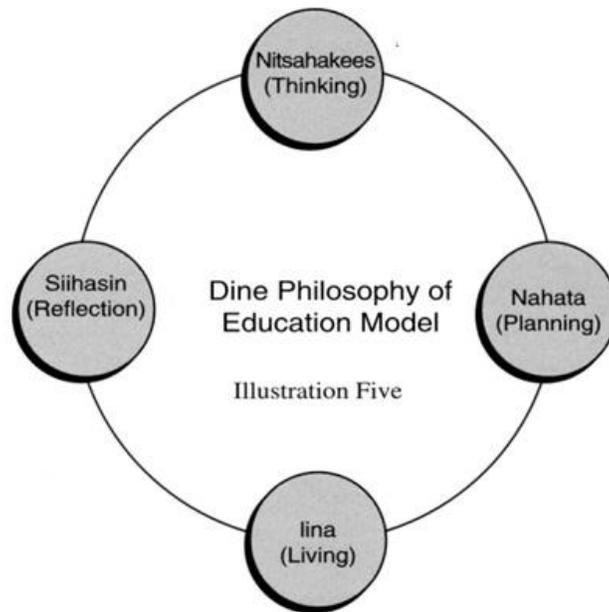
- Mindful Breathing: box breathing visual is offered by PT health (2022)
 - Find a comfortable position
 - Visualize a box (see image below): inhale for four seconds, hold for four seconds, exhales for four seconds, hold breath for four seconds, and repeat



- Body Scan steps are below offered by Kruchko (2022):

Step One Ease yourself	Relax first. The most comfortable position is lying down, supporting your head, especially if you're performing BSM right before sleep. You may also sit on a chair with your feet flat on the floor and keep your back straight but not stiff. Close your eyes or maintain a delicate glance while keeping them open.
Step Two Start deep breathing	Instead of breathing from your chest, use your belly. Put one hand on your tummy and the other on your chest. You'll probably notice that the upper hand is moving less than the bottom hand as you continue to breathe deeper. Breathe in via your nose, hold it in your abdomen for 5-10 seconds, and then exhale out through your mouth.
Step Three Start scanning from your feet	For the next step, bring your awareness down to your feet and pay attention to your sensations. If you experience pain, accept it, along with any accompanying thoughts or feelings, and take a few more breath-ins and breath-outs.
Step Four Focus on different parts of the body	Now, work your way up your body, focus on your legs, shoulders, arms, and neck until you reach your head. Stop for a few seconds at each body part and notice your sensations and feelings, both pleasant and unpleasant. Take a deep breath and observe what happens. Imagine the tension vanishing into the air as you breathe it out of your body. When you feel ready, continue, moving your attention to another body part.
Step Five Focus on your body as a whole	After you've completed the exercise, take a moment to notice how your body feels overall. To end the meditation, take a few more breaths, move your toes and fingers to get back to reality, and softly open your eyes when you are ready.

- Mindful reflection questions are listed below influenced from Benally's model (image below) offered from Willetto's (1997) article called the Dine Philosophy of Educational Model incorporating "Sa'ah Naaghai Bik'eh Hozhoon", Sa means maturity, ah means unchanging or eternal, naaghai is "going about", bik'eh means way or pathway, and Hozhoon means harmony or beauty restored:
 - What are you feeling?
 - What are you thinking?
 - What are you planning?
 - How will we implement?
 - How do we reflect?



When practicing these strategies from a weekly to daily basis for three months, a pre and post set of questions asked in a qualitative and quantitative way will assess the difference of one's self-awareness of balance or Hózhó.

Evaluation

The leader will use a mixed method of quantitative and qualitative questions to assess effect of mindfulness with the influence of Hózhó. First, the following qualitative questions will be asked prior and after the implementation of curriculum:

- What does Hózhó mean to you?
- What does mindfulness mean to you?
- What does Hózhó and mindfulness in leadership capacity mean to you?

These questions will answer prior knowledge and will be used as reflective questions after the curriculum to observe one's self-awareness with perspective and behavior. The quantitative part of the evaluation would be answering the following questions in a Likert format from strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), neutral (3), agree (4), strongly agree (5).

- This guide helped me understand mindfulness strategies with the influence of the Hózhó Concept?
- I feel more confident in my understanding and practice of mindfulness.
- I feel more confident in my understanding of Hózhó?
- I recommend this practice guide to others.
- This practice guide helped me in my leadership role.

Both measures of assessing knowledge of one's self-awareness through mindfulness strategies influenced by the Hózhó concept would be collected before and after the implementation of the practice guide. This will be a guide for leaders before and after a semester to see effectiveness and change of one's ability to perceive balance with mind, body, and spirit when serving a leadership capacity role. The intention of this practice is to honor the balance of one's mind, body, and spirit when facing everyday challenges as a leader and when practicing breathing, body scan, and asking reflective questions to strengthen self creates a calm state during changing moments. Overall, this practice guide's purpose is to remind self in a leadership capacity when serving indigenous populations, one must appreciate the cultural understanding of balance with respect to wellness (e.g., mentally, physically, and spiritually). The concept of Hózhó reminds how to maintain and preserve balance, as reminded in the Dine Philosophy to connect with self and the practice of mindfulness is the beginning and one of the steps to restore balance and harmony.

References

- “Feeling stressed? Here’s why you should try box breathing.” *Pt Health - Physiotherapy, Massage Therapy, Acupuncture, Chiropractic, Naturopathic Medicine*, 14 June 2022, www.pthealth.ca/blog/feeling-stressed-heres-why-you-should-try-box-breathing/.
- Guajardo, M. (2020). Mindfulness matters in leadership. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*. Retrieved 5 Oct. 2025, from <https://oxfordre.com/educationa/view/10.10.93//acrefore/9780190264093.001.0001/acro-re-9780190264093-e--618>.
- Jackson, S. James, I.K., Attakai, M., & Begay, E.F. *Ama Sani doo Achei Baahane/The office of Dine culture, language, and community services*. Cortez, Colorado: Southwest Printing Co: 2004.
- Kahn-John, M, & Koithan, M. (2015). Living in health, harmony, and beauty: the Dine (Navajo) Hozho wellness philosophy. *Global advances in health and medicine*, 4 (3), 24-30. <https://doi.org/10.7453/gahmj.2015.044>.
- Kruchko, K. “EZCare Medical Clinic.” *MEDvidi*, 10 Oct. 2022, ezcareclinic.io/body-scan-meditation-the-procedure-and-benefits-for-mental-health/.
- Willeto, P. (1997). Dine College Struggles to Synthesize Navajo and Western Knowledge. *Tribal College Journal of American Indian Higher Education*. tribalcollegejournal.org/dine-college-struggles-synthesize-navajo-western-knowledge/. Accessed 6 Oct. 2025.